

Symposium ‘Healing and Spirituality’
Research Institute for Religious Studies and Theology (RST)
Research Institute for Social and Cultural Research (NISCO)
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Erasmus Building, Erasmusplein 1, 15th floor, room 39 (E 15.39 + 15.41)

Experiential anthropology, and the reality and world history of spirit: Questions for Edith Turner

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ABSTRACT. In the context of a symposium on Healing and Spirituality, Radboud University Nijmegen, the Netherlands (2007), the author was invited to put a number of questions before Edith Turner. This was to elucidate her sustained quest for an experiential anthropology and for the vindication, within anthropology and the North Atlantic region at large, of peripheral spirit traditions, such as (from her own fieldwork) those of N. Alaskan Inuit and the Ndembu of Zambia. The author’s questions seek to situate Edith Turner’s work in context, including the work of her late husband Victor Turner. In addition to the author’s sympathy for experiential anthropology and his own long-standing practice as an African spirit medium, he draws on intercultural philosophy and long-range comparative research into symbolism and mythology in order to critically adduce perspectives that may elucidate, complement or correct Edith Turner’s. Topics covered include: the reliability of eye witness accounts of the paranormal; the relation between experiential and mainstream anthropology; the critique of ‘going native’ as a research strategy; the critique of experiential anthropology’s claims of producing valid knowledge through vicarious experience; the positioning of anthropology as mediating between peripheral traditions and the North Atlantic region; can we claim that peripheral spirit traditions constitute both useful and valid knowledge?; an elaborate attempt to situate peripheral spirit traditions (and especially the details of the Ndembu *Chihamba* cult) within an emerging world history of shamanism, spirit and transcendence, and to define the flow of indebtedness between periphery and centre; and (in the light of the author’s own professed spirituality) a critique of spirit-matter dualism and of claims of spirit as ontologically independent from human consciousness, in lieu of which the author proposes a model of universal (also extrasensory) informability and occasional material effectiveness of the body-mind.

Introduction

In addition to his own 15 minutes’ oral presentation, which summarised some of his published texts,¹ I was asked, for the above Symposium, to have a 30 minute public interview with Edith Turner. On the basis of a selection of her publications,² the following questions were prepared

¹ Notably, van Binsbergen 2003c, 2000, 2003b, as well as sections from the 2003a book.

² See list of references, below.

in advance, although they were only put before Edith Turner at the time of the actual interview. The interview took place after the four speakers had introduced their positions. Here the parallels had already been brought out between Edith Turner as an experiential anthropologist of religion seeking to vindicate the reality of spirit as she felt she had come across it during fieldwork in Zambia and Alaska; and myself, who, as an established anthropologist of religion, in 1990 had crossed the line to become a practising Southern African diviner-healer (*sangoma*), and who has kept up this practice also after having exchanged, in 1998, his chair in anthropology for one in intercultural philosophy. In the light of these parallels the important differences of opinion between interviewee and interviewer were played down. After all, the idea was primarily to highlight Edith Turner's work and thought as the distinguished guest, to give her a chance to speak at length, rather than to engage in a polemical discussion. Moreover, since the symposium was held in a theological faculty, I as interviewer felt that (whatever the recent transformations of Dutch, and international, theology towards empirical studies and religious anthropology) from their perspectival distance the theologians present would mainly perceive the similarities between the two anthropologists, and would be less interested in a methodological and epistemological discussion that might risk to go largely over the top of the audience's heads.

During the interview, summaries of the questions I had prepared beforehand were in front of me, in handwriting. The present paper was produced when I wrote these notes out, after the Symposium, inevitably with the power of hindsight, and with full library and bibliographical resources at hand. Of course, the actual interview could never have accommodated some of the extensively argued and referenced questions below, nor would Edith Turner have had the time to answer them extensively. But far from trying to cook the book, I am here presenting more or less what I had in mind at the time of the interview. If I took the trouble to write all this out, it was primarily for the benefit of my interlocutor, who with her typical sense of integrity and unlimited capacity for absorption and comparison, specifically asked for a copy of my text.

Unfortunately, although the reader may be getting far more accomplished questions than were actually posed by me during the interview, he will remain deprived of Edith Turner's answers – more than half of the dialogue. Edith Turner's extensive and illuminating responses were, I believe, taped by Eric Venbrux as the convenor of our Symposium, but I do not know if the recording succeeded, or if it will be transcribed in the foreseeable future.

The questions as I prepared them (if not in writing, then at least mentally)

1. Invitation to Edith to set the Symposium on a spiritual footing in the peripheral spirit traditions she is seeking to vindicate

Edith, at this point in time we are well into our Symposium on Healing and Spirituality, having listened to your own presentation and that of the three other speakers.³ The chairman's

³ The speakers were: Edith Turner (Anthropologist, University of Virginia), Wim van Binsbergen (Professor of Intercultural Philosophy, Erasmus University Rotterdam / Africa Studies Centre, Leiden)

and the Dean's opening words have established this meeting as a secular, academic exchange, whose prerogatives – or so it was suggested –self-evidently and non-problematically extend into the domain of spirituality. Could I propose we take this opportunity to turn the tables? You are without a doubt the oldest person present in this room, moreover you can call upon the riches of at least two traditional spiritualities (those of the Ndembu and those of the Inuit) which you have studied in detail, and somehow assimilated. Could you adopt the typical elder's role, and, in one or two sentences, with a prayer formula or something like that, to restore the balance and put this meeting on a spiritual footing?

2. Have these spirit traditions also, somehow, become her own?

The previous question invited you to represent any 'field' spirituality you may have picked up in the course of your anthropological fieldwork. We shall come back to the question of 'field' as a suitable attribute, below. In your writings, you clearly identify as a Roman Catholic, but, as you say,

'When I say the creed at Mass I say, "I believe in all religion", then I take communion' (Turner 1997: 69).

Across the mists of forty-five years that separate me from my native Roman Catholicism, this statement at first was not clear to me ('so what, she says the creed, then takes communion' – as a former choir-boy I merely seemed to remember that there were other sections of the mass in between, was their omission from your account perhaps the point?). Only later it dawned upon me that you were deliberately (heretically!) altering the wording of the creed so as to agree with your own (and incidentally, mine) conception of the plurality and convergence of the religions of humankind; and subsequently, in defiance of the divine punishment that was supposed to follow such sin, partook of communion, in order to put into ritual action (through the pursuit of a sacrificial meal – the primordial form of *communitas*⁴ according to Robertson Smith (1927) – the sense of unconditional, total inclusiveness which you had just articulated in words.

With such a conception of Roman Catholicism, one may feel at home anywhere in the world. But reversely, did elements from local spiritualities in Zambia and in Alaska, manage to permanently settle in your own life even after having returned from fieldwork, and did they become part of your day-to-day private spirituality? For instance, have you, too, become a practising healer?

University), Kees Waaijman (Professor of Spirituality, Radboud University Nijmegen) and Paul van der Velde (Chairperson Foundation for Psychotherapy and Buddhism / Radboud University Nijmegen) – with Eric Venbrux (Professor of Religious Anthropology in the theological faculty) in the chair, and welcoming words pronounced by the Dean of the Faculty.

⁴ The term 'communitas' designates a heightened sense of sociability first explored by Victor Turner as the principal dimension of ritual, and later also central to Edith Turner's work. Various authors have indicated that Turner's *communitas* is in many respects a reformulation of Durkheim's *effervescence* – the height of ritual excitement, when religion takes on subjective reality, the boundaries between the participants fade, society emerges beyond the separates individualities, and when even Kant's transcendental categories are socially forged (Durkheim 1912; Olaveson 2001; van Binsbergen 1981b, 1999a, 1999b).

3. Edith Turner's itinerary from Zambia to Alaska

Your first research site was in Africa (among the Ndembu of N.W. Zambia, where you worked with your late husband Victor Turner in the early 1950s). Here you returned in 1985, after Vic's death, and it was in that context that you and I first had some contact. Subsequently, you concentrated on a totally new research site, Northern Alaska. *Could you tell us something about the personal itinerary (intellectually and experientially) leading from Africa to Alaska?*

4. With Victor Turner, then beyond Victor Turner

We have known you as a lifelong companion of Victor Turner, only to emerge from publicity obscurity with the joint book you and Vic did on *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture* (1978), and it has mainly been after Vic's death in 1983 that you have asserted yourself as a highly original anthropologist of religion in your own right. *Could you tell us something about the development of your ideas and practice in association with Vic, and beyond Vic?*⁵

5. The reality of spirits

Now the central theme of your work of the last decade or so has been *the reality of spirits*. *Could you tell us once more what you mean by this phrase?* It is that spirits are in possession of some imaginary reality of their own, in the sense of some mythical space which they are supposed to occupy, like the characters in a novel? Do you mean 'reality of spirits' as one could have 'socks of Evans-Pritchard'? Or do you bluntly mean that our own reality comprises spirits, where they can occasionally be experienced by the senses, and by the effects they exert on human minds and bodies, and on other aspects of our visible reality?

⁵ For a sketch of the history of ideas that formed the background of Victor Turner's work, especially the Manchester School, see for instance van Binsbergen 2003 and 2006, and the abundant bibliography cited in the former paper. Victor Turner's first major book (*Schism and continuity*, 1957) was entirely in the Manchester tradition: a study of Central African inchoate social process conceived as micropolitical microhistory; here ritual was relegated to just one relatively short chapter (X, pp. 288-317), and exclusively analysed from the ostentatiously sociologicistic perspective of its alleged politically integrative function. Clearly, the ritual core of his project could hardly be accommodated within a Manchester framework, Max Gluckman (the autocratic founder of the Manchester School) declaring habitually and with some complacency that he was 'tone-deaf for religion'. This propelled Turner to a position of social and geographical outsidership among his Manchester peers (he became a professor of anthropology at Cornell University, in upstate New York, USA – like two other heroes of mine: another remarkable Briton in intellectual exile, Martin Bernal, and that proverbial Russian exile, Vladimir Nabokov), and made him one of the great innovators of the study of ritual in the 20th century. A large number of publications have paid tribute to Vic's significance for the anthropology of religion, extending into such fields as theology, science of religion, drama studies, etc.; a small selection: Alexander 1991; Ashley 1990; Babcock & Mac Aloon 1987; Boudewijnse 1990; de Boeck & Devisch 1994; Deflem 1991; Eade, & Sallnow 1991; Eade & Coleman 2004; Jules-Rosette 1994; Kapferer 1996; Nichols 1985; Olaveson 2001; Shorter 1972; St John 2001; Weber 1995; van Binsbergen 1981: *passim* (see index s.v. Turner).

6. Vindicating the reality of spirit, against the dominant North Atlantic views

As a catch phrase, *the reality of spirits* has certainly been very effective, and you tell us that your short article with the same title (Turner 1992a) was reprinted at least five times. Now a major argument for your affirmation as to the reality of spirits, is that you claim to have seen spirit matter *with your very own eyes*. This was in 1985 in Zambia, when after more than three decades you came back to the old Ndembu research site, and were once more present at a *Chihamba* ritual of possession.⁶ at the height of the ritual, you saw a big lump of what you identified as ectoplasm (using the standard parapsychological and spiritualistic term of the first half of the 20th century) separate from the patient's body, which event, in your interpretation, marked the beginning of her physical and mental recovery.

Now I am not in the least doubting your integrity nor your sophistication, but we must realise, I feel, two things:

1. in the first place, there is (between Pythagoras' and Empedocles' shamanism⁷ and Socrates' *daimōn*, via the immensely influential impact of Judaeo-Christian notions, to Hegel's *Geist*, Freud's *Unbewusste*, Poortman's (1978) insistence on spirit as subtle-matter, and contemporary philosophy's attempts⁸ to shed the Cartesian mind-body dualism that meanwhile has become a dominant collective representation and thus also informs most of current anthropology) hardly a topic that, across the centuries, has attracted more attention, and more specialist conceptualisation and theorising, in North Atlantic culture than the question of the existence and nature of spirit, and its relation to the everyday reality we seem to perceive with our senses; and
2. in the second place, eye-witness accounts, even though they make up the bulk of our information on paranormal events, yet are notoriously suspect.

