

CIVILISATION AND THE UNITY of AFRICA

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In this paper I will take up an aspect of Wim Van Binsbergen's development of the Black Athena thesis on the 'Unity of Africa' and in my presentation at the conference I will also consider some of the archaeological evidence relating to and supporting a modified version of his 'Palasgian' thesis.

The historical experience of Euro-Mediterranean 'empires' did much to encourage thought on the ideal unity of empire and civilisation even though paradoxically it rarely occurred and even then was claimed by both political units and the papal empire of Western Christendom. The heritage of the Roman Empire remains a Western nostalgia that attempts to re-achieve unity (e.g. the ideal unity of imperium and terra orbis) which the Holy Roman Empire; the time of Napoleon and the idea of a thousand years of Hitler's Third Reich have done little to dispel either as threat or aspiration. The concept of Empire, based on the writings of the European experience, emphasises unity as achieved ideologically through the imposition of some kind of universality even though the reality of the form they took was adapted to the historical forces that dragged them into ever increasing differentiation. Max Weber's ordering of political order around the concept of sovereignty remains an essential issue for recognising different philosophical notions of empire as a community of shared universality (e.g. after the conquests of Alexander the Great, the Stoic philosophers argued that Greek civilisation had a single mission, to create a shared *oikoumene* characterised by universal reason or it was believed in the Roman Empire that conquest would lead to the union of all civilised peoples witnessed in the standard architecture of the forum in all Roman colonial cities symbolising the peace, order and justice promised to all citizens (Folz 1969). By idealising the achievement of universality it was assumed that the fusing of empire with civilisation could be achieved.

As is well known Chinese modernisation began during an age of empire when the opaque and complex relations that emerged were a product of internal developments and external forces. Quite different sorts of splits emerged in contrast to the European idealisations of Empire and Civilisation. Instead long term continuities of 'civilisation' espoused issues of continuity in contrast to absorption of more disruptive and externalising ideas of change. Some would say this has now reached its end and the cessation of the *longue duree* of Chinese civilisation meets a new and distinctive form of Chinese modernity (e.g. Wang Hui). Others, I am sure, would argue that unique forms of Chinese universality (Confucian philosophy; sage rule etc) retain their salience in transformed states. All of which may be undeniably the case but in this paper I want to use the test case of Africa to argue that here Western debates of Empire and Civilisation and its *longue duree* have been positively harmful and need to be set aside; yet the influence this has had on developing a consciousness of Africa as unity (particularly outside 'Africa') is undeniable and of considerable importance.

There is a perception that if Africa has a distinctive civilisation or universality then it exists without a history of empire formation or the ideal fusion of *imperium* and *orbis terrarum*. Archaeologists, concerned with the development of 'complex societies', have been most explicit about this in describing a pre-colonial Africa as 'non-complex'!. Taking up an argument made by Carole Crumley who questioned whether hierarchy was a necessary feature of densely populated, urban settlements (in Early Iron Age Europe), the Macintoshes excavating at Djenné-Jeno in Mali, a major medieval trans-Saharan trading city in the Niger delta, described the 'Empire of Mali' as heterarchical rather than hierarchical i.e. a system 'where each element in a social system is either unranked relative to other elements or possess the potential for being ranked in a number of different ways' (cf Stahl 2005 :335). The consideration that economic complexity may not be linked to political or religious hierarchies to have true 'complex societies' means that large population aggregates such as found in the 'Empire of Mali' had no detectable centre; settlement was a wide spread of coeval units of similar form, with evidence of increasing scale and of economic specialisation and a lack of obvious stratification or hierarchy. Dumont , writing on caste hierarchy in India, would not find this surprising and for that matter it rings a lot of bells when you consider K.C.Chang's and others description of coeval settlement in Early Bronze Age Shang China although centralisation of power was to become the dominant feature of their political landscapes for later periods (cf von Falkenhausen). Africa, by comparison, is an

enigma; a continent without a history of empire formation (except for the perhaps misnamed earlier cited example from Medieval Mali influenced by the Trans Saharan trade) and a civilisation lacking overall political centralisation and vertical forms of transcendence. If so, then not only may it be the necessary contrasting case to the universal argument derived from Europe but it may also help us create another theoretical language for understanding large spreads of apparent cultural similarity.

