

Grappling with the ineffable in three African situations:

An ethnographic approach

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ABSTRACT. The production of scholarship, and a fortiori of anthropology, *is production in language*. Whatever transformations anthropology as an academic subject may have undergone in the most recent decades, anthropology has originally come into being, shortly before the 20th century CE, as the art of covering with texts that part of the world that was not already so covered out of its own internal dynamics. Hence there is a marked and crucial contradiction between anthropology and the experience of the ineffable ('that which is too great to be described in words'). In recent ethnographic production, language has increasingly appeared as a trap and a danger – as *violence* inflicted on our research hosts, and upon ourselves in our role as fieldworker; in the process, language has revealed itself as utterly unable to express many of the most important aspects of the human experience

Also for the present author, the ineffable has been the inevitable and conscious boundary

¹ An earlier version of this argument was presented at the workshop: 'Capturing the Ineffable: Wisdom in Perspective', Department of Anthropology, University of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, USA, 20-21 March 2015. I am indebted to the following persons and institutions: in the first place, to my research hosts in various fieldwork settings in Africa and Asia, for stimulatingly and patiently awaiting whatever slight understanding of, and growth towards, wisdom I might begin to manifest; then to Joe Alter and Phil Kao, the workshop's conveners, for inviting me and making the necessary financial arrangements; to the Belgian Royal Academy of Sciences, for prompting me to focus on wisdom in the late 2000s; to the African Studies Centre, Leiden, the Netherlands, for stimulating and facilitating my research from 1977 on in many ways; to the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities and Social Sciences, Wassenaar, the Netherlands, for co-opting me to the 1994-1995 Working Group on Religion and Magic in the Ancient Near East, where I, rather a stranger to that field of study, had the great good fortune to familiarise myself – in a context of daily specialist debate – with many of the most ancient wisdom texts available, and could bring my ongoing comparative research into geomantic divination worldwide on a more solid historical-philological footing; to Michael Witzel and the Department of Sanskrit and Indian Studies, Harvard University, Cambridge MA, USA, for generously furthering my involvement in comparative mythology and Asian studies since 2004; to those of my colleagues mentioned *passim* in the text of this paper; and to my wife and children, without whose love all my dabbling in exotic wisdom would have left me 'as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal' (St Paul, *1 Corinthians* 13:1). I consider wisdom the privileged domain where knowledges meet, merge, complement and reinforce each other, and by the Paulinian Christian quote I identify, not as the renegade Christian I have been for over half a century now, but as an avid searcher (though so far rather unsuccessful) for wisdom.

condition of all his fieldwork since the late 1960s. Its manifestations are to be highlighted by serially discussing

- the Humiri highlands of NW Tunisia (North Africa);
- The Nkoya of South Central Africa (rural W. Zambia and urban Zambia); and
- The *sangoma* ecstatic healing cult in urban and peri-urban N.E. Botswana.

After each ethnographic summary the argument assesses how wisdom manifests itself in that particular context, and how people considered wise are locally identified there. These three case studies are our stepping stones to more fundamental theoretical questions:

- Is wisdom truly an indigenous, *emic* concept or is it merely an alien, *etic* imposition on the part of us, North Atlantic analysts?
- Ethnography appears to be, among other things, the art of articulating and transmitting the ineffable that manifests itself in the form of local self-evidence
- Although science may be the systematic pursuit of communicable, empirically grounded truth, truth can be argued to be culturally bounded, and to proliferate and fragment (under today's conditions of globalisation, localisation, and 'glocalisation') into numerous local 'truth enclaves' whose truth cannot be transmitted intactly, *as truth*, across cultural and linguistic boundaries, towards other such truths enclaves
- Under the circumstances, and in addition to the task the social sciences have defined for the ethnographer on the impetus of their own intra-disciplinary paradigmatic development, to today's ethnographer a unique and globally pivotal task seems to have accorded: that of becoming spokesperson for apparently peripheral wisdoms, whose wider global applicability and relevance we are invited to explore.

1. Introduction: The topicality of wisdom today

In the context of the 2015 Pittsburgh conference, and of the present collection of papers based on it, I am conscious of a heavy responsibility to which I can scarcely hope to live up: I represent two continents here, not only Europe (with just one other representative, from Cambridge, UK – perhaps scarcely to be called Europe any more since the Britons opted for 'Brexit' in 2016) but also Africa (not touched upon in any other contribution). Whereas most of the other contributions concentrate on what could be termed, somewhat too negatively, *literate traditions from various parts of the world but appropriated, canonised and reified by North Atlantic specialist scholarship*, my own focus here is on situations (typically outside the North Atlantic region: in Africa) that are not logocentric,² that are largely illiterate, and where the researcher does not have a pre-existing text as her or his disposal but centrally aims at producing such a text (as ethnography) for the first time.

All our contributions deal with wisdom; but for all our contributions and certainly for my own, we may ask whether we do deal with wisdom in a sufficiently wise way. For many decades, the notion of 'wisdom' used to be confined, in the general academic understanding and within the scope of philosophy, philology, and anthropology, to either

² cf. Rorty 1989; Derrida 1967a, 1967b.

- antiquated complexes of local esoteric knowledge devoid of objective truth, or to
- equally antiquated complexes that had relevance only within a limited context of space and time, and within a limited field of scholarship – such as the wisdom books of the *תנ"ך Tanah* also incorporated in the Christian *Old Testament*, or *易經 yì jīng / I Ching* as a wisdom book widely used for divination in East and South East Asia.³

My own interest in wisdom was kindled, more than half a century ago, when my elder brother gave me an extensive introduction to the Presocratics (Ancient Greek philosophers) for my fifteenth birthday (de Raedemaeker 1953); and much later, thirty years ago, by the writings of my close colleague and friend Richard Werbner (1973, 1989, and in preparation) on ‘Kalanga wisdom divination’ in Botswana – a practice that was not text-based then, but whose textual basis in the medieval Arabic divination form called علم الرمل, *‘ilm al-raml* (*‘Sand Science’*), I was to explore extensively from 1990 onward (e.g. van Binsbergen 1995, 1996, 2012a, 2012b, 2013).

In the last few decades the intellectual landscape associated with wisdom has been transformed due to, among others, the following influences:

- the positive re-evaluation of wisdom in a spate of recent scholarly literature, from psychology, psychiatry, anthropology, philosophy etc.,⁴ rethinking knowledge, truth and agency (for an extensive overview, cf. van Binsbergen 2009a).
- new technologies of information and communication, especially the creation of the Internet; this has brought about greatly increased, worldwide, access to; communication about; attempted (often hegemonic, reductive, and superficial) appropriation; as well as reification; of the wisdom traditions of remote regions and periods
- the above has been largely aspects of globalisation (the dramatic reduction– mainly through recent technological means – of the effects of time and space on present-day actors), but another aspect of globalisation has been: the erosion of hitherto habitual and moderately comfortable boundaries of knowledge, groups, identities; in reaction, a new, increasingly insistent and violent, politics of identity has emerged, in which new identities and new distinctions proliferate in the face of their annihilation (real, apparent, feared, imminent, threatened) under conditions of globalisation.

The amorphous and eclectic *New-Age* movement⁵ is an example of the now worldwide circulation of wisdoms that were earlier far more confined to their original cultural, linguistic

³ An important implication of my argument is that the representation of a local truth domain in a North Atlantic *lingua franca* and in terms of scholarly analytical categories, entails a crucial imposition of a distortive and hegemonic nature. Merely in order to constantly remind the reader of this state of affairs, I have insisted on rendering, in my recent scholarly writing, local concepts and names in local scripts whenever in existence, and whenever available to me. I am not much of a linguist, and such training as I have received in this field, has been in General Linguistics, hardly (with the exception of Greek and Arabic) in the specifics of the world’s language families and their orthographies. My use of scripts from outside the present-day North Atlantic is likely to be wrought with orthographic errors. It is mainly an embellishment reminding the reader (who may also be assumed to be a non-specialist in the languages in question) of the immense distance between the North Atlantic / global scholarly rendering, and what takes place in and among the original participants.

⁴ Much of which was explored in my extensive earlier work on wisdom: van Binsbergen 2008, 2009a, 2009b.

⁵ Of the extensive literature on the New-Age movement, I mention: Aldred 2000; Callewaert 2007; Hanegraaf 1996, 1999; Hunt & McMahon 1988; van Wersch 1990; Wood 2007; York 2003; Zinser 1987.

and geographical niche. In the same vein, fundamentalism, militant Islamism, creationism, are some examples of movements revolving on the retreat within hardening boundaries as a response to boundary- and identity-threatening globalisation. Such movements, on the one hand, themselves rely on, and seek to militantly propagate, what they consider unique wisdoms; on the other hand, the combination of truth claims with physical and / or ideological violence requires from those not involved in such movements, a new kind of wisdom: dealing with the dilemmas rising from the fact that now, again, the wisdom of others may take on life-threatening features.

Not for the first time, though. When, exhorted by monks, a Christian mob lynched, among others, the female ‘pagan’ *i.e.* non-Christian philosopher Hypatia in Alexandria, 4th c. CE, this was a similar case; her conventional image adorns the cover of a book on African women philosophers we did a few years ago (Osha with van Binsbergen 2008). Similar cases were also the Crusades, the Inquisition, the genocidal *auto-da-fés* enacted by Christian religious orders among pre-Christian inhabitants of the New World, the witch craze of the Early Modern Europe, and the witchcraft eradication movements of early 20th-c. sub-Saharan Africa. The violent aspects of the pursuit of (un)wisdom remind us of the close link between belief, language and violence throughout history; also *cf.* Schroeder 1996.

This argument reflects my grappling with wisdom issues and intercultural epistemology during the past two decades, and especially some of the ideas now being worked out in my book project in progress, *Sangoma science: From ethnography to intercultural ontology: Towards a poetics of the globalising exploration into local spiritualities*.

2. ‘On the way to language’ (Heidegger 1985)

Worüber man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muss man schweigen’
(Wittgenstein, *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*, 1921 / 1964: lemma 7)

With its emphasis on the ineffable, our collective project focuses on what cannot be said (is considered to be too great to be said) in language. Implicitly therefore, our project is about the critique and the limitations of language. This is noteworthy in several ways.

In the first place, the production of scholarship, and *a fortiori* that of anthropology, is *production in language* – and even in discursive, written language, usually in one of the few international *linguae francae* of today, especially English. *Whatever transformations anthropology as an academic subject may have undergone in the most recent decades* (with its obsession with the politics of identity, with Foucault and Deleuze, with multi-sited fieldwork, the relative abhorrence from prolonged, expensive fieldwork in distant places)⁶ *anthropology has originally come into being, shortly before the 20th century CE, as the art of covering with texts that part of the world that was not already so covered out of its own internal literate dynamics*. Hence there is a marked and crucial contradiction between

- anthropology and

⁶ One of the striking developments in recent anthropology has been that theoretical inspiration is no longer exclusively generated from inside the discipline on the basis of the incessant critical revisiting of a corpus of classic texts (Durkheim, Frazer, Tylor, Boas, Malinowski, Evans-Pritchard, Radcliffe-Brown, Gluckman etc.), but that instead the half-digested texts of French philosophers, usually only cursorily read in ramshackle American translations, have been adopted as a new canon – a new scholastics exempted from critical and theoretical evaluation. This is no doubt a caricature on my part, and one which I have set out more elaborately (along with detailed discussions of selected post-structuralist philosophers) in van Binsbergen 2015a.

- the experience of the ineffable among most of the other participants in our project.

For, contrary to the philosopher, the linguist, the (documentary) historian, the literature scholar, only the ethnographer text has no text yet at her / his disposal – typically, such texts still needs to be created as a result of the researcher’s very own research efforts. The anthropologist thus casts in the wind Wittgenstein’s above admonition. Cases in point are the great anthropologist of religion Vic Turner (1967, 1968) in his seminal analyses of South Central African symbols; or the Louvain school of Anthropology (e.g. Devisch, De Boeck, Stroeken):⁷ reconstructing in words, what never was expressed in so many words by the local participants themselves, with all the risks and uncertainties of such an ethnographic attempt.

From earliest childhood on, my own life as a literary and scholarly writer has been predicated on the assumption that nearly everything can be said (van Binsbergen 2015b). That assumption can hardly be considered personal and idiosyncratic: it is built into the very culture of my native city Amsterdam, and reflects the unquestioned logocentricity of both the Protestant Christian, and the Jewish, strands that have helped to shape Amsterdam, and Dutch, culture over the last half millennium, and before. Almost obsessively, throughout my research career I have been trying to extend the realm of what has been said – ‘creating history where previously there was none’⁸ – but also producing ethnographic description, on the same basis. Inevitably, I hit on contradictions:

- what was effectively expressed in the routinised, globalised discourse of professional anthropology (preferably in an international language, such as English – nearly all my anthropological publications have been in that language), on second thought turned out not to capture the existential thrust of the fieldwork encounters with fellow human beings on which it was based; and what was even more regrettable, my professional texts did not make much sense to my original fieldwork hosts, and if they became yet a source of pride and identity to them (van Binsbergen 1987, 1992a, 2003) it was not

⁷ Cf. the writings by Devisch as cited in this argument’s bibliography, and: de Boeck & Devisch 1994; de Boeck 1991a, 1991b, 1993; Stroeken 2000; Okere *et al.* 2005. I have repeatedly represented and assessed the Louvain School as a commendable and daring, yet risky form of *ethnography through introspection*; cf. van Binsbergen 2017: 83n; 2015a: 138, 363; 2003: 516; and 1992b (more specifically on de Boeck).

