Chapter 14

Time, space and history in African divination and board-games

This Chapter was originally written in 1995, from what was clearly a social-science perspective, as an invited contribution to a valedictory conference and a Festschrift on the occasion of Heinz Kimmerle's retirement from the Chair of Foundations of Intercultural Philosophy, Philosophical Faculty, Erasmus University Rotterdam. Kimmerle had initiated that new chair upon his retirement (1990) from the institutionally more central Rotterdam chair of continental philosophy, which he had deservedly occupied after spending decades on research in the Hegel archive in Germany. Given the substantial disciplinary, social, and geographic distance between Leiden African Studies and Rotterdam philosophical anthropology, my links with Kimmerle and his department were loose and superficial at the time. Kimmerle had taken the initiative to these contacts since as an intercultural philosopher his main focus was no longer in the first place on Hegel, but was to be redirected to sub-Saharan Africa. Despite the initial distance, my participation in these valedictory functions initiated a chain of events which resulted in my emergence, two years later, as Kimmerle's successor – the surprising outcome of an internal struggle within the Rotterdam Philosophical Faculty. My accession went not without considerable opposition and protest, but that was years after we fittingly celebrated Kimmerle's long and fruitful career.

14.1. Introduction

14.1.1. Heinz Kimmerle in Africa

Heinz Kimmerle's fascination with Africa has been a move, not so much away from main-stream Western philosophy (to whose Hegelian overtones he has been particularly tuned, with a mounting critical attitude), but towards modes of thought which might help to relativise and fertilise the Western tradition, in preparation for the global philosophy the world shall need for the third millennium CE. In the process, he is likely to have developed an interest in the im-

plicit forms of philosophising as contained in African literary productions, proverbs (*cf.* Kimmerle 1997), rituals including divination, and games.

It is significant that his collection *Philosophie in Afrika / Afrikanische Philosophie* (Kimmerle, 1991) contains a poetic section in which Abimbola (1991; *cf.* 1975) rephrases the highly standardised interpretational catalogue of the Nigerian Ifa oracle. Incidentally, one of Kimmerle's last PhD students comes from a family of diviners and seeks to render this background in his academic writing.[592] Much more than in the North Atlantic world today, divination has remained part and parcel of the African everyday experience (Devisch 1985d), and as such it constitutes an important perspective upon African processes of thought. There is no African society that does not have a variety of divination systems, and while many of these are highly confined in space and time, others have crossed cultural and linguistic boundaries and are found, in thinly disguised form, all over the continent. Thus Ifa is the most famous West African variant of a dominant and amazingly wide-spread family of geomantic divination systems which, first attested (under the name of علم الرمل *ᶜilm ar-raml)* in the Arabian high culture around 1000 CE, has spread over West Africa (and from there to the Caribbean and the Southern USA), East and Southern Africa and the Indian Ocean, Iran, India, and Medieval and Renaissance Europe. The structure of all these variants is identical: by simple manual chance operations,[593] and involving signs which can take two values ('yes / no'; 'one / two'; 'black / white'), a specific value out of a total range of 2^n values is generated (typical values for n are 4, 6 or 8), as a specific entry in a astrologically-inspired (but locally divergent) interpretational catalogue of 2^n such entries.[594]

Very likely, in his visits to Africa Kimmerle has also come in contact with another formal practice ingrained in African daily life: the *mankala* board-game consisting of 2 or 4 (occasionally 3) rows of holes (typically between 5 and 20 per row) along which identical tokens (usually seeds) travel according to elaborate rules conducive to complex strategies. The game has been considered to be typical of sub-Saharan Africa (*cf.* Culin 1896; Kassibo 1992), not only because of its ubiquity there in a great number of variants, but also because, of the five main types of board-games commonly distinguished (Murray 1952), it is the only type to occur in Africa before colonial times.

Certain scholars have passionately claimed a predominantly or exclusively African origin for geomancy and mankala, but that is not the point here.[595] It is my

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[592] Uyanne 1994; upon Kimmerle's retirement, Uyanne's supervision was taken over by me, but before completing his thesis he returned to Nigeria to take over his father's meat business.

[593] Originally in sand, on the ground or with the use of a rimmed board, hence the generic name of *geomancy, i.e.* 'divination by the earth', and *ᶜilm ar-raml, i.e.* 'sand science'.

[594] *Cf.* van Binsbergen, 1994a, 1995c, 1996c, 1996a, 1997c / 2011e, 2012d, references cited there.

[595] Personally, I contest such an African origin, holding that they have a West African origin,

intention in this Chapter to show how these two long-standing features of African life, viewed as encoded forms of philosophising about time and space, help us to pinpoint the likely socio-cultural and historical context in which such philosophising came within Man's reach – thus hinting at the possible historical dynamics of categories which, ever since Kant, European thought has recognised as fundamental but as *a priori* given, without being particularly concerned with the conditions of their historical genesis.[596] A concise theory of ritual is included as a give-away point for the attentive reader. But let us first define the main operational concepts of the argument.

Fig. 14.1. Two courtiers of the Nkoya royal court of Mwene Mutondo, resting after work, while a minimalist four-row mankala board is within reach, Shikombwe, Kaoma District, 1977.

14.1.2. Board-games

Of board-games, as a category of formalised human activity, one of the classic

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and that they spread into sub-Saharan Africa in the Bronze Age, on the wings of Pelasgian expansion into that part of the world.

[596] Notable exceptions include Onians 1951 and Snell 1955; an inspiring exploration from a psychology perspective is Vroon 1992, *cf.* below, note 601. Cassirer's chapter 'The human world of space and time' is programmatic rather than historical 1977: 42 *f.*. Of course, built into sociology and anthropology, ever since Durkheim 1912, has been the idea of the social origin of the experience and perception of time and space: *cf.* Fabian 1983; Goody 1968; Leach 1972. The Proustian chapter title 'Le temps retrouvé' in Lévi-Strauss 1962, ch. viii, *cf.* Proust 1913-1927, to which my colleague Rijk van Dijk called my attention, deals not so much with the experience of time (as among agriculturalists) but with its mythical abolition (as among hunter / gatherers).

authors in this field, Murray (1952: 1), offers a useful descriptive definition, claiming board-games to be:

1. games (for the essential question as to what constitute games and how they relate to other forms of play and of human activity in general, we may refer, with Murray, to the fundamental philosophical works by Huizinga (1952), Groos (1901) *etc.*)

2. *consisting of a* coherent series of consecutive movements *('moves') of*

3. physical pointers ('pieces', 'men')

4. along co-ordinates defined in a space (a 'board') which, for that specific purpose, is set apart, *i.e.* bounded, and internally transformed and restructured

5. in such a way that formal and explicit rules define the movement of individual pointers as well as their interaction.

We note that space, rather than time, dominates Murray's definition; but it is the time dimension which the present Chapter is to highlight.

14.2. The theoretical convergence of divination and board-games; what is divination?

14.2.1. Divination

First we should narrow down the enormous scope of 'divination' (a virtual universal of culture; *cf.* Brown 1991). Let us agree to designate by this term:

1. procedures of knowledge production which meet the following criteria:

2. they are *institutionalised* within a particular historical culture, *i.e.* they are repetitive, socially shared, and show a tendency to persist over time;

3. actors – as should be clear from their explicit speech acts as well as, more implicitly, from demonstrable analogies with other forms of religious behaviour in their society – see these procedures as involving forces beyond human control;

4. through these procedures the actors seek to obtain information which is not available by direct sensory perception;

5. these procedures involve the use of a specific material apparatus (hence 'material' or 'inductive' divination – as distinct from incubation, trance *etc*.); often a random generator (*e.g.* a die, or multiple elements such as pebbles or sticks falling in an uncontrolled fashion, or an insect moving in an unpredictable way) is at the heart of the apparatus;

6. construction and operation are subject to rules which may often be highly formalised.

7.   the various values which the apparatus can produce are interpreted by reference to a catalogue of divinatory meanings which may be memorised or written out.

Fig. 14.2. School children at Nkeyema, Kaoma District, Zambia, having dug their own mankala board in the ground, 1978.

14.2.2. Board-games and divination compared

It is stimulating to compare the definitional characteristics of divination with those of board-games. Of course, board-games involve a material apparatus however rudimentary (for many games the entire apparatus can be summed up as a few pips or pebbles, and a few lines drawn on the ground); they also involve formal rules. But the parallel far from ends here. Little as we may realise

this, board-games, too, are devices for the production of knowledge not otherwise attainable. This knowledge is of considerable complexity: it includes the identity of winner and loser; the extent of gains and losses; information on the participants' differential skills, integrity and stress resistance; on a more generalised plane, insights into the differential merits of such strategies as the rules allow for, the tacit or explicit rehearsal of these rules, and the detection of possible omissions, contradictions and borderline cases in the rules. To the extent to which supernatural beings are held to be responsible for the outcome of the random generators involved, the procedure also generates knowledge about the favour or wrath these supernatural beings are supposed to feel vis-à-vis the players. With the exception of the interpretative catalogue (which however might be considered analogous to the gaming rules), the one remaining item which does not seem to take part in the parallelism between board games and divination, is the actors' notion involving forces beyond human control. However, many board-games (even some variants of chess, for instance) offset the players' conscious or semi-conscious strategies against the outcome of random generators (especially dice), in cultural contexts where these random generators are held to be controlled not by any blind impersonal forces of immanent nature, but by transcendent, supernatural entities, like those which allegedly determine the outcome of the divinatory apparatus' stochastic features.

14.2.3. Board-games and divination as formal models: the miniaturisation of time and space

The amazing parallelism which thus exists between divination and board-games cannot be found between board-games and most other items of culture. Both material divination systems, and board-games, are *formal systems*, which can be fairly abstractly defined in terms of constituent elements and rules *relatively* impervious to individual alteration. Both consist in a drastic modelling of reality, to the effect that the world of everyday experience is very highly condensed, in space and in time, in the game and the divination rite. The unit of both types of events is the *session*, rarely extending beyond a few hours, and tied not only to the restricted space where the apparatus (*e.g.* a game-board, a divining board or set of tablets) is used but, more importantly, to the narrowly defined spatial configuration of the apparatus itself. Yet both the board-game and the divination rite may refer to real-life situations which have the size of a battle field, a country, a kingdom or the world, and which extend over much greater expanses of time (a day, a week, a year, a reign, a generation, a century, or much more) than the duration of the session. In ways which create ample room for the display of cosmological and mythical elements, divination and board-games constitute *a manageable miniature version of the world*, where space is *transformed space:* bounded, restricted, parcelled up, thoroughly regulated; and where time is no longer the computer scientist's 'real time' – as is clearest when divination makes pronouncements about the past and the future.

Utterly magical, board-games and divination systems are space-shrinking time-machines. A further crucial feature of this modelling (crucial, since without this feature divination and board-games had long gone extinct) is that is it *a two-way process:* while real life is modelled onto the divinatory or ludic session, the session and its outcome is subsequently *fed back into real life,* through information and skill gained, through prestige redistributed, personal balance and motivation restored, fears explicitly named and confronted, *etc.* Without such feedback (if only at the level of the person's individual consciousness) divination would be rather pointless, as an uninterpreted dream; in other words, divination is meaningful because it actively and explicitly reconstitutes the person in relation to the social and natural environment. And much as theoreticians of play would tend to emphasise the escapist or deliberately non-utilitarian, purpose-free nature of play, in board-games too there is this element of reconstitution, of learning from vicarious experience which, if nothing else, conveys the message that basic configurations of man's confrontation with the natural and social environment may be represented, schematised, played out, and thus be rendered more transparent and manageable.

14.2.4. Relation with narrative literature

Divination and board-games far from constitute the only forms of modelling and representation, and a systematic comparison with these other forms (*e,g,* narrative, song, image or dance) should help us to pinpoint the specific nature of the session as a representation of a particular kind. Clearly, both divination and board-game are model versions of reality in a rather more dynamic and time-framed form than a picture or a sculpture, or even a series of these, could ever be. They are formal systems not in an abstract steady state of idleness, but define for the participants roles as protagonists which are to be dynamically and dramatically acted out from a uniform beginning, via more or less familiar but always slightly novel steps, to an essentially unpredictable end. In this they come close to oral or written narratives including myths, and on the basis of kindred forms of modelling they share the narratives' recreational, exemplary and revelatory potential.

Yet essential differences exist between the session and the narrative. In the session, the potential for identification between the human person and the representational forms is much greater than in the narrative; for in the session, the protagonists are represented not only verbally but materially, through the elements of the material apparatus, through the game pieces themselves – and these protagonists are not the narrative's named, imitable others, but are explicitly identified with the persons involved in the session; so much so, that in many games and many cultural contexts a player will describe a particular situation or move in terms of 'I' when referring to a piece that belongs to

him.[597] In contrast with literature, the complex performances of the game-pieces and of the divinatory elements (*cf.* literary characters) within the modelled reality of the apparatus are not controlled by a narrator, but by respective, self-conscious Egos and / or by stochastic devices explicitly considered to be beyond human control (although there is often the possibility of cheating). And this produces, perhaps as the essence of the model situation and of the participants' experience of it (and in ways only remotely resembling an oral narrator's free variations within an established genre and story-line), *an abundance of parallel trajectories, with choices whose effects and consequences are rarely immediately clear and whose ultimate outcome only gets increasingly determined while the session is already on.* Yet one might say that the experiential (both recreational and revelatory) value of divination and board-games is that they create an unlimited variety of *vicarious experiences, i.e.* stories. Spinning relevant, even illuminating and redeeming stories out of the raw material which the fall of the apparatus in combination with the interpretative catalogue provides, is the essence of the diviner's skill and training; and in the same way board-games can be seen as machines to generate stories in which Ego plays the leading part, confronting both nature and society.

14.2.4. Relation with symbolism and mathematics

The formal nature of divination and board-games lies not merely in the existence of formal rules, but in the saturation of these rules with fundamental and ubiquitous structural themes (*e.g.* such basic oppositions as odd / even, male / female, life / death, high / low, white / black), which form the basis for a rich imagery and inform the dynamics of the session. At the same time these systems are formal and have been so also in archaic contexts where formalism was still *in statu nascendi;* hence their articulation would seem to be related to man's most fundamental formalism, the one with the highest survival value: early forms of counting, arithmetic, representation and manipulation of numbers.[598]

This point has a direct bearing on our two main empirical cases, mankala and geomancy. It is highly significant that both of them have given rise to sophisticated formal mathematical analysis.[599] The dynamic implications of these simple systems as revealed by mathematical analysis turn out to contain unexpect-

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[597] Although space is lacking to pursue this point, this seems to suggest that divination and board-games find themselves somewhere halfway on a continuum stretching from external relative non-identification, as in the narrative, to internal relative identification, up to a point of literal incorporation, as in dance, trance and ecstasy – which have their own established places in the phenomenology and history of human religion.

[598] *Cf.* Seidenberg 1960, 1961; Schmidl 1915; Zaslavsky 1990; Crump 1994; Ifrah 1991.

[599] Jaulin 1966, *cf.* 1991; Popova 1974; Deledicq & Popova 1977: in terms of stochastic processes, topology *etc*.

ed features which directly reflect on strategies in the case of mankala, on the distribution of positive and negative outcomes and on the diviner's overall management of the session's ongoing communication and interpretation process, in the case of geomancy.[600] But even without such sophistication (which is beyond the consciousness of most real-life actors involved in mankala and geomancy) there are the simple arithmetic facts: in geomancy the dealing with odd or even (as reflected in the scoring of one or two dots in the composition of the geomantic symbol), obverse or reverse; in board-games like mankala the sheer act of counting, collecting and dishing out again, repeated as many times as the game session has moves, but anticipated in calculating strategy many more times than there are actual moves. Both varieties of formal behaviour are impossible unless as applications of simple but fundamental mathematical accomplishments, and they are likely to provide an early use (and hence reinforcement, and celebration) of just those.

Thus while we would retain Groos' insight in the link between board-games and the emergence of writing,[601] arithmetic (*cf.* Crump, 1994) would appear to be another fundamental of their emergence; and since not only divination but also board-games are situated in a religious context, all three Rs[602] would seem to have made a crucial contribution, thus corroborating Murray's point[603] that board-games reflect the emergence of civilisation. Let us now try to capture the historical questions which such emergence would seem to pose.

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[600] Thus I found that the mathematical properties of standard forms of geomancy inevitably produce rather more positive than negative outcomes – contrary to the common-sense expectation that these would be evenly distributied.

[601] In a fascinating argument which (although inviting correction on many historical minor points) greatly outweighs its popular image, the late lamented psychologist Vroon 1992, leaning heavily on Jaynes 1976, has argued that divination, far from being a universal of culture, must be considered in the historical context of the emergence of writing; he goes on to claim that writing (and by implication divination) must have had such an enormous influence on the human brain (particularly through upsetting the balance between the two cerebral hemispheres) that for the first time in history qualitative changes in its functioning were brought about, even though man's genetically determined phenotype has not demonstrably changed since the appearance of Anatomically Modern Humans, in Africa, some 200,000 years ago. However, elsewhere I have explored the question of prehistoric divination, and found that Vroon's insight, however stimulating, is to be faulted: there are many arguments, both archaeological and in comparative mythology, for assuming that divination has existed at least since the emergence of Anatomically Modern Humans; *cf.* van Binsbergen 2012d: ch. 6, pp. 179 *f.*, 255 *f.*

[602] Reference is made here to the standard English expression of 'the three R's' for 'reading, writing and arithmetic'.

[603] Murray 1952: 236 *f.*; *cf.* Huizinga 1952 to whom he rightly refers.

14.3. Historical problems posed by divination systems and board-games

14.3.1. Appearance in human history

Modern man takes for granted his or her capability of retrospect and prospect, of testing out the dilemmas of real life in parallel model situations of reflection, planning, strategy and game, without cost or engagement; however, I submit that the invention of such a *vicarious* (or, with an alternative term, 'virtual') reality, as exemplified in divination and board-games, occurred at a relatively late stage in the cultural evolution of mankind. While reflecting major structural changes at the time, the amazing mental operations in inductive divination and in board-games may well in their own right have made a crucial contribution to the realisation of more complex social and productive arrangements in time and space.

Tentatively I would situate the invention of both board-games and material divination (if such a distinction could already be made by then) in a Neolithic context of emergent agriculture – without the slightest doubt man's most drastic redefinition of space and time before the invention of the computer. Let me try to spell out the terms of that revolution – without any pretension of originality on my part.

The productive revolution involved in the shift (however gradual and over an extended area; *cf*. Renfrew 1979) from food gathering to cultivation amounted to a *redefinition of space*. A specific section of the natural environment had to be demarcated (implicitly, as the point beyond which agricultural activity would not extend; conceptually, in order to guide the agricultural process through the seasons and to define ownership rights over the crops as against rival individuals and (more likely) groups. And often also physically, by a fence, in order to keep marauding animals out. Internally, that bounded agricultural space, the field, had to be specifically structured and transformed: the ground would be opened in order to receive the seeds; invention of the plough would automatically systematise this transformation into more or less straight lines, furrows; and soon, in many of the early agricultural sites, a grid of irrigation or drainage trenches would become necessary (*cf*. note 611, below).

In the same way, agriculture was to *revolutionise the sense of time*, not so much by introducing an element of seasonality (for that must always have been part of hunting and gathering, given the built-in seasonality of the great majority of natural ecosystems), but of *purpose:* not by a passive undergoing of Nature's monthly and annual cycles, but only by man's timely initiative on the basis of calculated anticipation, in preparing the soil, planting, weeding and harvesting at critically appointed times could a year's agricultural cycle be brought to a success. Many historians of science have taken for granted that

astronomy and the calendar emerged in function of agriculture's need for pre-
cise and reliable time-reckoning.

Fig. 14.3. A mankala board from the Western Grassfields, Cameroon, held at the Musée la Blackitude, Yaounde, Cameroon (2015).

Without necessarily denying the possibility of preparatory stages of "proto-
science" in the Mesolithic and Palaeolithic (*cf.* Marshack, 1971) we may assume
that the sciences of the calendar, astronomy, geometry, arithmetic, were the
direct intellectual outcomes of this Neolithic transformation of space and time,
and they were soon carried to a level of formality and abstraction for which it is
difficult to see a reason outside the context of agriculture. The true test for a
different sense of time would appear to lie in the foresight which allowed peo-
ple to save up their seeds for next season even in the face of virtually yearly
food shortages, as well as investing so much energy in initiating an agricultural
cycle through clearing the forest, hoeing or plowing, planting, weeding – whose
uncertain pay-off would be many months ahead.

Finally, the redefinition of space and time could only mean the redefinition (or
the creation, in the first place?) of the notion of *person*, situated in a new time
and a new space, and represented (both in board-games and in the divinatory
apparatus) by external tangible, often anthropomorphic material objects mov-
ing, in Ego's stead, through time and space – usually interacting with other
persons so represented. Board-games and divination externalise, and offer new
models of, a redefined relationship between humans and their physical envi-
ronment, as well as between humans and their social environment – with major
roles of confrontation and competition being externalised in the apparatus and

redefined as opponents in a schematised exchange dominated by explicit rules (board-games), or as likely partners, enemies and witches (divination).

Fig. 14.4. A simple mankala board from Sri Lanka, 2012 (author's collection); probably the game was introduced to the island by forced migrants ('slaves') from sub-Saharan Africa around 1800 CE.