I do not believe understanding the presence of a civilisation without empire is helped any further by following Crumley's concept of heterarchy which, it seems to me, is simply an inversion of the hierarchy principle without questioning the basic assumptions on which both are based. These I take to be the political science language of shared sovereignty and universality but which ignores their fusion or coequality. We find similar problems with the classic political anthropology texts on stateless societies in Africa. The issue of social order without political centralisation fascinated earlier British Social Anthropologists and their concern with African stateless societies and ritual kingship (e.g. Middleton and Taut). Max Gluckman for example wrote on Custom and Conflict as modes of conflict resolution without centralised state apparatuses. Also Vic Turner writing on cults of affliction, denied the importance in African religions of the Christian separation of transcendence and immanence, arguing instead that direct access to the invisible world s of spirits and ancestors was the important everyday matter. The appeal of society without the state is a more widespread principle and full of romantic ideals that we do not need to go into here (eg Clastres) but still these writers were all arguing for the recognition that some kind of cultural unity can exist without political centralisation. So what is it that makes Africa so different or is it really so ?.

Africa: A limiting case of hierarchy ?

To begin this discussion I want to take up the idea how or whether you can have a sense of a cultural unity that precedes and in a sense, is a pre-requisite for what might emerge at some point in time as an 'empire' or a form of political centralisation . After all we can have no naïve illusions that 'empires' are only a kind of pre-modern social totality and have no future in Africa.

I need to begin with a discussion of what might constitute cultural unity as a form of ontological totality . In a recent discussion of African religions , both Wim Van Binsbergen and Stephen Ellis / Gerte Haar distinguish between visible and the invisible realms as distinct space-times set apart in African religions rather than ordered hierarchically (as for example the Christian ethos of transcendent and mundane worlds or in the way described by Eisenstadt for axial age civilizations . They argue that the spiritual or invisible world precedes the material in time ie spirits are future and will be in front of you in time. The spirit world also has no spatial constraints ie spirits can travel anywhere and be there instantaneously. But the visible and the invisible worlds also overlap , and where they do, there are gateways where kinds of heterotopias form that are materialised as spirit possession, or objectified in spirit shrines or Pentecostal churches. Materialising worlds is therefore a process of creating a space-time of the event – when time is cut into segments and space is divided into localities. Peter Worsley once described ritual as only capable of operating on the border between visible and invisible worlds (Worsley 1970:304) to which we might add that ritual establishes efficacy precisely through its role in materializing the invisible in the visible world. Using Badiou,() this materializing of identities is not only principally ritual in form but also as an event, does so through the spatialising act of segmenting and localizing the flux of temporalities as events. In fact this is the problem with most philosophies of time , the lack of recognition that time is basically invisible and the event is act of materializing it as form that makes it accessible and comprehensible.

But clearly it can do so in a number of different ways. I would draw upon the contrast between transcendence and immanence as a useful typology in the way different temporal perspectives are materialized in form Here I find the immanentist perspective of Viveiro de Castro's model useful For him the exchange of perspectives between different kinds of being are symmetrical or horizontal in time (cf Holbraad and Willersley :330) ; all beings whether human or non-human in the naturalist sense , can transform into each other because all beings are constituted by their capacity to become something else. Whether shamanic, totemic or other forms of immanentist being, humans and non humans interact precisely by their shared capacity to become the other. By contrast Holbraad and Willersley suggest , on the basis of inner Asian ethnographies, beings can become other not because they already are 'other' in some shared sense of common

character but because the perspective they occupy 'in a crucial sense remain other to them' – "they are constituted as what we call 'transcendent perspectives' (h and w : 331).

If we argue, counter to Viveiros de Castro's immanentist perspective, that hierarchical or asymmetrical relationships between beings are created precisely by what they don't share, (i.e. this is how as beings they render their perspectives as transcendent to one another) then how does their isolation from each other become resolved? H and W solution to this problem is to 'redefine each in terms of the other by rendering them mutually constitutive' (: 333). Transcendence as a perspective, is defined by the capacity to define each perspective as constituted within a totality i.e. a perspective is constituted in relation to 'all possible perspectives' – what they term 'the view from everywhere' transcending the 'view from somewhere' (335). What is 'seen' is therefore always a limited aspect of this totality ;why no-one ever sees souls or spirits since they are transcendental abstractions defined as having knowledge of the totality of all viewpoints which cannot be 'seen'. Materialising or actualizing the totality is a matter of recognizing the limitations or partiality of a material or seeable perspective, even more so when the capacity to even do this, for example in ritual, is appropriated by others.