⁸ Below we shall consider the relevant ethnographic settings in more detail. (1) My first fieldwork, Tunisia 1968, envisaged a detailed reconstruction of the residential history of a Eastern Atlas valley and its many shrines over two centuries – in a peasant socio-cultural context that was effectively illiterate and in which myriad fragments of ideologically manipulated and distorted oral-historical testimonies constituted my main data (van Binsbergen 1971, 1980a, 1980b, in preparation (b)). My subsequent projects aimed at (2) the reconstruction of late precolonial political and religious history in South Central Africa from c. 1500 CE onward (van Binsbergen 1981b, 1992a); (3) tracing the submerged and largely obliterated transcontinental influences which South Central African (and more recently, West African) cultures have undergone from South East, South and East Asia (van Binsbergen in press (a), in press (b)); (4) tracing the history of Ancient Mesopotamian magic (van Binsbergen & Wiggermann 1999 / 2017); (5) contributing to the *Black Athena* debate (van Binsbergen 1997 / 2011b) and more specifically exploring ethnicity in the Bronze Age Mediterranean, especially with a bid to identify the homeland(s) of the so-called Sea Peoples (van Binsbergen & Woudhuizen 2011); (6) tracing the genealogy and history of geomantic divination across the three continents of the Old World, and linking it with the postulated substrate cosmology of the transformative cycle of elements which is even attested in the New World and appears to have Upper Palaeolithic antecedents (van Binsbergen 2012b). Finally, my boldest attempts at creating history where previously there was none have been (7) in reconstructing – inspired by Michael Witzel’s seminal work (2001, 2012), and often in direct conjunction with him – humankind’s earliest intellectual history from the Middle Palaeolithic onward, by bringing to bear the recently revived comparative mythology upon iconographies and other ancient symbolic patterns revealed to us by archaeology (van Binsbergen 2006a, 2006b, 2011c; van Binsbergen with Lacroix 2000).

because of the details of their contents or because of the specific nature of my commitment, but simply because other, rival ethnic groups had possessed and boasted such texts for decades already

- and what came closer to the existential thrust of the fieldwork encounter (e.g. my 1988 novel in Dutch, *Een Buik Openen*, on my first fieldwork in North Africa, 1968; and many of my poems) was, with some exceptions, considered irrelevant to the furtherance of anthropology.

Although my first identity as an intellectual producer has been (and largely remained) that of a poet, in my anthropological and intercultural-philosophical work language has increasingly appeared to me as a trap and a danger – as *violence* inflicted on my research hosts, and upon myself in my role as fieldworker; in the process, language revealed itself as utterly unable to express many of the most important aspects of the human experience. Having acceded to the Rotterdam chair of intercultural philosophy in 1998, the results of my sustained probing into the possibilities and the epistemological conditions for valid knowledge production across cultural boundaries has highlighted language (because of its high levels of specificity and social markedness, which makes it the perfect tool for othering and exclusion) as a principal factor, not for genuine intercultural exchange (as is often pretended), but on the contrary, as a principal factor for the hegemonic, subordinative thwarting of intercultural encounter (van Binsbergen 2003).

Thus, the ineffable, in other words what could not be said in language has constituted the inevitable and conscious boundary condition of all my fieldwork and ethnography since the late 1960s. How did it manifest itself? Let me highlight some of the main instances, by serially discussing

- the *Humiri* highlands of NW Tunisia (North Africa);
- The Nkoya of South Central Africa (rural W. Zambia and urban Zambia); and
- The *sangoma* ecstatic healing cult in urban and peri-urban N.E. Botswana.

After each ethnographic summary we shall assess how wisdom manifests itself in each context, and how people considered wise are identified there. These three case studies will be our stepping stones to more fundamental theoretical issues:

- Is wisdom truly an indigenous, *emic* concept⁹ or is it merely an alien, *etic* imposition on the part of us, North Atlantic analysts?
- Ethnography appears to be, among other things, the art of explicit, language-based articulation and transmission of the ineffable that manifests itself, in the local participants' actions including speech acts, as self-evidence
- Although science may be the systematic pursuit of communicable, empirically grounded truth, truth can be argued to be culturally bounded, and to proliferate and

⁹ On the relevance of the distinction between *emic* (i.e. in the local actors' conceptualisations) and *etic* (i.e. in imposed, external, alien conceptualisations, e.g. those of North Atlantic / global science) for intercultural / transcultural analysis, cf. Headland *et al.* 1990; van Binsbergen 2003: 22 *f.*

fragment (under today's conditions of globalisation, localisation, and 'glocalisation')¹⁰ into numerous local 'truth enclaves' whose truth cannot be transmitted intactly, *as truth*, across cultural and linguistic boundaries, towards other such truths enclaves

- Under the circumstances, and in addition to the descriptive and analytical tasks the social sciences have defined for the ethnographer on the impetus of their own intra-disciplinary paradigmatic development, a unique and globally pivotal task seems to have fallen upon today's ethnographer: that of becoming a spokesperson for apparently peripheral wisdoms.

Let us now first turn to the three case studies.

3. Three African situations

3.1. Ḥumiriyya, the highlands of N.W. Tunisia, North Africa¹¹

3.1.1. Wisdom in Ḥumiriyya

In Ḥumiriyya, the highlands of N.W. Tunisia, I did participatory and oral-historical research into popular Islam and local social organisation (1968, 1970, 1979).¹²

This was my first encounter, as a child of the Amsterdam urban slums, with peasants' popular religion (rather similar to the folk Roman Catholicism that, along with diffuse folk Judaism, had been a major influence during my childhood). The fieldwork took place well before the revival of formal Islamism in the late 1970s. Except in terms of prestige I had little benefit from the Arabic I had studied, for this folk complex 'was largely illiterate, and millennia-old regional traits (which decades later I was to subsume under the heading of 'Pelasgian')¹³ blended almost imperceptibly with the stipulations of a much more recent (late 1st mill CE),

¹⁰ I shun from giving an overview here of the familiar recent literature on globalisation; essential readings are cited in Robertson 1994, who also seems to have coined the term *glocalisation*; also cf. van Binsbergen 2003, 2015a, 2017 – the indexes will guide the reader to a relevant selection of the literature.

¹¹ Cf. van Binsbergen 1971, 1980a, 1980b, 1988, 2017: 49-115, and in preparation (b).

¹² I am indebted to the Musée des Arts et des Traditions Populaires, Tunis, Tunisia; to Muḥammad Suudi, who taught me elementary Arabic; to my untiring assistant *Ḥasnāwi bin Ṭahar حسناوي بن طاهر*; the people of the Ḥumiriyya, especially those of the villages of Sidi Muḥammad and Mayziyya; Amsterdam University and specifically its Anthropological Sociological Centre, whose staff (led by Douwe Jongmans and Klaas van der Veen) organised the research training facility in whose context my Ḥumiri research was initially conducted, with follow-ups 1970, 1979 and 2002. Apart from a small subsidy from Amsterdam University, this research was self-sponsored.

¹³ Cf. van Binsbergen & Woudhuizen 2011; van Binsbergen 2011b, 2012b, 2017. In van Binsbergen, in preparation (b), which is essentially a thorough revision of my 1971 text, I have inserted a new chapter discussing Ḥumiri religion *as Pelasgian*. This perspective is admittedly a possible source of confusion, for both in Antiquity and in modern scholarship there has been a wide range of opinion as to what constitutes Pelasgian culture or language. Yet the Pelasgian Hypothesis allows us to appreciate Ḥumiri culture's continuity not only with Ancient Europe in the Neolithic and Bronze Ages (the Northern shore of the Mediterranean, the British Isles, the Baltic region), but also with West Asia including the Iranian Plateau, – a distribution pattern sporadically extending all the way East to the South Asian peninsula, Bangladesh, China, Indonesia, the Pacific, and even the New World.

and still somewhat alien, formal Islam. I was immensely impressed by the way in which especially the local women, and the male attendants of the formalised, white-washed local domed shrines,¹⁴ understood

- the local landscape,
- their privileges and obligations as peasants,
- the shrines and their invisible saints,
- and the likewise invisible army of جنون *jnūn* ('jinnns'),

all as one coherent and meaningful system for the production and distribution of البركة *al-baraka*), 'blessing' – thus sanctifying the *jinn*-haunted steep hills and rivulets where I was learning to be an anthropologist. And secondly, a major aspect of the administration of blessing was the ecstatic cult of the local فوقره *fūqra* ('faqīrs'), who were nominally members of the قدرية *Qadiriyya* brotherhood that is found all over the world of Islam. Under the trance-producing music from الطبلبة *tabala* frame drum and القصبة *quṣba* (reed) flute, nocturnal séances were staged, in which the *faqir* entered into trance, summoning the (spirit of the) local saint from his tomb, and without injury manipulating thorny cactus leaves, pointed women's claps, and fiery coals and scythes, as a sign of the saint's *baraka*-emanating presence. Just turned 21 years of age, I was impressionable, and I was immensely impressed indeed, successfully joining the *fūqra* at their repeated invitation, experiencing my first trance, opening up my urban eyes to the sacred and meaningful beauty of the countryside, studying pilgrimage practices in much detail, and entering into a ritual obligation towards the valley saint Sidi Mḥammad, which I and my family have kept up ever since. However, I soon steered away from the original sacred and existential inspiration, by concentrating on a highly formalised, statistical approach to observable social and religious interaction in this community, allowing myself to be alienated from its wisdom until much of that found its way into my 1988 novel. Moreover, in order to understand the myriad local shrines within the landscape and its history, I had to reconstruct, from scratch, a detailed local history of over twenty agnatic descent groups with their socio-political struggles in the course of two centuries, and though this made me a oral-historian and proto-historian, it meant that the promise of wisdom deriving from this fieldwork remained dormant for a long time.

When engaged in this first fieldwork, I was a very young anthropological apprentice, shy, inexperienced in interviewing, and at a loss as to how to manage my participation and observation in an alien environment of people twice or thrice my age. I had not yet even begun to think through the violence which my incessant emphasis on verbal utterances was imposing on the largely implicit, scarcely ever verbalised world-view of my informants. Although much of my insights came from observation, participation and unobtrusive conversation ('small talk', where my assistant Ḥasnāwi bin Ṭahar حسناوي بن طاهر compensated in a masterly way for the severe limitations of my knowledge of local spoken Arabic), I insisted on conducting formal interviews, recording all the utterances *verbatim*, and exploring (especially with the aid of spun-out hypothetical cases laid before my informants) what the uses and

¹⁴ Besides these standard shrines acceptable to formal Islam, there were many more lesser shrines (مزاراة *mzara*) mainly frequented by women. These were mostly megalithic structures dating from the Bronze Age, and I suspect so were largely the attending practices.

semantic fields were of such basic concepts as *baraka*, ولي *ulī / wali* (saint), حرام *ḥarām* (polluted, forbidden) etc. In fact, most of my interpretation of the interview data thus gathered took place not immediately and on the spot, but much later, back in my North Atlantic academic environment. It was a most unwise approach, largely based on the implicit false assumption that a one-to-one relationship should exist between local *emic* terms and their ethnographic, *etic* rendering. Even though I was closely supervised in the field by teachers from my home institution, I remained – for such were the times, and such was anthropology in the 1960s – unaware of the hegemonic and artefact-producing effects of such a strategy in the field. Going through the myriad ways in which the word *baraka* could be used in everyday local parlance, and persecuting the peasants with ever more refined alternatives put before them to choose between, their complaint was not only boredom and fatigue, but also the reproach that it was as if I thought they were lying to me about their own culture. What little wisdom I ultimately (years later) managed to thresh out of the experience, came not from verbal utterances but from accepting the lead of one of my key informants in her enthusiastic exclamations about the local saint in his tomb: جدونه 'they are our grandfathers / our ancestors'.



Fig. 1. The leading elder [°]Amer bin Mabruk and his grandson photographed in the village of Hamraya, [°]omdat [°]Aṭaṭfa, [°]Ain Draham, Tunisia, in 1968; in the background a neighbour's house. Photograph © 1968 / 2017 Wim van Binsbergen



Fig. 2. A sacralised landscape: Ḥumiri women harvesting rye in the outskirts of the village of سيدي محامد Sidi Mḥammad, ^oomdat ^oAṭatfa, ^oAin Draham, Tunisia, in 1968; in the background, along the path, on the crest of the hill, under the larger tree, the main shrine of سيدي بوقصبية Sidi Bu-Qasbaya can be made out; it is of the مزارة *mzara* type, with Bronze Age megalithic connotations. Photograph © 1968 / 2017 Wim van Binsbergen



Fig. 3. The shrine of Sidi Mḥammad Sr, N.W. Tunisia, 2002; Photograph © 2002 / 2017 Wim van Binsbergen



note the domed saint's grave (middle ground, centre left); another, more senior shrine finds itself on the nearest hill top in the background, immediately under the arrow.