We will come back to eye witness accounts later, and will first attend to spirit as central theme in your work.

I think we can agree that modern religious anthropology is largely predicated on the following assumption: outside the urban sections of the North Atlantic region today, the life world of a large part of humankind is informed by local people's belief in gods, spirits, demons and less personalised spiritual forces, as it was in the past; now the assumption is that these postulated entities have no objective ontological status in reality, they simply do not exist, so the task of religious anthropology is to understand what is producing and sustaining these figments of the imagination.⁹

⁶ Cf. Turner 1962; Turner 1986, 1992b.

⁷ Cf. Dodds 1973.

⁸ E.g. Feigl et al. 1958; Pétrement 1973; Ane 1966; Popper 1994; Hart 1998; Griffin 1998; Salami 1991; Sheets-Johnstone 1992.

⁹ Cf. Geertz's (1966: 4) famous definition of religion:

‘Without further ado, then, a religion is:

(1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.’

Against this background, *let me ask you to articulate what you mean by spirit, and why, in your later years, you have started on a crusade to vindicate spirit notions that are taken for granted in many cultures around the world but that, so far, are rejected by the dominant scientific worldview in the North Atlantic, including mainstream anthropology?*

7. Is eye-witness account a ground to affirm the reality of spirit?

Now on to the decisive weight attributed to eye-witness accounts. Parapsychology started over a century ago with the Society of Psychical Research, which already developed complex techniques to test and if necessary expose eye witness accounts of allegedly paranormal events; and from there we have seen a continuous tradition right up to today's Skeptics,¹⁰ who have been determined, ever since their powerful movement's foundation a few decades ago, to eradicate any trace of superstition, credulity and what they call 'pseudo-science' in the North Atlantic world, and especially academia. Outside the study of paranormal phenomena, for instance in forensic and judicial contexts, the psychology of eye witness accounts has developed into a major speciality. With participant observation as their principal ethnographic method, anthropologists are supposed to be trained observers (although few anthropology curricula actually include formal training in observation). However, the snag is that they use their own body and mind subjectivity as their main and only measurement instrument, so that much depends on the validity and reliability of the individual anthropologist's introspective interpretation of (typically unique and solitary, often nocturnal, often stressful) observations she has made with the senses. Well, in regard of such introspection – equally common (cf. Socrates, Descartes, Freud and William James, yet equally suspect as a philosophical technique – , *who will rule out the elements of projection, wishful thinking, transference?*)¹¹ This applies *a fortiori* in the domain of the spiritual and the invisible, which in most people tends to be associated with deep-seated cravings for meaning, acceptance, reprieve, deliverance – ultimately going back, in part, to formative childhood experiences. Finally, modern North Atlantic thought (not just philosophy) has been based, since Immanuel Kant, on the assumption that we do not and simply cannot experience the world as it really is, but only have knowledge of our *representations* of the world, such as have formed in our minds as a result of our attempts to interpret our sense impressions – in other words, we seem to be condemned forever to live by mere appearances alone.¹² We could go further and claim that awareness of the deceptive nature of our sense impressions has been a constant of Western thought from very early on (Plato's theory of the Ideas, as for instance expounded in the famous Allegory

¹⁰ Cf. a journal like *Skeptical Inquirer*, or the website 'Skeptic: The Skeptics Society and Skeptic Magazine', at <http://www.skeptic.com/index.html>. I have in mind here the movement of mainly natural scientists, including a fair number of Nobel prize laureates; and not the philosophical tradition of Scepticism, whose antecedents go back to ancient Greece. The modern Skeptic's point is the exposure (in the light of a somewhat naïve affirmation of established, mainstream natural science truths and methods held – in the most unscientific manner – to be exhaustive and eternal) of unwarranted paranormal truth claims. The philosophical scepticists' point is the denial (disconcerting in for scientists, yet rather persuasively argued) of the possibility of *any* truth claims (cf. Klein 1981; Popkin 1979; Strawson 1985; Dancy & Sosa 1992, s.v. '(modern) scepticism').

¹¹ Cf. van Binsbergen 2003a, index, s.v. 'transference' and 'projection'.

¹² Cf. Kant 1964; Oosterling 1996.

of the Cave).¹³ And if we add that in the Buddhist tradition the whole of the sensory world is deception, *mara*; or that among your Ndembu research associates as well as among my Nkoya ones, and among many peoples throughout Africa, the visible world is considered only one particular fragment, and not necessarily the most revealing or transparent fragment, of reality, we are reminded that doubt about the senses is not just a modern North Atlantic passing affectation.

Against this background, reaffirming the reality of spirit on the basis of an appeal to ‘what you saw with your own eyes’, is inherently problematic. *Could you tell us what makes you so sure of these observational claims? Or is there some other, inner reality, with which we may communicate in ritual, trance and possession, and which has better testimonies than those of the senses?*

Please note that this is not a rhetorical question, as if I were implying that you could not possibly have seen what you claim to have seen, or that that must have been some hallucination without any ground in empirical reality. Below it will become clear that I am not doubting your observation, but merely your interpretation.

8. Merely against mainstream theology or also against mainstream anthropology?

One of your papers (Turner 1997) specifically addresses theology, and attempts to enrich what you depict as a relatively rigid – in your words, rationalistic – theological perspective, with a more lively, spirit-affirming, anthropological discourse. Now, here we are in a theological faculty, and my question is: *is your quarrel not as much with mainstream anthropology, which may be just as rigid and ‘rationalistic’ as far as the kind of phenomena is concerned that you seek to do justice to?*

‘Rationalistic’ does not seem to be the proper word here. There is nothing irrational or anti-rational about recognising the existence of spirit. The whole edifice of European medieval philosophy – eminently rationalist, yet utterly theistic – is there to prove this statement. Admittedly it is established usage to designate such topics as witchcraft, sorcery, intuition, telepathy, healing, astrology, divination, belief in spirits and in God, as belonging to the realm of the irrational – regardless of the (usually quite rationalistic) ways in which such beliefs are articulated and turned into action.¹⁴ However, most of these beliefs and actions are not irrational in the sense of being predicated on the absence or denial of rationality. Material divination for instance may be based on premises (such as the existence of gods or ancestors capable of influencing the fall of dice and other random generators when activated) that appear to be false or at least ungrounded from the point of view of current North Atlantic science, yet divination often proceeds along strictly rational paths – and it is this proto-scientific insistence on intersubjective procedure that, to the practitioner and his clients, lends credibility to divination’s outcome. ‘Sensorialist’ appears to be a slightly more appropriate term, in the sense of a school of thought that insists that the senses of our physical body are absolutely the only means through which a person may gather valid knowledge about the world external to that

¹³ Plato 1975: *Republic* (book 7, 514A–520A).

¹⁴ Cf. Dodds 1973; Duerr 1981 (a collection that includes, in German translation, many famous Anglo-Saxon anthropological essays on the topic).

person; this is the term I used in *Intercultural encounters* (2003: ch. 7). In combination with rationality, the macro-experiences (i.e. visible to the naked eye and audible to the unaided ear) of everyday life as mediated through the senses, help us produce a manageable ‘Newton’ world (i.e. one following classic mechanics rather than 20th mechanics of the quantum and relativity types) fit for elementary human survival: one in which elementary classic laws of physics apply (within the broad error range characteristic of this elementary level of measurement) ; one, therefore, in which arrows can be shot and reach the animal victim at the intended spot so that the hunter’s quest for food may be successful; in which time can be kept so that planting time may be determined, etc. In my opinion, these practicalities once were the cradle and the nursery of rationality, and there is (*pace* Kant) no reason to assume that the vast non-practical aspects of the human existence nor of the universe at large can or should be subjected to rational arrangement. There is much to say for a strategy which reserves the term ‘irrational’ (Barrett 1958) for modes of thought and behaviour that choose not to employ the framework of rationality, for reasons of tradition, heroism, honour, vitality, artistry, absurdity, or whatever.¹⁵

As background to my question as to your departure, not only from mainstream theology but also from mainstream anthropology, let me add the following. Almost in the manner of an Islamic *silsila* (listing an unbroken chain of spiritual authorities from generation to generation) you cite (Turner 2006c) a whole intellectual genealogy of over sixty publications at least going back to the middle of the 20th century (Turner 1964; Deren 1953), that may all be claimed to pursue the rehabilitation of the spirit as reality, and the strategic role of the anthropologist in reclaiming that reality. You may agree that this does not mean that this type of approach (‘experiential anthropology’ – obviously owing a considerable debt to your and Vic’s 1985 book *On the Edge of the Bush: Anthropology as Experience*) has become mainstream. In fact, it is so little mainstream that I, who have worked along similar lines in Africa and Europe from the early 1990s, and who have an excellent Africanist library at my disposal as well as the Internet, was only aware of the earlier of these titles, but missed many of them from the mid-1990s on.¹⁶ The protagonists of experiential anthropology constitute a somewhat esoteric group concentrated on mainly two journals (*Anthropology of Consciousness*, and your own journal *Anthropology and Humanism*), and also in this respect are not exactly mainstream (yet). Most importantly, there is, as is brought out in some of my other questions, a controversial conception of fieldwork and experience, which places this group of anthropologists outside the mainstream of the anthropological profession, even though they are clearly involved in a centripetal movement, representing a paradigm shift that may well suc-

¹⁵ Also cf. Davis 1996; Sperber 1982.

¹⁶ Somewhat to the detriment of my 2003 book *Intercultural encounters*, which otherwise would have engaged in, and benefited from, productive debate with many other kindred authors, instead of having to struggle virtually all by myself with the formidable problem of doing justice to people’s beliefs in religious anthropological research. However, the advantage of this isolation has been that thus, without the comforting but practically blinding reassurance of a peer support group, I was forced to thresh out the epistemological, ontological and knowledge-political implications of whatever my fieldwork experiences were bringing me to say; and, as a professional philosopher, to thresh them out much more explicitly and incisively (painfully too, inevitably – with relentless self-criticism) than I see the USA experiential anthropologists normally do. And, I should add, to thresh them out far more than their actual presentation during the Symposium suggested (when pressures of time and sociability dictated otherwise). Anyway, one major result of the present seminar has been to finally make personal contact with this movement.

ceed in overtaking the centre in the near future. Incidentally, by repeatedly expressing my sympathy for this approach it should be clear that I do not consider ‘mainstream’ synonymous to ‘profound’ or ‘true’.

Let us dwell a bit on this controversial conception of the anthropological craft.

9. ‘Going native’ as a research strategy

‘Going native’ is the old colonial and dismissive term for a specific method of knowledge production. It has produced the kind of insights that you are divulging at this Symposium, and that resonate so clearly with the work of an increasing number of other ‘experiential’ anthropologists mainly in the United States of America (cf. Turner 2006c for an extensive list; cf. footnote 11), as well as my own work (e.g. van Binsbergen 1991, 2003a). What begins as classic anthropological fieldwork, at some point drops the studied distance between observer and the observed; the anthropologist’s learning of local concepts and actions sheds its instrumentality and becomes existentially appropriated, validated and rooted into the anthropologist’s own life, so that she no longer *acts as if* she were a local believer, practitioner etc., but simply *acts as* a local believer, practitioner, or whatever the case may be. Local beliefs and actions are appreciated and adopted by the research, no longer because of their exchange value in some foreign and distant academic environment, but simply because of the value the local research associates attribute to them – so out of social and cognitive charity. The canons of scientific, distancing objectification are cast overboard, and the operative expression becomes: ‘living with the people by their own standards’, rather than ‘studying them by the imposed alien standards of a distant academic discipline and higher degrees board’. One of your articles (Turner 2003b) opens with the assertion that *in the past, in anthropology, ‘going native’ spelt academic doom*. You go on to assert that this is why Vic and you insisted on avoiding this stance at all costs during the 1950s Ndembu fieldwork in Zambia, whatever the temptations (the extreme attractiveness of the spiritual forms that appeared to manifest themselves in Ndembu rituals; and the lure of *communitas*, promising that, by letting go, the stranger fieldworker could merge with the locals into one grand ‘we’). Of course, the discoveries you believe you made in subsequent fieldwork, and the converging work of people like Paul Stoller, Michael Jackson, R. Jaulin, Wim van Binsbergen,¹⁷ and quite a few others, could only be made to the extent to which these anthropologists in the field ignored the prohibition on going native. They did not do so without encountering severe criticism. As you told me, Stoller was viciously jeered when he presented an account of his experiences before an American Anthropological Association annual meeting. In 1991, and despite sympathetic reactions from the majority of the audience, I experienced a similar treatment (in far more articulate, dismissive words) on the part of the long-standing convenor of the Satterthwaite Annual Colloquium for African Religion and Ritual, in 1990 – it cost us what until then looked as one of the best friendships of my life.¹⁸

Accounts based on varieties of ‘going native’, and presented with fair helpings of introspection and anecdotes, are often dismissed under the label of ‘postmodernism’ – although

¹⁷ Stoller & Olkes 1987; Stoller 1984; Jackson 1989; Jaulin 1971; van Binsbergen 1991, 2003a; Turner 2006c contains many more similar writings, especially of more recent vintage.