I find this discussion immensely helpful in getting us beyond the axial age kinds of discussion of transcendence and the mundane rooted in contextualizing kinds of argument. The debt is recognizably to Merleau Ponty's writings on visible and invisible seeing – in particular his concept of *chiasm* – i.e. there always exists the hidden side, removed from view but we can be certain not only it is there but also that it can be made accessible, tangible or viewable by the right person or the right means (MP 2002(1949):79). What M-P envisaged as the 'normative ideal' and what Viveiros de Castro describes as the grounding or origin of perspectivism in mythical past, is the ideal of a 'view from everywhere' laid bare in absolute transparency ; an ideal that actually can never be seen and thought of or mediated except in the concept of the presence of an invisible soul or spirit.

If beings never materialize themselves in this ideal form then appropriating the best position or creating a hierarchy of differences in perspective will depend on their closeness to achieving this ideal 'view from everywhere'.

Civilisations and Human being-in –the – worlds

Where does this take us in understanding Africa as a civilization without transcendence ? - A more elaborate version of the overlapping of the visible and the invisible worlds is described by the anthropologist Philippe Descola as four groups of humans ontology based on different forms of immanence viz:

Animist :where animals, plants, spirits,and certain objects are treated as humans and vice versa , as intentional agents that can have a soul - act like humans – have dwellings ;broadly the Amazonianist position of Viveiro da Castro. .

Naturalist: Naturalism – dominating in the West – is the reverse of animism – only humans are thought to possess an interior ‘soul’ or being – a human spirit with an intentionality and a rationality that separates them from the non-human and makes the latter passive and inert.

Totemic – where groups of distinct human and non-human share similarities i.e. shared identification of the visible and the invisible and can transform into each other.

Analogistic : composites or hybrid images of persons and things whether human or non human –when each are believed to inhabit discrete worlds and be singular in essence but where formal analogues are drawn between them and hybrids formed from their composites

I think it is the latter that has a great deal to say about African conceptions of the distinction between human/non-human and the interaction of visible – invisible worlds. In the sense of the achievement of Merleau-Ponty’s

‘normative ideal’ –a ‘view from everywhere’ – distinctions between humans, ancestors and spirit worlds are drawn as inhabiting separate worlds and yet they combine to create composite or hybrid forms as partial forms of materialisations of the totality of an invisible world.

West Central Africa as a civilisation ?

So far I have argued that ‘civilisation’ can be understood as the materialisation or objectification of a shared if invisible ontological totality . As such it may well be realised in a number of different settings, each of which define themselves in difference ; the point being that they do so precisely because they are shared variants of the same totality. This is what I take Mauss to be trying to get at in his well-known phrase that : “The form of a civilisation is the sum of the specific aspects taken by the ideas, practices and products which are more or less common to a number of given societies.” (Mauss 2006:63).

A ‘civilisational spread’ must therefore have some presence of shared characteristics that are perceived as constituting a number of discrete societies by their inhabitants. We find such a case of difference constituted in similarity through a large area of the forest cultures of West and Central Africa extending from Nigeria to Malawi.as a widespread description of presence of cults forming a materialization of invisible powers (cf McGaffey ;Turner : Jantzen ; Vansina).The idea of the area sharing a common cosmology goes back to Herskovits and even earlier more speculative variations of culture areas or provinces (*Kultukreise, Kulturprovinzen*)¹ which scholars wanted to find cultural units to understand more widespread common cultural features to explain general questions of human cultural evolution and diffusion. Mauss general conception of ‘civilisation’ as a ‘spread of cultural unity’ preceding in time and encompassing the formation of several ‘linked social forms was a more sociologised version of this argument (Mauss 1929/).

After the abandonment of such questions as mere speculation, they have rarely been taken up again. Some of the scholars who have tried to do this on

the basis of archival and field research are Jan Vansina, Wyatt MacGaffey and John M. Jantzen. They demonstrated that Bantu forest cultures share a cosmology which is defined by ritual cults which are common to this larger area and share use of shrines, drums, or masks as efficacious means of materialization of troubling experiences. Jantzen and MacGaffey concentrated on the cult's aspect of healing. Jantzen (1994), after Turner (1952), calls them cults of affliction, and MacGaffey (1980: 301-328, 2000: 13-24) is concerned with cults balancing the impact of witchcraft and killing with cults which are about healing and reconciliation.

This cosmology which is widespread in the forest areas of West and Central Africa has in common the means of mediating with spirits and things from an invisible world (variously attributed to the Wild bush or forest, to Europeans involved in slave trade, to colonial powers and now modern diasporas) and transform them into new and powerful instruments. Fritz Kramer followed this approach to understand the African interpretation of "wilderness" is made from both within and outside their own society. (Kramer). According to him, Africans interpret the arrival of strangers, colonial powers , capitalism and modern worlds , by identifying them with new cults and appropriating their powers mimetically in their masquerade plays in the forest areas and through spirit possession cults in the savannah areas of west and central Africa.