Fig. 4 The valley of Sidi Mhammad as seen from my house, °Aṭaṭfa, °Ain Drāham District, Tunisia, 1979.



Fig. 5. The mzara °Ain Raml (2002), an originally megalithic type of shrine in the valley of Sidi Mhammad, °Ain Draham, Tunisia; ; Photograph © 2002 / 2017 Wim van Binsbergen

3.1.2. Wise persons in Ḥumiriyya

In the context of our 2015 Pittsburgh conference it became increasingly interesting to consider what the *wise person* looks like in a specific local culture and society.

In Ḥumiriyya, the answer to this question would (in a way perhaps characteristic of wisdom and its ambivalences) be divided between two possibilities.

In the first place there is the category of *the elder* (الكبير *al-kabīr* masc. / الكبيرة *al-kabīra* fem.) – leading personalities marked by advanced age, high status (with secular power and wealth as an unmistakable prerequisite), and exemplary public behaviour, and exercising wide-ranging authority (from prayer, healing and pilgrimage, to conflict regulation, the management of oral traditions and traditional knowledge, marital arrangements, and the co-ordination of everyday productive activities) at the ward and village level, and within the various hierarchical levels of (nominally) agnatic descent groups. Ḥumiriyya is a profoundly segmentary society, and secular elders of greater and lesser scope would be found at every segmentary level. Agnatic segments in the course of their dynamics over time might straddle and outgrow the geographic boundaries in the landscape, but usually, in the 1960s (half a century after colonial rule, the end of open warfare and feuding, land scarcity, and population increase had led to sedentarisation) agnatic and territorial segments would tend to coincide. At the highest segmentary level, the *العمدة* *omdat* (‘*ṣayḥdom*’, in fact: ‘mayoralty’), there would be only one or two generally recognised elders. I was fortunate, as a very young man, to become close with one of the very principal elders of the *عطاطة* *Atatfa shayḥdom*: *العمر بن مبروك* *ʿAmer ben Mabruk*, a lean and very tall man in his mid-seventies, rich in land, cattle, descendants and stories, an indispensable key figure in any major social and political event in the valley, and endowed with a great and contagious sense of humour. Although generally admired and revered, his style of behaviour would often be indecorous.

Thus, one day he treated us to the story of the first human conflict over land: Būni Ādam (Our Father Adam, the first man) and Sīdī Ibrahīm (St Abraham) had decided to try and terminate their continuous fighting over land by erecting a boundary stone, but scarcely had the stone been placed or the two started fighting again, and while wrestling and rolling over the ground, Buni Adam surreptitiously kicked the stone to a more advantageous position. And without interrupting the flow of his story, the near-octogenarian epitome of wisdom suddenly lay down on the dusty ground and laughingly imitated the kicking action of our common ancestor.

But offset against this secular ideal of the elder-as-wise is the wise person whose claim to wisdom resides in that *person’s exceptionally intimate links with the sacred and supernatural*:

- in the first place the warden (الوكيل *al-ukīl*) of the major, domed local shrine(s), and secondly
- the invisible, deceased saint himself or herself, alleged to be buried in that shrine and the object of an intensive cult of invocations, sacrifices, pilgrimages and ecstatic dances, all justified by the stereotypical account of that saint’s life as a path to sanctity and to the public recognition of that sanctity.

In this time-honoured world of popular Islam in the late 1960s (not yet affected by the general, dramatic shift towards formal Islam following the 1979 Iranian revolution, the Oil Crises of the 1970s, and the subsequent international rise of modern Islamism), the saint was considered to display some (certainly not all) of the characteristics of a pious adherent of formal Islam (notably the prayer five times a day – even to the local peasants such a simple observance of a general Islamic prescription was already an uncommon, unprecedented sign

of piety; pilgrimage to Mecca الحج *al-hajj* was not even contemplated as a saintly characteristic), but especially the display of miracle signs (الكرامات *al-karamāt*) such as stone balls, or birds (as celestial messengers) alighting on his shoulders, or the power to protect the cattle entrusted to him as a herdsman even if he took a nap, or the power to bestow fertility on barren women,. These all constituted signs of special blessing deriving from an exceptionally close relationship with الله / Allah.

The two categories of wisdom, elder and saint, would not be strictly separated. Also secular elders would be considered to bestow blessing hence healing, whereas also shrine wardens would engage (not always successfully) in conflict regulation and marital arrangements. In a society that still vividly remembered to have been torn, as recently as the beginning of the 20th century, by frequent and life-threatening violent conflict, the religious wise, however,

- would be strictly pacifist (they could afford to be so because they were considered to be sacrosanct, untouchably protected by the invisible saints they were serving), and moreover,
- to be characterised by a quality called النية *al-nīya*: a simpleton piety bordering on naïve madness.

Finally, beyond these roles occupied by insiders belonging to the local community and local kin groups, there were outsider roles dispensing sacred wisdom:

- the principal (الشاوش *al-shawush*) of the Qadiri lodge situated, since the late 19th century, on the other side of the mountain range of عين فلتوس °Ain Fellus, in the adjacent valley;
- the soothsayers (التكازة *tekeza*) who, with adulterated cleromantic techniques that had circulated for centuries in the world of Islam, offered villagers a momentary private refuge for the expression of their problems at the distant, segmentarily neutral market of the district's capital عين دراهم °Ain Draham; and
- the Qur'ānic teacher المدب (*meddeb*), whose privileged position of being literate had allowed him, a stranger, to take up residence in the valley and the teach the local children the rudiments of reading in his ramshackle private school – but who besides dabbled in divination and other forms of magic with the help of gross, mass-produced magical books that were available in every bookshop, but which inspired the villagers with a sense of religious awe.

Although as ancestors the saints' characteristics as locals had to be stressed (only locals could make legitimate claims to local land), the general understanding was, however, that as representatives and bringers of formal Islam (soon to relapse into popular forms) the saints had to have come from far away: e.g. Kairwan, or Sequiat al-Hamra in Mauretania.

3.2. The Nkoya of South Central Africa (rural W. Zambia and urban Zambia)

3.2.1. *Ethnographic summary*

Among the Nkoya of Zambia (South Central Africa) my research has concentrated on ecstatic

healing cults (rather in continuation of the research line on trance and mediumship I had started in North Africa), kingship, and (as indispensable key to these two topics) the details of a complex kinship system, and of a regional settlement history over an area larger than my (admittedly small) home country, the Netherlands.¹⁵ This time, leaders in the major ecstatic cults were no longer ‘informants’ but my close fictive kinsmen, and my association with them was to last from early 1972 till today; in the process I became an effective member¹⁶ of several villages and kin groups, adoptive member of a royal family, sponsor of ecstatic ritual, and (after my apprenticeship in Botswana) even an active local diviner and healer. I edited and published in both Nkoya and English *Likota Iya Bankoya* (the standard Nkoya ethno-history, compiled in the 1950s by Rev. Jehosophat Shimunika, the first Nkoya Christian pastor), and played a certain role in the Nkoya’s remarkable ethnic resilience over the decades. I have internalised Nkoya language, culture and society to a much greater extent, and over a much longer time, than I have the Ĥumiri equivalents. Although the Nkoya are small-scale agriculturalists, the main identity especially of the Eastern group (Mashasha) on whom I have concentrated, is that of hunters, and their ties with the land are limited and shifting. The Nkoya setting entirely lacked the idea of a sacralised landscape as the main vehicle of wisdom, as among the Ĥumiris (and among the Manjacos of Guinea Bissau, where I did fieldwork between 1981 and 1983). Nkoya society even had a trait that struck me as utter unwisdom in the first place: the framing of *all* primary relationships in the kin group and the local community in terms of an idiom of potential sorcery – with the attending actual magical practices of sorcery, and the incessant suspicion of sorcery practices in others. The atmosphere of immense paranoia which this generates (and from which I found it often impossible to distance myself as a fieldworker over the years) lends an edge of bitter doubt and disappointment to even the most intimate and trusted relationships.

However, in the several extensive discussions I have devoted to the Nkoya kinship system I have identified sorcery, not as the *core* of the social process within Nkoya villages and kin groups (also extending into urban contexts), but as a vital *boundary condition*, inside of which the unmistakable riches of care, reciprocity, trans-generational continuity, altruism, self-sacrifice, non-violence, unconditionality, and reticence, would nonetheless thrive. Considering myself (in ways that are immaterial here) a life-long victim of the North Atlantic kinship system in modern transition, I had from the beginning the greatest admiration for the Nkoya kin system, considering it a locus of great wisdom, and also of personal comfort and signification. After a few decades of Nkoya research, I began to ask more fundamental

¹⁵ Extending from early 1972 to the present day, this research was initially (1972-1974) self-sponsored, but subsequently (from 1977 on) adopted by the African Studies Centre, Leiden, the Netherlands; and (through the intercession of A.J.F. Köbben) by WOTRO, the tropical branch of the Netherlands Research Foundation. It was greatly facilitated by the unfailing support, over all these years, of my sometime research assistant subsequently my elder brother Mr Dennis Shiyowe (now Mwene Shumbanyama) and his family; king Mwene Kahare Kabambi (my adoptive father), his successors, and his court; king Mwene Mutondo and his court, where I was nominated a sub-chief in 2011; in general the Nkoya people of Kaoma District and of Lusaka, Zambia; Rev. Mary Nalishuwa and her family; Rev. Jehosophat Shimunika and his family; Dr Stanford Mayowe; and a network of educated middle-class Nkoya people organised (since the early 1980s) within the Kazanga Cultural Society. Henny van Rijn and Patricia Saegerman shared the Nkoya fieldwork as my successive spouses, making essential contributions, as did our children. From among my numerous publications on the Nkoya, I may mention: van Binsbergen 1979, 1981a, 1990b, 1992a, 1993, 2014, in press (a). A fairly complete list is available in the end bibliography of van Binsbergen in press (a).

¹⁶ To explain why, among the Nkoya, one is a *member* of a village rather than an inhabitant, requires an extensive argument, which I have presented in my study of Mabombola village (van Binsbergen 2014; English version incorporated in: in press (a))

questions, e.g. if my initial impression was true that *transcendence* – the backbone, I would say, of the North Atlantic experience under Christianity, and even further developed since Early Modern times – has no proper place in Nkoya life. Explicit thoughts on this point are scarcely verbalised by the Nkoya, so ethnographically reconstructing and rendering their wisdom is truly an application of the art of *capturing the ineffable*.¹⁷ Initially I thought their worldview to be entirely immanent, incapable or unwilling to reach beyond the common limitations of the human existence, but as I probed deeper into the question (van Binsbergen 2012c), I had to admit that their rituals, music and dance indicated a profound desire to rise above the human condition; these elements of expressive culture even turned out to amount to an affective spiritual technology to fulfil such desire, and even (notably, in the *ushwana* name-inheritance ritual (van Binsbergen 1990b / in press (a)) to defeat death, albeit only conceptually and ritually. In their ecstatic cults of the last 100 years, such as *Bituma*, *Moba*, *Mwendapanchi*, etc., impersonal spirits of alienness and contagion have come to largely replace the ancestral and royal spirits that – according to my painstaking ethnohistorical reconstructions – were locally considered to be in control of the life-world until late pre-colonial times. The Nkoya know a creator god, Nyambi,¹⁸ but Nyambi’s gender is undetermined (the Nkoya language knows no gender). Nyambi is not, or scarcely any more,¹⁹ the object of a cult, and (except in the Christian context) rarely prayed to or otherwise invoked. The deep forests (where, kilometres away from the village, big game used to be hunted – or poached, depending on who is speaking – until the 1980s) are considered to testify vocally to the creative presence, glory and beauty of Nyambi, and moreover are the haunts of a unilateral being Mwendanyangula (‘The One Whose Identity is On High’), often conceived as snakelike, and often difficult to distinguish from Nyambi – but although they are thus both epiphanies of the sacred, in nearly half a century now very few participants volunteered specific comments on their nature. A famous song in the royal orchestra’s repertoire chides Nyambi as a clumsy creator proving unable to prevent that the speaker fell in love with his sister (the standard mode of address between lovers being that of siblings). Mwendanjangula may happen upon you in the deepest forest, and if you are the first to greet him he will bestow great riches and healing powers upon you – but in the opposite case will destroy you. For an iconographic study of a statuette representing, among other supernatural beings, Mwendanjangula, cf. van Binsbergen 2011e.

¹⁷ ‘*Capturing the ineffable*’ was subtitle of the 2015 Pittsburgh workshop convened by Alter and Kao.