¹⁸ Cf. van Binsbergen 1991, 2003: ch. 6; a discursive criticism of this relatively recent development in religious anthropology, with special attention to Stoller, cf. Olivier de Sardan 1988.

in many ways such accounts have been endemic to the anthropological profession from the very beginning. Such a label is not totally inappropriate, nor necessarily pejorative. The core of postmodernism (Lyotard 1979) is the deconstruction of the modernist project, exposing the latter as some sort of Hollywood scenario imposed upon (an otherwise chaotic, contradictory and multicentred) reality: a Grand Narrative, sustained by an almighty and invisible Narrator (here: the modernist anthropological author), who mistakes for objective reality his own delusions of order, control, clear-cut and impermeable conceptual and social boundaries, and his own non-problematic access to a privileged point of view – to a vantage point that renders him nearly omniscient. The postmodern anthropologist realises that she must give up all these arrogant pretensions, must admit that her knowledge construction in the field is utterly precarious, and that her best bet is to join – at their own conditions – those who are already locals, and who are hence already in the know. However, this requires a receptive humility that, in principle, has always been implied in anthropological fieldwork – even though in colonial times some of the masters of the anthropological discipline (Malinowski, Griaule) in their dealings with their local research associates may have shown less of this attractive human trait. While in the field the anthropologist's 'going native' may still be forgiven – usually she works alone there and her supervisors could be unaware of whatever field strategies she chooses to adopt in detail. In the field most anthropologists have little problem dancing, singing and praying along, going through the motions of local believers. The test (van Binsbergen 2003: ch. 0 and 15) comes after fieldwork, when the stance of 'going native' is either dropped for the production of yet another Grand Narrative (i.e. the coherent and distant ethnographic account), – or honesty, loyalty, and cognitive charity are allowed to prevail, and the beliefs and action once adopted in fieldwork, are not betrayed overnight under the compelling gaze of academic peers and supervisors – on the contrary, they are allowed to shine and to be taken seriously in the published ethnographic texts the fieldworker produces.

Honesty, loyalty and cognitive charity – who would like to do without them? Their emotional appeal informs much of my own experiential accounts (van Binsbergen 1991, 2003a). Yet, the professional ban on 'going native' has had a very good reason, even beyond safeguarding intradisciplinary power relations and paradigms. It has reminded us that, even though our own person – inserted in a socio-cultural context where we are, initially, ignorant outsiders – is to be our main research instrument, and even though it is in human nature to respond sociably (by the merging of actions, ideas and even bodies) to the often extreme nearness of other persons in fieldwork, the purpose of fieldwork is not just to end up as a knowing insider and live happily forever after in the field, but to leave the field and write an anthropological treatise. If we do 'go native', we may end up knowing more and being more accepted locally, but probably at the price of defeating the scientific purpose why we came to the field in the first place. This may be a good thing – most probably, humans should not attempt to study their fellow humans with the same objectifying, distant method that, in the natural sciences in the course of the last few centuries, produced such impressive insights and such Faustian and destructive technological control over the non-human world. Yet to the extent to which, after fieldwork, we remain within the anthropological profession and its institutional arrangements (university departments, disciplinary organisations, the scholarly format of text production), the texts we produce will continue to have a claim to being scientific. Postmodernists like Clifford and Marcus¹⁹ tried to cut the Gordian knot of this dilemma by

¹⁹ Cf. Clifford & Marcus 1986; Clifford 1988.

declaring ethnography primarily a literary text genre, whose authority i.e. whose claim to the production of valid and reliable scientific knowledge was merely supported by stylistic and narrative means – in other words by performative sleight-of-hand. But such a position marks Clifford as an armchair anthropologist; it does not have the feel of sustained fieldwork, where one struggles, and suffers (lack of comfort, sleep, privacy and home friends; a constant sense of local incompetence, ignorance, and lack of control; and usually health threats) for the sake of *knowledge* – which knowledge, once acquired through sweat, blood and tears, one does not allow to go discredited as a mere literary invention.

So here is the real problem of ‘going native’: *solitarily, and almost unconditionally, one follows the host society to the knowledge it has to share, but having relinquished the professional distance that implied an entire methodological package in the field, how can we ever be sure that the knowledge then collected is valid and reliable, and is not full of the effects of projection and transference that usually attend non-scientific attempts to take in new knowledge domains?* And this, Edith, is also my question to you at this point.

10. Can the fieldworker, even if ‘going native’, experience what the hosts are experiencing?

I have another question on the point of ‘going native’. If the fieldworker, the participant observer, goes it ‘all the way’, the assumption is often that she will not only go where the locals go, get a right to see what has been there for the locals to see, and to share home truths that all insiders know, but no outsiders do, but that literarily, she *will experience what the locals are experiencing*. This claim is there, in so many words, in your own recent writings, as in much other ‘experiential anthropology’ (Turner 2006b). And here you disagree with the lamented Clifford Geertz (Turner 2003b; Geertz 1986: 373), who dismisses such a claim, considering it impossible for an anthropological fieldworker to experience what her local research associates are experiencing. Now the quality of his work, both ethnographically and theoretically, made Geertz (1926-2006) one of the leading anthropologists of his generation, which is also yours. As an anthropologist he was something of an exception in that he had a fair awareness of current philosophical thought, and especially underwent the inspiration of phenomenology, through Paul Ricoeur. If by experience we understand, not, of course, the sheer stage directions of any social or ritual event (the observable movement of human bodies and other objects through space over time), but the evolving individual consciousness of that event, then it is clear what Geertz’s position is based on. For, to the extent to which consciousness is culturally informed and therefore is particular in space and time, the visiting anthropological fieldworker will experience any event in fieldwork differently from her local research associates. Of course, the essential thing about culture is that it is learned, and therefore, as months and years go by, the overlapping between the locals’ experience and the researcher’s experience will somewhat increase. However, the fieldworker is already an adult, who brings to the event deep-seated conscious and especially unconscious mindsets and sentiments that were produced in her own home society and condemn her for the rest of her life to a different experi-

ence. Like any other fieldworker, I could adduce to this point anecdotes from my own fieldwork in various places,²⁰ but the message is, I think clear.

Therefore my question to you, Edith: how do you defend your claim that, in fieldwork, anthropologists may experience what the local research associates are experiencing?

11. The anthropologist as globalising hero

I am surprised to see you use a short-hand expression like ‘field people’ as a designation for the host community among which an anthropologist conducts her fieldwork. Elsewhere you describe how anthropologists in their annual meetings may produce a sense of *communitas as if they were ‘field people’*. These are meant to be endearing expressions. We know that anthropologists like to think of themselves as having been enriched, and positively re-socialised, by the example of the people they have gone out to study; I am such an anthropologist myself. But is there no danger here, when the personal subjects who make up a particular socio-cultural community, are primarily defined by the instrumental and perspectival fact that they happen to be studied by a (usually North Atlantic) anthropologist in an artificially and one-sidedly constructed situation called ‘the field’? Medieval thought saw the whole of the non-human natural world as created in order to fulfil a particular purpose for humankind, sheep to give wool, ants to remind us of the virtues of hard work and thriftiness, etc. Similarly, and much more recently, male sexism, objectifyingly, saw the whole of female humanity as an extension of their desires and needs. I am afraid the expression ‘field people’ is uncomfortably close to these historical examples, in that it refers to a set of people not for what they are in themselves and by self-definition, but for what they are to the anthropologist who happened to pass by. In itself the expression may be harmless and reflect state-of-the-art common anthropological parlance. But it is an anachronism by the standards of modern thought.

And there are, perhaps, other indications that the type of religious anthropology you are advocating, is implicitly shifting the focus of research

- from human subjects in socio-cultural community in their own particular time and place,
- to anthropologists, and anthropology, as the vicarious receptacles of humankind’s cultural and spiritual wisdom

Are we not encountering a similar move when (as addressed in a previous question) the experience of the anthropologist in the field is declared identical to that of the hosts, and therefore may be conveniently analysed through introspection *under the pretension of producing valid and reliable knowledge concerning the hosts’ experience?* Or when (as throughout your project) anthropology becomes redefined as the proper arena for the dissemination and contestation of a particular conception of the world – one in which the reality of the spirit is centrally recognised? Are we not forgetting then that, overlooking the range of socio-cultural expressions of humankind since the Lower Palaeolithic (3 million years Before Present), and overlooking the sheer variety of such expressions across the globe, anthropology is, in space

²⁰ In van Binsbergen 2003a projection and transference in fieldwork are a major reason to doubt this method as a tool for valid intercultural knowledge construction.

and time, a very limited expression, weighed down by the inheritance of North Atlantic colonialism and racism, and still (with its unmistakable centre of gravity in the United States of America) largely under the influence of today's North Atlantic world hegemony – even if trying to counter and compensate that influence? *Or is perhaps your main point that, in a globalised world, anthropology is in a truly unique position as foreshadowing the kind of intercultural fusion of knowledge we will need more than anything else in order to survive as a species and to know reality in all its aspects (including those aspects so far not recognised by North Atlantic science):*

‘The anthropology of religion too will gradually become a science belonging to the alliance of all the planet's peoples, not excluding even Serbs, Hutus, Ghadafi, Farrakhan, Russian communists, or Middle Eastern males. We can put ourselves at the service of the planet-the way it is, not the way it ought to be.’ (Turner 1997: 71).

The point appeals to me, although in my opinion the defects of anthropology are too obvious for such a noble task, which I then assign (naïvely, no doubt) to intercultural philosophy (van Binsbergen 2003a; for critique of this position, cf. Boele van Hensbroek 2003).

12. Spirit traditions: merely *useful* knowledge, or indeed *valid* knowledge?

In one of your papers, Edith,²¹ you contrast the cyclical cosmology of the Inuit and others (where human death and the decomposition of the human body is only one phase in an eternal cycle of the transformation of matter, in other words, of a food chain) with the vertical cosmology of the Judaeo-Christian-Islamic tradition and of, not unrelated, capitalism.²² Their different implications for environmental survival are obvious: cyclic leads to respect and preservation, vertical to waste and destruction. In this respect it is clear that the knowledge enshrined in local spirit beliefs is *useful knowledge*, even though North Atlantic science refuses to support such local knowledge. However, your project goes much further and makes the claim that local spirit knowledge deserves to be universally recognised, in other words, that such spirit traditions amount to *valid knowledge*. Now, attributions of usefulness are based on a set of (ideally intersubjective) evaluations in the light of socio-cultural-political desirabilities informed by a particular spatio-temporal position and the interests that position implies; they are, therefore, inherently relative – matters of taste, perspective, and situation. Valid knowledge however is something rather different – unless we opt for the scepticist position that relegates all knowledge claims to the domain of rhetorics (in the Aristotelian sense) and performance. Methodologically, the hallmark of valid knowledge consists in the intersubjectively recognised procedures by which that knowledge has been produced. Existentially (and you would feel more at home here), the hallmark of valid knowledge is that it coincides with what is, with Being.