But to answer how they do this – is helped by the suggestive inferences of Descola's description of analogistic ontologies. The classic example of the analogistic ontology is the chimera , a being composed of different attributes belonging to different animal species but presenting a certain anatomical coherence. The chimera is a hybrid made of different elements borrowed from different sources but in their recombination, we envisage a force or a divinity with each element or component clearly identifiable in terms of origin and their contribution to the whole.

The cults I have been describing are chimeric in the sense that they represent human – animal or ‘wild’ /bush-forest hybrids - the reason being that they represent a fusion between ancestors and spirits . In the past certainly – and to some extent now – not all people who die – become ancestors. Not necessarily because of accusations of witchcraft or ‘bad deaths; but through exclusion from the funerary rites that finally achieve ancestral status and recognition by a successor. We deal here with the way ancestral spirits successfully move to dwellings in the forest or wild equivalents – where they meet and join with spirits . The living descendants see the ancestors as having combined with spirits and then being capable of bringing them back to the village – the living – to the benefit of the latter. This may take the form of physical masquerades and visitations in the night – heard rather than seen – by music played and noise in general - but also by possession by spirits of the living – as described by Michael Lambek – Janet Boddy and others.

Civilising Modernity

In Descola’s ontological terms, what I have described so far is analogistic – ie the mediation between visible and invisible worlds does not take animistic or shamanic forms of mediation involving ideas of shared substances or the physical transformation of human into non-human form and vice versa. Rather composites or hybrid animal-human or autotichonous /stranger hybrids are made from discrete and yet complementary elements from the visible and invisible worlds. So ancestors are spirits but clearly different from those of the forest or the wild. It is the power of ancestors to attach themselves to and domesticate invisible spirits and bring them back to the visible world of their living descendants . But the qualities this gives to fused ancestor-spirit chimeras is that they can exist out of time and out of space (a point made by Stephen Ellis and Gert le Haar 2007) . The fact that they can appear almost spontaneously in the future and in distant places, make ancestors particularly powerful beneficers for the living , able to perform in ways that living descendants acting as divine kings or ‘big men’ can only mediate to others.

Mediation works by maintaining strict boundaries between the visible and the invisible worlds . In pidgin French , there is a word ‘blindage’ which is used to describe the armature that a powerful person , for example a politician, a businessman, an elder, or chief/divine king will build around

themselves to protect them from the ambivalent powers of invisible worlds. 'Blindage' as an objectified armature may take the form of things, shrines, palaces, museums, a sacred forest or any display of powerful objects. Whatever the materialized form, they share a common theme in making a world visible both as a boundary to the invisible but as a means of penetrating it and bringing elements of it to the practical help and benefit of inhabitants of the visible. Health, illness, protection are therefore not a product of maintaining a sterile exclusionary boundary with the invisible worlds of the 'bush, sorcerers, Europeans or now perhaps Chinese in Africa, but come from having the (ritual) means to enter these worlds and permit those either born with or acquired skills (learnt or ingested usually) to enter the invisible and bring back what is desired without being trapped by it, zombified in it or otherwise lost. As we saw in the discussion of invisible worlds, each are particular to and have their communities of ancestral spirits who should look after their equivalent living visible worlds and will do so as long as they are remembered, sacrificed to, have their music played etc. Ensuring the basic conditions of life therefore relates one personally back to the ancestral place and to the land where you were born and where ancestors are buried. Even those no longer zombified, i.e. the young and educated Africans living in America or Europe, who have adopted the manners and language of their host communities, have married there and had children, will return to bury their fathers in compound land, inherit titles and resolve disputes among family members (Geschiere and Nyamnjoh). The point is obvious enough that there is no rupture between modern and tradition and the notion of heritage as care instead makes the issue more how the modern as the outside is appropriated and domesticated in such settings.

Civilisation without Hierarchy

I have stressed the need to see modernity as an extension of the argument about power as the 'view from everywhere' that can only be glimpsed or glanced at ritually and not experienced or seen as a totality. In which case we also have to assume that power holders were and are today limited by the kind of force and violence they can bring to bear –not only on their own people – but in particular by any attempt to truly 'modernise' social relations as legitimised through 'the regulatory use of force'.

In West Central African societies experience often pervasive senses of force in everyday social and material life. Foods like cassava and maize or yams are pounded hard and ground and mixed to make smooth sweet soups and pastes; children are beaten on the principle that it is good to beat the 'badness' out of them; retribution to thieves and others deemed to be wicked is often swift and can be quite brutal. The phrase 'to bring something out' is often used both to justify how one works on materials and as a description of the product of labour. It is a difficult subject to discuss given recent events in civil wars in Sierra Leone or Congo, but it is important to recognise even superficially that the idea that force may have a cleansing character to it, is consistent with the analogistic ontology I have already described.