¹⁸ This theonym, with minor phonological variations, is ubiquitous throughout West and Central Africa; van Binsbergen 2015a: 18-22, and *passim*. I have repeatedly suggested that this name (associated with solar / spider symbolism, but etymologically relegating to a Common Bantu root *-amb-*, ‘to speak’) is continuous with a series of female theonyms attested, since the Bronze Age, for a range of North African, West Asian and South West European cultures, including, among others, Antinea, Neith, Athena, Anat, Anahita, and associated with women’s domestic tasks especially spinning and weaving, but also with military prowess and weaponry.

¹⁹ Mutumba Mainga 1972 describes a rudimentary solar cult (centring on Nyambi) for the neighbouring Luyi / Lozi / Barotse, with reference to a precolonial period (18th-19th c. CE) when these Western neighbours were still very close to the Nkoya, notably, speaking a closely related language, sharing a royal cult, a divination system, etc. Traces of such a solar cult are found in *Likota Iya Bankoya* (notably King Mwene Kayambila’s dedication of his new-born child to the rising sun; *Likota Iya Bankoya*, 25:1), and in fact survived in Nkoya rural practice in the 1970s. The latter’s royal cult and court etiquette are still closely related to an (otherwise submerged) solar cult: the king is equated with the sun, and cannot be venerated at night. There are many indications that the parallels with Ancient Egypt are not merely typological but reveal genuine historical continuity (cf. vanBinsbergen 2011d).



Fig. 6. Do the rural cosmology and ritual practice constitute the principal referents of urban puberty rites? Coming-out dance of a girl (standing, left, with head scarf), escorted by her under-age second (standing, right, with bead scapular), under the encouraging eyes of her mentrix (centre, with beads in her hair), Mukunkike village, Kaoma, Zambia, 1978.



Fig. 7. Although the global economy is omnipresent (notice the enamel basin, petrol drums, plastic bucket, manufactured textiles, next to locally grown calabash containers), viable agricultural production, a selection of which is shown in the picture, continues to provide relevance to the ancient rural cosmology; Nkeyema, Kaoma District, Zambia, 1978.



Fig. 8. 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.



Fig. 9. Virtuality reigns at the Kazanga festival. A clerk of the district branch of the Department of Cultural Services, dressed up in the historic attire of the court jester (*kayoni ka Mwene*, ‘the king’s bird’ – a cosmogonic evocation), reminds uniformly dressed village girls to position themselves in a regular grid and to keep in line – spatial patterns without roots in any Nkoya rural situation. In the back a poorly dressed chief’s court official wields a tape recorder of ghetto blaster size, so as to record the dance troupe’s song. Kazanga festival, Kaoma District, 1994.

These Nkoya examples unproblematically remind us of millennia of North Atlantic / West Asian cultural traditions during which also those regions have associated the ineffable with epiphanies of the sacred. One other peculiar way, however, in which the ineffable has manifested itself in the Nkoya context is in isolated enclaves of apparently concentrated and conventionalised meaning that no contemporary competent bearer of Nkoya culture manages to explain or translate any more. When editing the *Likota lya Bankoya* I hit on many such instances, provisionally but lamely translated as *e.g.* ‘The Snuffbox of Nyambi’s Child’; the personal names of royals, the praisenames of kings, and the names and epithets of clans (suggestive of a transformative element cosmology with catalysts – with parallels only in East Asia in the last few millennia), would offer many more instances. Having grappled with such elusive nuggets of meaning for decades, I finally resigned myself to the idea – admittedly anathema and politically incorrect to most modern Africanists – that (like much of the Nkoya musical and mythical repertoire) these cases represented substrate transcontinental borrowings, especially from South Asian Hindu and Buddhist contexts once firmly established in South Central Africa but since long expelled from conscious collective memory there (van Binsbergen 2012, 2017: ch. 10, and in press (a)) – and likewise expelled from conscious collective memory among the Southern African *sangoma* diviner-healers, on which my

fieldwork was to concentrate subsequently.²⁰

Graduating over the decades from an erring young fieldworker to a Nkoya elder and royal, guardian of a locally recognised treasure of historical and cultural knowledge, I may have succeeded somewhat in some of my writings, to afford Nkoya wisdom the informal and largely tacit, yet central place it has in its original context. One important way for the Nkoya to bring out and to transmit implicit wisdom is by the teachings and admonitions of elders (*ku longesha*, e.g. as part of the wedding ceremony, and in girls' puberty training) – and my gradual incorporation in Nkoya life was marked by an increasing number of instances in which I myself have become the object of such admonitions, having failed to live up to common local standards of conduct in sexual, marital and communicative matters, and in anger management. Here, like in court cases, the emphasis is on verbal expressions, often with the aid of proverbs, so apparently the opposite of the ineffable – but the underlying principles and their cosmological anchorage remain hidden and can only be guessed at through introspection, *à la* Turner and the Louvain School.

3.2.2. Wise persons among the Nkoya

In Ḥumiriyya, notions of implied wisdom were to a considerable extent predicated on the presence of a Great Tradition that (under the heading of Islam) had commanded respect and religious authority for over a millennium even though periodically sinking to a low ebb, and even though much of the implied contents of that Great Tradition, as Pelasgian, is likely to have predated Islam by two millennia. Among the Nkoya, however, such a Great Tradition was²¹ apparently²² absent – although since the advent of Christian missionaries in the 1910s,

²⁰ A few examples will suffice (van Binsbergen 2003, 2017, and in press (a)): among Nkoya royals personal names circulate that are unmistakably those of South Asian gods, such as Mangala (the planet Mars) and Skanda (war god and brother of Ganeša). Nkoya court culture, including gestures / stances and verbal expressions of respect, the format of court chronicles, and the dynastic numbering of royal incumbents, follows South Asian literate patterns. *Keye-keye*, one of the principal songs on the repertoire of the Nkoya royal orchestras, has an almost literal counterpart in a Buddhist text from Sri Lanka. Nkoya music in itself suggests many South Asian (and South East Asian) reminiscences (van Binsbergen 2015: 159 *f.*). A central *sangoma* hymn closely follows the *Lotus Sutra* of Buddhism, while (with a surprising play on Bantu nominal prefixes) the High God Mwali has many features of Kali. The differential initiation rites of *sangomas* from various strata of Southern African society follows a caste pattern described in a classic South Asian text, *The Questions of King Milinda* (Rhys Davis 2988 / 1880-1920); etc. The South Asian connection may also go some way to explain the Mongolian (via the Moghul empire) and Celtic strands I detected (van Binsbergen 2010) in Nkoya mythology, e.g. the cauldron of kingship, stealing the moon, deadly royal sibling rivalry involving an artificial woman, but by and large I would consider these Pelasgian effects.

²¹ Although fieldwork has continued till 2011, the ethnographic present of my Nkoya summary is primarily that of the 1970s, hence my occasional shift here to the past tense.

²² *Apparently*, for – as set out in a previous footnote – my research of the last two decades has brought to light many strands of hitherto secret, forgotten or overlooked transcontinental cultural continuities (especially with Hinduism, Buddhism and Taoism) which might well be interpreted in terms of an implicit, substrate Great Tradition. Cf. van Binsbergen 2003: ch. 8; 2012b; 2017: ch. 10, pp. 361-412; and in press (b). In addition to these protohistoric influences dating from the 1st mill. BCE to the second mill. CE, Pelasgian diffusion might be considered, going back to West Asia and the Mediterranean region during the Late Bronze Age, and possibly accounting for the wide distribution of certain mythological and ritual themes, e.g. male and female puberty rites, sun worship, and the abhorrence from pork (which, of course, could also be a trace of Islamic, Jewish, and Hindu Vishnuist influence). The difference between the Great Tradition in the contexts of Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam, and such a submerged, substrate postulated Great Tradition apparently underlying considerable parts of Africa including Nkoyaland, is that the former is locally enshrined in written documents whereas the latter,

and local labour migrants' exposure to many varieties of Christianity in distant place of work since about 1860, Christianity has come to assume the quality of a recent and optional Great Tradition, in the face of historic practices and representations of ancestral, royal and ecstatic cults had continued virtually unabated.

Among the Nkoya, too, elders combined roles of productive management, healing, management of oral traditions and custom, and economic power, – but invariably with a twist: no person would be called wise unless he or she would also be surrounded with the connotations of witchcraft and sorcery that inevitably accrue to any exalted position (van Binsbergen 1981b, 2001). Rising above the crowd, in whatever respect, implicitly requires the magical powers to ward off the crowd's equalising magical violence towards redistribution of scarce resources. The wise person is necessarily also a sorcerer, and mobilising that person's specialist knowledge carries considerable risks from which only the White missionary, medical worker, administrator or anthropologist are supposed to be exempted and immune.²³ The greatest achievement of my fieldwork (extending, intermittently, from 1972 to 2011) was not to learn the previously almost totally undocumented Nkoya language, culture and social organisation, nor to retrieve fragments of protohistorical knowledge otherwise lost forever, nor even to very gradually discover the hidden strands of transcontinental continuity in Nkoya culture and society, but very simply, to be allowed to graduate from a White outsider immune to sorcery, to an insider, adoptive kinsman and aristocrat, in other words a *muntu*, locally considered to be subjected to the same cosmological categorisation and supernatural forces as his hosts.

Given the local insistence on the ambivalence, the terror even, of wisdom, the idealised figure of the eminently wise, exemplary person is virtually absent among the Nkoya, except in an alien, imported context of Christian biblical models (where Joseph, Solomon, and Jesus, among others, qualify as such). What, among the Nkoya, comes closest to global notions of wisdom is the art of managing productive and social relations where there are hardly any binding, transcendent norms and values, so that all authority is based on capabilities of negotiation, persuasion, self-presentation, and impression management. Perhaps the firm direction yet loving care with which a mature woman teaches domestic, social and sexual and reproductive matters to the non-kin girl who has been entrusted to her during the latter's puberty, comes also close to global notions of wisdom. Among the Nkoya's regional neighbours the Lunda, Luvale, Mbunda and Chokwe, formal teaching of adolescent men on ontological, cosmological, historical and reproductive matters has been locally contained within the formal initiation process of *Mukanda*,²⁴ but, among the Nkoya, *Mukanda* and the

being submerged and largely eclipsed from local consciousness, cannot explicitly be invoked by the participants to justify particular beliefs and actions.

²³ The reasons for this exemption are not immediately clear. The standard explanation is that, cosmologically, Whites (Nkoya: *Bakuwa*), along with Arabs, Chinese, Indians and other somatic / ethnic types sporadically spilling over the horizon into the Nkoya awareness, are not real 'human beings' (designated *bantu* in Nkoya and in Common Bantu generally), but constitute an indeterminate and liminal, freak category of animate beings somewhere between animals, evil spirits, and the supernatural. This language use (epinymous – Bleek 1851 – for the large Bantu-speaking linguistic cluster, which is at least a few millennia old) is certainly much older than the colonial period, which in Zambia only started in 1900 CE. However, the ancient classification may subsequently have been redefined in the light of the incomparably greater power of Whites in the colonial period, under the hegemony of the colonial state and the Christian church.

²⁴ *Mukanda* is the regional name of the male puberty rite (including genital mutilation) among selected peoples in South Central Africa; until the advent of the 20th c. CE, the Nkoya overlapped with this cluster, from which they subsequently dissociated in the course of the 20th c. For a detailed discussion of this process and its

attending male genital mutilation, have been abolished in the early 20th century.

In the second half of the 20th century, some elderly headmen and leading women in puberty rites and in cults of affliction) could perhaps meet, among the Nkoya, the criteria of the ‘village sage’ presented as a model of African wisdom by the Kenyan anthropologist / philosopher Odera Oruka (1990; *cf.* Mosima 2016). Beyond the paucity of explicit cosmological, ontological, mythical and historical discourse at the village level, such sages would personally, originally and idiosyncratically reflect on life, existence, God, evil and death, and sometimes informally share their ideas with their fellow-villagers – but these sages would scarcely reap recognition for their insights, and would ratheracerbate the reputation as sorcerers that would tend to adhere to their status and age anyway.

3.3. The *sangoma* cult in urban and peri-urban N.E. Botswana

3.3.1. *The ethnographic setting*

I skip here my experiences, however instructive, as a fieldworker investigating local psychiatric healing methods among the Manjacos of Guinea Bissau (for relatively short periods in the years 1981, 1982, and 1983; *cf.* van Binsbergen 2017: 243-290), and immediately proceed to my third major fieldwork experience, that in the context of urban healing cults in modern Francistown, Botswana.²⁵ Although my research here was initially conceived in far more secular and sociological terms,

- my own specialist orientation as an anthropologist of religion; in combination
- with my professional network involving such colleagues as Richard Werbner, Terence Ranger, Inus Daneel, Matthew Schoffeleers and Renaat Devisch,²⁶
- with the vicissitudes of our urban experiences as a family (especially medical tribulations, and the considerable ostracism to which we as Whites were subjected in a local all-Black residential area);
- and with the peculiar way in which traditional spiritual orientations had been forced to go underground in this globalised, commoditified, South-Africa dominated boom town of N.E. Botswana,

background, *cf.* van Binsbergen 1992a, 1993, where also a selection of the extensive literature on the topic is cited.