What I have said for agricultural also – but perhaps in a slightly attenuated form – applies to animal husbandry, from the clearing and fencing of a kraal (but without further active transformation of the area of soil thus enclosed) to the active response to seasonality in terms of transhumance, provisions for mating, pregnancy, birth and infancy of the animals, gelding, festivals involving animal sacrifice, *etc.* [604]

This would mean that the distribution of board-games and divination among the world's non-agriculturalists is to be interpreted as borrowing. It falls outside our present scope to confront this hypothesis with the evidence in the archaeological and anthropological literature. However, it is certainly in line with this hypothesis that board-games are reported (Murray, 1952, p.4) to be near-universals of human culture, with the exception of Eskimos, Australians and

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[604] For a tentative theory of shrines in an agricultural context, *cf.* van Binsbergen 1981: 107 *f.*

New-Guineans before these human groups came into contact with Iron Age and post-Iron Age civilisations.[605] In terms of productive techniques, Eskimos (*cf.* Birket-Smith 1946: 473 *f.*) and Australians can be said to have perpetuated until only a century ago cultural forms already found in the Palaeolithic, while the New-Guineans' digging-stick agriculture would situate them just inside the Neolithic. It is moreover interesting that in four African hunter-gatherers societies divination was found to be absent in contexts where it is very frequently resorted to in agricultural societies: to ascertain the causes of death of a group member (Woodburn 1982). The dynamics of borrowing and parallel invention are notoriously complex, and it would be very dangerous to assume that a specific level of the development of productive technique dictates a social-structural (let alone a mental) incapability for board-games. Of this we are reminded for instance by the case of the San hunter-gatherers of Southern Africa, among whom mankala is being played – but in a context where there is ample evidence, over several millennia even, of a variety of relations (including trade, raiding, serfdom and conquest) involving not only surrounding Bantu- or Indo-European-speaking groups (Wilmsen, 1989) but also, at the end of long chains of exchange and dislocated, de-contextualised cultural influence, Middle Eastern and Mediterranean groups.[606]

14.3.2. The relative a-historicity of divination systems and board-games

The formal nature of divination and board-games lead them to be relatively a-historic (in the sense of being rather inert in the face of general social and cultural change) and to elude localisation (crossing cultural, linguistic *etc.* boundaries and, while allowing for localising transformation, diffusing in such a way that they can hardly ever be said to truly reflect the central orientation of a

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[605] The only truly universal game which Murray acknowledges, and which therefore receives the honour of featuring in the last, slightly incoherent pages of his *History of Board-games Other Than Chess*, is the string game or cat's cradle, on which incidentally an extensive comparative literature exists worldwide.; *cf.* van Binsbergen 2011g Incidentally, Meggitt 1958 reports a board-game played by Australian Aboriginals in the 1950s whose only tools until modern times had been lithic, but without hesitation Meggitt attributes the game's local presence to recent diffusion from India. The impact of South Asia on New Guinea, Australia and further east into Oceania has been brought out in *e.g.* Redd *et al.* 2002; Stubbs 1978 / 1974.

[606] *Cf.* Denbow & Wilmsen, 1983; Breuil, 1952. The San hunter-gatherers are presumably the only people in Africa to produce the characteristic ostrich-shell beads today still available in Southern Africa, but with a wide archaeological distribution over much of the African continent, including Ancient Egyptian graves. Russ, whose enthusiasm for the mankala family of games clearly exceeds the extent of his scholarship, prefers to enlist the San (ethnocentrically called *Bosjesmannen* by the first Dutch colonisers of South Africa – subsequently anglicised into *Bushmen*) in a rather more romantic capacity, as the mysterious, largely vanished and unattested, hypothetical *Urhebers* of nothing less than the most complex and accomplished variety of the mankala game, *cf.* Russ 1984, – an untenable position which probably goes back to Townshend 1976-77: 95.

local culture). [607] Therefore attempts to show how, for instance, a particular local variety of the mankala board-game 'so eminently fits the more general local culture' miss the point, since they are predicated on the assumption of some local cultural core from which meaning and structure exclusively springs, rather than that the latter are fragmentarily conveyed across cultural and linguistic boundaries from multiple and disconnected distant origins, finding only a very partial local integration and streamlining.

Fig. 14.5. A ndop *statuette held at the British Museum, London, UK, and depicting the culture hero King Shamba Bolongongo of the Kuba / Bushong people, Congo, who reputedly introduced mankala in his lands in the 17th c. CE.*

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[607] *Pace* Townshend 1982 for *bao* in the Swahili context; Barnes 1975 for the Indonesian context of Kedang. The latter author however is aware of the problems I signal here (1975: 82 *f.*.

At the same time this state of affairs would suggest that divination systems and board-games in themselves constitute very welcome guiding fossils in cultural history, hinting at spatial and temporal links between other cultural items with which they are found to be associated; yet the specific history of divination systems and board-games as such (in the sense of movement in space and transformation over time under explained conditions) is far more difficult to write.

14.3.3. Three basic variants of the historical relation between divination and board-games

On the basis of the parallelism between material divination and board-games their actual relationship in time and space can take a number of specific forms:

1. Board-game and material divination complementarily serve identical functions, *e.g.* are used to mark, to visualise and to cross essential boundaries in the life of the individual and the social group. Hence the prominence of board-games in funerary and puberty rites: these are rites of passage, which (as anthropological research has shown) tend to be accompanied by divination. Hence also, for instance, the co-occurrence of family board-games and drawing-room versions of divination at Christmas as a calendar rite in 19th-c. Western Europe.

2. The board-game, without denying its (postulated) primarily secular, recreational nature, is interpreted by the actors as a divinatory device, *i.e.* its outcome is supposed to reflect on the fate of the players; examples of this abound around the world.

3. The divination system is routinised and profanised into a pastime and effectively becomes a board-game. This would seem to be the case with the board-games from the Ancient cultures of the Near East, Egypt and Crete, which are partly based on astronomical or astrological notions.[608] A similar case seems to present itself for mankala and geomancy, as I shall presently argue.

14.3.4. Neolithic production as a key to the imagery of mankala and geomancy

If the above argument concerning the Neolithic context for the emergence of board-games and divination cuts wood, it offers one of the most obvious con-

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[608] Murray 1952: 12 *f.*; Musées 1992; Herberger 1988; and extensive references cited there. If we need pre-existing boards which could be turned into gaming-boards, astronomic / astrological apparatuses and computational aids would be a likely place to look, especially since these, already in Antiquity, often declined into grids within which the actual position of the heavens was no longer carefully calculated, but guessed from the fall of dice, *cf.* Boll *c.s.* 1966: 60, 191 *f.* In view the striking similarities between West African divinatory boards, and ordinary waxed or sand(!)-covered writing-boards in Antiquity, the latter might also be considered as proto-divinatory and perhaps also proto-ludic.

texts in which to interpret the specific forms and imagery of both mankala and geomancy, and thus suggests a base-line beyond which we do not have to seek for historical clues and geographical connections.[609] The fundamental image of mankala is that of a series of a few (p) parallel lines on the ground, with a number (q) of demarcated and transformed spaces defined along each line (normally q >> p); identical elements are inserted and withdrawn from each of these spaces according to a fixed routine which yet invites human strategy and planning. In the existing literature, little attention has been paid to the imagery of mankala, except from a few references to cattle,[610] as if the holes are cattle kraals and the elements heads of cattle. In view of the basic two Neolithic situations outlined above: agriculture and animal husbandry, such an interpretation has a certain appeal, although it is difficult to imagine adjacent kraals whose contents undergo such rapid redistributions all the time – a game-board depicting a number of non-adjacent kraal in combination with a more clearly recognisable representation of practices of cattle raiding or the circulation of cattle in a context of marriage payments would be more convincing. On the other hand, if the holes are considered to be agricultural fields fewer difficulties arise. The parcelling up of a local area in adjacent yet separately worked and administered fields, surrounding a localised community whose ritual unity is expressed by a shrine or temple, a cemetery, a megalithic structure, *etc.* – a community whose main *raison d'etre* may well have been to pool resources not only against outside attack but also against internal food shortages – fits the Neolithic archaeological record (and the form and rules of mankala) fairly well. It also has a link with the iconography of early agricultural communities, in whose representations a grid-like pattern not unlike a mankala board is a recurrent feature, even although we may not assume the correspondence to be everywhere as neat as in the major earliest forms of human writing: Sumerian (South Mesopotamian), Egyptian and Chinese writing, in all of which such a pattern indeed signifies 'field'.[611] The grid-like pattern is admittedly extremely simple and

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[609] Since this was first written, Irving Finkel kindly drew my attention to archaeological finds corroborating my hypothesis as to the Neolithic context of mankala: Anonymous 1990; Rollefson 1992.

[610] *E.g.* Townshend 1976-77: 93. Townshend's point 1979b that, contrary to structural-functional theoretical pronouncements, *cf.* Roberts *et al.* 1959, board-games do occur among pastoralists, is well taken. By the same token, pastoral societies have been found, *cf.* Long 1977, to display a marked propensity for divination, perhaps associated with the need to identify stray animals, perhaps also related to the vast geographical space in which their productive ecology revolves.

[611] *Cf.* van Binsbergen 2010: 224 *f.*, *n.* 10 (slightly edited so as to apply the Shortened Harvard format of referencing):

'In the most archaic Sumerian writing (c. 3000 BCE) the agricultural field was simply represented by a rectangle divided by vertical lines: the image of a field divided by irrigation ditches: ⊞⊞⊞⊞. In the subsequent archaic script (Borger 1978 character no. 105 I) this was only slightly transformed into: ⊞⊞, which ultimately led to the standard character (no. 105 I (77); Borger 1978: 87): ⊞. Similarly, in Chinese ([Wei 1995 /

hence has such ubiquity[612] as may well defy any convincing systematic and con-
verging interpretation by reference to productive and community patterns.

Yet here, I stubbornly think, may be the ultimate origin of the layout of the
mankala board. It remains of course to be ascertained whether (in line with the
hypotheses propounded here) all grid-like representations unearthed by ar-
chaeology, are indeed Neolithic or later; in principle that would already be
highly unlikely, since also Palaeolithic techniques like weaving and basket-
making suppose or produce grid-like patterns; but perhaps these patterns can
yet be demonstrated to be qualitatively different from those referring to agri-
culture. In geomancy, the husbandry angle hardly seems promising, and one
would see the many variations of the 'art of drawing lines in the sand' as pri-
marily an evocation of the several transformations of space through which the
environment is turned into a productive field, through demarcation, clearing,
ploughing, irrigation perhaps, and harvesting. Significantly, whatever departure
from more original forms we encounter, there is always the link with the soil: if
the divination no longer takes place on the actual ground but in a miniature
representation, such as the square (!) West African divining-board, then at least
its bottom has to be filled with sand; if the soil imagery has been almost en-
tirely abandoned and the system reduced to the fall of four tablets, these are at
least cast upon the soil, typically a soil which is transformed by covering it with
a sacred cloth or skin. I think it is highly significant that the Southern African
diviner consacrates his newly-made, virgin divination tablets and renders them
potent primarily by burying them, for up to a few days, in a fresh grave or un-
derneath a busy pathway, thus allowing them to absorb chthonian powers and
the related powers of the dead; and in daily practice the same diviner usually
begins a session by smacking down onto the soil, with great relish, the bag con-
taining his tablets – thus calling the chthonian spirits including his ancestors.
Especially in West Africa divination offers many converging examples of grid-
based procedures. One instance is jackal divination (Griaule 1937; Paulme 1937),
where in the evening the soil is divided according to a rectangular grid in order
to be able to inspect, in the morning, if and how a jackal has disturbed the sur-
face in that grid. Another examples concerns the harvest ritual as described by
Pâques (1964), and which is locally depicted exactly as if it were a three-row

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]1988,] (...) Beijing), the character for 'field' is: 田, which as a radical occurs in a great
many expressions, *e.g.* in the expression signifying 'man' ('agriculturalist'), later stan-
dardised as 男; such a representation of 'field' is already attested in the most archaic
Chinese writing on seals and oracle bones (2nd mill. BCE), as: 𡠽 (Needham with
Wang Ling 1956, II p. 226). In Egyptian hieroglyphic, the oblong grid: 𓈉 has the
cognate meaning of 'district', 'administered land area' – which was translated in Greek
as νόμος *nómos*; Faulkner 1962: 54, 178 and *passim*; Gardiner 1957: sign N24 p. 488.'

[612] *E.g.* in rock art, *e.g.* Breuil *c.s.* 1954, vessel decoration, tattooing patterns, *cf.* Marcy 1931,
textile decoration *etc.*

mankala board, with small piles of grain deposited as sacrificial offerings in the middle of each square cell, *i.e.* each field. In addition to an actual description of a mankala-type game (1964: 91), Pâques also presents (1964: 83) intriguing diagrams of patterns of irrigation in arid circum-Saharan communities, which almost read as descriptions of mankala.

Fig. 14.6. An Ifa divining board, acquired at Cotonou, Benin, 2002 (author's collection), and probably dating from the early 20ᵗʰ c. CE. Cowry shells are cast on the board's central rectangle which is lined with powdered white kaolin, and the four-lines geomantic symbol (each consisting of a dot or a line) is determined by the number of shells which, in four successive throws, appear with their aperture up (dot), or down (line).

14.4. Models of time

At this point the specific historical analysis of African geomancy and mankala can only begin, but our initial exploration has yielded enough to make the present argument a fitting contribution to the collection on time and temporality for which it was originally written. In conclusion, let us examine, the modelling of *time* in the context of these African formal systems.

If time is miniaturised and transformed within the divinatory session and the

board-game, so that the reality outside the modelled session appears, to the client, as better understood and more easily confronted and manipulated, we should proceed and try to define in what specific ways this feat is brought about. *What is the temporal structure of the session? And how does the session's time relate to the time of everyday life, in the many African cultures in which these formal systems occur?*

These two questions are fundamental to my argument. Before trying to offer even tentative answers, let me remind the reader that in this Chapter I have adopted an external position which abstracts rigorously from the specific cultural forms and signifying practices such as exist in each of the many local African cultures involved. I have done so in order to bring out such formal characteristics as board-games and divination systems have in common across the continent. I am cultivating a distance which contrasts awkwardly and even painfully with my first-hand and intensive involvement, in the course of several decades, in a limited number of narrowly localised African situations – my main inspiration as an anthropologist and intercultural philosopher. Yet I feel justified in this stance because, as I have pointed out, the formalism of these systems demonstrably does not historically spring from present-day local African cultures, and is transferred and largely retained across cultural and linguistic boundaries on the African continent. Thus as an analyst I am tempted here to formalise without much reference to specific cultural contents such as could be mediated by African actors in the course of discussions and interviews, as their explicit comments on ludic and divinatory sessions. Perhaps this approach will ultimately wreck the entire argument, for, whatever their formal characteristics, these systems can only function and acquire meaning in specific local cultural settings; at any rate, what remains is the necessity to go back to the African actors and submit the argument to them for comments and criticism.

Even at the formal level, can we try to be more specific as to the structure of time as presented in geomantic divination and board-games?

Much as the two formal systems may be historically related, on the surface they are rather different and should be approached separately. The temporal structure of the mankala game can be summarised as follows:

- There is a well-defined beginning and end.

- From an initial balance (where both players have the same number of counters) there is, through all the moves and counter-moves of the two players (and a game typically involves 'many' such moves: a few score at least), the gradual development towards a decisive imbalance, where one player defeats the other by taking all the counters.

- While the game is on, players impose upon their next few moves the temporal organisation of short-term strategies, but at any one mo-

ment in the game except towards the end, the overall odds are only dimly perceived by all but the most expert players: the strategies are short-lived eddies of purpose in an encompassing flow of largely uncontrolled and unknown 'destiny'.

- To the extent to which time is measured by spatial pointers (and empirical manifestations of time are invariably in terms of spatial displacement, in African formal systems as well as in all other situations), the appearance of the game is strikingly repetitive: not only do the players meticulously take turns, also an ever-changing number of pointers keeps being redistributed, by simple acts of collecting in one's hand, and dishing out one by one, among the same limited number of cups as arranged in two to four rows, so that the centre of action keeps racing around and around the gaming board.

- Both in time and in space the session as well as the physical gaming board are incorporated within a far less structured, and unbounded, domain of events: 'everyday life'.

- This description makes it clear that the temporal structure of the game is complex, ambiguous, dynamic, opaque. It cannot be readily reduced to only one of the three popular formulae of linearity, circularity and punctuality which have haunted the philosophical and anthropological literature on time and which are increasingly penetrating the African intellectual discourse on time.[613] In fact, all three forms of temporality occur at the same time, in an admixture which may well constitute one of the basic characteristics of the mankala family of games, as well as the main reason for their virtually ubiquitous distribution and appeal on the African continent. The game is not only a time machine, it is a time symphony, and it amounts to a practical philosophy of time.

A similar case could be made with regard to the divination session (*cf.* van Binsbergen 1994, 1995b). Against the diffuse and unbounded structure of everyday life is offset the session's structured temporal format, with a clear beginning and end, and with a sequential temporal structure where question-throw-verbal interpretation-question-throw *etc.* succeed each other up to about forty times. And while a suggestion of linearity is offered by the session's progress from initial distress and lack of insight towards final revelation, redress and remedy, this is accompanied by themes of circularity: the fusing of references to past, present and future persons and events, the dead's continued action in the world of the living, and their reincarnation there. Here again we have to recognise the fact that the temporal structure of the divinatory session consists in a subtle combination of all three major modes of conceptualising time as can be

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[613] *Cf.* Mbiti 1990; Adjaye 1994; Wiredu 1995 / 1996.

distinguished analytically. This is why the divination session constitutes the minimal ritual *par excellence* (Werbner 1989); in fact, much of what I have said about divination applies to ritual in general, and suggests that ritual, much like the music that often accompanies it (Zuckerkandl 1963), is a form of time art.

This takes me to my final point. The argument in this Chapter suggests that the board-game and the divination session are not just alternative, parallel ways of dealing with time. They are not merely complementary to whatever may exist in the way of a conceptualisation of time in African everyday life; alongside the latter they are the opposite of being unnecessary, playful, virtual. On the contrary, I submit that as implicit models of time the conceptual effects of these formal systems and the 'virtual' experience they engender, shades over onto everyday life. Here they provide some of the few available conceptualisations of time within the local culture. Starting out as models of everyday temporality, they turn around and breed a more structured sense of temporality in their own right. Thus they seem to provide the experimental grounds upon which a structured time sense is tested out and from which it may be extended so as to temporally restructure experiences in everyday life.

Our two formal systems never provide the only models of tempolarity, of course. I have already pointed at ritual as a more general related category. Obviously myth is another domain that comes to mind; it provides its own time machines, but not for the miniaturisation of time but for its inflation beyond human scale. A further model of temporality is offered by kinship, with its sequentiality of generations and (in most rural settings) the projection of the latter's dwellings and wider localised social groups onto the space of the local landscape. And kinship in itself often offers conceptual models for political organisation even in the total absence of biological clues; here the classic example is Evans-Pritchard's (1967 / 1940: 94 *f.*) famous chapter on 'Time and space' in *The Nuer*. Kingship, with a genealogical sequence of dynastic identity over time, and the narrative celebration of human achievement through legend and charter, offers a further temporal model for societies which, contrary to the acephalous type like the Nuer's, are organised around formal and enduring leadership. And perhaps the most significant set of time models on the African continent is to be found in healing rituals, of which divination incidentally forms an integral part, and which make selective and transformative use of the various time models available in the local culture.

Yet among all these and possibly other models of temporality in African cultures, the exceptionally abstract, formal nature of geomantic divination and mankala board-games makes them particularly illustrative, and effective, as local modes of implicit philosophising about time.

Chapter 15

Does African divination 'work', and if so, how it is this possible?

Divination as a puzzle in intercultural epistemology

If the completed manuscript of my book Tears of Rain (ultimately published as van Binsbergen *1992b) had not disappeared from the house where I was living during field-work in Francistown, Botswana, 1988-1989, I had never taken the step of extending my field-work on divination and healing beyond my habitual, distancing and objectifying stance as a religious anthropologist. However, submitting to one of the principal local diviners' ministrations in an attempt to find out how my manuscript could have disappeared and to exonerate a likely suspect, I became a client and soon an apprentice of the regional* sangoma *cult. Two years later I graduated as a fully-fledged* sangoma *diviner-healer-priest, and six years later I had relinguished my Amsterdam chair in the Anthropology of Ethnicity, and acceded to the Rotterdam Chair of Foundations of Intercultural Philosophy. Divination was at the root of a major career shift in my life, and of the present book. In many of its Chapters, the empirical grounding which the book's title promises is specifically found, surprisingly, in the field of divination and its distribution inside and outside Africa. While thus studying divination, I came to concentrate more and more on transcontinental continuities in remote global cultural history. However, to make p h i l o s o p h y proper of divination proved another matter, initially well above my theoretical and epistemological powers. I made a first attempt in Chapter 7 of my* Intercultural Encounters *(2003b), and revisited the philosophical implications of my experiences as a diviner in the context of the International Conference 'Realities re-viewed / revealed: Divination in sub-Saharan Africa – Realités revues / revélées: Divination en Afrique sub-saharienne', where I had been honoured to speak as one of the two key-note speakers. The empirical overview I provided in that connection is out of place in the present book (cf. van Binsbergen 2013), but the epistemological argument is repeated here.*

15.1. How has it been possible that African divination survived?

> εἴη δ' ἂν καὶ ἐπιστήμη τις ἐλπιστική, καθάπερ τινές φασι τὴν μαντικήν
> 'and indeed there might be actually a science of expectation, like that of divination, in which some believe' (Aristotle, *De Memoria et Reminiscentia*, I 449b 5, Aristoteles 1831, *ed*. Bekker, English tr. McKeon, Aristotle 2001a: 607).

Throughout sub-Saharan Africa, and despite the onslaught of such world religions as Islam and Christianity, of formal education, of modern health care, and of other conspicuous manifestations of modern global science, divination is still alive and kicking as the dominant first-line diagnostic and therapeutic idiom frequented by the uneducated poor but also resorted to in times of crisis by the educated and powerful elites. Hence the study of African divination has of old constituted a core industry of African Studies, and has gone through a revival in recent decades.[614]

How can divination survive, and even go through a process of resilience, especially in societies in the process of modern, electronic globalisation? Most African clients of diviners would tend to give more or less the following answer:

> 'because divination allows the diviner to see through space and time, and thus to assist the client in the latter's predicament'.