The idea that force does something in a purificatory manner is not peculiar to Africa. It takes us to Girard's argument in *Violence and the Sacred* that 'Violence is the heart and secret soul of the sacred'. But in his argument on mimetic desire, violence is directed against contestants or the objects of envy. He insists that it is the erosion of difference, i.e. fear of sameness that provokes fear of loss of identity and anxiety over subsumption to an external identity. A mimesis of 'all against one' unites rather than divides and opposed to the external source of fear, mimetic desire promotes internal unity through the destruction of the other. This may have some bearing on the expansion of empires and certainly the cosmologies of violence that are often at the very heart of their beginnings. But it bears little relation to the West-Central African world I have tried to describe where the external is invisible and superior in its immanence. - It is simply impossible to mobilise a unity of fear and violence against that source of the invisible. Instead fear of loss of identity promotes internal division, in particular fear of close ancestrally based kin, i.e. those who share similar body substances and who may be the most likely to turn their access to the invisible against their own kin. In pidgin English, in West Cameroon for example, sorcery is described as 'eating back into your own house' (i.e. chop na house) - The sorcerer is the person who would use the powers gained via ancestral intervention from the invisible world (since only spirits see everywhere) not to 'eat outwards' into the world and gain success, but instead 'eat' his own people, quite literally causing their deaths.

The core of Girard's mimetic argument that violence is directed outwards towards rivals and creates a new basis of unity that unites all against one, also promotes the cosmological drive to create a new transcendental unity, which lie at the basis of quite a few cosmological theories of empire and

civilisation. I do not necessarily subscribe to the Girard argument but I do think that he is correct in identifying the important question that unity through acts of expansion has a principal goal to find a form of transcendental unity that will subsume the frightening realities of implosion of difference and mimetic rivalry.

As argued earlier, the ideal identity of civilisation and empire resides in the spread of an underlying and often preparatory sense of universality that may already be in existence in an everyday material practice sense but only later becomes rationalised as a 'normative ideal '. The move from the immanent to the transcendent is therefore always in a state of flux or reflux as in the case of Stoic philosophies in Greece or Confucianism in China neither of which was *sui generis* but emerged as rationalised philosophies based on earlier more materialised exegeses'. Universality is achieved through different means of achieving a transcendent moral authority objectified in a materialised /immanent identity as text ,image or thing. But this did not happen in Africa or at least it hasn't happened yet although the spread of Pentecostal Christianities may be such a universality on which future empires could form. Instead we cannot make a clear separation between the transcendent and the mundane since the relation of the mundane and the transcendent or the visible and the invisible is of the same moral order. What separates them is a concept of violence directed by visible against the invisible on the blindage principle that these actions are justified as the protection of a 'this world' constituted moral order. Protector deities have a more general appearance , in Buddhism for example, as a protection of a 'this world' moral order so that final access to a transcendent 'other world' will be preserved.

Conclusion

My explanation for why there is no empire in the history of Africa therefore is that Girard is not relevant there. The invisible world as I have described for west central Africa is immanentist in the sense that the relation of visible to invisible is mundane and pragmatic. It is based on a space-time segmentation that is neither hierarchical nor transcendental but coeval and separate yet joined. As such access to and from the parallel worlds via the dead constitute ambivalent powers capable of providing everything good and everything bad in the world. Violence in these circumstances is not

structured and cosmologically driven, in the way descriptions of how in Ancient Mesopotamia the establishment of a new unity in 'conquest' was recognised by all once the main temple of a city deity had been captured. Instead the turning of kin against family (often child) members as witches or the kinds of violence orchestrated by Christians and Muslims in Nigeria for example are symptomatic of violence has no purpose in unity. Hierarchy should be located in achieving elimination of the blockage that threatens to impede the path from visible to invisible worlds but it is precisely the fact that this depends on embedding the transcendent in the immanent and therefore promoting both a form of mediation and violence and as cure that must in the end undermine the possibilities of establishing a cosmological power in unity. I could write more in this context on the issues of 'divine kingship', sexuality, bio-politics and nature of bureaucracy. But the important point is that they all relate to the normative ideal of civilisational unity by, at least I would claim for West Central Africa , undermining closure and unity and certainly the development of any kind of polity that might be called an empire. Moreover I see no reason why this would not be predictive for a non –imperial future as well.