²⁵ Largely at the instigation of Richard Werbner, my research in Francistown, North East District, Botswana was initiated in early 1988, with one year of fieldwork 1988-1989, and many subsequent follow-up visits. I am indebted to the African Studies Centre, Leiden, for research funding; to the Applied Research Units, Ministry of Local Government, Lands and Housing, for providing a stimulating research context; to the people of Francistown and surrounding peri-urban and rural areas, for welcoming me and my family; to MmaShakayile, MmaNdhlovu and Mr Smarts Gumede for extending their profound esoteric knowledge to me; and to Patricia Saegerman and our children for living through the first spell of fieldwork. The *sangoma* complex of Southern Africa has been the subject of an extensive scholarly literature, much of which is cited in my own relevant publications, including van Binsbergen 1990a, 1991, 1995, 1996, 2003; 2015a: 179-188 and 505: 518; 2017: 145-186.

²⁶ *Cf.* Daneel 1970, 1971, 1974, 1988; Ranger 1968, 1972, 1975, 1979, 1985, 1999; Schoffeleers 1972a, 1972b, 1972c, 1978, 1979, 1985, 1991, 1992; Devisch 1978, 1984, 1985, 1987, 1991, 1993, 2004; de Boeck & Devisch 1994.

led me soon to concentrate on historic religious practices, especially the *sangoma* ecstatic ancestral cult.²⁷ Within a few years (1988-1991) I graduated from being a distressed client seeking redress (in itself already scarcely a stance of hegemonic ethnographic detachment), to being an initiated, publicly qualified, certified and even state-recognised ritual leader and diviner.



Fig. 10 . Sangomas in action: The younger sister, Kwani, expresses her genuine surprise at the particular fall of the divination tablets from the hands of her elder sister, Molly; Monarch township, Francistown, Botswana, 1988. Being our first encounter, this must have been (although this was a not disclosed to me until a year later) the moment when – with tremendous impact on my life and career – the oracle predicted my becoming a sangoma, and identified me as the incarnation of these young women’s great uncle, Johannes.

²⁷ In Botswana, the *sangoma* cult is considered a recent (20th c. CE) introduction from South Africa and from Ndebele-speaking regions in Zimbabwe, but in Southern Africa as a whole the cult has a venerable history of at least several centuries, partly as a cult sustained by court priests. Ultimately shamanic and thus sharing in the global history of shamanism ever since the Upper Palaeolithic, its more specific origin may lie in Hindu and especially Buddhist South Asia.



Fig. Fig. 11. Fellow-*sangomas* supervise one of the principal acts marking Wim van Binsbergen's (left, squatting) final initiation as a *sangoma*: the sacrifice of a goat at the male ancestors' shrine in Matshelagabedi village, North East District, Botswana, 1991.



Fig. 12. Operating under the smoke of Francistown's magnificent Nyangabgwe hospital, an urban diviner, in what is locally known as 'his surgery', casts his divination tablets (ultimately derived

*from Arabian and Chinese geomancy, but entrenched in African localisation since c. 1500 CE)*²⁸
*in order to diagnose a case of suspected witchcraft. Somerset East squatment, Francistown,
Botswana, 1989.*



Fig. 13. Dr. Smarts Gumede's surgery, Francistown, Botswana, 1989.

The wisdom proffered in the context of this cult – although much later found to border, as always perhaps, on unwisdom – included the possibilities and strategies of precognition, veridical divination, telekinesis, far-reaching healing capabilities, and the sense of being one

²⁸ Already in 1561, the Roman Catholic missionary Father Gonçalo da Silveira SJ was condemned to death at the court of Monomotapa (the Shona ruler of a large part of today's Zimbabwe) only a few hundred kilometres from present-day Francistown, on the basis of the outcome of the very same four-tablet oracle; *cf.* dos Santos 1901 / 1609. By an interesting parallel, also the Apostle of the Frisians, my Roman Catholic patron St Willibrord, was condemned (ca. 700 CE) by a cleromantic oracle when accused of sacrilege by his heathen royal host in an island North of Frisia, but subsequently acquitted (Lampen 1939: 30, 40).

of the very scarce (roughly, one in a thousand) living people who had been elected by the ancestors to wield these powers among the living as sign of the ancestors' presence and of being elected by them. Learning to divine means spending weeks, even months, on end at the *sangomas'* lodge, practicing every afternoon with one's fellow-novices, until coherent readings and interpretations can be made of the successive falls of the oracular tablets – readings out of which the learner can finally produce a convincing liberating and redressive verbal account of what is wrong with the client, and what is to be done (in terms of ritual action, medicines, and other forms of redress e.g. taking a different name) to remedy the client's predicament.

This, in particular, is the local wisdom which I have propagated (van Binsbergen 2003: ch. 7), in my writings and as a practising *sangoma* through face-to-face sessions with African and Europeans, and through the Internet, far outside its original cultural and linguistic niche in Southern Africa – whilst discovering, in the process, that that wisdom is far from originally Southern African but belongs to a very widespread family of geomantic divination systems, whose history and transmission I have since traced in several scholarly studies. However, divining and healing are part of a more comprehensive practice of caring for clients' existential problems, there was a 'bedside manner' to be learned, as well as performative self-presentation in dancing, ritual, sacrifice, dress; the gathering, preparation, and administration of herbal medicine; and the intricacies of detecting the influence of the dead (and of sorcerers) in the vicissitudes of the lives of the living.

Even so, *sangomahood* proved to be a wisdom with limitations. It allowed me to help others in their existential, social or medical crises, but not myself. And the post-graduation token bonus that was extended to me by my spiritual leader, in the form of a big gold nugget,²⁹ did not survive a goldsmith's professional scrutiny – it turned out to be a pebble covered with gold paint. But the huge black bull my lodge leader had freely thrown in to add splendour to my graduation, had been real, and priceless. I was taken by her to the Mwali cult's distant regional headquarters, there confirmed as an accomplished *sangoma*, and even cloaked in a leopard skin where most others had been refused and rejected. When I brought to bear my (fortunately unimpaired – or so it seemed) scientific methods of objectivity and statistics onto the results I was getting as a diviner, I could only admit that *sangomahood* did enable me – very much to my surprise – to produce what my clients, and I myself, were persuaded to consider veridical divination, not just once, but almost invariably, in many dozens of cases.....!³⁰

²⁹ Southern Africa, especially the Zimbabwe Plateau, has been a gold-producing and (transcontinentally) gold-exporting region for millennia, and the earliest South Asian cultic influences ultimately producing the *sangoma* cult are likely to have been in the context of Indian gold prospecting and trading. Cf. van Binsbergen in press (b), and there especially the contributions by Thornton and by Hromnik.

³⁰ However, this fact (or illusory appearance?) of producing veridical divination, was only brought about under conditions of genuine *bona fide* practice, going through the prescribed motions in the prescribed ritual attire, after proper ritual preparations, spontaneously and with a relaxed, open state of mind (although my panick-stricken awareness that the client could at any moment be disappointed by my furtive or non-existent divinatory powers was difficult to dispel). I could never *at will* produce specific results – but that is a common finding in research on the occult and the paranormal, and is the reason why objectifying experimental devices to test paranormal phenomena have invariably failed. I submit that the mechanism behind this is more or less the following. Wisdom, including the capability of performing veridical divination, consists in the acquired ability (not exactly learned overnight!) to let effortlessly yet transformatively coincide one's own human person with the structure of the universe. Compassion is an implied, though secondary, aspect of such connectedness. Rational thought, by contrast, consists in the demarcation and idiosyncratic articulation of one's own sense of

3.3.2. *Wise persons in the context of the sangoma cult of Southern Africa*

Speaking related languages of the Bantu branch of the Niger-Congo linguistic macrophylum, and sharing largely in the same protohistoric Bantu substrate cultural heritage, the urban, peri-urban and rural communities I have studied, since 1988, in North East Botswana displayed, as far as wisdom is concerned, a pattern rather reminiscent of the Nkoya. Moreover, both regions have undergone substantial Asian influence in the most recent millennia – as has all of South Central and Southern Africa. Also among the *sangomas* the culturally constructed ambivalence of power and knowledge meant that every diviner-healer-priest, while offering insights in clients' life and in the manifestations of ancestors and evil forces therein, was at the same time inevitably a specialist in evil, destruction, sorcery. *Sangomas* would periodically stage collective manifestations outside their lodges (typically situated in the midst of densely populated urban neighbourhoods), and when doing so would make a point of inspiring supernatural fear, with their black cloaks, fly-switches, drumming, intimidating gaze, dancing and singing. For their non-initiated neighbours the *sangomas'* wisdom in divination and healing, although often considered indispensable, was only applied to as a last resort, and the worst that could happen to a family was to see one of their children elected to the status of apprentice *sangoma* as a necessary stage in the course of ancestral healing of very serious cases of affliction. At the remote Nata lodge, in Central Botswana – the national branch of the Mwali cult whose headquarters are in the Matopos Hills in neighbouring Zimbabwe – the high priest who had to confirm, in a personal ritual at the High God shrine he administered, the final initiation of all new *sangomas* (and of all African Independent church leaders, too, for that matter), some leading *sangomas* were (without in the least being defrocked) debarred from entering the shrine because these leaders were generally known to engage in ritual murder for the preparation of success medicine for the benefit of their affluent and politically active clients. Unmistakably, the leering, cunning voice of the High God that those admitted could hear making elaborate and articulate pronouncements at the shrine in an obsolete Shona dialect, was that of the high priest himself – who was an immigrant from Ilaland, Zambia – the eastern neighbours of the Nkoya, and in many respects hardly distinguishable from the latter.

self – the Cartesian *cogito ergo sum* (which however does not cover altered states of consciousness, when for instance the medium in trance exists whilst being temporarily unconscious of herself or himself; in *sangoma* circles the test of true ancestral trance – sometimes yet performatively faked – is precisely that the medium must have no conscious memory of acts and utterances made while in trance). My mind's rational self-affirmation juxtaposes, opposes, confronts, and commits to othering, everything that is not me, and thus rents the texture of, and my own being embedded in, universal connectedness on which paranormal phenomena including veridical divination depend. Cf. Descartes 1984 / 1637; Hintikka 1968; Williams 1968. In ways that I cannot go into here (but that I have discussed *in extenso* elsewhere: cf. van Binsbergen 2003b, 2004a, 2004b, 2012b, in press (d); van Binsbergen & Woudhuizen 2011: 412-415) we hit here on, demonstrably, very old themes in the history of human thought: the slow but traceable emergence of the capability of affirming fundamental difference, in other words the emerging capability of thinking binary opposition; the incredibly wide distribution in space and time, and the equally incredible, linguistic convergence, of granulation symbolism (for which the spotted leopard skin – my very own –, the star-spangled night-sky, rainfall, and plant seeds are near-global natural pointers), with smooth, unarticulated, unstructured continuous extension (as the lion's skin; as if untouched by human thought) set off against articulated, pin-pointed, discontinuous speckledness as if the latter brings out reality under the disruptive, separating impact of human thought). Related phenomena, perhaps prematurely canonised in specialist circles, have been the interpretation of patterns in rock art in psychedelic, trance-inducing terms (cf. Huffman 1983; Lewis-Williams 1985; Clottes & Lewis-Williams 1998); as well as the very widespread theme of *therianthropy* (cf. Jolly 2002; Parkington 2003; Hollmann 2006), where humans (often dressed in animal skins, including leopard skins – the first known case being ca. 60 ka BP; de Lumley 1972) impersonate animals in an implied mental play on identity / continuity / merging / binary opposition between humans and animals.

Let us proceed from these obvious performative aspects of the *sangomas*' public presentation (as element continually stressed in *sangoma* training at the lodges), to their common public perception as being wise. There are only feeble indications that locally wisdom was attributed to them as a genuine *emic* category. Southern African dictionaries, written by specialists on the basis of many years of global formal education and therefore somewhat to be mistrusted as renderings of local non-specialist thought, tend to present lexical items to be translated as 'wisdom', e.g. *botlhale*, *tlhalefō* (Tswana; Matuma 1993: 643); *uchenjeri*, *ungwaru* (Shona; Hannan 1974: 933). For the clients, the *sangomas*' wisdom consists in the ability 'to see one's life', to weave – out of scraps of private (and usually not consciously disclosed) biographical data whose accuracy only the client can assess and affirm – a detailed meaningful story naming specific circumstances, victims and perpetrators, thus casting light on what hitherto were diffuse troubling factors in life, and linking the perceived misfortune of the past and the present to a brighter, redeemed near future, with specific ritual action stipulated by the *sangoma* as the nexus between troubled past and bright, redeemed future. For the clients, this ability springs from the *sangomas*' link (privileged, immediate, and periodically renewed through offerings, trance ritual, dreams) with ancestors, both their own and the clients'. The *sangomas*' knowledge of sources of pollution, and of natural and sacrificial remedies for redress and healing, further reinforces their fame of wisdom. One of my teachers in the Francistown context, Mr Smarts Gumede, though not a *sangoma* himself, was a herbalist not relying on trance but merely on cleromantic, geomantic divination; an aspect of his wisdom was that he engaged in herbalist research and experimentation, identifying and testing hitherto unrecognised medicinal herbs on the basis of thinking through their symbolic characteristics, such as long and entangled stems, or violent physical effects when ingested. A display of cunning, and the presentation of arrogant authority in specialist-client interaction, is part of the *sangomas*' public act; and if the *sangomas* put these qualities to profitable use in secular activities e.g. the retail trade, a transport company this is not held against them. Yet perhaps their greatest claim to wisdom is the piety with which they go about representing the ancestors, and empathically, compassionately yet reticently revealing and redressing the hidden chains of connection in their clients' life. It took me years to realise, and to be able to prove, the originally Buddhist strands in Southern African *sangomahood*, but once perceived, this made their entire presence appear in a milder, less entrepreneurial and more spiritual light (van Binsbergen 1990a; 2003: ch. 8; 2005a).