Most anthropologists, however (following an approach initiated by Evans-Pritchard 1937 / 1972), would give a very different answer:

- Divination survives, not because it has any justified claim to veridicity (it has emphatically not), but because it produces local meaning and even truth, and it does so tautologically (as any detailed analysis of diviner-client communication would reveal), in such a way that error and sleight-of-hand are seldom found out by the actors themselves'. For instance, one of the most perceptive non-African students of African divination has been William Bascom. In one of his earliest publications on Ifa, he believed he had found the key to the impression of veridicity Ifa divination creates in the average client. It is an answer that most anthropologists would find inherently convincing, and that can be summarised in the following terms: In divination, the specific dynamics of interpersonal

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[614] *Cf.* Devisch 2008; Peek 1991; van Beek & Peek 2013; Winkelman & Phillip Peek 2005; Pemberton III 2000; Karp & Bird 1987. These publications also look back at the splendid tradition of African divination studies, including such names as Junod 1925, 1927 / 1962; Evans-Pritchard 1937 / 1972; Griaule 1937; Trautmann 1939-1940; Bascom 1969; Maupoil 1943; Hébert 1961; Turner 1975; Werbner 1973; Rodrigues de Areia 1985; and many others – including (in an examplary trend of the localisation and de-hegemonisation of global knowledge production more and more African scholars, such as Eze 1993; Traoré 1979; Kassibo 1992; Mendonsa 1982; Oluwole 1998; Uyanne 1994; Ogbaa 1992; Adedeji; Abimbola 1975; Abimbola & Hallen 1993; Ajayi 1992; Sekoni 1992; Aromolaran 1992; Bewaji 1992.

communication between client and diviner fully account for what-ever (apparent) truth the diviner's pronouncements turn out to contain, so as the make any counter-paradigmatic recourse to the extrasensory, paranormal transfer of knowledge unnecessary.

> 'Mr. Clarke implies that it is the diviner who determines which of the several verses associated with each figure is appropriate to the client's problem. Had he realized that it is not the diviner, but the client, who does the selecting, it might have been possible for him to explain the accuracy of the diviner's predictions in more realistic terms than "telepathy" or "hyperesthesia." On the other hand, Clarke is one of the very few writers to make the important point that if they (the diviners) are honest we must exclude the hypothesis that, through their associates, they inquire into the affairs of their clients and thus know the probable subject of an inquiry and are enabled to prescribe the measures which should be taken.' (Bascom 1942: 251)

- Meanwhile the most common anthropological explanation of divination remains the following:

> *Divination survives, not because it has any justified claim to veridicity (it has not), but because it negotiates existential crises and intra-community conflict, and hence offers an essential social service, regardless of the inherent truth of the divinatory pronouncements.*

While these two explanations satisfy the common sense of anthropologists and their readers, they do not do justice to the common sense of African diviners and their clients. The discussion is an old one: how can the scientific knowledge we produce as students of African divination live up to its promise of being revelatory and liberating, if it is predicated (like so much in religious anthropology has always been) on the denial of the experiential and mental competence of the people we study (van Binsbergen 2003b)? Thus we may prepare ourselves for a counter-paradigmatic exploration: one that, from an epistemological point of view, calls into question the very rationality on which anthropologist's scientific approaches to African divination are based.[615]

15.2. African material divination as procedural, inter-subjective, objectified knowledge production

I submit that what distinguishes *scientific* knowledge production from nearly

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[615] For clarity's sake I will concentrate on the case of *material* divination, *i.e.* when the diviner does not rely on the altered states of consciousness typical of the dream and the trance, but uses a material apparatus (at the heart of which is a random generator), whose specific outcomes, each clearly marked as different, are systematically interpreted by reference to an inter-subjective catalogue of divinatory meanings.

all other forms of knowledge production, is primarily a matter of *procedure*. By a commonly-held conception, the truth of a scientific statement resides in the explicit, intersubjective procedure (method, in other words) through which that knowledge has been produced. The same emphasis on intersubjective procedure as the decisive basis for valid knowledge production is, however, found in the arts of the diviner and the healer, the astrologer (even though it is most unlikely – *pace* such modern affirmative studies as I cite in van Binsbergen 2003b: 254 – that there is an actual, objective connection between individual human fate, and the apparent position of selected, minor celestial bodies as projected onto the ecliptic at a given moment of time), the metallurgist (even when seeking alchemical gold), the navigator (even when looking for a non-existent Eldorado), *etc.* These specialisms are now found all over the world. The oldest texts at our disposal documenting such specialisms derive from the Ancient Near East over four thousand years ago. They are expressions, not so much of traditional wisdom (although they may contain lessons to negotiate the practical difficulties of life), but of protoscience. The hallmark of such procedures is that *knowledge appears as the necessary implication attending an intersubjectively (professionally, often) recognised limiting condition whose occurrence is implied to be not unique but repetitive, so that a standard rule can be established:*

'if the lob of the liver turns out to be darkened, then...', (Ancient Mesopotamia; cf. Bottéro 1974; Jeyes 1989)

'if the goddess Aphrodite ♀ (*i.e.* the planet Venus) and the god Ares ♂ (*i.e.* the planet Mars) are in conjunction in the heavens, then...' (Ancient Greece; *cf.* Bouché-Leclercq 1879; Tester 1987)

'if the chick's gut turns out to have black spots, then...' (Guinea-Bissau, author's field notes 1983)

'if the patient displays a insuppressible urge to dance to the singing tune peculiar to Sidi Mḥ·ammad but remains indifferent to the tunes of other local saints, then...'. (Tunisia, author's field notes 1968)

'if the patient displays a insuppressible urge to dance to the singing tune peculiar to a particular invisible possession agent (*e.g. Bituma, Moba, Mwendapanci, Bindele, etc.*) but remains indifferent to the tunes of other such agents, then...'. (Zambia, author's field notes 1972; the striking parallel with the previous item, across a distance of over 5,000 km, is deliberate, accurate, and no mistake)

'if the throw of the *Hakata* divination tablets brings up the tablets *Kwame* and *Shilume* face up ⬒ ⬓, but the tablets *Lingwana* and *Ntakwala* face down ▨ ▨, then...' (Botswana, author's field notes 1989).

The art of the African diviner-healer usually – if he or she relies on material divination and not exclusively on trance and visions – includes specific technical procedures (*cf.* Shelton 1965), which are well-defined, managed and transmitted among the specialist owners of such wisdom. In Southern Africa these procedures are considered to be highly objectified and intersubjective, and they are administered by guilds of diviners which (ever since the lifting of the colonial ban on divination, at Independence) work together with the national government concerning the issuing of diviners' licences; any novice diviner-healer

aspiring a state-recognised licence (which is good for competition in a declining esoteric market, but whose main attraction lies in the fact that it offers protection in case of client fatalities) is tested by a committee of senior diviners other than his or her own teacher(s). Such divination is largely procedural, determined by the specific conventionalised interpretations of conditions defined by explicit limiting conditions, of the type:

'if ..., then...'.

If they were in fact so determined for the full 100%, such formal procedures would in principle produce (proto-)scientific knowledge. However, to the extent to which the implication triggered by the limiting condition (for instance: '...then the king will die') in reality – under the regime of truth construction that informs our modern North Atlantic / global science – can only be said to be totally unrelated to the limiting condition, such implications are false and such science can, under the dominant scientific paradigm, only be called pseudo-science.[616] On the other hand, if the diviner-healer's lay client (and often the diviner-healer himself) consciously finds that he believes in the diviner-healer's pronouncements, this is so not only on the basis of the latter's authority (as in wisdom knowledge), but also and particularly because of the client's belief in the objective infallibility attributed to the divinatory procedures followed, as patent truth-producing techniques of a repetitive, objectifying, technical nature. *We are left with a puzzle, an* aporia, *for if the material instruments of divination (e.g. four tablets, a collection of bones or figurines, the chance traces left by nocturnal visitors from the animal kingdom, the painstakingly calculated chart of the position of planets at a particular place and time) are strictly applied in accordance with the rules, which formally do not leave any degrees of freedom, they could not – under today's global scientific assumptions – possibly produce veridical divination. Yet they do, in my experience.*

Two different solutions present themselves at this juncture. The first is in line with the mainstream anthropological approaches to divination, the second is in defiance of such approaches.

15.3. The mainstream solution: African divination as normal wisdom production beyond strict procedure

My first solution to our epistemological puzzle is that in fact the procedures are *not* strictly followed, and cannot be. Every divinatory outcome displays what

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[616] As today's astrology is justifiably called pseudo-science today (Popper 1959 / 1935, although 3,000 years ago it was in the forefront of (proto-)science, and less than 300 years ago it was still taught at West European universities. Probably, and hopefully, the paroxysms of today's science (the theory of relativity, quantum mechanisms, and neurobiology) will end up as pseudo-sciences within a few centuries, to be replaced by even better science...

the divination specialist Werbner (1973) has called

> 'the superabundance of understanding':

there is never just one clue but there are always several, and these are always more or less incompatible and contradictory.

For instance, in Southern African four-tablet divination,[617] every fall of the four tablets (and with back and front of each tablet being marked as different there are $2^4 = 16$ different outcomes possible, which are coded as sixteen different named configurations) can be interpreted in very complex ways. In addition to the polysemic semantic connotations of the configuration's name, a general abstract meaning and a standard interpretation, all three of which are also hinted at in the conventional praise proper to each of the sixteen configurations, there are several dimensions that may or may not be implied and activated whenever a particular configuration comes up in the course of a divination session: ancestors, the body, witchcraft, generations, social relations, property, and the animal world. Together these dimensions form what has been called a correlative system (Fiskejo 2000), that in fact encompasses the entire world and all human experiences. The conventionalised praise texts are ambiguous and dark, just like the pronouncements of the Delphi oracle in Ancient Greece,[618] or those of the dominant Chinese wisdom oracle known as 易經 *I Ching / yì jīng* (Legge 1993).

By the same token, a full astrological theme ('horoscope') in the Near Eastern, Graeco-Roman, or South Asian traditions (which are historically closely interdependent, *cf.* Pingree 1978) is an array of immense complexity. The astrologer has to take into account all the possible so called 'aspects' (in degrees, with each cohort of degrees having its own conventional *benefic* or *malefic* connotations), with very specific meanings and elaborate correlative correspondences – of colour, musical tone, geographical location, gender, mood, moral quality, *etc.*, each of which very specific to each of the various planets, zodiacal signs, astrological houses, and several secondarily constructed astrological points. Invariably, what the diviner ends up with is a bundle of contradictory and incompatible associations from which simply not one unequivocal outcome can ever result, *unless through drastic selection and weighing* i.e. *by sleight-of-hand (even if performed in good faith)*. Therefore, the diviner simply engages in the production, not of scientific procedural truth, but in the production of manageable, interpersonally relevant and practically applicable *wisdom*. In doing so, the diviner will juggle the abundance of clues, many of them mutually contradictory, which the oracular procedures provide in combination with the diviner's background knowledge of

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[617] See (via the General Index) the various treatments of this topic throughout the present book, with references.

[618] *Cf.* Andersen 1987; Berve 1949; Dempsey 1918; Fontenrose 1978; Holland 1933; Maass 1993; Maurizio 1995; May 1968; Parke & Wormell 1956; Robbins 1916.

the client and of the latter's situation, and pressing all the loose ends into an increasingly coherent complex narrative, which (due to the intensive interaction between diviner and client during the session) the client will increasingly recognise as revealing and as relevant, and to whose articulation the client herself or himself often makes major contributions. Thus the diviner can be said to work along lines that are not essentially different from the creative skills (of selective synthesis and massaging over contradictions, and rhetorical persuasiveness) allowing a scholar to produce a convincing and publishable textual argument.

In the process, the diviner makes intensive use of the multi-interpretability and of the degrees of freedom which the oracular apparatus provides. Yet at the same time he derives his own authority from the fact that he can nonetheless let this sleight-of-hand pass as the immutable, unequivocal, authoritative outcome of technical oracular procedures. We may suspect that the authority attributed to such divination is already predicated upon a proto-scientific wider context, where (even in the eyes of the individual lay client, having somehow adopted the specialists' proto-scientific outlook) it is procedures rather than supernatural authority that produce oracular truth. But even though the diviner and the client believe that the oracular pronouncements are compellingly determined by the strict application of the intersubjective, standard oracular procedures, *in fact they are not*. From complexity and contradiction, via techniques of negotiation, weighing and selection, to meaningful pronouncement – this is the path of wisdom, not of science. *What the diviner does, is (a) the production of unique, bricolaged practical wisdom under the disguise of (b) the production of systematic and unassailable knowledge by means of repetitive standard procedures that enhance the authority of his pronouncements*.

15.4. The radical alternative solution: African divination as paranormal, veridical knowledge production

The second solution is more radical, and more to my liking.[619]

As a social scientist, historian and philosopher, who for decades has studied religious and ethnic ideologies in modern Africa, I know full well that collective representations, and the practices based thereupon, need not be *true* in order to survive – all that is needed is that they are endowed with social power by being socially instituted; and we have already stressed the highly institutional nature of African divination as one of its major structural characteristics. So let us admit that the survival of divination is not *proof* of its veridicity. Yet I wish to defy the mainstream solution, and insist on the fact that divination often has

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[619] Also *cf.* my long footnote 74 on the Assyriologist Temple, divination and extraterrestrials, in the Introduction above.

a qualified, limited, yet justified claim to veridicity; as such it does produce enough truth that is verifiable to the client, so as to lend redeeming authority to the rest of the diviner's therapeutic revelations (and by thus constructing an apparent touch-stone that is firm and apparently true, the diviner adds authority to *all* aspects of his diagnosis and healing, which thus become reassuring and illuminating to the client to the extent of healing the latter's predicament). In other words, the clients are to a certain extent acting rationally in taking divination seriously. Although I understand (and use, as a diviner) the technique of picking a client's mind surreptitiously by ordinary (including non-verbal) communication methods, my years of work as a practicing diviner have convinced me that part of what the client experiences as oracular truth, is often in fact just that, and is based on knowledge not explicitly and verbally shared with the diviner, but acquired by the latter through extra-sensory means.

Philosophers, epistemologists, psychologists and physicists have given much thought to the possibility or impossibility of paranormal knowledge. Motivated in part by a healthy dislike of charlatans, ignoramuses and naïve *New Age* dreamers, the powerful and vocal Skeptic Movement, especially in the USA, with several Nobel-Prize laureates among its members (*cf.* Bok *et al.* 1975), seeks to discredit all suggestions to the effect that the world may be more complex and less mechanicistic than assumed in the materialist, optimistic days of scientism, from the late 18th to the early 20th c. CE. Considering the epistemological and political naïvety of many present-day Skeptics, their close links with the military, political and industrial establishment of the North Atlantic region, and the fact that the science they blindly defend has become the central legitimating force in the modern, post-religious world (Foucault 1969), their strong opposition can only be an additional reason for us to take a different view from theirs in regard of divination. Like the ancient astrologers, the Skeptics show uncritical allegiance to a form of scientific rationality that, far from being manifestly universal and eternal, is instead specific in space and time, and that, despite the power and legitimacy with which that specific form is invested in their own time and age, can only – by the very nature of science – be expected to be recognised as obsolete in the very near future.

In the Western philosophical tradition, the philosophy of mind has faced aporias for a number of reasons:

- the heritage of Platonic / early Christian / Cartesian body-mind dualism (critiqued by, among many others, Ryle 1949, and now no longer accepted by most modern philosophers);

- well-known but difficult to avoid pitfalls of the 'other minds' problem;[620]

- the Western stress on the concept of the individual, undivided self – conceived not as a socio-cultural construct peculiar to a particular

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[620] Bilgrami 1993 and references cited there.

> time and place, but as a self-evident given of the human condition in
> general – as the central cosmological and ontological entity.

The latter point claims that it is impossible for minds to communicate directly
with one another, leaving only the indirect transmission of mental contents via
material signs (including speech) received through the senses. Such an indi-
vidualistic and atomistic conception of the mind, whilst a basic tenet informing
most publicly mediated secular and religious thought today, leads us into some
difficulty, since *the actual direct communication between minds (as implied in
the ideas of divination, precognition, and telepathy) is, at the subjective level,
simply an everyday experience to many people from all cultural orientations,
wherever in the world, and all times*. Admittedly, neuroscience (as touched upon
above) allows us to construe such experiences as illusory and offers an explana-
tion as to why they should occur at the subjective level; however, most African
worldviews offer totally different explanations. Are these obviously wrong?

Philosophers have given some attention to (the claim of the existence of) para-
normal phenomena.[621] An authoritative synthetic overview of the vast empirical
evidence for paranormal phenomena, in the face of the Skeptics movement, is
offered by Dean Radin (1997, with extensive bibliography). Radin holds a PhD in
physics. One of his further contributions to this field was that, together with R.D.
Nelson, he persuaded an authoritative, mainstream physics journal to publish a
discussion of nearly a thousand cases of consciousness-related anomalies in ran-
dom physical systems, *e.g.* computers whose internal functioning was demon-
strably (*e.g.* in the production of what should have been random numbers)
influenced by the presence of humans seeking to systematically influence these
electronic process mentally without any demonstrable material contact (Radin &
Nelson 1989). If modern physics can seriously consider the question (which ad-
mittedly is very different from positive affirmation) whether digital random
generators can deliberately be tilted out of randomness by sheer human con-
sciousness actively mobilised for that purpose, then students of African divina-
tion systems must be prepared to entertain the same question for the random
generators that are at the heart of African systems of material divination, even
though these happen to be analogous instead of digital. The point is very rele-
vant, for as divination sessions using the four-tablet oracle develop (in interplay
between diviner and client, where they take turns in throwing the tablets and
where the diviner, in his comments to throw after throw, progressively weaves an
increasingly detailed, relevant, and coherent story explaining the client's pre-
dicament and its remedy) the diviner is professionally supposed (by his profes-
sional peers) to be able to throw, at a crucial point in the session, precisely that

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[621] *E.g.*, Eisenbud 1982; Brier 1974; Mundle 1964; Grim 1990; Bonin 2001; Jung & Pauli 1971; Broad
1953 / 1969; Oesterreich 1921; Wheatley & Edge 1976. I have elsewhere discussed these themes in
connection with my work as a diviner (van Binsbergen 2003b), presenting what I consider re-
markable indications of the four-tablet oracle's veridicity.

particular one of the sixteen combinations that happens to best fit the evolving narrative. Many diviners claim they can, and my personal experience as a diviner is that I, too, prove often capable of influencing the complex random generator that a set of four hand-held wooden pieces constitutes, and of thus producing the required combination – not by any conscious training in sleight-of-hand that I am aware of, but by what I take to be semi-conscious and not particularly *willed* psychokinesis.

A fundamental insight from quantum mechanics is that there is no objective reality out there waiting patiently and immutably to undergo the probing of our measuring instruments. Instead,

  1. the human observing subject,
  2. the measuring instrument, and
  3. the world at large

are inextricably caught in the clutches of collusion, *so that each of these three terms produces the other two in the most literal sense*. This may well be the mainstream, state-of-the art physics basis for what I have experienced as a di-viner-cum-scientist numerous times: *depending on what face we turn to reality, reality will encounter us accordingly*:

  • as a world in which veridical divination is not only thinkable but be-comes a reality, if we approach that world with our diviner's mind set and trained skills, and dressed in full diviner's regalia;

  • or, alternatively, as a world in which veridical divination (or other paranormal feats of the types claimed by African ritual and thera-peutic specialists) remains merely a figment of the imagination and cannot be produced under controlled experimental conditions, if we approach it objectifyingly – with the white coat and the measuring instruments of modern North Atlantic / global natural science.[622]

There is no saying how many more modalities the infinite, ultimately divine, possibilities of the universe may put before us (us, as the privileged self-reflective exponents of that universe, both belonging to it and capable, by our very powers of discursive thought, to dissociate from it).

Anthropologists working on African divination and trance often have similar phenomena to report which seem to go against the dominant, 'Skeptical' natural-science paradigms of today's globalising world culture under North Atlantic hegemony.

It must be emphasised that there are huge epistemological and methodological difficulties inherent in such claims of extrasensory and otherwise paranormal

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[622] This is precisely why the Skeptics will always have it their way in the sense that no scientific proof under the kind of laboratory circumstances they would insist on, can ever be offered of the very phe-nomena that are common-place in the diviner's art when performed in its own congenial setting.

phenomena in the African context.[623] On the other hand, contrary to what most modernist Skeptics, and their lay parrots, seem to realise, the mainstream physics theory of *non-locality as an aspect of quantum mechanics* does provide a convincing theoretical basis for the possibility of such paranormal phenomena.[624]

Since such insights, in locally encoded cultural forms, are common-place in many African contexts but repressed from public circulation (especially among non-specialists) in the post-Enlightenment North Atlantic region, *paranormal phenomena may be argued to constitute a domain where the truth claims of African knowledge producers are not just valid within the local African space of culturally-created self-evidence, but may deserve to be globally mediated as a statement of a challenging transcultural truth, an alternative to current collective representations in the West*. Yet most anthropologists with such experiences hide in anthropology's mainstream explanations that make the diviner merely a skilful manipulator of plain sensory information derived from the client or the community at large. Of course, there is no denying the ordinary psychology of the interpersonal information flow, by virtue of which clients often sensorially transmit information to diviner-healers without the client being aware of this, thus allowing the diviner-healer to spuriously claim paranormal sources of knowledge. Yet I have grown convinced that these normal processes of communication, coupled with the techniques of trans-individual sensitivity that one is taught as an African divinatory and therapeutic specialist, create fertile grounds also for non-sensory forms of knowledge transmission.

Such transmission is eminently accounted for in the worldview of African wisdom. In the Southern African divinatory idiom, extrasensory production of what appears to be valid knowledge is explained by the (in that cultural context) self-evident intercession of possessing or guiding ancestors. A West African alternative view is contained in the local philosophy of mind, such as articulated by Gyekye and Wiredu, for instance, in their rendering of the ontology of the Akan ethnic and linguistic cluster in West Africa.[625] In the Akan version, individual minds are, as forms of what is locally called *sunsum*, considered to be semi-autonomously subsumed in a universal World Soul, *okra*, and it is this interconnectedness which eminently accounts for telepathy, precognition and veridical divination.[626]

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[623] Olivier de Sardan 1988; however, *cf.* from the African side: Hebga 1998; set in a wider framework by Amougou 2006, as discussed in Chapter 11 of the present book.

[624] *Cf.* Einstein *et al.* 1931, 1935; Bell 1964; Walker 1977; Bohm & Hiley 1993; Aerts 1985.

[625] *Cf.* Wiredu & Gyekye 1992; Gyekye 1995; Wiredu 1980. The accounts of these two philosophers of the Akan system do not completely match. *Cf.* Müller 2002, 2008.

