

# Reconciliation

Ideas and procedures constituting the African social technology of shared and recognised humanity

## 11.1. Introduction

‘Reconciliation (theology) means in general: the lifting of enmity and the restoration of peace. Usually this effect cannot be brought about fully by compensation of the evil perpetrated; in addition is required forgiving of guilt and foregoing retaliation. In Christian ethics the genuine (readiness to) reconciliation with enemies has always been regarded as a sign of love and humaneness (for example Mt. 5: 43f). The opposite applies when the reconciliation, or the readiness to reconciliation, is insincere. That is the case if reconciliation is desired for other reasons than the restoration of right and love, if contradictions are merely covered up and if aggressive feelings are not genuinely resolved and integrated.’<sup>1</sup>

The above quotation offers a fair summary of the Judeo-Christian conception of reconciliation. Van Kessel, the Dutch theologian who wrote this as part of an encyclopaedia entry, shows considerable insight into the dynamics of conflict. In his article he stresses that reconciliation should not come too late or too early: for conflict has not only negative, but also positive, effects on people and groups, and we should guard against less noble motives for reconciliation, such as cowardice. In many religions, and especially in Judaism, the author goes on, reconciliation as a concept addresses relationships not only between people but also between humans and the supernatural: the Day of Atonement, which, among other things, involves

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<sup>1</sup> The original text:

‘Verzoening (theologie) betekent in het algemeen: opheffing van vijandschap en herstel van vrede. Doorgaans kan dit niet volledig bereikt worden door compensatie van aangedaan kwaad, maar is daarvoor ook vergeving van schuld en afzien van vergelding noodzakelijk. In de christelijke ethiek is waarachtige (bereidheid tot) verzoening met vijanden steeds gezien als kenmerk van liefde en humaniteit (o.a. Matt. 5: 43vv.) Het tegendeel geldt, als verzoening(sbereidheid) onwaarachtig is. Dat is het geval, als verzoening om andere redenen dan rechtsherstel en liefde wordt gewild, als tegenstellingen alleen maar worden toegedeckt en agressieve gevoelens niet werkelijk worden opgelost en geïntegreerd.’ (van Kessel 1975; my translation).

dismissing the scapegoat into the desert.<sup>1</sup> There reconciliation is primarily with God and presupposes an awareness of God's forgiveness, and moreover repentance, conversion, and a change of behaviour. Christianity, van Kessel continues, builds on these basic ideas, defining the decisive reconciliation between God and men as the redemption brought by Christ.

Thus from the Jewish-Christian orientation of North Atlantic culture, a specific, and historically important interpretation has been given to the concept of reconciliation. Yet reconciliation is very far from primarily or exclusively a Christian concept. The society of Israel in the late second and in the first millennium BCE reflected in its social organisation, in many respects, the societies of other Semitic-speaking peoples and of the Ancient Near East in general. The patterns of conflict settlement that have been sanctified in the Jewish-Christian tradition have more or less secular parallels in the Near East and North Africa.<sup>2</sup> I would go even further and claim that reconciliation is an essential aspect of all human relationships, both in primary human relations based on face-to-face interaction, and in group relationships of a political, religious and ethnic nature that encompass a large number of people. As in the Christian theological conception of reconciliation, in the religion of many societies the theme of interpersonal reconciliation is complemented by that of the reconciliation between man and god by mean of ritual, prayer and sacrifice.

In this chapter I intend to present a preliminary reflection on reconciliation. For this purpose, the data have to be gleaned from various sections of cultural anthropology. I have primarily derived my inspiration from my own researches over the years, in various parts of Africa south of the Sahara and in North Africa, on group processes in small-scale social contexts, and on the role of ritual, therapy and litigation in those contexts.

The self-evident attention of social scientists, especially of anthropologists, for processes of social accommodation, conflict regulation, reconciliation, in small-scale social contexts means that many of us have been researching reconciliation, along with the related topics, from a comparative angle without deeming it necessary to establish a formal anthropology of reconciliation. Some forty years ago such pioneers as Max Gluckman and Louis Coser<sup>3</sup> had to realise that the obsession with regulation, integration, consensus and institutionalisation, under the then dominant paradigm of structural functionalism, had prevented the social sciences from developing a sub-discipline which could do justice to everyday experience: the study of social conflict. The preoccupation with processes of reconciliation as an implicit anthropological field of study has become possible by a fundamental shift that occurred in anthropology in the middle of the twentieth century, especially on the initiative of Max Gluckman. Because of that shift, the study of institutions ('society as a fixed scenario that is faithfully acted out by the actors, who in themselves are

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<sup>1</sup> Lev. 16: 1f.

