Chapter 4. Towards a cultural anthropology of evil in present-day Africa

(whence, in Mali and Nigeria, the Bori cult\(^{191}\) had exerted considerable influence on the ecstatic forms of North African popular religion). And finally, and as another spirit of the wilds next to the jenūn but far more formidable, the ominous mythical being of غربان, who would suddenly materialise in lonely places on the mountain slopes, and strike you with his fingers – leaving you with as few days to live as he left dark bruises on your skin.

\[\text{J.J.J. THE MYTHICAL BEING ĠRBĀN IN THE LIGHT OF COMPARATIVE MYTHOLOGY.}\]

Ğrbān (apparently a cognate with the Arabic root غرب meaning 'West') is a puzzling demonic being, but comparative mythology helps us to situate it fairly convincingly. I am indebted to my brother Peter Broers, a Romance and Hebrew scholar and a former Franciscan friar novice, for spontaneously identifying Ġrbān as the daemon meridionalis at a very early stage, shortly after my first field-work. There is a frequent occurrence of Jewish elements in Ḥumiri life and its popular Islam (van Binsbergen forthcoming; e.g. the standard local name for God is not الله Allah but ربي Rabbi; the injunction 'Thou shalt not seethe a kid in his mother's milk' (Exodus 23:19) was spontaneously cited to me there; and a common man's name is there كنورود, cf. Hebrew קמרוד Kašrūd 'state of purity'). Rural North Africa is permeated with Judaism – e.g. the author of the main Islamic geomancy, Muḥammad az-Zānātī, is named after the Zānāta Berber tribe well-known for its Jewish elements. Therefore, a connection may be sought between the name Ġrbān and the Hebrew קורבן korban, in Judaism the standard expression for 'approach, sacrifice' (de Vries 1968: 16, 167), which makes sense both phonologically and semantically (the human victim apparently being considered as sacrifice), but does not bring out all the layers of implication apparently involved. The Ḥumiri description reminds us of the Ancient Persian 'Lord of the Noonday Heat' (Hinnells 1973). In early Christian conceptions of sin – which certainly once obtained in this part of Tunisia, not far from St Augustine's Hippo – a demon was recognised under the name of accidie or 'midday demon' (cf. Psalms 90:6), with similar sinister connotations as Ġrbān, although originally just a sense of sloth and extreme fatigue bringing monks to fall asleep in their cells (Taylor 1908-1920). There is also a connection with the zodiacal sign of ΙLeo, since the sun (which rules Leo in astrological discourse) is at its highest culmination at the noon hour. Other associations are with Saturn, under the Ancient Assyrian name of Ninib (Graves 1988: 264, n. 1). The destructive connotations of the noon sun have still more pre-Christian antecedents: they are also found in the Ancient Mesopotamian god Nergal (Ions 1980: 14) and in Ancient Egypt in the destructive figure of the Sun's Eye, Ḥwt-Ḥr / Hathor, who (according to texts inscribed in the graves of Seti I and Ramses III) would have destroyed the whole of humankind if the sun god Ra had not tricked her with beer she mistook for human blood (Smith 1984; Spiegelberg 1917; Daumas 1975-1986; Obbink n.d.: 10 f.). Under the heading 'climatic anxieties in the tropics', Kennedy (1990) describes the same belief system and confirms my identification here. The obligation to be the first to greet Ġrbān, on penalty of grave misfortune or death, reminds us of the unilateral mythical being which plays a considerable role in comparative mythology (von Sicard 1968-1969, with all major sources for Africa and the rest of the Old World). The comparative mythology of the unilateral figure includes, for instance, the South Asian god Aruna / Dawn, unilateral because he was born from the broken one of the two eggs

\[^{191}\text{From the extensive literature I only mention: Tremearne 1914, 1915; Onwuejeogwu 1971; Monfouga-Nicolas 1972; Masquelier 1995.}\]
his mother Vinata laid (Cotterell 1989). Grossato (1987) points at other unilateral characters in the South Asian context. Vinata is reminiscent of Leda mother of the Dioskouroi, Helena and Klutaimnestra in Greek mythology. The global distribution of the mytheme of the unilateral figure was traced by me in van Binsbergen 2010a: 198 f.; and I used this distribution along with that of other Old-World traits (geomantic divination, the mankala board-game, the spiked wheel trap, the Bantu language phylum), to argue the typical Pelasgian distribution pattern: widespread in sub-Saharan Africa, yet in all probability originating in Asia (van Binsbergen 2010b). The Eurasian distribution of the Luwe figure is considerable; the Dutch writer Augusta de Wit even evokes it for rural Java (de Wit 1903), and it also crops up, surprisingly, as a legendary human 'Mediohombre' (a soldier who in combat lost an arm and a leg), in the recent novel *Caesarion* by the Dutch author Tommy Wieringa (2009). The Mwendanjangula unilateral figure with first-greeting obligation is also described for Southern Africa, e.g. as the unilateral Tintibane, 'Child of God and Child of Earth', alias *Thobege a Phachwa*, 'Dappled / Speckled Lame-leg' (Matumo 1993 / 1875). Speckledness has, of course, leopard-skin connotations, which according to Brown (1926) is the god whose name is most common among the Tswana. Working in Western Zambia, the missionary Jacottet (1899-1901) has published many vernacular texts in which Mwendanjangula plays an important role. Interestingly, in that connection the figure is possessed of a staff – which seems to return in the North African myth of Sidi Mhammad, who (like the South Central African figure) is a cow herd and uses the staff to put a spell on the cows, so that the saint may go to sleep without his charges coming to any harm. That mythological themes in Africa, especially in the hands of pastoralists, may span the entire continent has been noted before; for instance, unmistakable echoes of Ancient Israelite mythology and ethics were picked up among the Masai herders of East Africa (Julien n.d.; citing Merker 1904, but also H. Baumann’s criticism of Merker’s findings). Cognate with the unilateral figure seems to be the Graeco-Roman figure of Herakles / Hercules, who, as Melqart / 'Town Lord' was almost certainly associated with some of the Ḫumiri shrines in Antiquity, before these were Christianised and subsequently Islamised.

In Ḫumiriyya, however, most misfortune, meanwhile, was not even interpreted in terms of such evils, but as the result of perfectly rational and justified vengeance by invisible local saints with whom the living villagers had entered into

193 *Belles lettres* are full of surprises; Mwendanjangula is the name of the unilateral figure in Zambia and Angola *(cf. van Binsbergen 2010a)*, and there is also a recent Dutch study of AIDS in Zambia with that name – exploiting the fact that under the AIDS epidemic of the last few decades, the terrifying theonym Mwendanjangula became a nickname for the disease (van Kesteren & van Amerongen 2000).
194 van Binsbergen 2003k, 2004d, and in press (h).
196 Herakles / Hercules, who, as Melqart / 'Town Lord' was almost certainly associated with some of the Ḫumiri shrines in Antiquity, before these were Christianised and subsequently Islamised.