[626] Of course, the idea of the World Soul is not limited to African worldviews as recorded in historical times. It is found in the literate, specialist traditions of the East and the West. The idea of the World Soul is associated with the concepts of Ātman आत्म / Brahman ब्रह्म in

Part of the problem here has been brought out by the philosopher of science Sandra Harding[627] in her critical writings (first from a feminist, then from a South, and intercultural-philosophical, perspective) about the extent to which dominant modern, North Atlantic but effectively globalised, science can yet be called an 'ethno-science', just as local and as limited as all other forms of systematic knowledge production found in the world today – including astrology, African divination, *etc.* Harding sets out by stating the case for the view that it is especially North Atlantic global hegemony that supports science's claims of being objective, rational, and universal. However, on closer analysis she yet sees no alternative but to admit, somewhat grudgingly, that this power constellation is not the only factor in rendering North Atlantic scientific knowledge valid. The validity of science, and hence the substantiation of its claims to objectivity, rationality and universality, are found by Harding to be largely based, after all, on internal epistemological and methodological conditions, that are in principle independent from power and hegemony in the modern world. *This means that the Skeptics, however unsympathetic we may find them and however much we may be tempted to accuse them of Eurocentric intellectual hegemonism, yet have a point:* not all types of knowledge production can lay a claim to truth,[628] and in the scientific realm such claims are recognised by reference to explicit, state-of-the-art epistemological procedures governing the method by which knowledge is generated and expressed. Modern science may deserve to be taken seriously, whereas divination (as the proto-science of a remote past of the same Western tradition) *by the same criteria* may no longer so deserve.

South Asian Advaita Vedanta अद्वैत वेदान्त philosophy as formulated by Ādi Śankara आदि शङ्कर (c. 800 CE). In the Western philosophical tradition, the idea of the World Soul is associated with such names as Herakleitos (*e.g.* fragment D. 22, A, 17; *cf.* Diels 1951-1952), Plato (*Timaeus*, 29 *f.*), the Stoics, Plotinus, the early St Augustine, the alchemical tradition from Late Antiquity onward; the idea of the World Soul re-surfaces again with Spinoza, Leibniz, Newton, Lessing, the Theosophical movement around 1900; and (on the borderland between philosophy, the life sciences and *New Age*) notably with Lovelock's *Gaia* hypothesis (1979). Considerable correspondences between (a) Akan and (b) classical Greek culture have been pointed out (*cf.* Graves 1964: I, 22 *f.*, inspired by Meyerowitz 1951, 1960, and Rattray 1923, 1927, and it is not impossible that one is indebted to the other, or that both (a) and (b) partially derive from a common African source (*cf.* Arnaiz-Villena *et al.* 2001. But whereas in the Western tradition the idea of the World Soul has become a specialist and minority idea without vital anchorage in popular collective representations, in West Africa it has been an expression of widely held traditional wisdom as recorded in the 19th and 20th centuries CE.

[627] Harding 1997, 1993; *cf.* van Binsbergen 2007, reprinted in the present book as Chapter 13; Harding & O'Barr 1987.

[628] Here I deliberately gloss over the Post-modern position according to which such truth-producing methods, however much steeped in explicit theories that are in line with a discipline's paradigm, are all, without exception, Grand Narratives to be distrusted – in other words, fantasies to be deconstructed, personal opinions to be argued and contradicted rhetorically and nothing more. All I can say in defence is, rather lamely, that I did not spend my whole life in the pursuit of science, to accept such relativism in the end; *cf.* above, pp. 37 *f.*

Still, this does not necessarily mean that the epistemological underpinnings of modern Western science make the latter *the only possible path to truth*. There could be alternative criteria that have been so far overlooked, and that the study of knowledge systems outside the North Atlantic may help us to identify. *Could African divination play such a sensitising role towards an intercultural epistemology?* Involving what would be 'irrational behaviour' from a naïve North Atlantic viewpoint, African divination systems activate the epistemological 'principle of charity'[629] to the effect that whatever others consider true, we may try to consider true as well, instead of simply dismissing it without serious reflection as to how and why others have come to their conviction, strikingly different from ours though it may be. African divination systems represent knowledge claims not supported in the North Atlantic (hegemonically global) mainstream popularised science (although they turn out to be supportable by state-of-the-art North Atlantic research into quantum mechanics, philosophy of mind, and parapsychology). Among these knowledge claims made by African divination systems, the one allowing non-sensory sources of knowledge appears to be the most striking. Perhaps by virtue of explicitly allowing non-sensory sources of knowledge (and thus creating a wider socio-cultural framework as well as a specialist environment where it is much easier to lower the threshold blocking out non-sensory sources of information), African divination systems occasionally make these knowledge sources work and, again occasionally, may produce valid knowledge even though such is impossible by North Atlantic standards. We are reminded of the fact that epistemological conventions, both in the North Atlantic science and in African divination systems, are to some extent not universal but local and one-sided, and that a greater truth, beyond North Atlantic hegemony, lies in the admission of the complementarity of knowledge production in different cultural traditions (*cf.* van Binsbergen 2008b / 2009b, reprinted in the present book as Chapter 16).

Finally, this qualified epistemological relativism (not the post-modernist denial of the possibility of truth, but the intercultural-philosophical admission of the equal rights of multiple, even contradictory truths, and the attempt to negotiate these contradictions by ways of practical wisdom that derive as much from Africa as from the North Atlantic) also constitutes a context for what would otherwise appear as contradictory: that in the present argument I have both lavishly employed the findings of state-of-the-art science (in genetics, linguistics, archaeology, and anthropology), whilst at the same time advocating an epistemological framework in which such science would have to tolerate, next to it, alternative forms of knowledge production with different, but equally valid, claims to truth.

In such a framework, the North Atlantic professor who becomes, and remains, a practising African diviner is no longer a desperate case of cultural and epistemo-

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[629] See chapter 1, above, p. 115.

logical self-denial, self-hatred, or lunacy; his is an attempt at intercultural humility and at a transcultural learning process, not just about one African culture specific in time and space, but about the human condition and the structure of the universe.

Chapter 16

Traditional wisdom: Its expressions and representations in Africa and beyond

Exploring intercultural epistemology

Taking our cue from Aristotle's influential distinction between theoretical and practical knowledge, in this Chapter wisdom is initially defined as creative practical knowledge that allows one to negotiate the pitfalls and contradictions of human life (especially in domains that are not tightly rule-governed, and that thus carry considerable uncertainty, ambivalence, and mutually incompatible multiple truths), and to accept both the social *nature of human life, and its finitude. After indicating the resilience of wisdom as a topic in modern thought and science (in such fields as the auto-critique of Western culture, globalisation, technological development, psychology and philosophy), a brief overview of wisdom in various periods and regions of the world is presented. The dilemma of expression in wisdom is highlighted: while scholarship thrives on specialist language use, wisdom is often secret and risks to be destroyed by both expression and translation. Next, a context for the appreciation of expressions of traditional wisdom is created by offsetting these against four modes of* 'tacit modern unwisdom', *in such fields as corporality, conflict regulation, the concept of mind, and myth. The next Section deals with the possibility of an intercultural transmission of wisdom, within and outside an academic context, and identifies the mechanism of situational oppositional framing that makes traditional wisdom both an alterised object of study and a site of identification and encounter. This Chapter's argument then proceeds to define the specific difference between scientific and wisdom modes of knowing, and sees this in the former's reliance on standard, repetitive, intersubjective procedures of knowledge formation embedded in limiting conditions. The four modes of tacit modern unwisdom are then contrasted with African perspectives on the same topics. Finally, intercultural philosophy is argued to refer to a situation where Western mainstream philosophy has to give way to a wisdom perspective as defined here.*

16.1. The resilience of wisdom as a topic in modern thought and science

In the first booming period of Western philosophy, the fourth century BCE, the analytical mind of Aristotle distinguished[630] between σοφία *sŏphia*, as specialist theoretical knowledge including that of the philosopher, and φρόνησις, *phronē-sis* as creative practical knowledge that allows one to negotiate the pitfalls and contradictions of human life. *Phronēsis* deals with sensitivity to life's problems in concrete situations – the wisdom that we also find in the widespread genre of 'wisdom texts'. Emphasis here is on those domains of life of which we would say today that they are not tightly rule-governed – *cf*. Wittgenstein 1967b – and thus carry considerable uncertainty, ambivalence and mutually incompatible multiple truths, and to accept both the social nature of human life, and its fini-tude. The concept of *phronēsis* has been influential throughout the history of Western thought and especially in the twentieth century CE has been reconsid-ered from various angles.[631]

Throughout, the perspective on finitude has remained important in approaches to wisdom. Already prominent in Plato, it plays a central role in the work of Dilthey, Heidegger, Sartre, Gadamer, and Ricoeur.[632] On the psychological side, Taranto, in a synthesis reviewing the preceding decade of wisdom research, concludes – and I find this very illuminating – that

> 'that factors relating to wisdom (age, experience, intelligence, knowledge, intuition, common sense, and personality) can be unified theoretically if wisdom is viewed as *the recognition of and response to human limitation*' (Taranto 1989, my italics; also *cf*. Fow-ers 2003).

Meacham (1983), emulating Socrates' famous paradox

> 'I know nothing except the fact of my ignorance' (Diogenes Laertius, II 16, see Hicks 1995),

stresses another dimension of finitude in the context of wisdom: *knowing that one doesn't know*. Two decades later, Ardelt (2004) in a review of the Berlin Wisdom Paradigm in psychology (with such names as Baltes, Kunzmann, Sternberg and Achenbaum), in an attempt to steer away from the latter's exper-tise-centred orientation[633] makes significant additions to the Taranto position:

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[630] Aristotle, *Eth. Nicom.* 1140a and following.

[631] Modern treatments of *phronēsis* include Gadamer 1960; MacIntyre 1981; Bernasconi 1989; Flyvbjerg 1993; Gallagher 1997; Noel 1999; practical studies of *phronesis* in a concrete modern setting are Halverson 2004; Jamal 2004. Also *cf*. the stimulating 2007 paper by Koutsoumpos & Zhuang 2007.

[632] *Cf*. Heidegger 1983; Ricoeur 1960; Sartre 1943; Gadamer 1960; also Hyland 1995; de Mul 1993; Smith 1991.

[633] *Cf*. Horn & Masunaga 2000. At the 2007 Symposium where this Chapter was presented in an earlier version as keynote address, the expertise aspect of wisdom was articulated by Professor

> '...I consider compassionate and sympathetic love, which represents the affective dimension of my three-dimensional wisdom model, an integral component of wisdom, and I would predict that wisdom as a personality quality is positively related to forgiveness.'

Also Kramer (1990) speaks of the 'primacy of affect-cognition relations' in the conceptualisation of wisdom.

However, another major form of finitude which so far has been understudied in the context of wisdom, is *the awareness of the finitude of one's own and the other's specific cultural orientation in intercultural situations, hence the awareness of plurality, incompatibility, conflict, and the need to negotiate these within a wider socio-political framework*; we shall come back to this point repeatedly.

In recent decades, there has been considerable philosophical and general-intellectual / academic effort directed at affording wisdom a more central position within philosophy, science, and modern thought in general. This heterogeneous movement can be seen as responding to a number of major developments in the North Atlantic region and the world at large:

1. *Beyond the Enlightenment heritage.* The recognition that the project of the Enlightenment, with its firm belief in the liberating and world-innovating force of specialised reason, has been shattered in the wars and genocide of the North Atlantic region in the twentieth century CE. These violent conflicts have further intensified, for a considerable part of the world population, a crisis of meaning already brought about by secularisation, urbanisation, and scientific and technological advancement; from this crisis, time-honoured local and foreign wisdom may offer relief in a new bid for survival through spirituality (*cf.* Waaijman 2002: 335 *f.*).

2. *Globalisation, which after the demise of European colonialism and despite subsequent North Atlantic claims (less and less convincing over the last few decades) of global hegemony, yet drove home (partly through such globalising knowledge strategies as anthropology, intercultural philosophy and (however criticised, cf. Said 1978) Orientalism; partly through millions of people's personal experience with intercontinental travel and migration; partly through the quest for transcontinental roots) the irreducible potential of modes of knowing (often designated as 'wisdom') outside the Western mainstream tradition of thought and science. These modes of knowing are now being recognised,*

   - not just for their own intrinsic value in their original geographical context, but also
   - because they have been subjected to globalising reformula-

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Baetens Beardmore in response to my presentation.

tions (one conspicuous form of such a globalising reformulation is the appropriation of ancient 'non-Western' wisdom – especially from South and East Asia, Africa and North America – into the global *New Age* movement, where it is blended with selectively appropriated state-of-the-art science and technology), and particularly

- because effective globalisation has produced complex problematics concerning the co-existence and conflict of worldviews, religions, cultures, ethical systems, legal systems, for which North Atlantic thought and experience (caught in an Aristotelian and Cartesian logic of insurmountable opposition and difference) does not offer ready answers, and which may only be negotiated through a combination of practical wisdom strategies (especially those aiming at the avoidance, reduction and termination of violent conflict) from various origins. It is worth noting that scholars from all continents have contributed to this exploration.[634]

3. *New technologies and ancient wisdom.* Globalisation has inevitably brought the encounter between the technologies of the developed countries, and local technologies in other parts of the world, in the agricultural, medical, organisational, and other fields. After hegemonic North Atlantic ethnocentrism had dominated the development scene for several decades from the middle of the 20th century CE on, in the last few decades the awareness has grown that, since any specific technology is part of the culture and worldview of its owners, the one-sided hegemonic imposition of technology is as violent as it is ineffective, whereas a combination of imported technology with 'ancient wisdom' often stands a better chance of success – perhaps in terms of the maximising rationality informing developed technologies but especially in terms of ecological / environmental considerations.[635] Remarkably, traditional wisdom not only may ap-

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[634] *Cf.* Takahashi 2000 (who stresses, for the ancient wisdom literature from Western Eurasia, analytical ability, as contrasted with more inclusive and synthetic orientations in South and East Asia – a similar distinction is made by García & Pelechano 2004 – and who highlights the themes of void and co-dependence as central to the Asian tradition. There is no consensus in the literature as to the relation between scientific or intellectual knowledge versus wisdom-related knowledge. Coomaraswamy 1943 and Ardelt 2000 rely on such a distinction. However, Strijbos 1995 sees the two forms of knowledge converge from a systems perspective, while Bethe 1968 calls science 'a road to wisdom' (thus also Maxwell 1984; also modern Chinese philosophers have been interested in the transformation of knowledge into wisdom: Guorong 2002). For a Neo-Thomist approach to the relation between science and wisdom, *cf.* Maritain 1940.

[635] *Cf.* Agarwal & Narain 1997; Sen 1999; Samoff & Stromquist 2001; Berkes *et al.* 2000; Haverkort & Hiemstra 1999. Indian scholars have been particularly prominent in exploring these possibilities.

pear to be complementary to modern technology and science – it may also be argued to be based on parallel and similar modes of thought.[636] And apart from highlighting ancient local forms of competent and efficient interaction with the forces of nature, these ancient wisdom traditions must also be recognised as empowering peripheral local communities and reducing their vulnerability and dependence vis-à-vis the encroachment of a global capitalist economy and ideology (cf. Quanchi 2004). However, the more typical effect in a context of globalisation is destruction of traditional wisdom, and then outside researchers and local specialists may be exhorted to join hands to preserve and record local ways of knowing that may be unique in the world (Balick 2006).

> Q. THE COELACANTH: KNOWN TO AFRICANS, UNKNOWN TO NORTH ATLANTIC SCIENCE. The following example may yet bring out the dangers involved in the idea of such complementarity. In the 1930s-40s great excitement was caused by ichthyology identifying the first living Coelacanths (*Latimeria chalumnae*) off the coasts of South Africa and the Comores Islands – as a species of jawed fishes virtually unchanged since the Devonian geological period, c. 400 million years ago, and thought to be extinct for at least 60 million years. However, it turned out that this fish had been commonly known since times immemorial among the population of Madagascar. Here, under the name of *combessa* its meat had constituted a despised but cheap relish, while – over the last hundred years – the rough scaly skin was used as an abrasive *e.g.* in the repair of bicycle tyres! If international science had been able to make contact with local fish-related practices on Madagascar at an earlier point in time, it would never have considered the Coelacanth extinct. Yet we cannot say that African wisdom here surpassed global science, for whereas the fish was common-place (in fact despised) from an African perspective, it is only from the evolutionary perspective evolved in science since the mid-19th century CE that the scientific identification of the Coelacanth was a significant event, even (Terofal 1975) 'the most important scientific feat in modern history'.

4. *The psychology of wisdom.* In the field of psychology, intensive work over the last few decades on such topics as personality, life span, maturity, aging (in other words, gerontology), moral reasoning, and acceptance / forgiveness of finitude including failure and death (stimulated, in part, by the progressive aging of the population of the developed countries) has produced a focus on wisdom that is empirical, comparative, theoretically orientated, and conceptually highly sophisticated. Here, in the consideration of what makes a good life; what a wholesome society and future; what forms of interaction and communication are conducive to well-being and meaning; and what

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Here we are touching on the discussions, during the last quarter of a century, of 'indigenous knowledge systems', which however our present scope does not allow us to go into.

[636] *Cf.* Jiang 2005; Jones & Culliney 1998; Capra 1978; Zukav 1979.

attitudes and skills can be identified and taught towards these goals, an extensive and exciting psychology of wisdom has come up, developing more and more to re-unite intelligence with wisdom.[637] Here there is generous attention for wisdom texts and teachings belonging to literate traditions (including world religions) from all over Eurasia;[638] spirituality; the reception of diffuse, oral wisdom traditions from all continents; the analysis of expertise and expert systems; along with the psychological discipline's habitual methods of conceptualisation and theorising, measurement and both qualitative and quantitative analysis.[639] Especially illuminating are studies in which the world's various regional traditions of wisdom are compared and contrasted.[640] Among the many remarkable findings I cite the following: the interaction of minds facilitates wisdom performance (Staudinger & Baltes 1996); and the narrative is a typical context for the production and transmission of wisdom (Kenyon 2003) – which reminds us of the closely-knit face-to-face relations and fire-side recreation in small-scale groups, as the typical situation in which traditional wisdom is being enacted in real-life situations in historic settings. Whereas in these studies the emphasis is on the significance of wisdom for the individual, the sociologist Schloss (2000) has offered an approach to wisdom as part of (cf. Parsons 1949) the integrative mechanisms of society at large.

5. *Recent approchement of wisdom and philosophy.* The gradual dissociation of the empirical sciences from the domain of philosophy proper, and philosophy's concentration on questions of logical, conceptual and theoretical foundations, made that, in the course of the history of Western thought, we have tended more and more to see philosophy, in practice, as the opposite of the quest for wisdom. Perhaps we should see this as an apt illustration of the question Robert Sternberg (a leading wisdom psychologist) has sought to answer: 'Why Smart People Can Be So Foolish' (Sternberg 2004). Yet the

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[637] Blanchard-Fields *et al.* 1987; Kunzmann & Baltes 2003.

[638] For Islam, *e.g.* Choudhury 2001, Lewin 2000 (Sufism), and the work of Seyyed Ḥossein Naṣr, *cf.* Norton 2004; Massignon 1922; Faḥd 1966, 1978; Ullman 1972; Bakhtiar 1991; Shah 1971; Chittick 1989. For Buddhism: Levitt 1999 (Tibet), Epstein 1985, Vokey 1999, Humphreys 1987. For a Vedantic perspective, *cf.* Atchley 1993. Yang 2001 studies wisdom concepts in Taiwan, where Taoism and Confucianism have remained important orientations. For references to Judaism and Christianity see notes below.

[639] *Cf.* Erikson 1963, 1982; Stemberg 1990; Ardelt 2004; Baltes & Freund 2003; Baltes *et al.* 1990, 2002; Hanna & Ottens 1995; Kramer 2000; Maercker *et al.* 1998; Maslow 1968, 1971; Pasupathi & Staudinger 2001; Brown 2000a. I have considerably benefitted from the extensive bibliography of Trowbridge 2005.

[640] Assmann 1994; Takahashi & Bordia 2000.

quest for wisdom, and the encounter with the wisdom of others, has continued to inform some of greatest minds, including de Spinoza, von Leibniz, Schopenhauer, Heidegger, Levinas, and Derrida.[641] The intellectual developments, as outlined above, outside the field of philosophy proper have made that 'wisdom', far from remaining an obsolete and antiquarian topic, has become one of the main growth points of a global intellectual culture, and as such constitutes an obvious bedding for modern (or rather, post-modern) scholarship aware of its social and existential responsibilities as well as of its limitations. It stands to reason that philosophers, in such fields as the history of philosophy, philosophical anthropology, and intercultural philosophy, have risen to this challenge, and have sought to contribute to the growing literature on wisdom by studies investigating the nature and development of the various wisdom traditions in philosophy worldwide,[642] the philosophical foundations for wisdom psychology, the encounter of wisdom traditions with each other and with modern science, the interaction between cultures (or rather, the situational articulation, dissimulation, and fusion, of 'cultural orientations')[643] within today's globalising space, and the reconstruction of meaning and practice under post-Enlightenment conditions.[644]

It would appear as if the dividing line between wisdom traditions worldwide, and the Western philosophical tradition, lies specifically in Kant's 'Copernican revolution' – in his critical writings and especially in *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (Kant 1983a / 1781 / 1787), where the idea of the possibility of direct and certain knowledge of the world 'as it is' came to be supplanted by the realisation that reality as such is unknowable unless through the deceptively distorting appearances of representation, so that, in Oosterling's (1996) apt expression, we are *Moved by Appearance* (the translated title of his Dutch book *Door Schijn Bewogen*). The dominant trends of subsequent Western thought, especially on the

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[641] General: Hadot 1995. De Spinoza: de Dijn 1996 – despite de Spinoza's banishment from the Jewish religious community, Hebrew wisdom remained an important influence on that philosopher. Von Leibniz (*cf.* 1994 / 17th c. CE) was fascinated by Chinese Taoist thought 道教 / 道家 as mediated by the Jesuit fathers resident in China. The Indian Vedic writings, notably the Upanishads उपनिषद्, had reputedly great influence on Schopenhauer (*e.g.* Janaway 1999: 12). Heidegger's great inspiration was the Presocratic 'wisdom' philosopher Parmenides – Heidegger 1982, 1977: *passim*. Levinas (*cf.* 1976) was considerably inspired, again, by Biblical wisdom. This also applies to Derrida (*cf.* 1999, 1996).