Therefore, if your project is to recognise, as universally valid knowledge, the spirit traditions from outside the North Atlantic intellectual tradition, could you please tell us what

²¹ Turner 1997: 78f.

²² Interestingly, the same food-chain imagery is pervasive in modern Africa in the context of witchcraft beliefs and the exercise of political power: who is to eat whom? Cf. Geschiere c.s. 1995. It is, in Bantu-speaking Africa, also the standard imagery to apply to accession to socio-political office: one ‘eats’ (*ku lya/dya* etc.) a title or a position.

you mean, and especially by what criteria you go about establishing the validity of that knowledge?

13. Translating spirit traditions to the modern world at large: Once more the anthropologist as hero

If your point is to affirm the validity of spirit traditions outside the North Atlantic intellectual tradition, we still have a major problem of translation and format. These spirit traditions are phrased in a local idiom that, even if it is English on the surface (as in your Alaska fieldwork), conveys concepts and relations that are not yet in a shape fit for circulation outside the local horizon within which they are at home: not only because the language in which they are phrased, but also because of their content, because of their particular indigenous format, e.g. their fuzziness and inner dialectics, and because of their merging with non-verbal bodily expressions and with notions beyond words. If the spirit discourse represents valid knowledge in the local field, how do we ensure that it may continue to constitute valid knowledge in a globalised, universalising context like that of the modern media, the Internet, and intercontinental scholarship?²³ The problem is all the more pressing, considering the formal-organisation format in which much of life is organised today, in the North Atlantic region and increasingly all over the world. Religion, education, health care, the judiciary, economic exchange, recreation, political life, is now in the hands of formal, bureaucratically implemented organisations, whose structures of command, and whose internal and external legitimation, all depend on the formal written word, increasingly in a digitalised form. This development could scarcely be foreseen a century ago. It has rendered our social life experience very different from what it was for people in Enlightenment Europe (late 18th c. CE), and from the experience of most people still close to local spirit traditions, even though (in Alaska as in Zambia, and anywhere else) the formal organisation has continued its conquest of the world: colonialism, capitalism and later forms of globalisation have allowed that conquest to extend to all continents of the world. If in this modern context, spirit beliefs are to be vindicated as valid knowledge, they must be recast in the language and the format of the formal organisation – only in such a format can these beliefs and the forms of spirituality that cluster around them, become the subject of a formal institutional course of action (be taught, funded, staffed, researched, rewarded, and becoming the subject to library acquisition, publication, web publication, etc.). This, incidentally, is the link, at our Symposium, with the papers by Kees Waaijman (on spirituality in modern institutional healthcare) and by Paul van der Velde (on the difficulty of mobilising Buddhist concepts and practices for modern psychotherapy): if we want spirit ideas, however inspiring and valid, to be inserted, to be recognised, and to work, in a modern environment, we must see to it that these ideas undergo such a translation and format change that makes their reception in a formal organisational environment possible, without destroying their content and meaning in the process.

It is implied in your project that anthropology is in a unique position to effect such translation and format transformation, which we might summarise as 'North Atlantic domes-

²³ Having affirmed, and attempted to demonstrate, the validity of *sangoma* science especially its claims in the field of divination and clairvoyance, this question is at the heart of my extensive chapter 7 in *Intercultural encounters* (van Binsbergen 2003e).

tion', or nicer perhaps, 'institutionalisation'. Could you tell us how, and why, you think anthropology, of all possible candidates in the global field of knowledge and communication, should be capable of discharging this responsibility?

14. Spirit traditions and globalisation: from periphery to centre, or the other way around?

The previous question was about the possibility and survival and transformation of spirit traditions *in a context of today's globalisation*. Now, Edith, I would like to turn this around and ask you whether you are prepared to acknowledge the effects of globalisation in the ethnographic situations of the Ndembu and the Inuit, as you have described them. Globalisation is a confusing and multifaceted term; I understand by it the profound socio-cultural transformation resulting from dramatic advances in the technology of information and communication.²⁴ This of course did not start with the computer and communication satellites, as Vic's own characterisation of the Ndembu situation in the early 1950s demonstrates:

'In many parts of Zambia the ancient religious ideas and practices of the Africans are dying out through contact with the white man and his ways. Employment in the copper mines, on the railway, as domestic servants and shop assistants; the meeting and mingling of tribes in a nontribal environment; the long absence of men from their homes – all these factors have contributed to the breakdown of religions that stress the values of kinship ties, respect for the elders, and tribal unity. However, in the far northwest of the Territory, this process of religious disintegration is less rapid and complete; if one is patient, sympathetic, and lucky one may still observe there the dances and rituals of an older day.' (Turner 1968: 2)

Even more globalised would have been the situation of the Ndembu in 1985 (it was scarcely different from that of the Nkoya at the time, which I knew first-hand). And from what I have read of your Inuit accounts, these are people effectively incorporated in a globalised, English-speaking society, with television, air links, military bases and churches, whilst preserving – or so it appears – elements of historic spirit traditions.

So far, taking your cue, we have discussed these peripheral spirit traditions as if, in essence, they were both local and ancient, have to be protected against the onslaught of the globalising, secularising and rationalising modern world, yet deserve to be recognised and received by the modern world because of the valid knowledge and the therapeutic wisdom they constitute; experiential anthropologists venturing out into these far-away places, are to play a key role in the identification, transmittance and global recirculation of these spirit traditions.

Much of this could have been taken from my own writings. Yet I invite you to consider, and comment upon, the alternative model, according to which some of what we take to be spirit traditions in the sense just now expounded, may not so much be elements of peripheral societies ready to invade the North Atlantic and the global world at large, but, quite the other way around, are in themselves signs of the global world already having invaded peripheral local communities – signs and products of (proto-)globalisation.

²⁴ Cf. van Binsbergen et al. 2004.

Let me elaborate. The concept of spirit is, per definition, surprisingly volatile and non-localised for something that is supposed to be at home within the narrow horizon of the village, the clan and the ethnic group. Did the cults serving such spirits spring from the local soil in remotest Africa, Asia and the Americas – or did they merely end up there, whilst originating from recognised centres of cultural and religious transformation and innovation? In recent work I have done a considerable amount of work on the comparative world history of shamanism, as an aspect of global leopard skin symbolism and the global long-range history of myth. My personal encounters with forms of ecstatic religion practically indistinguishable from shamanism had all been in the African continent. So I was surprised to see Frobenius – whom I have come to take more seriously than most Africanist do today – set aside (Frobenius 1954) shamanism as an Asian import, which relatively recently (mainly in the course of the 2nd millennium CE) had invaded Africa along various routes, each associated with a specific, named cult. The appearance of shamanism in the Ancient Near East from the second millennium BCE, as spotted by Assyriologists, is related to this movement. At the background is a general ‘Back into Africa’ movement from Central Asia to the West and South West, which has effected a massive genetic, demographic, linguistic and cultural influx from c. 15,000 Before Present.²⁵ The Frobenius model (Fig. 1) turned out to fit my own Africanist research excellently.

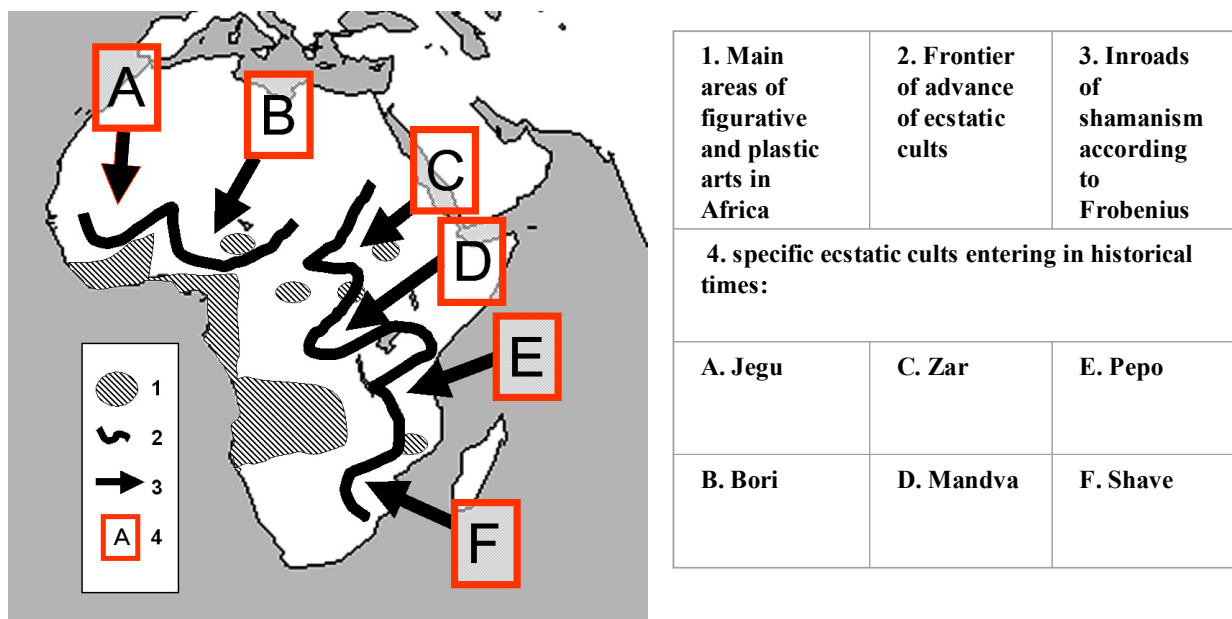


Fig. 1. Frobenius view of inroads of shamanism into Africa, second millennium CE

In this connection, let us not forget how Buddhism and Islam in Asia, and Islam in Africa, are now being considered as vehicles for the spread of spiritualist, shaman-like religious forms way outside the overpopulated centres of learning where these world religions are at home; even the very term *shaman* in N. Asian languages has been explained in this connection (as a loan from South Asia), although as we shall see the institution of shamanism is very

²⁵ Cf. Cruciani et al. 2002; van Binsbergen 2006b.

much older than any world religion. In Africa in more recent centuries (from the 16th c. CE onwards), Christianity has similarly imported an highly elaborate spirit idiom whose transformations into apparently historic, local African spirit traditions of the interior we can only rarely trace in detail, but whose vast expanse is suggested by the sheer frequency with which Heavenly Queens, Angels and Holy Spirits turn up in African syncretic cults and African Independent Churches. We touch here on a topic which Vic and you have studied at length at the local level, among the Ndembu, under the heading of ‘cult of affliction’ (Turner 1957: ch. X; 1962), but whose transregional dimensions are more important to us, at the present juncture.

You will remember how C.M.N. White, the anthropologising district officer from N.W. Zambia whom you must have known in the 1940-1950s, in a remarkable paper sketched the emergence, in that region, of non-ancestral, even non-tribal, spirit cults without any moral concerns, as an alternative to historic local cults that were tied to a local descent group or ethnic group, and centring on morality such as the discharge of kinship obligations (White 1949). From 1972 on I followed up his initial analysis, in both oral-historical and ethnographic fieldwork, and I could identify a fair number of cults (such as *bituma*, *moba*, *mwendapanchi* etc.), which in broad east-west movements swept over the South Central African countryside from the 19th century onward.²⁶ Elsewhere in South Central Africa similar cults, with the same characteristics in time and space, were identified, such as *mashawe* and *mpepo*. These new cults of affliction by and large followed the trails of long-distance trade and labour migration, and in fact could be regarded as the ideological elaboration of such transregional movement. Their essential non-local nature (venerating vague, non-personal entities that were supposed to spread ‘like wind’); the fact that anyone could catch such a spirit without any moral infringement being involved, so guiltlessly, more like an epidemic disease; and these cults’ spread through a chain reaction, where any patient could become an adept and end up as local cult leader recruiting further adepts in turn; – all this helped create and spread a new model of the person in which individual, market- and commodity-orientated action could be liberated from the connotations of sorcery it used to have in the local socio-cultural context. In my opinion the ecstatic ritual and the paraphernalia in these cults, although greatly transformed and localised in the meantime, are not indigenous to South Central Africa but ultimately derive from the Indian Ocean coast, with considerable impact of South Asian ecstatic cults and other religious forms from the contexts of Buddhism and Hinduism. Many years later I had occasion to apply the same model (a mercantile economic context, geared to commodity trade and facilitating transoceanic South Asian influence) to Southern African cults of affliction, especially to the *sangoma* cult (van Binsbergen 2003a: ch. 8, and 2005).