Having prepared the ground ethnographically with these three vignettes of wisdom, let us now discuss their possible implications for our collective project.

4. Discussion

4.1. Wisdom: indigenous, *emic*, concept or alien, *etic*, analytical imposition?

By and large, our little survey of wisdom in three cultures where I did intensive and prolonged fieldwork over the decades, suggests that rather than being an indigenous, *emic* concept (see above) whose definitions and situational use in the local context might be traced from the local participants' explicit verbal statements and observed actions, wisdom in these three cultures turns out to be largely an externally-imposed, *etic* category, no doubt inspiring to the extent that it may highlight tendencies within the ethnographic data and may be conducive to cross-cultural comparison, but always remaining at the analytical, *etic* level.

I suspect that this apparent state of affairs owes much to the fact that the three cultures in question are effectively, on the ritual and divinatory level, non-literate – the written word is not absent there, and there is some awareness of a distant Great Tradition of literate religion, yet established and transmitted sacred texts play hardly a manifest role.³¹

The H̄umiri worldview appears to be largely continuous with a Neolithic, Pelasgian society based on early food production through rudimentary agriculture and animal husbandry; what I have perceived in my first fieldwork as ‘the wisdom of the landscape’ is conceived within the scope of perennial productive and reproductive forces, to which later symbolic complexes (Phoenician / Carthaginian, Hellenistic and Imperial-Roman shrine cults, early Christianity, and Islam) have added an explicit, text-based superstructure. The latter now dominates the conceptualisation but not the management and administration of wisdom.

The ambivalence of power, knowledge and healing that is to be at the heart of any wisdom-orientated analysis of the Nkoya and *sangoma* situations, is on the one hand the manifestation of a perennial and ubiquitous characteristic of the sacred as inherently ambivalent (recognised and emphasised by such early theoreticians of the sacred as Durkheim and Otto,³² but on the other hand reveals a widespread worldview (an attempt to trace its global manifestations was made in my *Before the Presocratics*, 2012b) that is largely immanentist, a-moral, and cyclical, and that has managed to stay aloof from the tendency (so marked in literate world religions) towards firm categorisation, and towards transcendence. Once again I revert to my view already stressed in my earlier writings on wisdom, transcendence, and evil: that these concepts are largely predicated upon the literate traditions of the interrelated world religions of the last few millennia (with transcendence in part³³ a by-product of textuality – the text as a means to think beyond the chaotic, boundary-effacing here and now), and therefore, while inspiring, and while reminding us of the literate, transcendent thrust of our own North Atlantic and Asian cultural backgrounds, these concepts should not be allowed to pose as cultural universals.

Let us stop a moment to ask why

³¹ Only one exception comes to mind. When after graduation I was taken to Nata for final confirmation, I was at first sent back for I had not presented myself there in ‘the traditional attire of [my] people’, a *leopard skin*. Francistown being a centre of skin tannery and wildlife trophies, this puzzling omission (which set me on the long trail of my subsequent leopard-skin research and the discovery of the South Asian strands in *sangoma*; van Binsbergen 2003a, 2003b, 2004a, 2004b, in press (d)) was remedied within a week, and during that liminal week I was told by the Nata High Priest (a graduate of a Rhodesian / Zimbabwean minor seminary for the Roman Catholic priesthood) to recite, a few times a day, *Psalm 121*:

1 I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help.

2 My help cometh from the LORD, which made heaven and earth.

3 He will not suffer thy foot to be moved: he that keepeth thee will not slumber.

4 Behold, he that keepeth Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep.

5 The LORD is thy keeper: the LORD is thy shade upon thy right hand.

6 The sun shall not smite thee by day, nor the moon by night.

7 The LORD shall preserve thee from all evil: he shall preserve thy soul.

8 The LORD shall preserve thy going out and thy coming in from this time forth, and even for evermore (Bible 1985).

³² Cf. Durkheim 1912 (also Smit & Alexander 1996; van Binsbergen in press (c)); Otto 1917 / 2004.

³³ But not totally so: the use of a more or less fixed and stable lexicon depends on the ability to refer, with a word, to what is not necessarily here and not necessarily now; this essentially transcendent quality is a fundamental characteristic of all language, not just of text. Therefore some diffuse form of transcendence is already implied in all human language.

- so much that is assumed to be self-evidently expressible in speech and writing in North Atlantic society today, and *a fortiori* in anthropological discourse,
- is not so expressed in many of the societies we study.

Several reasons combine here:

1. *Cosmological reasons.* The life world that is reality within a specific culture in space and time, is largely constructed, maintained, and transmitted to new generations and to adult newcomers, by non-verbal means: gestures, artefacts, rites, symbols inscribed onto the body both consciously – e.g. genital mutilation – and subconsciously; the underlying concepts are not so much absent but mostly remain implied; it requires local ‘sages’ (cf. Odera Oruka) to try and articulate them and to develop a (personal and idiosyncratic) discourse about them – such sages are by definition few and far between, and their pronouncements idiosyncratic.
2. *Reasons for non-verbality consciously associated with a social category, or consciously prompted by the specifics of time and place.* In much of Bantu-speaking Africa, children before formal initiation / maturity have no right to talk about sexuality in any form; before a king one cannot speak of death, nor greet or address him at night; one cannot call one’s spouse by the latter’s given name even though the latter is commonly, publicly known; some words cannot be said at night; some not by women; some not by members of a specific clan; etc. The ineffable is not only part of the local cosmological construction, it is also a product of the explicit local production and regulation of social categories, their interaction, and the rules and prohibitions governing such interaction. Early travellers, missionaries and administrators writing on local cultures outside the North Atlantic must have remained unaware of the verbal taboos involved, condescendingly and even racistically attributing the non-response they met with to the local people’s ignorance and impaired mental faculties.
3. *The comparatively exceptional verbality of the North Atlantic tradition, and a fortiori of its academic subculture, would make it anyway most likely that the central position which writing, the state, proto-science and organised relation have accorded to Western verbal expression for five millennia, has no counterparts in most of the societies anthropologists study.*
4. Above I have already briefly discussed *the ineffable as a result of cultural amnesia*, notably *via-à-vis* substrate cultural layers no longer consciously perceived by the participants (or actively censored out of overt expression in the light of socio-political pressures).
5. *Religious reasons:* the ineffable is commonly (perhaps globally and universally?) associated with epiphanies of the sacred, which tend to be heavily restricted, tabooed.³⁴
6. Finally it cannot be *a priori* ruled out – although the idea runs counter to anthropology’s standard conception of culture as (Tylor 1871) everything that is learned, retained and transmitted through conscious, overt, sensorily-based communicative learning mechanisms – that some cultural contents (primary bodily responses,

³⁴ Hence the important tradition of negative theology in Western thought, concentrating on what *cannot* be said about the godhead, with an early expression in pseudo-Dionysius (1910 / 5th-6th c. CE), and recently revived in post-structuralist philosophy (Derrida 1996, 2002; Bulhof & Ten Kate 1992; cf. van Binsbergen 2005b).

emotions, and what triggers them – cf. Devisch 1987; perhaps also basic models of relationships, and basic myths)³⁵ is programmed so deeply and so near-universally in humans, that it is in the most literal sense beyond the reach of the words of the participants' themselves, and thus also cannot be directly and reliably captured in ethnography.

If it is thus rather difficult to encounter and recognise the wisdom of our hosts in societies outside the North Atlantic region, could we say that that region, in engendering ethnography and its methods, has developed a methodologically underpinned strategy to solve at least some of the above problems of the limited articulation of wisdom? This is the question to which we now turn.

4.2. Ethnography as the art of articulating and transmitting the ineffable that manifests itself in the form of local self-evidence

In all three situations evoked above, Humiriyya, the Nkoya, and the Botswana *sangomas*, the ineffable in fieldwork manifested itself in the first place by the near-total absence of 'sub-titles': the local actors were scarcely structuring their society and reality in terms of explicit verbalisations, and I had the greatest difficulty (especially during my first fieldwork) to generate texts that seemed to fit their practice and experience and that were manifestly grounded in their own recorded verbal utterances.

I began to understand why, as already alluded to, in his analysis of ritual symbolism Vic Turner (doing research among the Ndemba Lunda, who are closely related, in culture and language, to the Nkoya) had to rely so much on his own introspection, on reading between the lines of... a non-existent text, and could hardly rely (as would have been sound ethnographic practice) on recorded utterances from his informants. Also the Louvain School, Belgium, mainly researching the Northern extensions of the Lunda complex of Central Africa, worked largely on the same principles, and the ethnographic method of 'speaking like a Yaka' (Devisch) – where a fieldworker would produce ethnographic pronouncements in the vernacular on the basis of the local linguistic and cultural knowledge gathered and internalised – much like a non-native speaker may teach the language he has acquired as an adult; by the Louvain School, such pronouncements have been considered not artefacts nor anathema (as many other anthropologists would consider them to be), but privileged self-evident knowledge.

Among the *sangomas* similar handicaps attended the fieldwork – even though by that time I

³⁵ Cf. van Binsbergen 2015a: 557n. Cultural drift – changes in culture due to chance fluctuations – is a commonly observed fact, and one that makes us suspicious if we encounter claims of cultural constancy over long stretches of space or time: thousands of miles, tens of thousands of years. Yet there is considerable evidence of very long-term cultural inertia in certain aspects of human culture, notably in the field of comparative mythology, of initiation rites, of material culture (lithic industries remaining virtually unchanged for dozens of millennia, etc.) and of modes of production (notably hunting and gathering). Seldom can we identify the precise social institutions and communicative procedures bringing about such massive continuity – but time-honoured, highly sanctioned and densely controlled central institutions such as puberty rites are likely to have served as repositories for cultural contents of very long standing (van Binsbergen 2011c). Such rites tend to have a secluded and secret character, therefore not only *transmitting* the ineffable but also *producing it in the first place*. Invoking, in addition, genetic factors to explain long-term cultural inertia (as Jung did – in a time and a discipline where the modern anthropological concept of culture had hardly penetrated yet) gives a biological twist to the ineffable, but probably without solid grounds.

had already graduated from being an ethnographer looking for data and desperately, publicly wielding his little notebook in formal interviews, to being an apprentice unobtrusively seeking spiritual enlightenment and spiritual techniques including four-tablet divination. There was never any explicit elaboration of the underlying principles of the ancestral cult, or of the fixed and named interpretations associated with each of the sixteen (2^4) basic divination configurations in which the four tablets (each differently marked on one site) could fall – the spiritual leader’s non-subtitled mere example was supposed to suffice. This model for knowledge transmission bewildered me, until in the course of my subsequent explorations into Asian proto-historic influences on Africa, and my short spells of actual fieldwork in South Asia and South-East Africa, I recognised that this was very much the model of the आश्रम *aśram* – one of the many jigsaw pieces of Asian-African continuities gradually falling into place, ill-prepared though I was for them as an Africanist. More recently I have even been able to identify the very considerable South Asian strands in Nkoya society, culture and occasionally even language, but I have only partially addressed (van Binsbergen 2017: ch. 10, pp. 361-412; and in press (a)) the question as to what such South Asian influence means for Nkoya wisdom.