[642] For China: Weiping 2005; for the European Middle Ages, *cf.* Celano 1995, Hopkins 1996 (on Cusanus); European Renaissance: Rice 1958; Early Modern Europe specifically Hegel: Rosen 2000.

[643] *cf.* van Binsbergen 2003a, ch. 15: 'Cultures do not exist', pp. 459-522.

[644] *Cf.* de Mul 1993, implicitly on the wisdom relevance of Dilthey; Gadamer 1960; Kekes 1983, 1995; Manheimer 1992; Curnow 1999; Geyer 1989; Godlovitch 1981; Hartshorne 1987; Jacobs 1989; Kuczyński 2001; Marquard 1989; Maxwell 1984, 2004; Nielsen 1993; Smith 1998.

European continent, have largely been elaborations of the Kantian position. It is therefore that Mortimer Adler, editor in chief of the collection *The Great Ideas* (1952 / 1992), rejected modern philosophy from Hume and Kant onwards, and instead advocated a return to Aristotle. While Adler pretends that this is a move inspired by wisdom, it might have been wiser to try and find, in the history of ideas (in interdependence with political economy and the history of formal organisations, the state, absolute monarchy, citizenship, classes, art and *belles lettres*), an answer to *the question as to what specific socio-political and ideological constellation brought Kant (thinking beyond Hume) to his remarkable departure,* that has had an incomparable impact upon the history of modern thought. However, there is some simplification in the idea of such a revolution. For Kant, not all knowledge is of the shaky nature of appearance and representation; for the *transcendental* categories which make thought and knowledge possible in the first place (space, number, causation, *etc.*), are said to be given *a priori*, and these tools could arguably be claimed to be on the side of the wisdom with which we confront the practical problems of human life – they are what allows even a Lower Palaeolithic[645] hunter to fabricate his spear, take aim and kill his prey. The transcendental is one of Kant's central concepts, and its incisive and innovative analysis as such as executed by the leading Dutch philosopher Duintjer (1966), reveals that here layers of knowledge, intuition and mysticism may be mined that are in continuity with, rather than in denial of, the great wisdom traditions of Western thought, and that, after Kant, found their greatest expression in Heidegger.

In fact, a wisdom orientation could be argued to be implied in all of Continental philosophy, whereas Analytical philosophy, with its exclusive concentration on specific procedures by which the truth claims of a statement may be substantiated, are more in line with procedural, repetitive approaches to the construction of knowledge. In other words:

$$\frac{\text{Continental Philosophy}}{\text{Analytical Philosophy}} = \frac{\text{expressions of traditional wisdom}}{\text{academic philosophy}}$$

as if what we are dealing with here are two complementary modes of knowing which kaleidoscopically, or rather fractally, reproduce and proliferate at whatever level we approach them.

All of the above drives home the message of the topicality of traditional wisdom as an object of modern scholarship.

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[645] The oldest attested spears derive from Schoeningen, Germany, as long ago as 400,000 years Before Present (Thieme 1997).

Meanwhile, the word wisdom is often used vainly in academic texts today, to denote, not time-honoured modes of knowing complementary to scientific knowledge, but rather, within a given North Atlantic / globalising discipline (*e.g.* physics, law, econometrics) the obsolescent conventional approach of an earlier vintage. Thus an experimental physicist may chide the 'conventional' or 'traditional' 'wisdom' of measuring the interaction of elementary particles by means of a specific, received experimental setup – thus referring to intradisciplinary practices of global physics that may only be one or two decades old, and that have nothing to do with 'expressions of traditional wisdom' as understood in the present context.

While such usage of the word 'wisdom' is still transparent and neutral (although irrelevant in our present context), an extensive inspection of the enormous literature referring to wisdom also shows a usage that is far from neutral, but rather appropriative, distortive and ethnocentrically implying that the perspective from the North Atlantic is the only permissible one. This occurs when the term 'wisdom' is perfunctorily and alterisingly used in order to designate representations and practices which originate from outside the Western tradition and which deviate from common-sense views of a North Atlantic moderately educated middle class; such practices are then indicated in sweeping stereotypified terms. The use of the word wisdom in such cases merely serves to smother, under a cloak of a politically correct term suggestive of respect, the implicit rejection of these alien traits. The Internet, in its tendency to identity-biased nutshell formulations of dubious reliability and authority, is the typical site for such usage. Modern organisational management may develop into another such site (Small 2004). In these specific cases, the phrase 'expressions of traditional wisdom' refers to a quality that we ourselves imply to lack, and by that reference we are constructing ourselves by contrast with some stereotypified other. Thus we emphatically claim not to have wisdom by ourselves, but we reserve wisdom (euphemistically, again) as an attribute of that which we are not and do not wish to be. Such contrastive wisdom which constructs, by negation, our own self-image then is likely to turn out as: knowledge that is obsolete, local, essentially invalid and incapable of generalisation. It is typically the kind of knowledge non-specialists in African affairs, and non-Africans, attribute to Africans, *in a deceptive bid at contrastive self-construction as more rational, universalist and objective non-Africans*. Understandably, therefore, that among champions of secular, democratic modernity 'wisdom' may become a pejorative term implying retarded divisiveness (*e.g.* Jacoby 1994)

16.2. In search of traditional wisdom

The term wisdom has often been used as a respectful evocation of the cultural achievements of the ancestors, be they Ancient Italians, Africans, or Ancient Egyp-

tians from the Egyptophile, Afrocentric perspective and the *New Age* perspective.[646]

Like in the Graeco-Roman classics, in the context of Asian philosophy and ethics the term wisdom tends to stand for a mystical worldview that combines cosmology, theology and ethical teachings.[647]

A prominent place in the global wisdom literature is occupied by so-called wisdom texts from Ancient Mesopotamia,[648] Ancient Egypt,[649] and the Bible.[650] Here a senior person, well defined in time and place, ethnic and linguistic belonging, gender, age, and worldview, dishes out life lessons and magical instructions, against the background of the dominant local worldview. But the genre is far from limited to the Ancient Near East.[651]

Next to Graeco-Roman classics, the Bible was North Atlantic scholars' principal frame of reference until well into the nineteenth century CE. I suspect that, with the Egyptians (often metonymically designated by a conventionalised external term for their head of state, 'Pharaoh'[652]) being presented as unrivalled in magical powers and as Ancient Israel's ultimate others, the combination of respect and alienness in conferring the notion of wisdom may have something to do with the images of Moses and Solomon, founder and greatest king of the Israelite nation respectively, both of whom were said to excel in 'all the wisdom of Egypt'. In the key passage on Solomon, wisdom appears as Hebrew חכמה *ḥokmah*, as in over a hundred other places in the *Old Testament*; in *Acts* 7:22 wisdom appears as σοφία *sōphia*, as in 25 other places in the *New Testament*. It would take us too far to attempt an extensive semantic analysis of these words here; a few remarks must suffice. The *Acts* reference to Moses has a suggestion of magical, technical and social, rather than sacred knowledge: the verse deals

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[646] *Cf.* van Os n.d (general); Vico 1710 / 1988 (Ancient Italians); Carruthers 1986 (Afrocentric); West 1987 and Schwaller de Lubicz 1955-1956 (*New Age* perspective). For Africa, see footnotes below.

[647] *Cf.* Müller 1875-1910; Yutang 1938, 1943, 1986; Wilhelm 1931; von Schlegel 1808; Mehlig 1987; van Praag 1962.

[648] *Cf.* Tanred 2007; Lambert 1960; Foster 1974.

[649] *Cf.* Cannuyer 2007; Simpson 1973; Lichtheim 1973-1980; Lange 1925; Brunner 1988; Gundlach 1996; Kaplony 1968.

[650] The Bible books of *Job, Proverbs, Ruth, Canticles, Ecclesiastes,* and *Esther*; and *cf.* Albright 1955; Noth & Thomas 1955; Camp 1985; Crenshaw 1969; Lebram 1965; Müller 1977-78; von Rad 1971; Sarkio 1994; Römer *et al.* 1990; Talmon 1963; Murphy 1981, 2002; Brown 1996; Dell 1994; Whybray 1989; Kirk 1999 (who follows Perdue in the application of Victor Turner's model of the ritual process, to wisdom texts – *cf.* Perdue & Turner 1978); Crenshaw 1995; Scott 1971; Achenbaum & Orwoll 1991. For a general theoretical perspective on wisdom literature, *cf.* Brown 2005.

[651] As several contributions in the 2007 Symposium brought out for Asia and the Americas.

[652] The word *Pharaoh* is an Hebrew corruption of the Egyptian *pr* ⌐¬ 'house', or (by an alternative suggestion) *pr wr*, 'Great House, palace' – although the latter expression, if written with the 'shrine' determinative, is reserved not for the palace but for the pre-dynastic national shrine of Upper Egypt (*cf.* Gardiner 1994: 492 n. 1, 494).

with what Moses learned as an Egyptian prince, and how this made him an Egyptian aristocrat competent in words and deeds:[653]

[21] τοῦ πατρός: ἐκτεθέντος δὲ αὐτοῦ ἀνείλατο αὐτὸν ἡ θυγάτηρ [22] Φαραὼ καὶ ἀνεθρέψατο αὐτὸν ἑαυτῇ εἰς υἱόν. καὶ ἐπαιδεύθη Μωυσῆς πάσῃ σοφίᾳ Αἰγυπτίων, ἦν δὲ δυνατὸς ἐν λόγοις καὶ ἔργοις αὐτοῦ.

[21] When he was thrown out, Pharaoh's daughter took him up, and reared him as her own son. [22] Moses was instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians. He was mighty in his words and works.

The *I Kings* reference to Solomon combines exalted sacred and magical knowledge, social virtue, proverbs and songs, and knowledge of the non-human visible world; such wisdom is explicitly declared to have a supernatural provenance and in the preceding verse is parallelled with תבונה *tebuwnah*, a word commonly translated as 'understanding' and also used dozens of times in the *Old Testament*:[654]

ט וַיִּתֵּן אֱלֹהִים חָכְמָה לִשְׁלֹמֹה וּתְבוּנָה, הַרְבֵּה מְאֹד, וְרֹחַב לֵב--כַּחוֹל, אֲשֶׁר עַל-שְׂפַת הַיָּם.

9 And God gave Solomon wisdom and understanding exceeding much, and largeness of heart, even as the sand that is on the sea-shore.

י וַתֵּרֶב חָכְמַת שְׁלֹמֹה, מֵחָכְמַת כָּל-בְּנֵי-קֶדֶם, וּמִכֹּל, חָכְמַת מִצְרָיִם.

10 And Solomon's wisdom excelled the wisdom of all the children of the east, and *all the wisdom of Egypt*.

יא וַיֶּחְכַּם, מִכָּל-הָאָדָם, מֵאֵיתָן הָאֶזְרָחִי וְהֵימָן וְכַלְכֹּל וְדַרְדַּע, בְּנֵי מָחוֹל; וַיְהִי-שְׁמוֹ בְכָל-הַגּוֹיִם, סָבִיב.

11 For he was wiser than all men: than Ethan the Ezrahite, and Heman, and Calcol, and Darda, the sons of Mahol; and his fame was in all the nations round about.

יב וַיְדַבֵּר; שְׁלֹשֶׁת אֲלָפִים מָשָׁל; וַיְהִי שִׁירוֹ, חֲמִשָּׁה וָאָלֶף.

12 And he spoke three thousand proverbs; and his songs were a thousand and five.

יג וַיְדַבֵּר, עַל-הָעֵצִים, מִן-הָאֶרֶז אֲשֶׁר בַּלְּבָנוֹן, וְעַד הָאֵזוֹב אֲשֶׁר יֹצֵא בַּקִּיר; וַיְדַבֵּר עַל-הַבְּהֵמָה, וְעַל-הָעוֹף, וְעַל-הָרֶמֶשׂ וְעַל-הַדָּגִים.

13 And he spoke of trees, from the cedar that is in Lebanon even unto the hyssop that springeth out of the wall; he spoke also of beasts, and of fowl, and of creeping things, and of fishes.

יד וַיָּבֹאוּ, מִכָּל-הָעַמִּים, לִשְׁמֹעַ, אֵת חָכְמַת שְׁלֹמֹה--מֵאֵת כָּל-מַלְכֵי הָאָרֶץ, אֲשֶׁר שָׁמְעוּ אֶת-חָכְמָתוֹ. {ס}

14 And there came of all peoples to hear the wisdom of Solomon, from all kings of the earth, who had heard of his wisdom.

The conventional translations into modern European tongues have frozen the multidimensional semantic dynamics of the underlying Hebrew and Greek biblical expressions, wrongly suggesting a narrowly uniformity and unidimension-

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[653] Digital text source (slightly edited): Perseus online version at http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/ of the Greek edition by Brooke *et al.* 1906.

[654] *I Kings* 5:9-14 or 4:29-34; electronic text source Mechon Mamre 2005.

ality of meaning which, due to the immense influence of biblical texts in European cultural history, have greatly informed the way in which we conceptualise 'wisdom' today. The phrase *wisdom of Egypt* was adopted as title for several scholarly works setting out Ancient Egyptian science, theology and practical wisdom (*e.g.* Petrie 1940; Brown 1923; West 1987).

The fact that the Ancient Near East (including Egypt) recognised divinities whose special province was wisdom, gave rise to scholarly studies concentrating on such divine figures, in which the term 'wisdom' was no longer an obvious scholarly imposition but could pass as a translation of a native concept (*e.g.* Arthur 1984).

In classical studies dealing with Graeco-Roman Antiquity the term 'wisdom'[655] is often used to pinpoint the transition

- from a diffusely mystical worldview that was admitted to be highly indebted to 'the Orient' (*i.e.* Ancient Egypt, Syro-Palestine, Anatolia, Mesopotamia, Persia and Scythia – the latter two especially transmitting to Greece the shamanistic trends that were to be hotly discussed in classics in the second half of the twentieth century CE),

- to Greek contrastively rational philosophy and science, the latter often being presented as an original, local Greek achievement.[656]

Wisdom then typically marks the intermediate phase, of the Seven Sages, Hesiod, the Presocratics. The connection between the Presocratic philosophers and traditional wisdom, especially in the form of Orphic and Eleusinian mystery cults and shamanism, has been studied intensively in the last fifty years and is now generally acknowledged; MacLennan (2006) offers a useful summary (although he wrongly attributes a North Asian, instead of Central Asian, origin to shamanism):

> 'It is now well established that ancient Greek philosophy had roots in the shamanic practices common to many cultures (...). The Greeks learned these techniques from the "Scythians" when they colonized the north shore of the Black Sea in the seventh century BCE and from the Thracians and Persian Magi, who also knew North-Asiatic shamanism (...). These practices are reflected in the stories of Orpheus, who exhibits many of the features of a "great shaman" (...); of Aristeas (...) whose soul could leave his body in trance and accompany Apollo as his raven: of Abaris (...), the healer-sage *(iatromantis)* who traveled on a magic arrow (a typical shamanic wand), which he later gave to Pythagoras; and of the semi-historical Epimenides (...). who purified Athens (...) and was also known for leaving his body while in a trance state (....). They all exemplify

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[655] *Cf.* Lloyd 1987; Sedley 1998; Kern 1888; Burkert 1962, 1968, 1987; West 1983; Riedweg 1995; Bernabé 2002; Betegh 2001; Graf 1974; Götze 1923; Halliwell 2000; Shapiro 2000 examines how the use of proverbs enables Herodotos to strike a bridge towards older wisdom traditions in the Aegean, and cites various Greek specialist terms for wisdom expressions: παροιμία *paroimia*, ὑποθήκη *hupothēkē*, ἀπόφθεγμα *apofthegma*, and γνώμη *gnōmē*.

[656] Dodds 1951 initiated a more relative view of the stereotypical juxtaposition of rational Greeks versus irrational barbarians. Also *cf.* Kingsley 1995a, 1995b; MacLennan 2006.

many of the characteristics of shamanic practice (...), and were closely associated with Hyperborean Apollo (...). Evidence of shamanic practice is also apparent in ancient biographies of historical figures, such as the Presocratic philosophers Pythagoras (...). who descended into the underworld and claimed to have the soul of Hermotimus, an ancient shaman, and whose followers venerated the *Orphica* and sometimes wrote under the name "Orpheus" (...); Parmenides (...), whose poem, with its progress from the illusory world of duality to The One, has many of the hallmarks of a shamanic journey (...); Empedocles (...), a magical healer who boasted that he could control the weather and retrieve souls from Hades (...); and other less well-known figures. They all combined "the still undifferentiated functions of magician and naturalist, poet and philosopher, preacher, healer, and public counselor" [657]

In ways that Bernal's *Black Athena I* (1987) has brought out most convincingly and impressively, the stark contrast between exalted Greek science and lowly barbarian 'traditional wisdom' has especially served in order to construct European racialist superiority in the nineteenth and twentieth century CE, which had made continuity with the ancient Greeks the basis of its identity. In deviation from such geopolitical delusions, the historical facts show how greatly the Greeks were indebted to West Asia and Egypt, and how well they were aware of this state of affairs, despite some anti-Oriental othering (as for instance in Herodotos) in the aftermath of the Persian wars.

Thus philosophy in the Western tradition was engendered in the Presocratic 'wisdom' context. Also in Plato the movement towards insights that are both true and wise in the conventional sense is still very marked (*cf.* Rhodes 2003; Stern 1997). I already referred to how Aristotle brought us his distinction between theoretical and practical knowledge; his contributions to both forms of knowledge (*e.g.* to poetics as the practical art of writing, and to rhetorics as the practical art of making things appear true before an audience) have constituted firm pillars of Western thought. Stoic philosophy, in turn, reverted to a wisdom-centred stance (with, for instance, Plutarch (Patterson 1991) and Cicero as prolific dispensers of *phronēsis* texts), and so did Neo-Platonism, with Plotinus and Iamblichus as main exponents.

In Africa, which is the continent of my principal expertise, expressions of traditional wisdom (beside the attention for proverbs, riddles and other oral genres)[658] have been recorded by such anthropologists as Griaule and Turner, highlighting the lessons of the Malian village philosopher Ogotemmeli and the

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[657] MacLennan 2006; his standard sources largely coincide with those already cited, and include: Butterworth 1966; Dodds 1951; Eliade 1951; Kingsley 1994, 1995a, 1995b, 1999.

[658] Mainstream scholarly approaches to African wisdom include: Scheub 1977, 1985, 2000; Madu 1996; Opoku 1975, 1987; Barber & Farias 1989; Horton & Finnegan 1973; Fabian 1990; Kimmerle 1997; Wanjohi 1997; Doke 1947; Mve Ondo 2007 / 1991; Rogers 1985; de Veyrières & de Méritens 1967; Ameve 1989; Sumner 1999; Bryant 1995; Razafintsalama 1988; Ford 2000 with his collection of African myths; Murithi 2006 on Southern African *ubuntu* philosophy (which however is to some extent an invented tradition in the Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983 sense, *cf.* van Binsbergen 2001b); and Ntekim-Rex 2007.

Zambian village diviner Muchona, respectively.[659] More in general, the African philosopher Odera Oruka has identified a genre of African knowledge production which he has termed 'sage philosophy' or 'sagacity' – *wisdom*, in other words –, and to whose documentation all over Africa he has contributed.[660]

Fig. 16.1. Headman Lubumba, photographed at the Njonjolo valley, Kaoma District, Zambia, 1973. He was active as a witchfinder and (in the style of his regional predecessor Mupumani) a nature prophet in Namwala District, Central Zambia, in the 1940s-1950s, and ended up in the Nkoya area, as a headman and a guardian of traditions and myths – a total cripple since his gun exploded in a hunting accident. Among his repertoire was a myth concerning the origin of evil in the world: Nyambi's child (gender is undetermined in the Nkoya syntax, although the modern interpretation imputes male gender here, probably wrongly – van Binsbergen 1992: 83 f.) had invented sorcery and was thrown out of Heaven – with faint echoes of the Titans, Lucifer, Ḥam (who by a Talmudic tradition committed sorcery with the remains of Adam and Eve in the Ark), and Gnosticism.

In the Africanist anthropological literature the word wisdom is used in a num-

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[659] Griaule 1948; Turner 1967a.

[660] Odera Oruka 1990a, 1990b; *cf*. Presbey 1999; Somé 1998; Mosima 2016. In an excellent article Kimmerle 1993 puts these efforts in a wider critical perspective, which includes academic African philosophy and points, beyond the 'everyday-life philosophers' that Oruka's sages mainly are, at the esoteric keepers of exalted secret and initiatory knowledge in African; here Kimmerle relies particularly on M. Tschiamalenga Ntumba 1989.

ber of different ways. Werbner (1989), writing on divination among the Tswapong people of modern Botswana, uses the word wisdom in the sense of the diviner's skilful, subtle evocation and symbolic redress of the contradictions in the life of his client and the latter's kin, based on a dextrous manipulation of symbols and rhetoric, and of sacred material objects multifariously alluding to such contradictions. Werbner was much influenced by Fernandez's work (1982) on the Bwiti cult in Gabon, which has a similar orientation and is at the same time (more even than Werbner's work) an example of the way in which modern ethnographers have sought to bring out and explain in great detail the poetics and dramatics of rituals of expression and catharsis. Here wisdom turns out to be, far from a static attribute of people in certain roles of authority and responsibility, on the contrary a dynamic product of symbolic and communicative work, which generates social resilience and resourcefulness by enhancing meaning and belonging.