Incidentally, the transregional and European, by implication Christian connection was admitted by Vic when he wrote (Turner 1962: 74):

‘There are several features in Chihamba which indicate that the rites may have been influenced by contact with Europeans, probably Portuguese, or with Europeanized Africans from western Angola. The miming of capture and of the slave caravans – with symbolic slave-yokes; the recurrent cross motif; and the ritual importance of cassava [whose whiteness is the main material referent of ‘Chihamba the White Spirit’ – WvB] – a plant of comparatively recent introduction into Central Africa: all these suggest that borrowing has occurred, though probably not later than the period of Chokwe slave raids (cf. the song on p. 31 [of Turner 1962 – WvB], ‘she has been caught by the

²⁶ van Binsbergen 1972, 1977, 1981.

Chokwe' [an highly mercantile ethnic group to the East of the Ndembu] in the 1880's. It is likely that the use of *musamhanjita* as a war-medicine [the Ndembu word means just that – WvB] became prevalent at this epoch.'

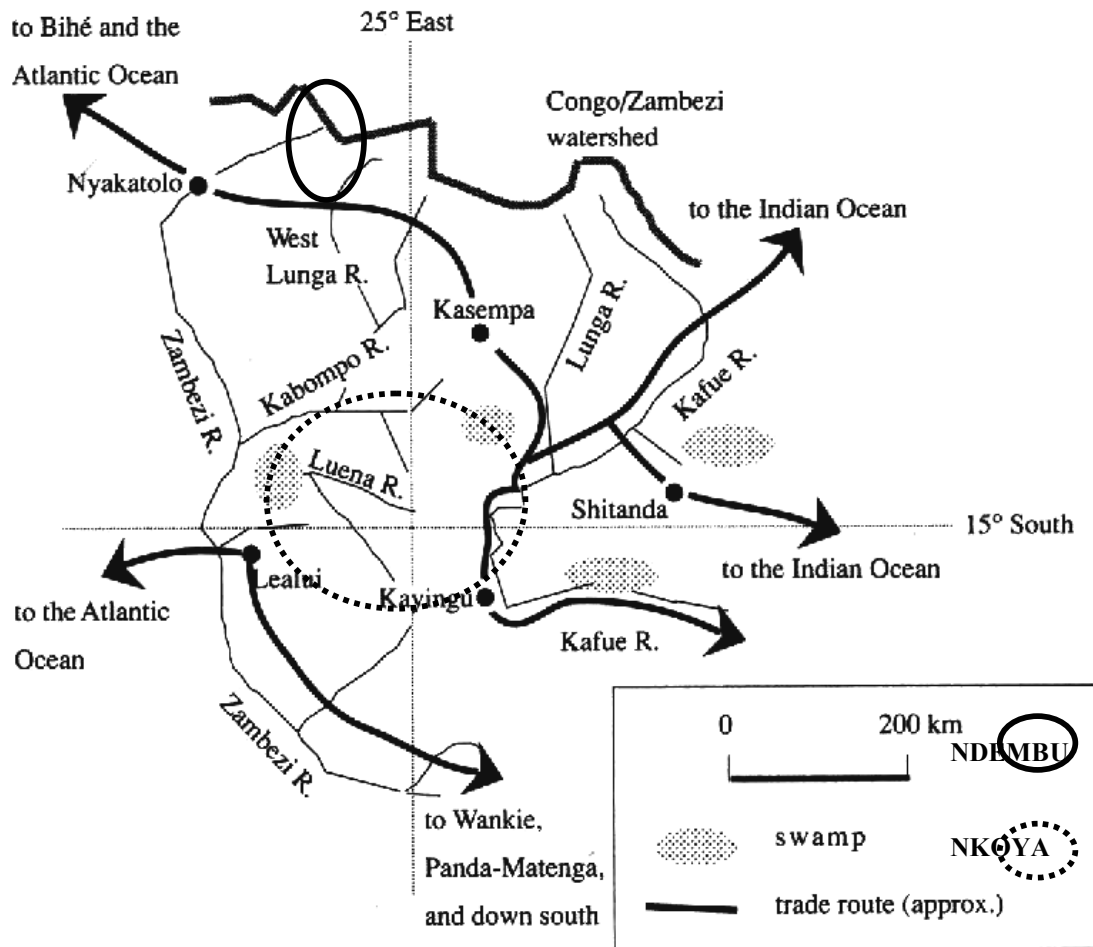


Fig. 2. Royal capitals and trade routes in the region of the Upper Zambezi and the Congo-Zambezi watershed, 19th century CE.

Interestingly, the root *-hamba* appears in various Bantu languages with the meanings of either 'plant' or 'travel, journey'. It is therefore particularly apt for a cult which through a plant which is identified (in ways full of comparative mythological reminiscences, to West Asia and much further afield, even Oceania and Meso-America)²⁷ with the murdered spirit of rain,

²⁷ From the Ancient Near East (Ancient Egypt, Syro-Palestine and Mesopotamia; with later ramifications to Ancient Greece) we may mention the cults of Osiris, Dumuzi/Tammuz, Ba'al, Attis, Adonis. The interesting thing is that many of these ancient deities have ritual drama's attached to their myths, not unsimilar to *Chihamba*. In Meso-America the maize god Hun Hunahpu descended to the realm of the death god, was defeated by him, and was scattered as the maize crop. The same mytheme is found in Oceania, Japan (the goddess Uke Mochi 保食神 alias Ogetsu-hime-no-kami 大宜都比売神) and Indonesia (the goddess Hainuwele). If the mytheme is rephrased so that the demiurge's dead body produces not just crops but the entire world, its distribution becomes even wider including Ancient Germanic mythology (the giant Ymin), Ancient Mesopotamian mythology (Marduk's female arch-

venerates long-distance movement of people and objects, including food crops imported from Meso America. Although the root *-hamba* thus occurs in many Bantu languages, especially along the Indian Ocean, it is not part of the proto-Bantu corpus (Meeussen 1980 and n.d.; Guthrie n.d.), and it may well be a loan from Austric, having travelled west on the wings of westward Sunda expansion, of which the colonisation of Madagascar has been the most tangible result. To this we may adduce Austric, specifically modern Indonesian *hamba*, ‘slave’; in South Central Africa the slave’s prime characteristic is that, having (involuntarily) *travelled* far, he consequently lives away from his kin hence without socio-political rights and resources.

That a Austric-Bantu linguistic relationship is far from an illusion, is suggested by the very word that inspired by Wilhelm Bleek (1827-1875) to name the Bantu linguistic family by that particular name: Bantu *-ntu*, ‘human’, cf. the virtually identical Austric *-taw* ‘human’. North Western Zambia (where the Ndembu live), and Western Central Zambia (where the Nkoya live, culturally and linguistically closely related to the Ndembu) are approximately equidistant from the Atlantic and Indian Oceans, where the transcontinental trade routes fizzle out to mere local capillaries (Fig. 2). Although from the late 18th century on, trade contacts in N.W. Zambia (including the Ndembu) were increasingly with the Atlantic west coast, throughout the second millennium CE the influence from the Indian Ocean (‘Swahili’) was more pervasive all over South Central Africa.

Also the material form of *Chihamba* would seem to link it to elsewhere in Africa and West Asia. In *Chihamba* the cult object (associated with death and rebirth, crops, and evoking the connecting between heaven and earth in the form of rain) is a an angular, roughly prismatic, object roughly the size of a human body, and covered in white cloth. White cloth as a major element of an ecstatic cult shrine is a recurrent element, in Western Zambia (where it also dominates the *bituma cult*, cf. van Binsbergen 1972 and 1981), and in Zimbabwe / Botswana / South Africa, in the context of the *sangoma* cult (van Binsbergen 2003a). In the times of the long-distance caravan trade such cloth was the standard offering for royal shrines. However, perhaps we can extend our comparison even further afield. In South Central Africa the colour white is primarily associated with death, and secondarily with Europeans; Victor Turner (1966) stressed how this colour is part of a symbolic triad with red and black, and in this context the reference is primarily milk and nurturation. Perhaps in continuity with the latter, throughout the Old World we find the colour white (and animals of that colour, especially aquatic birds) associated with primary gods of creation (e.g. Janus, Ganesha, Basajaun,



enemy Tīāmat, cf. Leviathān), Chinese (Pangu 盘古), Na Atibun of Gilbert Isl., Micronesia, Oceania. This makes it extremely unlikely that the *Chihamba* cult is a local Ndembu invention, rather than a peripheral adaptation and transformation of a major and central mytheme whose distribution all over the Old World suggests an origin at least going back to the early Neolithic. This does not preclude that specific New World mythical elements may be superimposed upon this substrate when, along with the new food crops of cassave/ maniok (*Manihot esculenta*) and maize (*Zea mays* L. ssp. *mays*), they travelled across the Atlantic Ocean from Meso-America. The literature illuminating what I believe to be the global mythological connections of Ndembu *Chihamba* point is extremely abundant, and I can only mention the barest selection: Bianchi 1971; Cotterell 1989; Frazer 1914; Griffiths 1980; Jacobsen 1970; Oldenburg 1969; Otto 1966; Saunders 1961; Tedlock 1985; Willis 1993; Young 1954. The transglobal cultural and specifically mythological connectivity on which such an analysis of *Chihamba* is based, may invite the scorn of fieldwork anthropologists pursuing a neo-classic paradigm (cf. Amselle 2001), yet it has considerable intersubjective backing as the emerging paradigm of long-range comparative mythology, cf. Witzel 2001 and van Binsbergen 2006b, 2006c.

even the biblical Noah), who usually have ceded their central place in the pantheon to mythologically more elaborate, later gods – typically, when this happens, the colour white changes meaning from cosmogonic to solar. Slight traces of such creation gods may be found in Africa. Yet the evidence is too scattered, and the alternative explanation (in the form of the participants making the explicit link with the white colour of American food crops) is too evident, than that we might convincingly interpret Zambian cults like *Chihamba* and *bituma* along the lines of primary creation gods.

However, striking parallels may be found for the angular form, the cloth-swathed nature and the demiurgical connotations of the *Chihamba* shrine. In the first place, after the separation of heaven and earth as the moment of cosmogony, the subsequent restoring of the connection between heaven and earth (through lightning, rain, the rainbow, a ladder, tower, rope, objects being thrown down etc.) is a dominant theme in relatively recent (Neolithic) mythologies of the Old World, and this trait also marks the mythologies of sub-Saharan Africa.²⁸ The theme is often elaborated in the form of a mythical character who, as son of the Sky God, as demiurge, embodies the connection between heaven and earth; usually he is a vegetation god, and usually his fate is tragic – like that of Osiris (killed by his brother), Tammuz (killed and locked in the underworld), Dionysus (torn apart by Titans who first lured him with toys), Jesus, and Husayn. In South Central Africa, parallels to the Ndembu demiurge Kavula (‘Rain Person’) whose ritual drama is *Chihamba*, are found, for instance, in the, allegedly murdered, Mwana Lesa figure of 19th century Central Zambia (Smith & Dale 1920; this figured inspired, but is not to be confused, with the murderously efficient 1920s witchfinder of the same name, alias Tomo Nyirenda, cf. Ranger 1975), and the Mbona martyr figure of Southern Malawi (Schoffeleers 1992).