The shadow – or should I say, the invitation? – of the ineffable hangs over the entire practice of ethnography, especially in the classic, extended-fieldwork-based form³⁶ which this form of intellectual production acquired from the 1930s on (at least in Europe; in the USA, the Boasian School reached this point somewhat earlier). As stated in my introduction to the present argument, anthropology is a verbal, textual practice, projected onto human phenomena which are often not, or scarcely, verbal or textual. A central tension derives from the contradiction between

1. the prolonged, day-to-day practice of *fieldwork as near-total social, cultural and linguistic immersion in a local community* (when the acquisition of discursive, cognitive and distancing insights in that local situation is constantly accompanied and guided by a process of social control: the fieldworker publicly displays emulations of local practices including speech acts which are noticeably approved or disapproved by the fieldwork hosts to the extent to which these emulations give signs of the fieldworker having absorbed and taking into account, or having ignored and rejected, the collective representations and tacit conventions which, in that community, produce the self-evident life-world in other words, constitute reality as the ineffable)

³⁶ The last three decades, under the influence of globalisation, the rise of Internet, reduced budgets for prolonged fieldwork, and lessening awareness of the severe limitations of approaching a local life-world in one of the world’s *linguae francae* (which, admittedly, have considerably gained in scope in that period – today one can somehow get by in English even in Indonesia, and France!), we have seen in many ways adulteration of the classic fieldwork model through a number of recent developments, including, *inter alia*, ‘multi-sited’ approaches, Internet searches, reliance on Big Data, commissioned applied research by unqualified researchers, lessening recognition of the local cultural and linguistic specifics of communities and the need to approach them, unobtrusively and humbly, on their own terms. Many European candidates today seeking a doctorate on the basis of their ethnographic fieldwork in distant places, have remained largely incompetent in the local language and the general culture of their host society. I suspect that the situation in the USA is not dramatically different. Needless to say how much I regret these developments – as someone who, in the course of nearly half a century, and at the cost of very considerable effort, medical risks, and existential commitment, has gained local cultural and linguistic competence in three or four local African settings, and has ventured into a handful of Asian research sites in a more limited manner. This, however, is not the place to engage in a critical discussion of this new mode of fieldwork. Suffice it to say that it is not only methodologically shallow, but also reinforces North Atlantic hegemony – as so much in globalisation.

2. the violent distancing from this day-to-day intercultural interaction, its patterns of obligation, reciprocity and identification, its displays of submission to locally publicly shared representations, values and beliefs, *in the process of the construction of ethnographic text* which is meant for academic circulation outside the host community, which is structured by conventions (including choice of language, conceptual apparatus, and stylistic register) totally alien to the host community, and in the first place conducive to career objectives and ulterior existential concerns likewise alien to the host community.

My childhood experiences had served to free me from excessive chauvinistic identification with the N.W. European society and languages in which I was reared; I was a published poet before I became a successful anthropologist; and it was thanks to the exhortations by my gifted and generous teachers of anthropology in the 1960s,³⁷ and the patience and loving understanding of my spouses and children as fieldwork companion, that I have generally tried to conduct my fieldwork in such a way as to let the locally ineffable seep in with maximum effect while in the field, and to salvage as much as possible from that ineffable content in my subsequent discursive, anthropological writing. When the conventions of academic ethnography initially seemed to thwart that intention, I have used poetry, short stories (notably *Zusters dochters*), a novel (e.g. *Een buik Openen*, on my North African fieldwork),³⁸ photography and more recently video,³⁹ as media. And failing all that, I have eagerly and wholeheartedly adopted locally available statuses and roles to internalise experience and to pay homage to the ineffable I was encountering in fieldwork. Thus I have been privileged to become (but only on one or two occasions)⁴⁰ a North African ecstatic *faqir* dancing to the honour of the deceased local saint Sidi Mħammad; a Zambian adopted royal; and a Botswana *sangoma* diviner-healer. And these identities – among other ones – I have kept up over the decades, as sources of anchorage, identification, and inspiration in the midst of my North Atlantic urban existence, and as sites of introspection-based ethnographic experiment and increasing understanding.

4.3. The cultural boundedness of truth, and its proliferation today

The collective representations that are being generated within a specific local context of language and culture, are in the most literal sense *world-creating*: they install the local self-evidences on the basis of which sense phenomena and human utterances become endowed with local meaning. They are therefore the criteria for the generation and the evaluation of truth. There is a cherished (though since the work of Gettier, somewhat dated and to be amended)⁴¹ definition of knowledge as *justified true belief*. And in our present context we may take the implied step to the extent that wisdom is eminent, sublime truth. Justification of

³⁷ Among whom I should mention, in the first place, Douwe Jongmans†, André Köbben, and Klaas van der Veen†. Cf. Jongmans & Gutkind 1967; Köbben 1965; Jongmans & van der Veen 1968.

³⁸ van Binsbergen 1984, 1988.

³⁹ See my personal channel at the video portal *YouTube*. My personal website <http://www.quest-journal.net/shikanda>, especially its weblog section <http://www.quest-journal.net/shikanda/topicalities/topicali.htm> contains hundreds of photographs from my various research locations.

⁴⁰ But in a non-specialist sense, I and my family have continued to routinely observe, like other local villages, the semi-annual cult of this saint for half a century.

⁴¹ Cf. Gettier 1963, and subsequent discussions, including: Conee 1988; Lehrer 1979; Moser 1993.

knowledge, and its assessment as being true, may take place on the basis of strictly formal criteria from logic and mathematics; or again on the basis of the unquestioned authority attributed to the person mediating the knowledge in question; yet in all cases, *real justification and truth must be locally acknowledged and felt to be justified*, in other words must be *culturally supported in terms of the local self-evidences*. Hence truth is inherently tied to local cultural domains, and in principle cannot simply be affirmed or verified outside the affirmer's or verifier's own truth domain, *i.e.* outside the latter's culture and language.

From a viewpoint of interculturality this is a most depressing thought. The idea of one global truth for all of humankind is evidently naïve, and has been, for millennia now, a source of much conflict and violence. Eminently typical especially of our contemporary, globalised world is the fragmentation of myriad truth domains (*'truth enclaves'*, we might call them), and the increasingly complex, intolerant and violent struggle between their respective representatives, who tend to be driven by a nostalgic, essentialist assumption of one, all-embracing, all-overriding truth. While we may easily identify incomplete globalisation (the shattering of local cultural horizons and of the microcosms contained within them – yet failure, as yet, to arrive at an integrated world culture) as the cause of such fragmentation, the relativism that, since the middle of the 20th century, has been anthropology's main contribution to this debate is not a convincing way out. For whatever the promises of relativism as a theoretical tool, *at the level of the thinker's and actor's existence the inevitable self-evidences she or he lives by in a more or less coherent and meaningful world, are inevitable surrounded by a halo of utter and non-negotiable truth – of relativism-defeating self-evidence*. By the same token, even the formal criteria such as logic and mathematics are peculiar to specific truth enclaves only (notably those of North Atlantic / global specialist academic life), and need not be considered universal.⁴²

The challenge of wisdom-seeking approaches in our time and age is therefore to

1. both affirm the local truth of the self-evidences constituting local cultural domains, and
2. to find a way to negotiate these local truths into a wider context, where they simply cannot be the whole truth and nothing but the truth, yet may be allowed to contribute their modicum of fragmentary truth to the knowledge heritage of humankind as a whole.

I was educated, half a century ago, as a specialist in the anthropology of religion, which then was dominated by Durkheim's work. Here the solution was very simple – so simple as to be

⁴² In my oral presentation at Pittsburgh, 2015, I gave at this point the example of vainly trying to substantiate Einstein's Special and General Theories of Relativity (1905 / 1917) among the Nkoya, arguing that that theory could not possibly be made into 'justified true belief' in Nkoya language and culture, on the simple grounds that the conditions for justification (the specialised physics concepts of mass, velocity, time; and the particular mathematical procedures employed to compellingly relate these and other concepts) were absent there or (even if present in the minds of some Nkoya secondary school or university graduates) at least had not the least compelling validity in Nkoya society at large. By the Pittsburgh audience of philologists and anthropologists (with no philosopher, mathematician or physicist present, let alone any other African) my point was readily misunderstood as denouncing the Nkoya's logical capabilities, as an hegemonic and ethnocentric statement. But such a reproach was unjustified for I meant the very opposite: Einstein is made true on the basis of truth criteria which are justified in North Atlantic / global academic natural-science sub-culture, but they are not justified, not even justifiable, not even meaningful, in Nkoya culture. Einstein is implicitly assumed to be universally applicable, but that in itself is a largely unwarranted hegemonic claim, largely (but not entirely; *cf.* Harding 1997; van Binsbergen 2007b / 2015a) reflecting the North Atlantic region's dominance in the modern world.

both hegemonic, and impotent. All religion was supposed to be a figment of the imagination, its truth claims were (half a century after Feuerbach's – 1841 / 1945 – deconstruction of Christian religion, and a few decades after Nietzsche proclaiming the death of God – 1973 / 1882) only to be dismissed, and instead we were facing an interesting charade of *the social* imposing its authority *through man-made but divinised symbols*. Much of my work in the anthropology of religion (*cf.* van Binsbergen 2017) followed Durkheim's inspiration but was increasingly intended to expose the dismissive hegemonic claims accrued to it, and to formulate an alternative. In fieldwork I had come into contact – repeatedly, intensely and in a handful of cultural and linguistic settings rather different from one another – with local religiously-generated truths, that I allowed to spill over, eclectically and situationally, into the many non-scientific, non-academic aspects of my life, – even if these truths turned out to work havoc, initially had a bewildering effect on my marriage, risked to destroy my colleague's respect for me, and were militating against each other. I felt⁴³ that supporting these truths was in the last analysis nothing but remaining faithful to the field hosts' expectations of sociability and reciprocity engendered and utilised in my fieldwork. Religion, then, is not so much about cosmological and metaphysical truths, but about local groups constituting themselves through basically arbitrary symbols, and offering their members the protection and self-esteem of belonging (this is still very much Durkheim). Denouncing these truths would be only too easy, but it would require excessive reliance on one truth enclave (that of North Atlantic / Aristotelian binary logic, global natural science), and thus would separate us from the majority of humankind; and at the same time, such denouncing would amount to social distancing ourselves from those holding these truths – and, if these were truths acquired in classic anthropological fieldwork, would amount to betrayal of the expectations and practices of sociability via which these truths were transmitted, and acquired by the fieldworker, in the first place. On the other hand, affirming these truths would put one at the charmed level of the simple believer – and would at the same time risk to amount to academic and intellectual suicide.

I have landed with the view that a wisdom approach can offer a way out of these tantalising dilemmas, which, beyond the academic ivory tower, dominate our time and age in that they inform the very real and increasingly violent struggles on the ground between the North Atlantic cultural, intellectual, economic and military status quo, and their defiance by militant Islamism and other forms of fundamentalism (including the belief in Intelligent Design, Creationism, the Market, racism, etc.). The way out seems to be this:

- instead of the common-sense conception of binary logic which – built around the principle of the *excluded third*, in other words, 'you cannot have your cake and eat it' – has dominated Western thinking about truth ever since Aristotle,
- we need a different (more kaleidoscopic, situational and oscillating) conception of truth, and a different ontology – a different conception of how reality is constituted and how we may situate ourselves in reality.

It is considered absurd to leave open the possibility that existence, in other words Being, does not exclude the possibility of not-Being.⁴⁴ Still both ontological modes appear as complem-

⁴³ By an intuitive application of what I later, as a philosopher, encountered as the 'principle of charity' (Lepore 1993): 'if this is what other people think and do, who am I to reject these thought and actions?'

⁴⁴ By definition, the principle of the excluded third state: *where P, there not not-P*. Where A is alive, there A is not dead. One of the most frequently cited thought experiments in quantum mechanics (recently called into

entary in many cosmogonies – while the oscillation between invisible beings (‘non-being’ or ‘not-yet-being’) to which tangible effects are yet attributed (‘being’) is at the heart of all religious imagination and practice, and of all cosmogony.

Part of the promise of wisdom as a focus is that *truth enclaves* may, after all, turn out not be totally local and disparate, but that a form of relevance may be found across several such enclaves. This certainly smacks of New Age, and would not sit well in an academic environment. Yet, if we could spell out the conditions under which the truth of one truth enclave could be received and admitted to be somewhat relevant in another truth enclave, it would mean that we would have found truth that does not just apply to one language and one culture, but that (after selection and transformation) may be shared by larger sections of humankind, perhaps by humankind as a whole. A solution on this point would also take us beyond the facile relativism that is anthropology’s principal stock-in-trade: for some local truth will turn out to be capable of generalisation, even universalisation. But here again, there would be a constant oscillation, in my experience at least, between two extreme conditions

- a. truth that can be subjectively recognised and affirmed, and
- b. the same truth subjectively evaporating into untruth.

The dilemma of wisdom is that we typically find such truths *outside* what which is culturally and linguistically familiar to us from childhood; so that they are almost inherently condemned to be non-truth, too, at the same time.