Fernandez (2000) again suggests a link between wisdom and peripherality: under today's cultural globalisation and North Atlantic hegemony, cultural attitudes and worldviews may well be considered wise because they are not part of the dominant mainstream culture, so (but this is my own excessively liberal paraphrase) in a nostalgic way constitute a harmless defiance of the structural, ideological violence which the dominant culture is exerting. It is in this way that cultures distant in time and place may be held to produce expressions of traditional wisdom: *as forms of nostalgic but important cultural criticism*. Such usage of the word wisdom is also found with several other authors.[661] The authority and healing generating connotations of alienness, although seldom discussed explicitly (however, *e.g.* de Boeck 1993; Colson 1966), are recurrent and widely distributed, from alien healers in rural Central Africa; to diviners in East, Southern and West Africa, Madagascar and the Comores Islands representing a geomantic divination system deriving from Abbasīd Mesopotamia end of the late first millennium CE (where it was known as *ᶜilm ar-raml* علم ألرمل 'Sand Science'), and likewise from China under the Shang dynasty 商朝, where it was known as *yì jīng* 易經; to astrologers and wonderworkers from the eastern periphery of the Roman empire coming to work in Hellenistic Greece and later at the Roman heartland (*cf.* Momigliano 1975). I have sometimes used a similar argument to try and explain why foreign forms of ritual and divination would command such great respect and attraction in the regions where they have been introduced: coming from afar, and hallowed by their unmistakable alienness, they represent the fascinating, immense, and potentially destructive power of the ultimate other; however, below we shall see how it is more attractive to seek the explana-

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[661] *E.g.* Maybury-Lewis 1992; Vitebsky's 1995 well-known book on shamanism appeared in the 'Living Wisdom' series. Already in the hands of certain enlightened authors in the (proto-) colonial period, the term wisdom amounted to a respectful evocation of distant otherness (*cf.* Burton 1865).

tion not in foreignness, but in the diffuse internalisation of proto-scientific repetitive, standard procedures as the hallmark of truth in knowledge.

Our initial overview of approaches to traditional wisdom has brought up a number of interesting and promising ideas and perspectives. Let us now try to penetrate a little deeper into this fascinating but difficult matter.

16.3. The dilemma of e x p r e s s i o n in wisdom

Given our own reliance on method in the production of our academic scholarship, traditional wisdom can only come within the orbit of our investigations if it does not remain implicit, *not* a totally unrevealed secret, *not* a totally tacit assumption, but if it is laid down, in whatever oblique and distorted form, in an expression that has some material manifestation: for instance in the sound waves carrying the spoken words of our living informants; or the clay tablets, bamboo leaves, papyrus sheets, or knotted *quippus* of the texts at our disposal; or the stone reliefs, rock paintings or masquerades that may express traditional wisdom iconographically. Without such *expressions*, we would scarcely be able to make scholarly pronouncements on traditional wisdom.

Here we must acknowledge the problematic status of 'expression'. Many wisdom traditions, from all parts of the world and from all documented periods, have *restricted, veiled, or downright prohibited expression*, and have tended to organise themselves around the secret – even if in itself meaningless and void – that binds and unites the initiated happy few (*cf.* de Jong 2007). As far as the history of Western specialist thought is concerned: ever since the Presocratics many philosophers have realised that language (even though allowing us to name, organise and lend meaning to the world) at the same time *obscures* Being, smothering it under a deceptive layer of enunciation that may well be the opposite of wisdom. The Chinese counterpart of this insight is in the famous second line of the opening chapter of *Dao De Jing* 道德經:

> 名可名 非常名 *míng kě míng fēi cháng míng* 'naming that fixes the reference is not true naming'.[662]

Thus we meet one particular awareness of finitude as the organising principle of wisdom: *the finitude of language*, both in its limited capacity of expressing essentials of life and the world, and in the multiplicity of human languages, which makes for grossly imperfect transmissions from one language to the other.

Perhaps my best, *wisest* option would be simply to shut up here. And I would be inclined to do just that, if on a worldwide scale, modern scholarship were coterminous with traditional wisdom – but there are indications that it is *not*.

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[662] Of the numerous editions of this ultimate wisdom text I only mention Ames & Hall 2003.

The interplay between modern scholarship and traditional wisdom is complex and paradoxical, as my entire argument goes to show.

16.4. 'Tacit modern unwisdom'…

Further aspects of the meaning and heuristic uses of the phrase 'expressions of traditional wisdom' may also be captured, somewhat flippantly, if we take the multiple opposite of 'expressions of traditional wisdom', which would be something like *'tacit* (taken for granted – as opposed to explicitly expressed and argued) *modern* (as opposed to traditional) *unwisdom* (as opposed to wisdom)'. It is not difficult to give a few examples (albeit, admittedly subjective, even tendentious) of such tacit modern unwisdom. I will quickly pass over such obviously spurious modern myths as that of the market and of commoditification or commoditisation (according to which all is merchandise), and that of rational maximising, especially as far as the attainment of material goals is concerned;[663] and the myth of North Atlantic cultural superiority and independent origin – for decades now exposed in the *Black Athena* debate and its aftermath.[664] Let me merely outline four examples of 'tacit modern unwisdom', which in a later Section will then be contrasted, one by one, with African traditional wisdom:

1. (R) THE IMMENSELY ALIENATING MYTH OF THE HUMAN BODY AS BASICALLY AN INDUSTRIAL PRODUCT,[665] *i.e.*

> 1. uniform and standardised (hence advertisements' emphasis on young, healthy and perfect)
>
> 2. modular in its composition, so that body parts may be modified, overhauled and replaced at will
>
> 3. and saturated (ever since the times of de la Mettrie (1747 / 1999) with the imagery of the machine, so that the same language ('check-up', 'engine', 'plumbing') may be used for our body and our motor vehicle (which is said to have its own 'body').

2. (S) THE MYTH OF THE FUNDAMENTAL CLOSEDNESS OF THE HUMAN PERSON, who thus is depicted as

> 1. in the first place an individual, rather than a member of a group
>
> 2. whose mind, by an inveterate axioma of modernist science, is to be considered a closed system impervious to other minds except,

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[663] *Cf.* van Binsbergen & Geschiere 2005; Bowles & Gintis 1993; Cramer 2002.

[664] Bernal 1987, 1991; Lefkowitz & Rogers 1996; van Binsbergen 1997.

[665] Smith *et al.* 2004; Sharp 2000; Martin 2006.

indirectly, through conscious reflection upon sense impressions (including those produced by speech) that may be taken to express the movements of other minds (*cf.* Dennett 1991)

3. (T) THE MYTH (going back to Aristotle,[666] as far as the Western tradition is concerned) OF THE EXCLUDED THIRD AND OF LOGICAL CONSISTENCY. In many ways this allows us to respond adequately and pragmatically in our interaction with the non-human world (which therefore can be argued to display, most of the time, and at the meso[667]-level of our conscious human interaction with it, a structure similar to that of our binary logic). Yet we cannot close our eyes to the fact that, in the interaction between human individuals and between human groups, the same logic incessantly creates intransigent positions of recognised and emphasised difference which cannot come to an agreement since both sides, by their own logic, are justified to consider themselves right, yet their respective truths are mutually incompatible and in conflict. The main conflicts in our globalising world of today (*e.g.* those between North Atlantic military capitalism on the one hand, and militant Islam on the other hand, as rival paths through modernity; those between economic short-term maximising globalism and a future-orientated ecological responsibility; those between consumption on the one hand, and integrity and global solidarity on the other hand) remind us of the potentially paralysing and destructive implication of such consistency. In Western thought it is only recently that such post-structuralist concepts as *différance* and *differend*,[668] and the elaboration of ternary and multi-value logics, have created a context where we can think beyond binary logic.

4. (U) THE MYTH OF 'MYTH' AS UNTRUTH. Typically but paradoxically, again, in this discussion of 'tacit modern unwisdom' we have taken the word *myth* itself in the modernist sense of: 'widely held collective representation that yet constitutes an untruth'. Usually such a use of the word 'myth' carries the implication that specific modern science is available to explode that myth – which implies (contentiously) that in all situations modern science is the source and the criterion of truth.

These are some of the themes of tacit, modern unwisdom against which we can begin to appreciate the wisdom of earlier times and different continents. We

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[666] *Metaphysica* IV.4, 1006^b and following; IV 7, 1011^b.

[667] I take the meso-level of phenomena to be that of our normal Galilei-Newton world, at the order of magnitude of the human body: 100° (= 1) metres. At very much higher and very much lower orders of magnitude (galaxies, elementary particles), the self-evidences of our Galilei-Newton world dissolve, and the paradoxes and wonders of the theory of relativity and quantum mechanics replace the (appearance of the) transparent logical structure and the object-subject distinction of the meso-level world, bringing out the restrictive boundary conditions of the latter.

[668] *Cf.* Derrida 1967a, 1972; Lyotard 1983.

will come back to these points below, when we will reconsider them in the light of African expressions of traditional wisdom.

Fig. 16.2. Seconded by her infant granddaughter, the white-robed Bituma-*cult leader, my adoptive mother Mrs Mayatilo Shiyowe, at the end of her sacred path and in front of her sacred pole hung with strings of white beads; Shumbanyama village, Kaoma District, 1973. Note the fly switch and the enamel container with sacrificial beer. Bringing a new, a-moral (for guiltless) interpretation of misfortune, modern, proto-globalisation-inspired cults of affliction offer a practical wisdom enshrined in bodily movements, drumming rhythm, songs.*

16.5. On the possibility of an intercultural transmission of wisdom, within and outside an academic context

If the West can be argued to have its share of modern unwisdom, the intercultural transmission of foreign wisdom becomes all the more desirable. But is such transmission at all possible?

One of the most important problems of the scholarly study of expressions of traditional wisdom turns out to be: *can we understand and represent these expressions in such a way that their original, local meaning is optimally preserved also in the new, globalising context into which these traditional expressions is mediated through our scholarship?*[669] This touches on the central question of all intercultural knowledge production and representation, and it does not have a simple answer.

The standard anthropological position is affirmative but patently naïve, and could be rendered as follows: *'if only we apply the proper procedural methods (long-term immersion in a local community aided by language mastery, more or less formal interviews, apprenticeships towards the competent assumption and discharge of local roles, and specific field methods of recording, analysis, host participation and feedback) we are bound to end up with an ethnographic representation that is both reliable (i.e. repetitively reproducible by other researchers) and valid (*i.e. *adequately represents the original)'.*

We note that this anthropological approach implies a procedural and repetitive conception of the production of intercultural knowledge – shortly we will come back to this conception of knowledge and contrast it with the wisdom mode of knowledge. Anthropological naïvety resides in a number of points (van Binsbergen 2003b). In the first place, from Kant onwards modern philosophy is predicated on the insight that direct knowledge of essence is an illusion, and that all representation is inevitably appropriative and distortive. To this we may add Quine's (1960, 1970) related *principle of the indeterminacy of translation*, which particularly applies to anthropologists' and philologists' attempts at intercultural knowledge construction through various forms of translation. Moreover, the ethnographer's commitment to the local society, its collective representations and existential predicaments is (even if subjectively conceptualised by that ethnographer as an existential encounter) largely optional and instrumental, and not supported by such early childhood socialisation as makes for inescapability on the part of the local actors themselves – instead, the ethnographer brings very different mind sets and gut reactions of her own to the field; therefore the local actors' life world largely remains that of others, and their wisdom remains
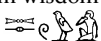
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[669] A special case of this question is: is it possible to express and transmit traditional wisdom in a new, state-of-the-art format, *e.g.* through the internet? *Cf.* Ess 2003 and van Binsbergen 2003b: Chapter 7 for discussions on this point.

largely irrelevant. Finally, the ethnographer's understanding is expressed in theoretically underpinned analytical terms, to be processed and ultimately published in a specialist technical language which, even if in principle accessible to the local actors, is utterly alienating and distancing.

In this light it is understandable that a non-anthropologist like the philosopher Niels Weidtmann (2007) articulates the thesis (but I am not sure whether he himself totally agrees with it) that, for instance, African wisdom cannot be represented in Western discourse; we will come back to this.

What ethnographers can do, and have done (for instance in the excellent work by Turner, Fernandez, Werbner, Devisch, as cited in the present argument), is: rendering explicit, and rebuilding or remodelling in specialist globalising scholarly discourse, what the formal components are of wisdom texts (both written and oral) including the accompanying social and ritual dramatics, and through what communicative and performative mechanism the practical knowledge they contain is communicated to their original intended audience. Such dissections of other people's wisdom may still speak to us in some poetic sense, but they no longer speak to us fully as the wisdom they originally constituted. Philosophers and scholars of textuality and performance may even be more skilful at such analytical exercises than anthropologists, and may go about them with more uninhibited cleverness, because their armchair approaches have (with few exceptions) been performed upon isolated texts that were already cut and dried to begin with – they were seldom forced to discharge their professional duties while at the same time intensively engaging with real foreign local actors, speaking in real time in concrete and confusing, logistically and medically challenging, foreign situations in which the researcher finds himself deeply involved.

The saving grace of both ethnography and text-based, philological approaches to expressions of traditional wisdom lies in the fact that their attempt towards intercultural knowledge production is never just othering and distancing and nothing more – it also hints at an existential interpersonal encounter in which streaks of understanding and identification light up, in the recognition of the fact that the local actors have a body and a mind very similar to that of the researcher, and in the recognition of their struggle with common dilemmas of the human condition (illness, death, competition and conflict, love and loyalty, meaning and consolation). The physical closeness and the *coleur locale* of fieldwork are conducive to a sense of adoption and transcultural intersubjective fusion; but, given the subtle, millennia-old tradition of cultivated textual sensitivity pervading the humanities, field-workers can by no means claim the monopoly on such encounters. The Egyptologist reading an Old Kingdom wisdom text such as the *Precepts of Ptah-Hotep i.e. Tsw n md.t nfr.t ptḥ-ḥtp* ⹈⹈⹈; or the Sinologist reading the great T'ang 唐朝 poet Li Bai 李白 (701-762 CE), will have the same sense of communicative

fusion in which wisdom resides and makes itself deeply felt.[670] My own experi-
ence, as a mere amateur reader of such texts, is that something of this quality
may survive highly deficient language mastery (but anthropologists' language
mastery in the field is usually deficient, or worse, anyway), and even the inter-
mediary of translation. The field-work situation, just like the text, turns out to
be not just a vehicle for specialist knowledge production along professional
lines (which would appear to be destructive for the transmission of wisdom),
but also (as a non-professional incentive without which most of us would have
long given up our scholarship) a vehicle for amazed but affirmative human en-
counter, which makes light with cultural, linguistic and somatic difference, and
highlights the common humanity we share – as a position of wisdom in itself,
as well as one conducive to the transfer of wisdom. The same argument could
be given for intercultural transmission of beauty. The problems of broadly col-
lective intercultural contact and knowledge production are not fundamentally
different from those at the interpersonal individual level.

What is involved is the transmission of specific meanings and insights from
sender to receiver, but beyond that, and more importantly, the very facts of
such transmission and of the ensuring partial fusion in themselves (regardless
of the specific contents being transmitted), – which liberates the receiver of his
or her articulated boundedness as an individual.

At this point we become aware of a mechanism of *situational, oppositional
framing* attending specialist intercultural knowledge production. As a scholar,
equipped with intersubjective disciplinary methods and commitments, the
specialist has no option but to retreat into a frame of conceptual and analytical
othering, where the traditional expression of wisdom is objectified, and thus
virtually destroyed, into a mere target for North Atlantic / globalising scientific
discourse. This is inevitably destructive: for it denies that the exchange of wis-
dom is a communicative undertaking, and therefore requires a common cosmo-
logical frame of reference (however implicit and inarticulate), recognition of a
shared basis of valuation however diffuse, recognition among both sender and
recipient of each other's shared humanity, recognition also of each other's po-
tential familiarity and competence in the problematic at hand, and agreement
as to a shared medium of communication (which could be as basic as a shrug of
the shoulders or a wink, or as elaborate as an actual spoken *lingua franca*). Only
when these requirements are met can the sender's pronouncements move the
receiver to an affirmation-inspiring emulation, to a re-arrangement of the re-
ceiver's view of self and world. All these requirements are left unfulfilled if, in
the intercultural encounter with expressions of traditional wisdom, the receiver
emphatically identifies as a North Atlantic / globalising scholar detachedly ap-
plying her specialist tools. Then the situation is dominated by the need to pro-
duce and to use specialist alienating language, which can never coincide with

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[670] Ptaḥ-Ḥotep 1917; van den Dungen 2002-2004; Lichtheim 1973 *f.*: I, 62.

the original wisdom utterance but thrives on its difference *vis-à-vis* that utterance. The alienating frame is in the first place a language frame. However, to the extent to which the academic specialist coming to the intercultural wisdom encounter (whether in face-to-face interaction in the field, or in text) manages to avoid such framing, and to reduce, or at least defer, the imposition of appropriative and alienating scientific language, – to the extent to which all language use on the part of the receiver is deferred, or at least an inclusive, fussily accommodating language format is chosen *e.g.* that of poetry or dance or song, or silence, to that extent the transcultural, potentially universal implications and applicabilities of the sender's wisdom may come across to the receiver, as an existential message quite comparable to the sender's conscious intentions, and equally comparable to what passes between close kin and between friends in a mono-cultural setting. It is not the intercultural nature of the wisdom exchange, but the scholarly framing, that to my mind is responsible for the truth articulated by Weidtmann: that traditional wisdom cannot be represented in Western scientific discourse; but let us not forget that there are other forms of discourse, and that much of life, on both sides of the cultural boundaries we tend to construct, is non-discursive.

I could go one step further, and claim that the situational, oppositional framing identified here – *the dynamic field of tension between identification / fusion and dissociation / confrontation, which incessantly oscillates back and forth, tending to dissociation / confrontation especially if the situation is dominated by specialist language use and its classifications* – is a fundamental mechanism in all intercultural knowledge production, and the source of many problems that have cropped up in this field.[671] Although public thought and geopolitics of the 20th century CE have persuaded us to reify cultures as firm givens of the human existence, they are yet intangible, ephemeral, and situational constructs – *social facts* (Durkheim 1897), no doubt, yet (because competence in a culture is learned, because people can be competent in more than one culture, because

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[671] Here I find that a useful and illuminating model is provided by the physico-chemical mechanism of the cell 'membrane', for instance (but that is only one very special case out of myriad such situations) as operating in the context of the human ovum being fertilised by a spermatozoon. Built up out of a tight network of lipid (*i.e.* fat) molecules, the membrane is only one molecule thick, and as long as the molecules are aligned *i.e.* in their hydrophilic state, between them they leave enough room for very small bodies to pass through – the membrane is then essentially porous; however, as soon as one body has been allowed to pierce through this array of molecules, the membrane's condition changes instantly from hydrophilic to hydrophobic, the porous transitions close shut, and the membrane is no longer permeable, although given the appropriate trigger might return to a permeable state. In the same way I see the interconnectedness, and the dissociation, in interpersonal and intercultural encounter, as two complementary aspects between which the process of intercultural encounter incessantly oscillates: with articulated speech, academic distancing, and encapsulation in a formal organisation (the state, a world religion, a voluntary association) as major situational triggers towards dissociation and disconnectedness – and on the other hand silence, dance, music, recognition of mutual human corporality and finitude, as major situational triggers towards interconnectedness.

they often situationally toggle between cultures, *etc.*) facts at a different onto-logical level from the facts that make our bodies occupy space, makes them per-ceptible to other human and animal bodies, bring them into being, sustain them through life, cause them to die. We cannot live without specific cultural pro-gramming, and part of it is so deeply ingrained that we cannot trade it for the specific programming from another culture, yet we can take a relative view of cultural difference and have encounters, learn wisdom lessons, dispense and receive knowledge across the ever so relative, intangible and situational (hence often merely illusory of non-existent) boundaries that separate cultures. Knowl-edge, in some post-Gettier[672] reformulation of the time-honoured definition as 'justified true belief', is inherently culture-bound, because justification, truth and belief are meaningless without a specific cultural embeddedness. Culture is just a machine for the production of local self-evidence, of local truths. But here the same framing mechanism is at work, for we may also opt out of the specialist analytical frame, and instead consider knowledge, in a more diffuse, intuitive, and essentialising metaphysical way, as 'an individual orientation (of cognition, emotion and / or motivation) that seeks to coincide with Being'. As the leading intercultural philosopher Mall (1995) has aptly stated,

> 'no language can claim to be the mother-tongue of Being',

yet, to the extent to which we do not allow ourselves to be carried away by our own language use, we are not necessarily exiled from Being, we are granted considerable knowledge within our own cultural framework. Nor are we neces-sarily deaf to those expressions of knowledge (*i.e.* wisdom) in which others tes-tify to their endeavour to coincide with Being, and this may well include *linguistic and cultural others* – after all, in the face of Being their very otherness may appear as only superficial and situational; it is oscillatingly complemented by a sameness that would be liberating if only to the extent to which it does not threaten our own, and the other's, construction of self-identity...

The less we speak of interculturality, and of the situations to which this term refers, in technical academic terms, the more we seem to be invited to achieve intercultural knowledge and to partake of intercultural wisdom. But this para-doxical lesson could only be learned by thinking the scholarly endeavour through, in a critical and scholarly way. In the pursuit of wisdom and knowl-edge, scholarship is a Wittgensteinian ladder (Wittgenstein 1921 / 1964: §6.5.4) we may cast away once it has brought us, as an indispensable tool, to within reach of where we were heading.

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[672] In a famous article, Gettier (1963) questioned (on rather pedestrian grounds, I fear) the validity of this definition, yet it remained in circulation; also *cf*. above, note 555.

16.6. Towards an epistemological perspective

In the preceding Section 5 I have approached the encounter between global scholarship and expressions of traditional wisdom, from the question as to the intercultural transmission of such wisdom. I will now develop a complementary perspective, notably an epistemological argument that allows us to articulate more clearly what the specific nature is of traditional wisdom as a form of knowledge – thus going beyond the Aristotelian *sophia* / *phronēsis* distinction of our opening Section. In Section 16.4 I gave four examples of 'tacit modern unwisdom'. They can maintain themselves as self-evidently true collective re–presentations in North Atlantic society today, by virtue of the place science has acquired as the central legitimating and truth-producing instance in the modern world, having replaced in this respect religion, magic, and other traditional worldviews (*cf.* Foucault 1966, 1969). When, exposing them as dubious collective representations (as 'myths' in the modernist, pejorative sense; but see Text Block 4. (Y) below) and nothing more, we try to take a distance from them, we can only do so in the hope of an alternative viewpoint that affords us greater relevance and a closer approximation of the essence of Being – in other words, a viewpoint illuminated by *traditional wisdom*.