Ethnographic parallels with the *Chihamba* shrine extend much further. Among the Manjaks of Guinea Bissau (van Binsbergen 1984, 1988) there is an annual festival celebrating the descend from heaven of the demiurge Cassara, son of the Sky God Nasinbatsi (‘King of Heaven’), and the scourge of witches; the festival marks the community’s annual cleansing from witchcraft prior to the rice-planting season. Cassara is dead when he reaches earth, and the festival commemorates his exploits in a ritual drama. His shrine is a funerary bier richly adorned with the funerary cloths for which the Manjaks are famous (although they are seldom publicly displayed and forever buried at funerals). The bier’s poles rest (like all such biers) on the heads of young male bearers in trance, and their movements identify witches, as a form of divination that also (like elsewhere in West Africa) is found in the context of mortal’s funerals. Except for the Ndembu emphasis on the colour white, the correspondences between Cassara and *Chihamba* are very striking, and also considering the central place which the Upper Guinea coast has occupied in the trans-Atlantic contacts (food crops, slaves) from the very beginning, I take it that the two cults are historically related – but in this case the connection is most probably from Africa to South America following the trail of the slave trade, and not the other way around. Incidentally, the Cassara shrine is virtually indistinguishable from the Great Father shrine among the Ndjuka communities established a few centuries ago by Maroons (runaway slaves) (cf. Thoden van Velzen & van Wetering 1988, front cover photograph). Halfway between the Manjaks and the Ndembu live the Yoruba of Nigeria, whose elaborate ritual culture includes the divinity and the mask of Egungun, God of Death. Angular

²⁸ Cf. van Binsbergen 2006b, 2006c; a detailed tabulation of general Old World, including sub-Saharan African mythological themes may be found in van Binsbergen 2007b.

because of its internal scaffolding of sticks, the Egungun mask is variable but often consists of richly textured and gaudily coloured cloth in which Arabising elements often seem to prevail. The mask represents the epiphany of benevolent spirits of the dead into the realm of the living, and reminds one of the St Nicolas ‘mask’ in NW European folklore. By a very far and wavering shot, I wonder whether the Mongolian, Buddhist *zor* portable shrines of a paper-covered scaffolding, again the centre of a ritual drama (Chen Ganglong 2006), may not be the far eastern outlier of a complex whose West Asian and North-West African representations might include the superficially Islamised *zar* cult in Egypt and the Sudan, first attested in the Arabian peninsula as late as the 19th century. I also wonder whether the Israelite Ark of the Covenant (which emulated Ancient Egyptian portable shrines being carried around for divination – much like among the Manjaks and the Ndjuka), their Tent of Assembly, and even the cloth-covered Holy Ka’aba at Mecca, may not all be remotely connected ramifications of the same tradition.²⁹ So might be the Ancient Egyptian portable *imiut*  shrine associated with Osiris : a death-and-rebirth magical assemblage consisting of a bowl with sacrificial blood, and a vertical pole draped with cloth, a leopard skin or a cow skin, and thus together the perfect evocation of the earth, the celestial pole and the star-spangled celestial vault (Stricker 1963f; Köhler 1975). And so might be the stones covered in swaddling cloths that, in Ancient Greek mythology, Rhea or her daughter Gaia gave her respective husband to devour instead of her children, until the youngest son violently put an end to this practice. Aniconic (imageless) stones, which may or may not be swaddled in cloth, and may or may not have meteoric connotations (again the connection between heaven and earth!) feature as representations of the divinity and as paladiums (communal sacred central identity symbols) of communities all over West Asia (cf. *bethyl*, *baytilia*)³⁰ and South Asia. Ever since the discrediting of diffusionism in the second quarter of the 20th century, the professional anthropologist’s gut reaction (cf. Amselle 2001) has been to dismiss the idea of any possible historical connection between such scattered Old-World attestations, and instead to appeal to postulated parallel workings of the human mind. However, the fact that in many other respects (genetics, linguistics, archaeology, comparative mythology) empirical research of the last few decades has repeatedly brought out converging and historically continuous patterns throughout the Old World *including* Africa, makes such insistence on the presentist, localist anthropological credo increasingly embarrassing.

Thus we can show the ‘world of the spirit’ among the Ndembu to be part of *a world history of spirit*. As an Africanist I am less equipped to make a similar argument for N. Alaska, but it is implied in the same overall genetics argument (now generally agreed on by specialists) which sees the New World peopled from Central Asia from Upper Palaeolithic times onward – in line not only with comparative mythology but particularly with long-range historical linguistics, which, since the 1980s, had distinguished a ‘macro-family’ of Dene-Sino-

²⁹ Harald von Sicard, whom I greatly respect as a pioneer tracing the global ramifications of the *luwe* mythical character with only one side to his body (von Sicard 1967), in a much more contentious book (1952) argued historical continuity between royal drums in South Central Africa, and the Ark of the Covenant of the Ancient Israelites. This idea may be reconsidered and further illuminate the range of variation of portable palladiums as well as their possible continuity in West Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, now that further evidence has made us somewhat more prepared to accept the presence of West Semitic / Israelite emigrants all over African soil (Williams 1930; Parfitt 1992; ‘Jews and Judaism in Africa’, n.d.; van Warmelo 1966), but also understand that they may be the closing phase of the much more comprehensive ‘Back into Africa’ movement from Asia since c. 15,000 Before Present.

³⁰ Fauth 1977.

guistics, which, since the 1980s, had distinguished a ‘macro-family’ of Dene-Sino-Caucasian speakers extending from East Asia (Sino-Tibetan) via the Bering Street to Arizona and New Mexico (Na-Dene speakers such as Apache and Navajo), with western outliers in West and South Asia (Caucasian languages, Burushaski) and even in Western Europe (Basque-speakers on the border between France and Spain). Such spilling-over of Central Asian populations to the New World, in combination with the Back into Africa movement from the same time and place, makes, incidentally, for considerable parallels between Native American and sub-Saharan African culture (e.g. in such relatively ancient and entrenched, even submerged fields as female puberty rites, games and divination, magic, animal symbolism, matrilineal kinship organisation, mythology). After the Ndembu, Edith Turner may have been more at home in N. Alaska than she actually realised.

What is important here is not whether the precise details of my proposed long-range symbolic, ritual and mythological ramifications of the *Chihamba* cult will stand up to elaborate empirical testing and further peer review; no doubt they need extensive correction. The overall point of transregional, even transcontinental connections of this cult, however, is certainly valid. And that implies that that cult is likely to represent, in its latter-day and peripheral form, notions of spirit (i.e. transcendence and mythological drama) that have a long, transcontinental history of cultural, mythological and religious innovation.

So local spirit traditions may be argued to belong to a world cultural history, and to derive much of their form, contents and meaning from these global connections. Now for the final step for my argument on spirit traditions and globalisation. I have suggested that, whereas today we may try to bring about (e.g. as anthropologists) a flow of spirit-centred beliefs and practices from peripheral communities (such as the Ndembu and the Inuit) to the global centres of the world, the more likely flow for such beliefs and practices is from global centres to peripheries. This is just not because world religions at global centres command incomparably more power than peripheral spirit traditions to capture appropriate media, to function as socially and symbolically attractive reference groups, to spread and proselytise. In my opinion, there is moreover an intricate relation between,

- on the one hand, a particular kind of worldview (including spirit beliefs) that may be summarised as ‘transcendence-centred’, and
- on the other hand, the capability of certain historic communities to rise to the position of global centres, and to retain that position, in the course of centuries and millennia (or, as is the more likely course of history) to pass on that position to other, adjacent communities that are largely the heirs to the original ones).³¹

It is common for human cultures to have beliefs concerning ‘spiritual’, partly non-sensorial forces as part of and in interplay with the sensorial world – as immanent forces which under certain conditions may be considered to detach from matter and thus be more fully transcendent, only to return to their original, more immanent state under normal conditions. Full transcendence, however, which can be thought to reside, permanently and by its

³¹ E.g. from Sumer to Babylonia to Assyria to Western Anatolia (with the empire formation under Tiglat Pileser III, Sargon II in the first quarter of the first millennium BCE), to Ionia and other parts of the Aegean region to Rome to Western Europe etc.

very nature, outside, and independently from, *the here and the now*,³² is a major deviation from humankind's common cultural form. Such transcendence is a major mutation of human thought; it only emerges and is only perpetuated under specific, exceptional historic circumstances. I consider such elaboration of transcendence as the highly productive, and historically absolutely decisive, effect of the emergence, in the Ancient Near East c. 5,000 years ago, of a peculiar package comprising *writing, the state, organised religion, and proto-science*. Admittedly, some measure of transcendence has always been implied in even the most primitive language of early Anatomically Modern Man – for the essence of language is that one is able to refer to what is beyond the here and the now, i.e. to have more or less stable words and syntactic forms that are valid not just for the one situation in which they are used for the first time, but that continue to be applicable, beyond that here and now, to myriad other situations involving the same speakers and listeners, and even others. However, it is only with the emergence (very late in the few million years of human cultural history, and only in a handful of – interdependent – places: Elam, Sumer, Egypt, probably involving an important historical connection with China) that it became possible to, transcendently, define and control, through written decrees, written wills, laws and trade records, vicariously and through virtualisation, situations separated from the here and the now by tens, even hundreds of years and by tens, even hundreds, sometimes even thousands, of kilometres. There are many indications that shamanism (as a much older knowledge tradition than our writing-state-priesthood-science package) prepared the way for this knowledge mutation: that the roles of king, priest and scientist were historic elaborations of the role of shaman – emerging in Central Asia c. 20,000 years BP, and from there spreading all over the world, including Africa, Upper Palaeolithic Europe, and the Americas, and thus laying a global substratum of common immanent spirit beliefs. However, it is particularly (perhaps even, in the last analysis, exclusively) in literate contexts that full virtualising transcendence can be sustained, and can generate such socio-political power that the state becomes possible, with organised religion and proto-science as its two, closely intertwined, manifestations. There is also an economic angle to this: typical of the specialist domain of writing-state-priesthood-science, is that it is essentially non-productive, hence parasitical upon more materially productive sectors of the same society; so a considerable level of surplus production is needed for the domain of routinised transcendence to establish and perpetuate itself – which³³ may be an important reason why in Africa, with its comparatively old and famished soils, the domain of writing-state-priesthood-science, although initially highly successful in a little corner of Africa (Ancient Egypt), and repeatedly (re-)introduced in many parts of the continent, has always been extremely precarious, defective, short-lived. Even today, true transcendence (e.g. the idea of natural death that is due to divine providence and not to human malice; and the idea of the state and political/institutional office as the embodiment of universal values not to be personalised for particularist advantage) tends to be rare and non-viable in sub-Saharan Africa. It is in literate, politically developed centres with organised religion and (proto-) science that 'spirit', as a separate category, is likely to develop into a category of transcendence in its own right, and it is from here that transcendent, and particularly elaborate, spirit beliefs spread out to conquer the rest of the world.

³² Not to be confused with the Kantian transcendental, which, as I have explained, refers to *a priori format* of thought but not to the contents of a substantive idea.

³³ I owe this suggestion to my colleague Han van Dijk.

This is not to say that *all* spirit traditions in the world hail from the Ancient Near Eastern writing-state-priesthood-science package – far from it; but it is to draw attention to the fact that, with that package, particularly powerful and impressive spirit beliefs have emerged which in many ways had a considerable impact far outside their original setting, despite localising transformation when arrived at their peripheral destiny. For instance, detailed studies of African magic and divination suggest that a considerable part of what is posing as traditional African today, is in fact a localising transformation of magical and religious forms found in West Asia and Europe, in Islam and Christianity (van Binsbergen, in press).