But does this not explode the kind of truth that is being generated by supposedly universal, rational and objective, *science*? Such scientific truth is very much based on complex applications of chains of binary logic, and this epistemic foundation seems to guarantee that what is true in one part of the world and one period, is still true in others. Here the impossibility of substantiating Einstein in Nkoya remains pertinent. Yet the airplane based on sound principles of aerodynamics and engineering, does not just fly properly over the part of the world where modern natural science is accepted and dominant, but continues to do so also over other parts of the world, where the global / North Atlantic natural sciences are less known and less accepted. There is a big problem here to be considered. Is science just another truth enclave, from a cultural-relativist perspective at a par with the others – with African systems of magic and divination, with Indian *Tantra*, with a Native American spirit quest? Is it, to use Sandra Harding’s (1997; cf. van Binsbergen 2007b / 2015a) provocative (and ultimately though reluctantly rejected, by herself) expression, just *an ethnoscience*? Or can it, contrary to these local truths enclaves, lay truth claims that are more comprehensive, – that are, in fact, universal? and that are *free* from the otherwise so common oscillation to and fro between truth and non-truth? Is the discovery of such generalisable, meta-cultural wise truths not the real goal of science, beyond its present North Atlantic ethnocentric complacency?

question, though) however is that of Schrödinger’s Cat, where the state of a cat locked in a box whose unlocking releases gas instantly lethal to the cat, remains undetermined between living or dead, until the box is actually opened (Schrödinger 1967; Gribbin 1984). Another major source of inspiration away from binary logic would be poststructuralist philosophy, where Derrida’s claim (also with reminiscences of Marxian dialectics) that everything carries inside itself its own opposite or negation, appears to revive some of humankind’s oldest forms of reasoning. An semantic exploration of the *Borean lexicon (a language reconstruct supposed to have been spoken in Central to East Asia in the Upper Palaeolithic) brings out its frequent reliance on what I have called (van Binsbergen 2012; van Binsbergen & Woudhuizen 2011) ‘range semantics’ – where the meaning of a lexical item consists of the entire range from A to A’s opposite, e.g. the same word being used for both ‘white’ and ‘black’, ‘wet’ and ‘dry’, ‘light’ and ‘dark’, ‘vulva’ and ‘penis’, etc.

Most scientists have no time (nor the epistemological background) to grapple with this kind of questions. They would simply assume unrivalled universality for what they produce as science – unhindered by the high probability that their science of today will be the superstition or pseudoscience of tomorrow. Let us not forget that once, four thousand years ago, in Ancient Mesopotamia, extispicy (‘divination by reading a sheep’s liver’) and astrology (making predictions on the basis of the apparent positions of celestial bodies as seen in heaven) constituted the first proto-sciences – yet today (although astrology was taught in the West at university level well into the Enlightenment, *i.e.* the 18th c. CE) these two sciences are no longer recognised as being scientific, and are widely held to be pseudo-sciences (Popper 1959 / 1935). Modern science, and most epistemologists, are satisfied that natural laws apply invariably, universally and timelessly (in the sense that they are considered not to evolve or change, not even over gigantic stretches of time such as the 14 billion years estimated to be the age of our present universe), and as a result miracles cannot exist. Yet most defendants of science (especially its many popular, journalistic, and lay defendants) fail to take into account that the edges of the thinkable and of the scientifically permissible have been stretched immensely with the revolution in physics through relativity theory and quantum mechanics, a century ago, to such an extent that precognition and prediction now seem to have acquired (notably in the field of *non-locality*)⁴⁵ a scientific basis still inconceivable in the totally deterministic universe of the late 19th century CE. And, beyond such a theoretical basis *within* science, it is possible (at least *thinkable*) that natural laws are temporarily suspended – that also scientific truths can occasionally be seen to apply selectively and kaleidoscopically, and to occasionally oscillate towards being non-truths; or that natural laws do differ depending on the specific of space and time, and do evolve.

And let us consider the following statements as truth claims:

- dead ancestors may actively and significantly intervene in the world of their still living descendants – a truth shared in many parts of the world including sub-Saharan Africa and China, but rejected in the North Atlantic especially among the educated classes), or
- telepathy, telekinesis and precognition exist to such an extent that it can be firmly demonstrated in the world of the senses (a widespread claim wherever divination is being practiced by ritual specialists).

Is it possible that these two statements are actually and literally true, although only within the truth enclaves where such claims are taken for granted, and with a kind of truth that *cannot* intactly, *i.e. as truth*, cross cultural and linguistic boundaries to a truth enclave of non-believers on this points? My extensive experiences and practice as a *sangoma*, from 1990 onward, have suggested to me (*cf.* van Binsbergen, 2007a, and in preparation) the following tentative answers (which admittedly raise more questions than they can answer!):

⁴⁵ In present-day thought, the concept of *non-locality* is used in two largely unrelated ways: (a) as the dissolution – under conditions of globalisation – of locality as a central principle of social organisation; *cf.* Appadurai 1995; (b) as the theoretical implication of quantum mechanics (notably, the implication that renders veridical divination scientifically possible; *cf.* van Binsbergen 2013, 2015: ch. 15, pp. 505-518) to the effect that any object in the universe has an impact on any other object, instantaneous and unmitigated by physical distance; *cf.* Einstein *et al.* 1931, 1935; Bell 1964; Walker 1977; Bohm & Hiley 1993; Aerts 1985; Nortmann 2008: 160 *f.*. For the bold-hearted, non-locality is simply another word for... God. This is not merely flippant, but also yet another example how the wisdom discourse in some truth enclaves, may well correspond, even coincide, with for instance scientific discourse in other truth enclaves. – a pet New Age idea, e.g. Capra 1978 / 1975; Zukav 1979.

ancestors do not in the least exist in the sense of autonomous entities capable of intervening in tangible reality; but once a kin group has conceived that they do, and once the group engages in the cult of such ancestors (notably under ritual leadership by a priest, diviner, sangoma, shaman, etc.), the ancestors' initial and essential virtuality⁴⁶ may oscillate, transform, into a real and tangible presence and power, which can then temporarily and situationally manifest itself in the empirical world.

So I propose that a possible way out of the plurality and mutual incompatibility of truth enclaves is the assumption of the kaleidoscopic flipflop nature of reality. *Now you see them now you don't* (a common expression in Bantu languages for the 'Little People', whose existence many – but certainly not all, not e.g. on the British Isles – inhabitants of the North Atlantic region would deny). According to my difficult and drastic proposal: even statements that are held to be true, proven to be true ('Socrates is mortal') yet may be untrue under certain circumstances ('Yet Socrates' name is still on everybody's lips 2400 years after his alleged death...'). Again: under what conditions can the truth claims of one specific truth enclave, be true outside that enclave? Both always, and never. From here it is only a small step to considering the nature of symbols: sometimes they unmistakable do refer to and are determined by the referent they signify, but sometimes they are effectively independent from the referent and take on a life of their own. By the same token, beliefs may often appear to be merely erroneous and fantastic, but yet sometimes they may reshape reality in such a way as to make these beliefs have a tangible effect on reality – for instance, when ancestors appear to be offering the paranormal information that makes veridical divination possible.

The last paragraph could pass as an example of whatever has remained ineffable in modern global scientific discourse – as forbidden scholarship⁴⁷ to end all scholarship. It sounds, admittedly, as the ravings of a lunatic, yet at the same time it may begin to account for subjective experience of billions of people in many parts of the world and during many periods. The creative, generative principle implicitly invoked here⁴⁸ would be the human mind, and the whole proposition again sourly smacks of New Age. Yet we may be tempted to think that, since as self-reflective humans we constitute one of the instances (so far: the only instance documented) in which the universe has become conscious of itself, it would not be unthinkable that the human mind, on our apparently insignificant and far from unique planet, may yet serve to funnel through, to mediate, the inconceivably immense creative and productive of the universe (of God?), and thus may be a catalyst in sometimes achieving what we would not give credit for to humans out of their own limited capabilities.

Though this be madness, yet there is method in 't.... (Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, II, 2)

⁴⁶ On the pivotal concept of virtuality, cf. van Binsbergen 1997 / 2015, 1998.

⁴⁷ An oblique reference to Cremo & Thompson's *Forbidden Archaeology* (1993), arguing (on the basis of the Hindu cosmology of repetitive aeons) the presence of apparently man-made artefacts in terrestrial geological contexts predating the accepted appearance of humans by many millions, even several billions, of years. My book in progress *Sangoma Science* is, *inter alia*, an attempt to deal with such impossible claims as Cremo & Thompson's, or Edith Turner's (1993) as to 'the reality of spirits'. A trained nurse, and more recently the charismatic major force behind the journal *Anthropology of Consciousness*, Mrs Turner is the life's companion, co-fieldworker, co-author, and widow, of the leading 20th-c. anthropologist of religion Victor Turner.

⁴⁸ As a paroxysm of idealism: the claim that the mind creates the world in the most literal sense.

4.4. Becoming a spokesperson for (apparently) peripheral wisdoms

Already many years before thinking all this through to the (admittedly still shaky, far from conclusive) point summarised just now, and before articulating it in terms of a comparative wisdom discourse, I have made it a priority in my scholarly and literary work to seek to mediate, to a worldwide audience, the local wisdoms I have been privileged to encounter in fieldwork; mediating them, while admitting some of the attending theoretical, methodological and political difficulties. This I have sought to do, in the first place through ethnographic and intercultural-philosophical texts, but also through pictures, moving images, literary prose and poetry, and especially by repeatedly presenting myself as someone who, although a fairly successful North Atlantic scholar, yet embraces these wisdoms and considers them worthy of global circulation and appropriation. I have considered this an important stance in the global politics of knowledge:

- affirming forms of knowledge that, given the hegemonic and sometimes even racist (Harding 1993) tendencies of North Atlantic knowledge formation over the past few centuries, have tended to be pushed to the periphery, discarded even, by main-stream global scholarship, as figments of the imagination, as mere ideology, as the *poor man's* thought of peripheral populations and peripheral continents
- experimenting with, and, affirming, the extent to which such peripheral knowledges are capable of being formulated in a globally understandable form, and thus are capable of contributing to the sum total of valuable human knowledge
- affirming the extent to which knowledges that have been considered local and peripheral, on closer scrutiny may turn out to be part of a widespread, even worldwide complex – so if we are most familiar with the European or North Atlantic manifestations of that complex, that does not mean that it is there that these knowledges originate in the first place.

A standard example would be geomantic divination, which (with the probable exception of Oceania) has a practically global distribution today, and which despite having been an important format of divination in Western and Southern Europe since medieval times, yet clearly was not of European but of West and East Asian, perhaps also African origin (van Binsbergen 2012; 2017: ch. 9, pp. 329-360). But it would not be the only example. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are cases in point – emerging outside Europe, even though they have grown into major European / North Atlantic expressions in recent centuries. And I have suggested (van Binsbergen 2003, 2015a: ch. 15, and in preparation) that my African colleagues, fellow-*sangomas*, have discovered already centuries ago strands of the kind of non-locality effects that have only very recently been formulated in North Atlantic natural science.

- to free the peripheral knowledges of Africans, Asians, inhabitants of the New World, and of Oceania, from the unjustified burden of historic irrelevance, and to affirm their place among the uniquely valuable knowledge traditions of humankind

This stance has granted me considerable recognition and esteem among my African colleagues and African intellectuals at large – while the expected punishment and ostracism on the part of my North Atlantic colleagues has been relatively moderate, although certainly

not negligible.⁴⁹

Yet fundamental questions remain here. Can one transmit wisdom and at the same time retain it as a personal resource? Can wisdom at all be transmitted across cultural boundaries? Does not the format of language-based representation kill wisdom? The purpose of gatherings like the 2015 Pittsburgh one, and of the present collection, would be defeated if the answer is ‘no’. Perhaps wisdom is not so much about contents, but about oscillating strategies of transmission and selective representation / acceptance / challenge; and not about the art of writing, but of listening attentively.⁵⁰

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⁴⁹ Thus, the first account of my own ‘becoming a *sangoma*’ (van Binsbergen 1991; *cf.* 1990a / 2017 for a less egocentric account of the same urban religious setting) was publicly ridiculed and dismissed in front of my long-standing colleagues in Africanist religious anthropology, by the then convener of the annual Satterthwaite Colloquium on African Religion and Ritual, 1991; however, in the very same session it was co-opted for publication in the authoritative *Journal of Religion in Africa*. A similarly negative experience, after I had much input at two preparatory conferences at Brussels (*cf.* Decouter *et al.* 2000), was my fate when I was excluded from a book on comprehensive approaches in science and scholarship, subsequently published by Aerts *c.s.* 2005. Also within my home institution (the African Studies Centre, Leiden, the Netherlands, with which I have been associated since 1977, holding positions of leadership 1980-2002) three of the last five years before my retirement were marred by similar exclusion, although this situation was subsequently redressed and I was made a life Honorary Fellow instead. On the other hand, my explorations into *sangomahood* and my continuing active practice as an African diviner have also gained much praise, e.g. Devisch 2008; Osha 2005, 2011-2013; Mosima 2016.

⁵⁰ In the last pages, and perhaps throughout my argument, there is a play on several meanings of wisdom that ultimately should be told apart:

- wisdom as a quality of persons and explicitly formulated by the local participants as a local cultural ideal
- wisdom as a quality of persons but only imputed, not explicitly formulated by the local participants as a local cultural ideal
- wisdom as a universal category to which North Atlantic scholars contemplating cultural manifestations of wisdom do themselves consciously aspire
- wisdom as a quality attributed, by external analysts such as the participants in this workshop, to social and cultural arrangements
- otherwise.

However, at this point I shun from taking my explorations any further.

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