Such hope testifies to the fact that, as modern scholars, we are divided within ourselves, and given to an amazing nostalgia. Although there is a wide range of disciplines and disciplinary paradigms currently exploring traditional wisdom and its expressions, nearly all researchers involved in this undertaking subscribe to the canons of modern scholarship: objectivity, rationality, and universalism (*cf.* Harding 1997; *cf.* van Binsbergen 2007b, reprinted in the present book as Chapter 13). The point of universalism may surprise and arouse those – the majority – who are emphatically involved as specialists, not in world-wide intercultural comparison, but in specific geographical regions, historical periods, and subject matters – Ancient Mesopotamian proto-science, African traditional worldviews as expressed in proverbs, Chinese Taoism up to the T'ang dynasty, the Central American peasant worldview today, *etc*. Such specialities are the backbone of scholarship in that they are sufficiently focused to afford the researcher a combination of a delimited field of study, in which extraordinary expertise and profundity of insight can be achieved. If I yet apply the concept of universalism to such particularising scholarly endeavours, it is for the following reason: however much our subject matters may differ, however much the languages, scripts, literatures, field situations differ that each of us employs in the pursuit of her or his speciality, yet our concepts, methods, goals, modes of scholarly expression and argument remain recognisable, and communicable, within the universalising, and globalising, academic context – we can speak to each other, and find that, across the boundaries of our disciplinary and regional specialities, we have a lot to say to each other, and much to share. Our looking at expressions of traditional wisdom is in itself an invitation to universalism in the sense I have used that term above.

Why then is such an endeavour a sign of being divided in ourselves? Because, however we may choose to define the concept in detail, *traditional wisdom* necessarily constitutes a mode of knowing that differs from the knowledge that is our joint scholarly pursuit. No traditional wisdom could ever be produced by our scholarly methods (all we can do with our scholarly methods is try and document, represent, and analyse, such traditional wisdom). If yet such a traditional mode of knowing fascinates us enough to spend years of our lives trying to come near it, then there must be an unmistakably nostalgic element there – as if we recognise that that traditional mode of knowing has a claim to continued relevance and understanding which are far from supplanted by today's science. Calling a mode of knowing 'wisdom' means that we take it seriously as an aspect of the human endeavour to understand the world and human life and meet their practicalities, as complementary to modern science rather than as to be superseded and exposed by modern science. We use the scientific mode of knowing to represent, and bring to intercultural recognition, a different mode of knowing.

What does that difference reside in? Having characterised the scientific mode of knowing as objective, rational and universal, we are tempted to define traditional wisdom as *subjective, a-rational* (not to say irrational), *and particularising*.

From wherever in the world, these expressions of traditional wisdom constitute texts (written or oral) whose main point is to instruct the audience on *the practical dilemmas of human life,* hence contradiction, tautology and ambiguity are as common, in this genre, as in most other oral and written genres of all parts of the world and all periods except specialist academic prose; the characteristic 'a-logical' is not totally inapplicable here. However, the important thing is that what is presented in these wisdom texts is unmistakably meant to be more than just subjective, particularising and personal, – to have a wider, more general applicability beyond the speaker's own life experience and specific situation; the lessons are implied to be worth giving, and taking, because they are claimed to capture something of the human condition in general. So in fact we are, with such wisdom texts, rather closer to scientific knowledge than is suggested by the inverted formula '*subjective, a-rational, and, in its practicality, particularising*'.[673]

I submit that what distinguishes scientific knowledge from the knowledge of wisdom text, is primarily a matter of *procedure*. The truth of a scientific statement resides in the explicit, intersubjective procedure (method, in other words)

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[673] Niels Weidtmann (2007) shows a particular interest in the rationality aspect of African expressions of traditional wisdom. He stresses that vocal African writers on traditional wisdom, such as Wiredu (1980) and Odera Oruka (1990b), take such rationality to be a general human trait – in line with a long-standing anthropological tradition seeking to vindicate the rationality of Africans, specially during the late colonial period; *cf.* Gluckman 1955, 1967; Evans-Pritchard 1937 / 1972; Malinowski 1954 / 1948). Such insistence on universal rationality, however, may yet not be Weidtmann's own position, for, as we have seen, he claims in the third thesis of his contribution that African traditional wisdom cannot be phrased in Western discourse.

through which that knowledge has been produced. This applies to all researchers currently involved in the study of expressions of traditional wisdom (however much they may, as humanities scholars, define their method as literary and intuitive rather than as rational, objective and universalising; and regardless of how much contempt or helplessness they may feel *vis-à-vis* the natural sciences). But the same emphasis on intersubjective procedure as the decisive basis for valid knowledge production is found, outside today's globalising scientific tradition, in the arts of the diviner and the healer, the astrologer, the metallurgist, the navigator *etc*. These trades are now found all over the world. The oldest texts at our disposal documenting these trades derive from the Ancient Near East over four thousand years ago. They are expressions, not so much of traditional wisdom, but of proto-science. As we have seen in Chapter 15, above, the hallmark of such procedures is that *knowledge appears as the necessary implication attending an intersubjectively (professionally, often) recognised limiting condition whose occurrence is implied to be not unique but repetitive, so that a standard rule can be established.*

Although such expressions are likely to be informed by a traditional worldview, they cannot to *reduced* to such a worldview; they properly belong to a different mode of knowledge production – one that leads directly to today's science. By contrast, the expressions of traditional wisdom typically lack the reliance on standardised, hence repeatable and generally available intersubjective (*e.g.* professional) conditional procedures to underpin their truth claims. The underpinning of expressions of traditional wisdom lies in human (especially ancestral) or divine authority, fed by revelation, a past charter, or diffuse, life-long experience. Such underpinning cannot be summoned, at will, repetitively, and instantly, in every specific situation as is the case for the limiting conditions underlying (proto-) science. As a result the *expression of traditional wisdom* is of the nature of a belief, or an exhortation, not of an empirical statement. Expressions of traditional wisdom tend to be concerned with the construction of a coherent worldview which endows everyday life and religious ritual with meaning. It is in this respect that expressions of traditional wisdom often are statements of myth – but here myth does not mean 'collective representation constituting untruth', but on the contrary, a 'collective representation which, although in narrative format, is implied (and sometimes explicitly claimed) to convey ultimate truth and meaning'. Thus, expressions of traditional wisdom are central statements of symbols, and they revolve on the construction and transmission of notions of continuity, connectedness, life force, and on the explanation and justification of illness, death and evil.

I take it that this emphasis on human or divine authority, rather than in abstract and repeatable intersubjective procedure, also suffices to illuminate the otherwise problematic term 'traditional', thus steering away from other less desirable usages of that term: *e.g.* 'traditional' as a euphemism for the distinction between that which belongs to the North Atlantic / Western region and that which does not – which given

the crucial indebtedness of the West to the Ancient Near East and Africa is unhelpful; or 'traditional' as necessarily confined to that which is handed down by intergenerational cultural transmission – which does not apply to Mesopotamian, Egyptian and biblical wisdom texts, nor to many other situations where we would yet like to be able to speak of 'traditional wisdom'.

What is the format of our encounter with such expressions of traditional wisdom? Scholarship consists in the production of texts, and therefore our scholarly encounter with expressions of traditional wisdom usually takes a written textual format – the scholar introduces and describes the expression of tradition wisdom in question, and meditates, in discursive academic prose, on the scope, relevance, meaning and shortcomings of such expressions of traditional wisdom, in the light of the current, North Atlantic scientific or otherwise dominant worldview. Written textual strategies of disclosure, representation, hermeneutics and global re-circulation in an academic format, such as make up modern humanities scholarship, also prevail when we deal with 'wisdom texts' from a provenance that is remote in time or space, or both. Such scholarly strategies take a particular, highly specialised (and contested) form in archaeology,[674] when, in stead of being written, the expressions of traditional wisdom appear also, or exclusively, in an iconographic format and (especially when all accompanying present-day commentary is lacking) need to be interpreted by analogies and other comparative models derived from contexts that either have such contemporary commentary or that open up to direct research in real time, through the medium of interviews and participation in field-work.

The tantalising attraction of such iconographic reconstruction of traditional wisdom on the basis of primarily images lies in the following paradox:

- On the one hand one is confronted, over vast expanses of space and time, with recurrent patterns to which one would like to attribute a convergent meaning (for instance, the mytheme of the Separation of Heaven and Earth in many myths from all over the world since the Upper Palaeolithic; or the proliferation of patterns – such as dots, granulation / speckledness, spirals, undulations – suggestive of 'entoptic' or psychedelic, trance-related phenomena and their imagery).[675]

- But on the other hand, how do we find an intersubjective scientific method that protects us from wishful thinking, from the amateurish habit (from the early anthropologist James Frazer – 1911 *f.*, 1918, 1968 – to today's *New Age*) of lumping phenomena from patently incomparable and historically unrelated provenances, and from the similarities that spring, not from historical interrelatedness deriving from cultural transfer and a shared cultural origin, but from simply

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[674] *Cf.* Hodder 1986, 1987; Renfrew & Zubrow 1994.

[675] *Cf.* Lewis-Williams & Dowson 1988.

the parallel effects engendered by the identical make-up of the minds of Anatomically Modern Humans[676] whenever and wherever during the 200,000 years of their existence, of which the first 120,000 years exclusively in the African continent?

Such iconographic interpretation is still based on texts (albeit pictorial ones) that have a tangible and lasting material record. However, the great majority of expressions of traditional wisdom, ever since the emergence of humankind[677] have been not written but oral, and the main way to capture these directly is through personal field-work, in which one engages profoundly and for a prolonged period with the community owning and managing such traditional wisdom, so that both in formal research settings and in more informal personal participation in everyday and ritual life, the expressions of myths, worldviews, moral codes and practical ethics may be picked up, understood, committed to writing in a modern language, and committed to academic or popularising global circulation.

From the late 1960s, it is particularly in such field-work encounters that I have personally engaged with, learned, and internalised, expressions of traditional wisdom in Africa:

1. Initially primarily as an academic ethnographer and ethnohistorian,

2. Then, from 1990 on, also and increasingly as someone who is taking a critical distance from the appropriating and distancing ethnographic stance inherent in mainstream global (but essentially North Atlantic) anthropology, and who instead has committed himself to local expressions of traditional wisdom as a certified and practising diviner-spirit medium-healer in the Southern African sangoma tradition (cf. van Binsbergen 1991, 2003), in other words as someone who (both in Africa and worldwide) extends existential counselling and pastoral work on the basis of African wisdom principles

3. And finally, from the late 1990s, as an intercultural philosopher calling to question the foundations and the politics of intercultural knowledge construction particularly where expressions of traditional wisdom are concerned; it is at this stage that I complemented my

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[676]The variety of humankind to which all humans on earth have belonged (ever since the extinction of the Neanderthals, *i.e.* equipped with articulate speech, symbolism and comparatively advanced tools and weapons made of stone, wood and bone.

[677] I write *humankind*, and not *Anatomically Modern Humans*, because there is accumulating evidence to suggest that traditional wisdom is older even than the emergence of Anatomically Modern Humans – that a certain amount of self-reflexive symbolising went on among Neanderthaloids and older human forms from the Middle and even Lower Palaeolithic; *cf.* Bednarik 1990; d'Errico *et al.* 2003.

> radical criticism of anthropology with an equally radical (self-) criticism of the adoptive strategy of 'going native' – for the latter is inherently problematic as a form of intercultural appropriation and as a movement that obscures, rather than illuminates, the problems of rationality, representation, instrumentality, hegemony, existential encounter and identity, in intercultural knowledge formation.

This personal development in the course of my career has put me in a position from which I can appreciate the way in which modern scholars both dissect and feel strangely attracted to traditional expressions of wisdom, and in which I have realised that *the 'nostalgia' implied in such attraction, is in fact an epistemological critique of the hegemonic and totalising pretensions of modern science.* It is also a recognition of the fact that much of what 'other cultures', outside the North Atlantic, have achieved in the way of expressions of traditional wisdom, must not be ignored or slighted as invalid or obsolete. On the contrary, it deserves to be acknowledged as genuine knowledge in its own right, as essential elements in the global knowledge heritage of humankind, based on an epistemology of its own, capable of solving some of the dilemmas of the human conditions as well as, or better than, dominant global / North Atlantic science.

This is claiming far more than I can substantiate in the present Chapter. All I can do here is offer some illustrations of what I mean. Let me therefore conclude by briefly discussing four forms of African traditional wisdom which I find particularly convincing as complements or alternatives to modern science, and capable of being reformulated in a global format, and globally circulated.

16.7. Four examples of viable African traditional wisdom with potentially global applicability

I refer to my four examples of 'tacit modern unwisdom' set out in Section 16.4 above, and contrast them with African traditional wisdom.

1. (V) THE HUMAN BODY IN AFRICAN TRADITIONAL WISDOM. Much traditional wisdom in Africa is concentrated on the human body,[678] whose life cycle and fertility are celebrated. Thus death may become the highest, and with all its sense of bereavement yet essentially festive, culmination of life; and puberty rites (especially female ones) appear as a vital resource of meaning spilling over to the other fields of the entire culture. Symbolic parallelism between the body and the land, and between the body and the structure of socio-political organisa-

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[678] From the very extensive literature on African corporality I mention: Ngubane 1977; Kubik 1977; Devisch 1985a, 1985c, 1990a, 1995b, 1995c, 2000; Rasing 2001; Jacobson-Widding 1991; Maw & Picton 1992; Fernandez 1990; Kimmerle 1989; Fédry 1976; Turner 1969b; de Boeck 1995.

tion, makes macrocosmic phenomena understandable at a human scale. Frequently the body is marked and covered with substances derived from other bodies, from surrounding nature, and from humans' local artefact production – yet the celebration of the undressed body, and of the cleaned and cleansed body, is an implicit articulation of purity and trans-moral innocence in the face of the continuity of life force (locally often conceptualised as the ancestors, or the spirits of the wilds). The movement of the body in space and time confirms dance and music as the most obvious way of situating the individual in its social and cosmological position, and of re-finding that position after illness, crisis and bereavement. Orifices are points of transformation between the cosmological, the social and the individual, articulating life as a constant flow of life force in and out the human individual, and between individuals – *e.g.* in a sexual context. Especially healing practices reconstitute the connections between worldview, social organisation, and body; they not only redress and restore, but effectively *create* the human individual. Most importantly, it is the body that situates individuals in a chain of continuity across generations, whose perpetuation is implied to be the true meaning of life. The African traditional wisdom of the body, expressed and mobilised in every ritual and every act of therapy, contrasts forcefully and convincingly with the alienating body practices of the North Atlantic region today, as evoked in Section 16.4 above; as well as with the time-honoured bodily conceptions and practices (often far more restrictive and rigid than their African counterparts) of the world religions (Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, *etc.*) which have become increasingly dominant in the Old World over the past three millennia. In African systems of corporality we find a wisdom which not only has remained vitally important to African people today, but which has also proved to be capable of reformulation into a global format, and of being globally transmitted in the form of African-inspired musical practices, dancing, healing, and sexual practices; ever renewed and increasingly amalgamated with globalising practices from elsewhere, African corporal wisdom continues to conquer the world.

2. (W) CONFLICT REGULATION IN AFRICAN TRADITIONAL WISDOM. African local-level practices of conflict regulation constitute an important expression of traditional wisdom, to be shared with the wider world. The relatively old and exhausted state of many African soils and eco-systems has been an important factor in the vulnerable and ephemeral nature that has been a recurrent feature of African state systems both in the past millennia and today, well after the end of colonial rule. Therefore, the grand logic of formal organisation (elsewhere the hub of political and economic expansion and innovation in the last few millennia and especially since the 19th century CE) has often remained an imported dream in Africa – repeatedly turned nightmare in post-colonial-state contexts. But on the basis of such principles as the complementarity of oppositions, and the awareness of sharing a fundamental humanity in the face of which *total* social exclusion of particular individuals and groups is literally un-

thinkable, African small-scale communities have managed to persist and to renew themselves by virtue of a particularly effective mode of conflict management. African local-level traditions of conflict resolution are typically based on the recognition of plural truths, of plural positions of integrity, and the symbolically creative invention of real or pretended common grounds that would allow the parties involved to yield and be reconciled – for if two opponents are both right then there can be no logical road to reconciliation except via the ternary logic of sleight-of-hand. These mechanisms have, however, turned out to be surprisingly ineffective at the national and international level (although post-apartheid South Africa might yet prove us wrong on this point), and as a result Africa has stood out, during the last half century, as a place of state collapse, civil war and genocide. Yet great African statesmen of the last few decades, such as Julius Nyerere, Nelson Mandela, Desmond Tutu, and Kofi Annan, seem to have been able to effectively transmit some of this traditional wisdom of conflict regulation to a level beyond the local community. A closer, comparative and theoretical study[679] of these African modes of conflict regulation as forms of traditional wisdom may help to reformulate them into a globally receptible format, which may also prove more effect at the national and international level in Africa.

> W.W. THE AFRICAN SENSE OF COMMUNITY: SELF-EVIDENT INPUT OR PRECARIOUS PRODUCT? In the discussion following my oral presentation on which the present argument is based, Niels Weidtmann stressed, rightly, that these African modes of conflict regulation do *not* spring from any exceptionally powerful sense of community in African societies – on the contrary, such a sense is often surprisingly weak. I totally agree, having stressed in various publications on the Nkoya people of Zambia how their villages are really communities of *strangers*, people who were not born together and who will not die together, but whose lives are only temporarily intermeshing in the context of a particular small village and / or kin group, whilst each individual is personally and uniquely involved in a life-long merry-go-round of rural and rural-urban geographical mobility, marrying, divorcing, and serially exploiting a whole range of potential kin alliances in the process. Other Africanist studies, for instance those from the Manchester School context (*cf.* van Binsbergen 2007a and extensive references cited there), show that such a setup is not peculiar to the Nkoya people but has a much wider African applicability. Given the loose and vulnerable sense of community in many African contexts, conflict resolution, just like marriage, *rather than being predicated on an already existing sense of community*, is an attempt to actively *create* community in the first place, because it articulates people into complementary opposing groups, and formulates an idiom in terms of which their opposition can be negotiated with minimum social and symbolic destructiveness. Conflict regulation can do this, not by virtue of any fixed, well-defined and well-sanctioned politico-legal system of clearly allocated individual and collective rights, prerogatives and obligations, but precisely by virtue of the inchoate nature (Mitchell 1971; van Velsen 1971) of African socio-political organisation, in other words by virtue of the existence of a complex web of *conflicting ties* which each potentially lay a total claim on the groups and individuals involved (Gluckman 1955, 1965; Colson 1960). In such a situation, where one may typically belong to more

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[679] *Cf.* Norbeck 1963; Gluckman 1955; Simonse 1992; Assefa 1996; Ngwane 1996; van Binsbergen 2003c.

than one conflicting group at the same time, and where more than one party in conflict may have an equally justified claim to truth, honour, compensation, bride-wealth, and other scarce resources, conflict regulation can only be through creative sleight-of-hand, invoking a ternary logic that allows one *to have one's cake and eat it* at the same time – in other words, the wisdom of negotiation, symbolic rhetoric, and finitude.

3. (X) THE ACCESSIBLE INDIVIDUAL MIND IN AFRICAN TRADITIONAL WISDOM. As a third example of African traditional wisdom I would cite African elements of a philosophy of mind, such as articulated by Gyekye and Wiredu, for instance, in their rendering of the ontology of the Akan ethnic and linguistic cluster in West Africa.[680] In the Western philosophical tradition, the philosophy of mind has faced aporias for a number of reasons:

- the heritage of Platonic / early Christian / Cartesian body-mind dualism (critiqued by, for instance, Ryle 1949),
- well-known pitfalls of the 'other minds' problem;[681]
- the Western stress on the concept of the individual, undivided self – conceived not as a socio-cultural construct peculiar to a particular time and place, but as a self-evident given of the human condition in general – as the central cosmological and ontological entity.

> The latter claims that it is impossible for minds to communicate directly with one another, leaving only the indirect transmission of mental contents via material signs (including speech) received through the senses. Such an individualistic and atomistic conception of the mind, whilst a basic tenet underlying most world religions today, leads us into great difficulty, since the actual direct communication between minds (as implied in the ideas of telepathy and precognition)[682] is simply an everyday experience to many people from all cultural orientations and all times. Anthropologists

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[680] *Cf.* once more: Wiredu & Gyekye 1992; Gyekye 1995; Wiredu 1980. The accounts of these two philosophers of the Akan system do not completely match. *Cf.* Müller 2002.

[681] Once more: Bilgrami 1993 and references cited there.

[682] Philosophical problems of (the claim of the existence of) paranormal phenomena are discussed in, *e.g.*, Eisenbud 1982; Brier 1974; Mundle 1964; Grim 1990. I discuss these themes in connection with African divinatory practices in van Binsbergen 2003b. An authoritative synthetic overview of the empirical evidence for paranormal phenomena, in the face of ill-informed and entrenched modern Skeptics movement, is Radin 1997, with extensive bibliography. Dean Radin holds a PhD in physics; one of his own contributions to this field was that, together with R.D. Nelson, he managed to have an authoritative, mainstream physics journal publish a discussion of nearly a thousand cases of consciousness-related anomalies in random physical systems, *e.g.* computers that, not only in their overall design, but – against all mainstream expectations – also in the details of their actual functioning (*e.g.* in the outcome of digital random generators), prove to be demonstrably influenced by the conscious thought of the humans operating them. (Radin & Nelson 1989)

working on African divination and trance have similar phenomena to report which seem to go against the dominant, 'Skeptical' natural-science paradigms of today. It must be emphasised that there are huge epistemological and methodological difficulties inherent in such claims (Olivier de Sardan 1988). On the other hand, contrary to what most modernist Skeptics, and their lay parrots, seem to realise, the theory of *non-locality as an aspect of main-stream quantum mechanics* does provide an excellent theoretical basis for the possibility of such paranormal phenomena.[683] Since such insights, in locally encoded cultural forms, are common-place in many African contexts but repressed from public circulation (especially among non-specialists) in the post-Enlightenment North Atlantic region, paranormal phenomena may be argued to constitute a domain where the truth claims of African wisdom are not just valid within the local African space of culturally created self-evidence, but may deserve to be globally mediated as a statement of a transcultural truth, and hence superior to current collective representations in the West. Yet most anthropologists with such experiences hide in psychological rationalisations that make the diviner merely a skilful manipulator of plain sensory information and an articulator of, essentially widely circulating, village rumour. Of course, there is no denying the ordinary psychology of the interpersonal information flow, by virtue of which clients often sensorily transmit information to diviner-healers without the client being aware of this, thus allowing the diviner-healer to spuriously claim paranormal sources of knowledge. However, my own quarter of a century as an African diviner have absolutely convinced me that these normal processes of communication and impression management, coupled with the trance-like techniques of trans-individual sensitivity that one learns as an African wisdom specialist, create fertile grounds also for non-sensory forms of knowledge transmission. Such transmission can hardly be explained by the publicly dominant, global / North Atlantic scientific ontology, but is eminently accounted for in the worldview of African wisdom. In the Southern African divinatory idiom, extrasensory production of what appears to be valid knowledge is explained by the (in that cultural context) self-evident intercession of possessing or guiding ancestors. In the Akan version, by contrast, individual minds are, as forms of what is locally called *sunsum*, considered to be semi-autonomously subsumed in a universal World Soul, *okra*, and it is this interconnectedness which eminently accounts for telepathy,

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[683] *Cf.* Einstein *et al.* 1931, 1935; Bell 1964; Walker 1977; Bohm & Hiley 1993.

precognition and veridical divination (see Chapter 15, above).