This may help to define your project somewhat more precisely. The peripheral spirit traditions that you, Edith, have been championing in the North Atlantic world today, appear to be forms of spiritual thought that have retained more of an older shamanistic inspiration,

1. either because they have *never* been touched by the more transcendence-orientated global centres where the package writing-state-priesthood-science has been dominant for several millennia,
2. or because, after having been remotely touched by such centres, and having initially been influenced by these centres' transcendence-orientated spirituality, they have localised and transformed this loan to a more immanentist form, largely detached from writing-state-priesthood-science.

Regardless of whether in fact (1) or (2) reflects the actual historical sequence, such peripheral spirit traditions remind us of ways of constructing and managing our life worlds (*remind us of spiritual technologies!*) that – *perhaps precisely because of their immanentism, which keeps them (by contrast with transcendence) down to earth as a viable locus for spiritual technologies still in touch with materiality?* – may well constitute useful knowledge, even valid knowledge, to complement such knowledge as is available in these global centres (under the familiar package of writing-state-priesthood-science).

So my question to you at this point is twofold:

1. *How would you respond to my alternative model, according to which some of what we take to be spirit tradition, including those in N.W. Zambia and N. Alaska, may not so much be elements of peripheral societies ready to invade the North Atlantic and the global world at large, but, quite the other way around, are in themselves signs of the global world invading peripheral local communities – signs and products of (proto-) globalisation?*
2. *And secondly, whatever the flow of indebtedness, how would you characterise the added value these peripheral spiritual traditions may have in the modern world and for the North Atlantic region?*



the *Kavula / Chihamba* shrine (Turner 1962)



bier divination among the Ndjuka Maroons of Surinam, second half 20th century³⁴



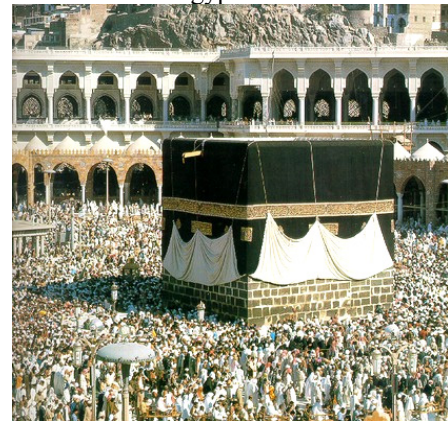
Egungun Yoruba spirit of the dead³⁵



Adept ridden by a *Zar* spirit in the outskirts of Cairo, modern Egypt © Nilsson³⁶



imiut in front of the composite god Ptah-Soker-Osiris

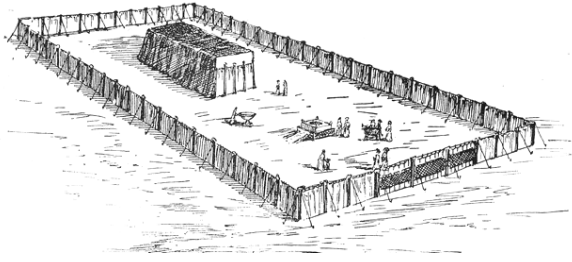


The Holy Ka'aba³⁷

³⁴ © Thoden van Velzen & W. van Wetering, cf. 1991.

³⁵ <http://www.egbaegbado.org/egba14.htm>

³⁶ <http://nmlsson.free.fr/zar3/zar-3.htm>



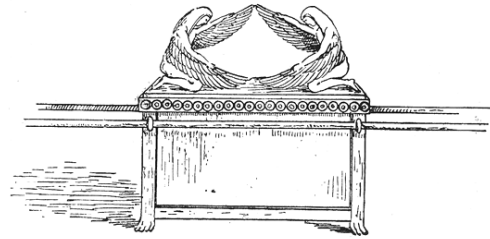
artists's impression of the Ancient Israelites' Tent of Assembly (Goote & Wielemaker 1912)



sacrifice to Mbona in Khulubvi, Nsanje, Malawi ca.1970³⁸



cassava/maniok: dried tubers⁴⁰



artists's impression of the Ancient Israelites' Ark of the Covenant (Goote & Wielemaker 1912)



The aniconic Jyotir Linga Shiva shrine of Grineshwar, India³⁹



cassava maniok: the plants⁴¹

15. In the light of the interviewer's own spirituality (which is only partially informed by *sangomahood*) and own worldview, once more the question as to the material grounds for affirming the reality of spirit

In extensive preparation for the next question – and also to take away an impression of naivety which my short oral presentation at this Symposium may have produced – I am now going to indicate the roots of my own spirituality today, and how I see these related to my *sangoma* practice.

³⁷ <http://faculty.maxwell.syr.edu/gaddis/HST210/Dec4/Default.htm>
³⁸ © C. Zonneveld, at <http://www.stichtingmlambe.nl/fotos.htm>
³⁹ http://www.sacredsites.com/asia/india/shiva_shrines.html
⁴⁰ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Casava.jpg>
⁴¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Manihot_esculenta_dsc07325.jpg

For more than twenty years I resisted, in the field, the lures of ecstatic religion on which I had specialised. When finally, in Botswana in 1990, I did submit to a combination of host community pressures and my own inner desire, and followed the call to become a *sangoma*, it was (as I later realised, and analysed)⁴² for three complementary reasons:

- (a) charitable sociability, i.e. a practical application of the philosophical principle⁴³ that what so many people believe, must be taken seriously and at least deserves the benefit of doubt
- (b) political solidarity: Southern Africa was still in the clutches of *apartheid*, historic local beliefs had for decades been suppressed from public visibility let alone recognition, and in this marginalisation one White Dutch/Afrikaner person's crossing the line and personally, through publicly undergoing initiation, affirming the validity of such beliefs, was news that captured the town like bushfire; it earned me the ostracism from the part of the local White population, and for Africans clearly represented an act of political correctness of the first order
- (c) an epistemological reason: my rejection of the dominant, reductionist and dismissive paradigm in religious anthropology, and instead my growing awareness of the wider, universal validity of (some of the) knowledge produced under *sangomahood*.

Points (a) and (b) still stand, but of course they do not constitute a reason to accept the reality of spirit. On the contrary: social and political niceties tend to conceal, rather than reveal, the truth. So this leaves us with point (c) as far as my own experience of the reality of spirit is concerned.

I have gone out of my way to give⁴⁴ adequate demonstration of the wider, universal non-local validity of (some of the) knowledge produced under *sangomahood* (i.e. point (c)), of the kind that should satisfy Skeptics – until I found out (in a painful episode involving the Leo Apostel Centre for the Philosophy of Science in Brussels) that the Skeptics' position amounts, not to healthy programmatic and empirical Scepticism, but to entrenched, immutable, and aggressive truth claims about the structure of the world, the definitive triumph of today's natural sciences to have completely revealed that structure once for all, and hence the impossibility of telepathy, clairvoyance, psychokinesis etc. This Skeptic position is being maintained in the face of extensive empirical and theoretical counter arguments. The paranormal phenomena in question have been well recorded under excellent experimental situations, to such high levels of statistical significance that they would make any PhD candidate in experimental psychology envious – and any PhD committee, for that matter. Moreover, they may well be explained as implications of straight-forward quantum mechanics under the Einstein-Rosen-Podolsky equations, which bring out that any object has (among other, far more conspicuous and far better studied effects such as gravitation and magnetism) an immediate effect on any other object wherever in the universe, regardless of distance, not diminished by distance, and simultaneously.⁴⁵

⁴² Cf. van Binsbergen 1991, 2003a.

⁴³ Cf. Lepore 1993; Malpas 1988; McGinn 1977.

⁴⁴ Especially in van Binsbergen 2003e.

⁴⁵ Cf. Einstein et al. 1931; Einstein et al. 1935; Bohm & Aharonov 1957; Aerts 1985; Bohm & Hiley 1993; Bohm 1980.

What more does one need in order to explain successful divination, and so many other paranormal phenomena? Time and time again I have been astounded when my *sangoma* divination turns out to produce valid knowledge about the life details of total strangers. Shocking as this is, it is, at the same time, about all I – by training an empirical social scientist, and a capable statistician – have concretely in hand as far as empirical, scientific proof of the validity of *sangoma* knowledge is concerned – proof of the kind that would satisfy my high standards. I am, perhaps, a Skeptic myself, and although I cannot escape the conclusion that my *sangoma* divination produces valid knowledge, I do not necessarily accept the *sangomas*' own professional explanation (in terms of the direct intervention of omniscience and omnipresent dead ancestors) as the only explanation. I would rather attribute paranormal phenomena to normal, scientifically demonstrable (which does not necessarily mean: recognised by today's North Atlantic science) characteristics of human beings and of the world at large. In this regard my working hypothesis is that of a universe all of whose parts are densely interconnected and hence, in principle, interdependent and inter-informed; so our individual mind is not closed in itself but porous, so is our body, we should speak of body-minds anyway. With these modest assumptions it would not be exceptional to have extra-sensory knowledge of other persons or places – the extraordinary thing would be that our modern mind filters out most of that knowledge unless under special circumstances (when we are in mortal danger, deeply in love, or engaging in technologies of altered consciousness through dancing, drumming, etc.). This interconnectedness at a cosmic scale is awesome and beautiful; the most comprehensive framework for producing, nurturing, ending, and rendering meaningful, the individual human existence; the true basis of my innermost spirituality and my poetry; the common fount from which my wife and I fill and refill our marriage; and the only credible comfort I give my children and my patients when in existential need. Yet this interconnected universe is not a personal entity, and (despite whatever suggestions there are to the contrary, see below) it does not consciously and lovingly respond even if I were to pray to it, which I do not – I pray to my ancestors, to the Virgin Mary, to Sidi Mhammad (a local North African dead saint whose adept I became in 1968 and in whose honour sacrificial meals are regularly prepared in our household), and occasionally to Our Father through the prayer of that name; and almost daily I bring little offerings of light and oil to several Buddha बुद्ध, Ganesha गणेश, Shiva शिव, Guan Yin 觀音 etc. shrines all around my premises, but these scarcely receive articulate prayer except *Aum nama shivaya ॐ नमः शिवाय*,⁴⁶ an affirmation of humble rapture in the face of the universe. I celebrate the universe in every instance of beauty, harmony and knowledge that comes my way, and the whole of my life has been in pursuit of such celebration, with infinitely greater fulfilment than my utterly unhappy childhood had made me expect.

⁴⁶ I realise that I am inconsistent in the rendering of names and phrases in their original scripts: why South and East Asian, and Northwest African (Ancient Egyptian), but not West Asian (Arabic, Hebrew), nor South European (Greek – even in Latin transcriptions), whereas these are more readily accessible for a North Atlantic intellectual? The point of using the exotic scripts at all is to remind the reader of the act of North Atlantic appropriation, what anthropologists would call *emic*. Probably in the final version I must use all non-European fonts whenever they apply – or resign to the fact that the ostentatious use of exotic fonts does not truly alter the violence of intellectual appropriation.

Then, to what extent does my spirituality hinge on my being, and affirming to be, a practising *sangoma*? The answer is: only on the surface, as an imperfect idiom to convey things that, without such an idiom however perfect, could not be conveyed at all.