Meanwhile there is an important point to be appreciated here, which throws further light on the peculiar rationality of divination and healing as a wisdom practice. True enough, the art of the diviner-healer includes specific technical procedures, which are well-defined, managed, and transmitted among the specialist owners of such wisdom. We have seen how these largely seem to be forms of knowledge production based on procedures, guided by the specific conventionalised interpretations of conditions defined by explicit limiting conditions, of the type 'if the lob of the liver turns out to be darkened, then...'. If this were truly the case, such formal procedures would in principle produce (proto-) scientific knowledge, not wisdom; and to the extent to which the implication triggered by the limiting condition (for instance: '...then the king will die') in reality – under the regime of truth construction that informs our modern science – can only be said to be totally unrelated to the limiting condition, such implications are false and such science can, from our present viewpoint, only be called pseudo-science.[684] On the other hand, if the diviner-healer's lay client (and often the diviner-healer himself) consciously finds that he believes in the diviner-healer's pronouncements, this is so not only on the basis of the latter's authority (as in wisdom), but also and particularly because of the objective infallibility attributed to the divinatory procedures followed, as patent truth-producing techniques of a repetitive, objectifying, technical nature. We are left with a puzzle, an aporia, for if the material instruments of divination (*e.g.* four tablets, a collection of bones or figurines, the chance traces left by nocturnal visitors from the animal kingdom, the painstakingly calculated chart of the position of planets at a particular place and time) are strictly applied in accordance with the rules, which formally do not leave any degrees of freedom, *they could not – under today's global scientific assumptions – possibly produce veridical divination.* Yet they do, in my extensive experience. My solution is that in fact the procedures are not strictly followed, and cannot be. Every divinatory outcome displays what the divination specialist Werbner (1973) has called 'the superabundance of understanding': there is never just one clue but there are always several, and these are always mutually more or less incompatible and contradictory. For instance, in Southern African four-tablet divination,[685] every fall of the four tablets (and with back and front of each tablet being marked as different there are $2^4 = 16$ different falls possible) can be

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[684] I repeat: as today's astrology is justifiably called pseudo-science today, although 3,000 years ago it was in the forefront of (proto-)science. Probably, and hopefully, the paroxysms of today's science (the theory of relativity, quantum mechanisms, and neurobiology) will end up as pseudo-sciences within a few centuries, to be replaced by better science...

[685] I refer again to the various treatments of this topic throughout this book, with full references in the bibliography.

interpreted along several different dimension: ancestral, witchcraft, social, health, economic, *etc.* Moreover, each fall has its specific conventionalised praise text – which is ambiguous and dark, just like the pronouncements of the Delphi oracle in Ancient Greece (Fontenrose 1978), or those of the *yì jīng* 易經 ('I Ching') oracle and wisdom text of classical China (Legge 1993). By the same token, a full astrological theme ('horoscope'), analysed with all the possible aspects (in degrees, with each cohort of degrees having its own conventional *benefic* or *malefic* connotations), with very specific meanings and elaborate correspondences – of colour, musical tone, geographical location, gender, mood, moral quality, *etc.* – very specific to each of the various planets and secondary astrological points) is an array of immense complexity, a bunch of contradictions and incompatible associations from which simply not one unequivocal outcome can ever result, *unless through drastic selection and weighing i.e. by sleight-of-hand (even if performed in good faith)*. As I have stressed in earlier accounts (*e.g.* 2003b, and Chapter 15, above), the diviner-healer may use this complexity to enter into a trance-like state in which he may be argued to become particularly receptive for extrasensory perception. But even regardless of the possibility of such an extrasensory contribution, the diviner simply engages in *wisdom*: juggling the abundance of clues, many of them mutually contradictory, which the oracular procedures provide in combination with the diviner's background knowledge of the client and of the latter's situation, and pressing all the loose ends into an increasingly coherent complex narrative, which (due to the intensive interaction between diviner and client during the session) the client will increasingly recognise as revealing and as relevant. Thus the diviner engages in wisdom as practical knowledge, – along lines that are not essentially different from the creative skills (of selective synthesis and massaging over contradictions, and rhetorical persuasiveness) that allow a scholar to produce a convincing and publishable argument. In doing so, the diviner makes intensive use of the multi-interpretability and of the degrees of freedom which the oracular apparatus provides, *yet the diviner at the same time derives his own authority from the fact that he can nonetheless let this sleight-of-hand pass as the immutable, unequivocal, authoritative outcome of technical oracular procedures*. The conclusion seems inescapable that the authority attributed to such divination is already predicated upon a proto-scientific wider context, where (even in the eyes of the individual lay client, having somehow adopted the specialists' proto-scientific outlook) it is procedures rather than divine authority that produces truth. But even though the diviner and the client believe that the oracular pronouncements are compellingly determined by the strict application of the intersubjective, standard oracular procedures, *is fact they are not*. From complexity and contradiction, via techniques of negotiation, weighing and selection, to meaningful pronouncement – this is what above we have identified as the path of wisdom, not of science. *What the di-*

> *viner does, is the production of unique, bricolaged practical wisdom under the disguise of the production of systematic and unassailable knowledge by means of repetitive standard procedures that enhance the authority of his pronouncements.*

4. (Y) MYTHOLOGY IN AFRICAN TRADITIONAL WISDOM. My final example of expressions of African traditional wisdom derives from a field on which I have concentrated over the last few years, comparative mythology, in a project whose rationale was to establish the empirical basis for my thesis of the fundamental cultural unity of humankind, in particular of Anatomically Modern Humans – a complement therefore to my hyperbolically challenging adage 'cultures do not exist'.[686] Here I will concentrate, not on meaning and content, but on formal processes in the global history of mythology, which spans at least 200,000 years. Myths are expressions of traditional wisdom in the sense that they articulate and support a culture's view of the world and of man; offering aetiological explanation of specific natural phenomena, human institutions, and names; and providing models for emulation and edification in real life. Many expressions of traditional wisdom are in the format of myth, not in the modernist pejorative sense as collective representation constituting untruth, but as collective representation in narrative format, *tout court* (*cf.* van Binsbergen 2003d). Although Ancient Egypt, one of the earliest, most powerful and enduring civilisations of the ancient world, was located in Africa and displayed many African traits, and although the African continent contained major sites of early Christianity and of medieval Islam, yet prior to the 19th century CE writing remained peripheral to most of African life, and African cultures have excelled in orality including storytelling. Anatomically Modern Humans emerged in Africa c. 200,000 years ago, and only began to trickle to other continents c. 80,000 years ago in the context of the Out-of-Africa Exodus. Genetically and culturally the African continent still contains some identifiable traces of the long pre-Exodus period. Such traces are also to be found everywhere outside Africa – it is these traces that allowed us to discover the Out-of-Africa Exodus in the first place. So before we fall into the trap of hegemonically inventing Africa (Mudimbe 1988) as the ultimate domain of primordiality (Conrad's *Heart of darkness*, as Africa has so often appeared in North Atlantic colonial and post-colonial stereotyping), let us consider the following points which are particularly important for an appreciation of the global importance of the traditional wisdom contained in myths:[687]

> Z. WHY MYTHEMES MAY PERSIST OVER MANY MILLENNIA. While we must acknowledge the possibility of parallel invention due to the common structure of the mind of Anatomically Modern Humans, and the converging effects of cultural globalisation, still an important partial explanation of the very many universals and near-universals of human cultures worldwide (Wiredu 1990, 1996; Brown 1991; Oruka 1990a) is the following:

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[686] van Binsbergen 2006, 2008; the adage is the title of 2003e; also *cf.* pp. 8-14, above.

[687] Also see my discussion of the theonym Nyambi in the Introduction, above.

these universals may be seen as elements (surprisingly constant and persistent over tens of thousands of years, as if deeply programmed into human culture) of our common cultural heritage long pioneered inside Africa before the Out-of-Africa Exodus, and subsequently spread all over the globe. I have called this common heritage 'Pandora's Box'. Considering the incomparable importance of narrative for creating and perpetuating human groups, and acknowledging articulate language as one of Anatomically Modern Humans' principal distinctive traits, Pandora's Box must have contained a basic mythological repertoire which the Out-of-Africa Exodus caused to spread all over the world, and which painstaking comparative research is now beginning to reconstruct – around such themes as the moon, the trickster, the fire, the rainbow snake, the tree of life, the reptile erroneously announcing death *etc*.

However, most of the development of world mythology took place after the Out-of-Africa Exodus, in the course of tens of millennia of ecological, cultural and cosmological development outside Africa, especially in Asia. Here, as transformations and innovations upon the mythological contents of Pandora's Box, and also linked, in identifiable ways, with the emergence of new modes of production and new linguistic macrofamilies, some of the major cosmologico-mythological themes emerged, such as (c. 30,000 years ago in Central Asia) the cosmogony based on the separation of Land and Water (with the Flood as cataclysmic annihilation of that separation, requiring world order to be restored by a second creation); and the alternative and somewhat later cosmogony revolving on the separation of Heaven and Earth,[688] which made possible the idea of the demiurge and other forms of re-connection (tree, mountain, bird, pyramid, ladder, stairway, rainbow, demiurge, shaman, king, twin) between Heaven and Earth – which have constituted central themes in theological and iconographic repertoire of civilisations from the Neolithic onwards. Much of the familiar mythological repertoire of Eurasia (faintly echoed in the Americas, more clearly so in Oceania that was mainly populated during the last few millennia) emerged in this phase along lines that we are now beginning to make out.

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[688] Hilde Link (2007) refers to the stage preceding such Separation in the narrative of the tight embrace of Heaven and Earth, in South Asia and in Ambon, Indonesia. This mytheme (generally worked out in such a way that the incessant mating of the two primal gods Heaven and Earth obstructs the birth channel through which reality is to be produced, and one of the infant gods thus locked in the womb has to force the way out *e.g.* by castrating the untiring father: Ouranos, Kronos, an Oedipal fate *avant la lettre* which was also predicted for Kronos' son Zeus) has extensive further attestations: Ancient Greece (Hesiod, *Theogonia*), Nigeria (the Yoruba primal gods Obatala and Oduduwa, *cf.* Scheub 2000), Oceania (Dixon 1916-1920; Poignant 1967; Willis 1994: 294; Cotterell 1989: 148, 164, 241f, 244 (Rangi – Heaven – and Papa – Earth, Polynesia; the same obstruction motif obtains in Hawaii and among the Maori), thus also (after failing attempts by the storm god Tachiri-wa-tea – which reminds us of his Japanese counterpart スサノオ Susanoo – Rangi is pushed upward by the forest god Tanemahuta to form the sky, *cf.* Egyptian Shu, who performs exactly the same act of separation for this children ⌂ Nut (Heaven, here female) and Geb (earth, here male); *cf.* te Velde 1975-1986; Bonnet 1971 / 1952; de Buck 1947. Incidentally, this Oceanian / Greek parallel is only one out of several such parallels between Oceanian and European mythology – others include the invention of the sail, the fishing up of the land (both mythemes compatible with the idea of seaborne Sunda spread), and specifics of Flood stories (for a full listing and analysis, *cf.* van Binsbergen, in press (f). These parallel attestations must be considered historically related, however distantly – *e.g.* through eastbound Pelasgian transmission from West Asia to East Asia, Taiwan, and finally Oceania; or through westbound Sunda influence (the latter is also suggested in the Nigerian context by attestations of headhunting, van Binsbergen 2014a and extensive references cited there).

As these themes proliferated, mainly in Asia, a Back-into-Africa population movement made for what state-of-the-art genetic research has discovered to be a feed-back migration from Central and West Asia into Africa, from c. 15 ka BP,[689] which on its way also had a major impact on Europe. In the process, relatively new Asian narrative themes entered Africa and dominantly installed themselves onto the pre-Exodus mythologies that had continued to transform and innovate there. As a result, sub-Saharan Africa now has the paradoxical combination of relatively new mythologies (largely continuous with those of Eurasia) told by people with relatively ancient genes.[690]

So much for the essentialisation and alterisation, in the hands of scholars, of the traditional wisdom as expressed in African narratives. The North Atlantic culture (which in the last few centuries has largely informed the scholar's perspective) and the cultures of sub-Saharan Africa turn out to be relatively closely related and to share highly important prehistoric substrates. What appears as nostalgic reminders of what makes the West incomparably different (and often, by implication, allows the inhabitants of the North Atlantic to construct themselves as culturally superior), is in fact part of a world-wide process of cultural history, in which the places of initiative and the flows of cultural indebtedness have often shifted, as they will do again in the future, and in which a common repertoire of meaning and image is

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[689] *Cf.* Hammer *et al.* 1998; Cruciani 2002; Coia 2005.

[690] Strictly speaking, this textblock tells us that some mythemes do persist over many millenia, but it does not answer the question posed in its title: w h y   a n d   h o w   *could they do that?* Focussing on institutionalisation and structural-functional integration, classic anthropology tended to assume that cultural items, once established, would persist indefinitely, but more recent anthropology would rightly insist that (given cultural drift; the tendency for culture to free variation, localising transformation, and innovation; the rise and fall, migration, globalisation, and violent conflicts, of cultural groups and populations; the likelihood of disasters, *etc.*) such persistence cannot be assumed *unless the mechanisms bringing it about* have been identified and attested. In the course of this book we have encountered at least two such possible mechanisms:

(a) ritual as a likely context for the enshrinement, the fairly unchanged preservation, and the transmission of cultural material across centuries, even millennia (so that prehistoric ritual iconography may still seem to carry meaning for us today, rendering it more or less decipherable) – and it is in this sense, notably, that recent advances in comparative mythology, by *e.g.* Witzel, Rappenglück, Lewis-Williams, Harrod, or myself, may begin to render hitherto enigmatic signs readable and meaningful, *cf.* van Binsbergen 2011g, where I interpret Southern African Middle Palaeolithic signs in the light of present-day Nkoya puberty rites, arguing that such cosmologically central rites (surrounded, moreover, by secrecy, seclusion, and specific, prolonged training) may be considered to be particularly conservative of very old cultural items)

(b) the possibility that some mythical contents may be innate and genetically transmitted (as centrally claimed by Jung, but as anathema in the eyes of most anthropologists, who insist that the distinctive feature of culture must be that it is *learned* so that, by definition, it cannot be genetically transmitted – despite the circularity involved in this view (the requirement of being learned instead of genetically transmitted is externally imposed by our paradigm and need not be in accordance with the actual biological, behavioural and social facts; the obvious survival value of mythemes for the persistence of groups and individuals would *in principle* be compatible with a biological anchorage).

We cannot exhaust this most important discussion here, but neither should we be reproached for ignoring it.

being managed by the whole of humankind –, in myriad fragmented, transformed and innovated yet more or less continuous, local forms, that were subjected to localising transformation when travelling beyond their initial cultural bedding, and whose under-lying continuity we could scarcely have suspected until, since the late 20th c. CE, global-isation created a framework for the recognition of *pan-human difference in unity*.

16.8. Situating intercultural philosophy from a wisdom perspective

Our discussion of traditional wisdom in the context of the multifarious wisdom revival today, promises to deliver a boon we had not bargained for. I have men-tioned intercultural philosophy among the globalising strategies

> that have driven home the irreducible potential of modes of knowing (of-ten designated as 'wisdom') outside the Western mainstream tradition;

and I have characterised wisdom as

> creative practical knowledge that allows one to negotiate the pitfalls and contradictions of human life (especially in those domains of which we might say today that they are not tightly rule-governed and thus carry considerable uncertainty, ambivalence and incompatible multiple truths), and to accept both the social nature of human life, and its finitude.

It is time to make one final step, and to point out that intercultural philosophy, whatever the pretences implied in its name,[691] cannot be philosophy in the ac-cepted present-day academic sense largely informed by the Kantian tradition. On the contrary, intercultural philosophy has to be some form of *wisdom* – not in the essentialist sense of incomparably wise and eternal truths, but rather in the technical sense of such intimations on the state and nature of Being as are not based on systematic, replicable and objectifying procedures of knowledge formation. If we agree that a cultural orientation is a machine for the produc-tion of self-evident truth which yet is merely a collective representation having no validity outside the collectivity owning and managing that representation, then the encounter between cultural orientations inevitably produces consider-

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[691] Another such pretence (*cf.* footnote 64, above) is the existence of a *plurality of cultures*, between which interaction and even dialogue is supposed to take place as if they were ontologi-cally distinct, and even conscious and articulate, entities. I have confronted this aspect of the term 'intercultural philosophy' (van Binsbergen 2003e), arguing that instead of the concept of 'cultures' (plural), the term 'cultural orientation' is more suitable for coping with the overlap, the situationality, the optionality, the plural allegiance, and the temporal dynamics of such patterns of collective programming – without denying, however, that part of this programming, especially in infancy, is effected so deeply as to become indelible, resulting in the production of self-evident truth which yet is merely a collective representation having no validity outside the collectivity owning and managing that representation.

able uncertainty, ambivalence and incompatible multiple truths', reminding us of the social constructedness of all truth, and of a very special type of finitude notably the intrinsically finite applicability of cultural truths to only a subset of humanity (in other words, cultural relativism). In such an intercultural situation, the very notion of *knowledge* as 'justified true belief' (even if rephrased to accommodate Gettier) becomes impossible, for strictly speaking (*i.e.* in the Kantian philosophical academic tradition) justification, truth and belief can only mean anything within one and the same language-based cultural orientation – they mean nothing *between* cultural orientations, where they must lack the self-evident validation they would derive from the context of just one unique cultural orientation. How to negotiate such a situation unless by the time-honoured strategies of wisdom: acceptance of finitude; silence *i.e.* avoidance of over-insistence on specialist articulate language which (as central encoding of a cultural orientation) can only articulate difference but fails to communicate diffuse communality; retreat into bodily practices (from caring for the sick and dying to dancing and drinking) that allow us to celebrate the human body as transcultural common given.

The present argument, and my other attempts at the production of intercultural philosophical texts, bring out the unmistakable fact that I am not a philosopher steeped in, and exclusively identifying with, the mainstream academic philosophical tradition of Western thought. Contrary to my highly distinguished predecessor in the Rotterdam chair of intercultural philosophy Heinz Kimmerle, I did not spend the first quarter of a century of my academic life in a monocultural reserve of philosophical textuality (in Kimmerle's case the Hegel archive – with afforded him a masterly understanding of modern and postmodern philosophy), but in messy and conceptually naïve anthropological field-work in African villages, royal courts, and urban slums. The wisdom of intercultural mediation and negotiation which I learned there (partly on the basis of such practical wisdom as I brought from my own society, but mainly on the basis of what wisdom I was privileged to learn from my African hosts) make up, for better or worse, the substance of my intercultural philosophy. Here mainstream philosophy has functioned mainly secondarily, as a major source of inspiration; as a critical touchstone for the well-formedness, plausibility, originality and profundity of whatever I think up as – to some extent – an untutored mind; and occasionally, merely as a strategy of textual embellishment and impression management. This downplaying of mainstream philosophy has been out of personal choice, and *not* because I do not know better or cannot do better – I had extensively engaged with philosophy before I had even read any social science, or had experienced any transcultural exposure to speak of. I deliberately play down mainstream Western philosophy (whilst using it eclectically), because I realise that in the face of the uncertainties and incompatibilities of intercultural situations, academic philosophy (especially in its Analytical variant), outside the specialist language-based domain of North Atlantic specialist thought, has no option but to simply rest its case. Here wisdom reigns

supreme, with – in the absence of rules that can be culturally supported by all parties involved – all the unpredictable capriciousness of the divine trickster (so that it often becomes unwisdom – as Continental approaches appear so often from an Analytical point of view); whereas a painstaking, sustained study of expressions of traditional wisdom worldwide (and the admission that this is what lies at the origin of mainstream academic philosophy, and is still to a considerable extent continuous notably with the Continental variant) can help us to come to terms with interculturality as one of the few greatest, and potentially most explosive, challenges of our time.

Here we can also pinpoint more precisely what cultural globalisation means: forging the multiplicity of disparate cultural orientations into a more coherent whole so that the various parties involved in a concrete situation (of the type we are used to call 'intercultural') may increasingly tend to apply convergent worldviews, recognise convergent rules, and thus produce convergent truths. However, the promise of equality and equal access inherent in such a definition, in practice is usually defeated by hegemonic imposition, of the worldview, rules and truth of one of the parties involved. Over the past two centuries, such hegemonic imposition was the privilege of the North Atlantic region (with allowed the Western mainstream tradition in philosophy to assume universal pretensions), but that condition is changing rapidly, in a bitter and bloody contest over the right to define reality. Here only wisdom, not science nor the logic of the excluded third, let alone military force, can safe humankind.

16.9. Conclusion

My argument in this Chapter has oscillated between two extreme positions, both of them wrong if taken literally and in isolation, yet in combination suggestive of an ulterior truth. On the one hand, we are tempted to declare that other people's wisdom is largely in the eye of the beholder as equipped with his distinctive cultural orientation; on the other hand, all wisdom seems to flow from a common source (and towards a common goal?), which we as Anatomically Modern Humans belonging to widely divergent cultural orientations, may each call by different names, yet which we are equipped to recognise as, perhaps, closeness to the essence of Being.

Modern intercontinental scholarship is but one aspect of globalisation. It is our task to respectfully record, interpret, compare, and recirculate in a globalising, more or less accessible format with varying degrees of specialist scholarly rigour, and thus to celebrate both the beauty and wisdom of individual local human cultural products, and the underlying connections that bring us all together.

Part VI. Reference material

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