Of course, I could cite many stimulating anecdotes about the work of the spirit in my fieldwork, my *sangoma* practice, and the life of my patients. But this is rather like any other religious anthropologist, and although constituting an under-researched variety of anthropological intra-disciplinary folklore, such narratives do not in the least qualify as proof of the reality of spirit. Many years of fieldwork, in North and sub-Saharan Africa, have managed to implant in me a typical villager's notion (not always active, and sometimes eclipsed by the mask of egotistic social forms of brilliance and competition academic life has forced me to wear) of humble dependence on higher forces, a sense of gratitude, and a practical sense of ritual obligation. I often give in to this, pour libations at my *sangoma* shrine, pray there (sometimes with my family), cast my divinatory tablets, make snuff offerings, etc. But (except perhaps in the initial years, in the early 1990s, when my *sangomahood* was still a novelty) I have never been sure whether these ritual actions, including my practice as *sangoma*, correspond materially to some objective ontological reality out there (i.e. *the reality of spirit*), or whether, on the contrary, it is simply an elaborate placebo. I am not in the least concerned about the strong probability that it is merely the latter. If a placebo, it serves well, allowing me and others to address and placate the more credulous, more infantile layers in my own personality and in the personalities of my patients; and of course it is not just African and Alaskan spirit notions that address these infantile notions and project upon them the infant's utterly personalised yet magical outlook – much the same happens, in my opinion, in world religions, including Christianity. These layers must be taken eminently seriously, because it is here that more affect, more pain, and more tyranny is invested than anywhere else in the body-mind. Therefore it stands to reason that expert ritual attention involving these layers – through the proper, time-honoured manipulation of symbols and paraphernalia, which is then to be tailored to the measure of the individual patient – may have a cathartic, sometimes dramatically positive, effect on the body-mind as a whole. Unfortunately my knowledge of religious anthropology, epistemology and psychoanalysis is probably greater than my expertise in *sangoma*, after all. So whenever I use my *sangoma* idiom to bring myself, and my patients, to a point of greater illumination, resignation and balance, pressing into service prayer, sacrifice, dancing and divination to reach that point, I cannot escape the censoring self-awareness, in the back of my mind, that I am feeding my childish mind-layer with titbits of totally imaginary infantile-lust material. Such action in itself does not prove the reality of spirit, nor does it require my belief in such a reality. As Laplace is reported to have said in reply to Napoleon when chided for the absence of the Creator in the former's work on mathematical cosmology,

‘Je n'avais pas besoin de cette hypothèse-là.’ (I did not need to make such an assumption).⁴⁷

I was a poet even before I became an anthropologist, I have remained a publishing poet, and the idea of rendering the world slightly more manageable by the mere poetics of *sangoma* eminently appeals to me, even (or rather: especially) if this means that the forms of *sangoma* cannot be taken literally or at face value.

⁴⁷ ‘Laplace’, n.d.

Allow me to take these poetics still further, although now I must pick my step very carefully. I would be lying if I denied that often (though far from always) my spiritual ministrations appear to be followed, in time, by specific occurrences that are rather beyond expectation, yet are more or less in line with what is most needed or desired. By the same token, neglect of these spiritual ministrations over a considerable period of time appears to be typically followed, in time, by occurrences that are highly undesirable, and equally unexpected. Note my careful phrasing which seeks to avoid any claim of a causal relationship in the way of *post hoc ergo propter hoc*. However, the sequences of events I describe here are precisely how my *sangoma* healers/teachers told me how it was going to be. Their causal standard explanation in terms of satisfied or irate ancestors may yet have a point – enough to repeat it before my own patients. Yet my own innermost interpretation of such events sees the idiom in terms of ancestors as merely a convenient, stereotyped, comic-books way of addressing more fundamental truths – even though I oblige by maintaining some regularity in my spiritual duties, making a point of going to my *sangoma* shrine especially at peak times of celebration or grief, and intensifying my practice after the tell-tale signs of negative events – like my very serious and protracted illness last year. Not only before my patients but also before my own infant’s soul I keep up the idiom of interaction with ancestors, but in fact I believe that something else is the matter. As I wholeheartedly and with gusto play at addressing cosmic connectivities through the idiom of *sangoma*, it is as if an echo of that play is refracted back to me, through some unexpected and invisible crack in space and time. It is as if the universe is largely, but not for the full 100%, governed by immutable natural laws. It is as if the universe turns us a different face, each time we approach it with a different paradigm. When we harness the universe in a fully-fledged, state-of-the-art experimental setup of a physics or psychology laboratory (or, which is rather my own experience and expertise, when I test observable socio-cultural behaviour by some utterly formal mathematical model), it largely obliges and largely produces the straightforward, unproblematic stochastic distributions we could predict on theoretical grounds; hardly any chance of capturing any paranormal phenomena, in this situation – and if we do (as several parapsychologists of the greatest integrity appear to have done, especially for telepathy and clairvoyance), the test setup would turn out not to satisfy the highest methodological requirements, since in fact no test setup ever does anyway. Under laboratory conditions, the universe *largely* complies with the predictions based on so-called natural laws, but not quite: much of twentieth-century physics has been about the discovery of fundamental unpredictability, in which the universe showed itself to be a triadic tangle, a collusion between the object under study, the observing subject, and the measuring apparatus; here one will learn both humility and interconnectedness. As one learns humility and interconnectedness under what I have called ‘*sangoma* science’: you must go through the rites, put on at least part of the *sangoma* uniform, pour the libations and the snuff offerings, energise the air around with a sacred fly switch and saturate the divinatory apparatus with whatever imperceptible ‘fluidum’ is produced in the process, and when you thus address the universe with a very different paradigm,⁴⁸ it will turn you a very different face, one in which veridical extrasensory

⁴⁸ Yet the *sangoma* paradigm is historically related to that of modern natural science: for both converge – along trajectories of transmission and innovation that become increasingly clear – to the proto-sciences of extispicy and star lore in Ancient Mesopotamia. When I felt that my becoming a *sangoma* had subjectively disqualified me from fieldwork anthropology, two ways out opened up for me. In the first place: gradually, in an attempt to vindicate *sangoma* knowledge and to understand what becoming a *sangoma* meant as an apparently self-destructive turning point in my yet so success-

perception and a whole range of further paranormal phenomena are matters of course, to be taken for granted provided one cultivates a receptive, resigned, *sangoma*-professional state of mind and does not push, wilfully, for results. This is nothing less than, in St Paul's words, the faith that can remove mountains (1 Cor. 13, 2) – an expectation of occasional, capricious miracles triggered by human thought. Other spirit traditions from other parts of the world and other periods may trigger the universe to turn yet a different face. One gets the feeling that even more is involved here than the triadic collusion of subject, object and measuring apparatus – it is as if the world is actively being shaped by the ritual, as if the ritual is world-creating not just in a symbolic but also in a literal sense, and if subsequently that creation, under conditions that are as yet mysterious, may occasionally take on a life of its own and produce material manifestations normally exclusively reserved for matter that is not dependent upon human thought. Here I am both affirming and denying the reality of spirit, and that, to me, is a particularly comforting thought, matching – hopefully – of the kind of occasional irrationality that I (*pace* Kant, Newton and Einstein) take to be the universe's innermost structure.

Now, when I admit that other spirit traditions from other parts of the world and other periods may trigger the universe to turn yet a different face, this incidentally means that I do not have to doubt the integrity and veridicity of Edith Turner's account of ectoplasm visibly emanating from the body of a Ndembu patient in trance, or of a giant nocturnal animal phantasm audibly plunging down in the backyard of a N. Alaskan home and leaving its imprints there, in the night of its calendrical celebration. My quarrel is not with the phenomenon but with the interpretation. I think these are figments of the human imagination taking (the appearance of?) material form, spilling over into materiality, and freezing there. If this is to be called 'spirit', so be it. But to me it is not sign of a transcendent reality beyond our world, not an invitation to go down on our knees and pay homage to this mere effluence of frozen energy, although ectoplasm has always inspired me with mortal fear. In their unmistakable *materialisation*⁴⁹ I would regard these paranormal things (if they do pass the test of reliable observation) primarily as manifestation of the immanent capabilities built into the structure of the universe. For these capabilities to be triggered we need the influence (probably mediated through some specific spiritual technology, such as *sangoma* or *Chihamba*) of human thought as (for the moment, and as far as we know) the universe's most complex product. In humankind, the universe has taken consciousness of itself, and which therefore humankind is not unlikely to have most, or even all, of the still largely inconceivable capabilities of the universe at its disposal. If our imagination, under the careful and complex technology of ritual, may produce the materialisations that sends shudders up our spine, perhaps it may also be similarly powerful when it projects the image of personal, caring, and manipulable social beings onto the universe and produce an echo of divine or ancestral providence, of hopes selectively fulfilled and fears selectively allayed; or when it projects the manipulative wishful thinking of magic. There are indications that events like this happen all the time, at a minor scale, but

ful anthropological career, I started on the path of epistemological and knowledge-political reflection, which in 1998 earned me the Rotterdam chair of intercultural philosophy. The second strategy was that I started on a series of library research projects seeking, initially, to identify the transcontinental, long-range roots of the divination system (apparently not of local origin) I had learned in Botswana – and gradually extending to encompass the whole of Anatomically Modern Humans' cultural history; cf. van Binsbergen 2007.

⁴⁹ A pun on the well-known parapsychological terms, cf. von Schrenck Notzing 1913.

again, for me such a distorting mirror of the human consciousness is no reason to believe in a personal god or a personalised universe as an objective reality.

Edith, what I see as the main problem underlying your attempt to vindicate peripheral spirit traditions and introduce them to the North Atlantic mainstream, of anthropology and of worldview at large, is that your project is still predicated on a conventional dichotomy, not so much of body and mind, but of spirit or energy on the one hand, matter on the other. It is the sheer appearance of *materiality*, in the Chihamba blob of ectoplasm and in the N. Alaska empirical signs (sound and soil impressions) of the animal phantasm, that bothered you most and that makes you believe you are on to something good. But why fuss over this spilling over of energy into some apparently frozen, material form? Nuclear physics, quantum mechanism, the theory of relativity have seen to it that, for almost a century now, physicists have completely done away with the dichotomy between matter and energy, which still divided Newton and Huygens in the 17th century, fighting over the corporeal versus the wave nature of light. What at a macro scale manifests itself under the appearance of matter, rather than waves of energy, is merely waves in a slightly different form – and if it is waves, they are bound to be interpenetrable, interacting, and extending to the very edges of the universe. It is not the spiritual, but the material that constitutes the phantasm in our naked-eye observations, and if we could bring ourselves to dissolve the images of bounded, corporeal materiality into just another bundle of waves, everything would fall into place.

Now, after this exceedingly long and personal introduction, the actual question can be short. Spirit beliefs outside the North Atlantic region are deserving of our loyalty, because of the global politics of knowledge which has, so far, largely discredited indigenous knowledge outside the North Atlantic, and because of the principle of cognitive charity. *But is there also a substantial, material ground to assume the reality of spirit in the sense of a manifestation of personalised transcendence? Or could you agree with me that any spirituality based on spirit beliefs is, in the last analysis, a mere convenient idiom to name, visualise and personalise, forces that our spiritual technologies conjure up and that are well within the range of the universe's immanent capabilities?*

16. The healer: agent or catalyst

Allow me one final and straightforward question on healing, which is after all one of the two pillars of our Symposium. Do you feel that the healer is the active agent in healing, or that she is merely a catalyst merely helping things to happen?

In both cases, healing would be a socio-ritual technology of intervention in the body-mind, but as active agent the healer could be supposed to rely more on unique personal qualities such as a physical aptitude to emanate healing power or otherwise to influence to body-mind of patients; whereas in the catalytic conception more emphasis would be laid on the, apparently typical, triadic relationships already highlighted above.

At Edith's clever initiative, it was democratically decided at our Symposium (by a vote of hands – nearly all from non-healers) that the politically correct way of looking at this matter is to deny any active intercession on the part of the healer, and to conceive of her as a mere catalyst. Under group pressure, and in my servile role as interviewer, I could not bring myself to represent the minority view. Yet, personally I tend to the opinion that the healer is not just a catalyst but that she has an exceptionally great talent, as well as the ritual-

technological learning, to produce, in the natural world, such echo-effects of the human mind as may bring about, not just fantasms and ectoplasm freezing into materiality, but also mental and even organic rearrangements that amount to an enhanced state of health.

Conclusion

With these questions I believe to have sympathetically delineated the discussion space around Edith Turner's project, in a manner that seeks to strike balance between my affirmation as a practising *sangoma*, my going beyond spirit notions in my own spirituality, my critical instrumentarium as an intercultural philosopher, and my empirical work in the anthropology and history of religion. Meanwhile, in some of the questions I have taken the opportunity to bring out my own current and evolving thinking about *sangomahood*, as part of a project that is similar to Edith Turners, yet essentially different. Imperfect and one-sided in its present form, I hope to rewrite this piece into a standard review essay in the near future.

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