<sup>2</sup> Gellner 1963, 1969; van Binsbergen 1980a, 1980b, 1985b, and forthcoming (c).

<sup>3</sup> Gluckman 1954, 1955, 1963, 1965; Coser 1956, 1961.

mutually replaceable<sup>3</sup>) gave way to the *extended case method*: society as the largely contingent resultant of the historicity of micro-political process.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile extended case research has developed into a very subtle and widely used anthropological tool. Following the increasing presence of violence in small-scale and large-scale social and political situations anywhere in the world, including North Atlantic society, we have seen, during the last one and a half decades, the emergence of a social science of violence.<sup>2</sup> It is time for an anthropology of reconciliation.<sup>3</sup> This not only reflects the increasing violence inflicted by national states, ethnic groups, citizens, men and women, elders and youth, upon themselves and each other; but also the context of massive socio-political movements as conceived in broader and more forward-looking terms than just violence alone: the formation of the European Union half a century after the most comprehensive and most disruptive war that Europe and the world have ever known; the incorporation, in Europe again, of the massive influx – again unprecedented in history – of intercontinental immigrants with their own somatic, cultural and religious specificities; the contemporary experience of being constantly invaded by information concerning large-scale violent conflict elsewhere in the world; and, most recently, the increased hostility between the USA-dominated North Atlantic region, and the world of Islam, creating scenes of violence and suffering in Palestine/Israel, Somalia, the USA, Iraq, and Afghanistan.

Given my specific expertise I opt to choose as the perspective of my argument not the macro-reconciliation of large social groups in the context of civil war, ethnic war and genocide, which Africa has seen so abundantly in the course of the last few decades of the twentieth century; instead I shall explore the micro processes that take place at the level of the village society, or of a group of neighbours within an urban quarter.

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<sup>1</sup> Van Velsen 1969, 1971; Turner 1968a.

<sup>2</sup> From among Africanist studies of violence I mention: Abbink 1995; Abbink *et al.* 1996; Beinart & Ranger 1992; Buijtenhuijs 1994; de Lame 1996; Devisch 1995a; Ellis 1995, 1999, 2000; Fisiy & Geschiere 1996; Geschiere & Fisiy 1994; Lan 1985; Le Roy & von Trotha 1992; Lemarchand, 1994; Longmann 1995; Malkki 1995; Mbembe 1988; Minnaar *et al.* 1992; Reynolds 1990; Richards 1996; Simonse 1992; van Beek 1988; van Binsbergen 1996d; Werbner 1991. To these may be added as general social science and philosophical reflections: Aya 1990; Bax 1995; Boehm 1984; Campbell & Gibbs 1986; Feldman 1991; Hamerton-Kelly 1987; Kapferer 1988; Krohn-Hansen 1994; Marsh & Campbell 1982; Riches 1986; Ross 1986; Scheffler 1991; Zulaika 1989.

<sup>3</sup> In the context of the present book, which seeks to formulate anthropologically-based *prolegomena* towards a philosophy of interculturality, such an anthropology of reconciliation amounts also to a philosophy of reconciliation; cf. Bernasconi 1986. Indications for a theology of reconciliation in the African contexts may be gleaned from: Hasenhüttl 1991.

## 11.2. An attempt to define reconciliation

### 11.2.1. Explorations

In the first place it should be clear that a necessary condition for reconciliation is the following: explicit recognition by the parties concerned, that there is an specific, explicitly expressed conflict. This is less self-evident than it appears. Many conflicts and oppositions in society are partially implicit and partially concealed from the actors' consciousness. Many overt conflicts do not in fact revolve around the stakes that are apparently being mediated, but on underlying stakes that remain partially unexpressed and that are unclear to at least part of the combating actors. Reconciliation is only possible if the conflict is clearly and publicly discussed by those involved, and such discussion creates a clarity that may well have a beneficial influence on future relations, also because previously unexpressed contradictions have found an overt expression that allows them to be taken into account in the social process much more readily.

Moreover, reconciliation is a creative social act of rearrangement and reinterpretation. This must be understood in the following sense: if available legal rules would have been self-evidently and simply applicable to the case, the conflict would not have arisen and there would have been no question of reconciliation. Probably reconciliation always resides in the recognition that firm rules are not sufficient. Dropping those rules is an acknowledgement of shared humanity and therefore creates the central condition for community, for society. This means that reconciliation is perpendicular to the normative, the institutionalised: it provides the additional cohesion that makes community and society possible. In this way reconciliation constitutes society. Hence also the fact that a confession of guilt needs certainly not always be a condition for reconciliation, or a necessary part of reconciliation.

Reconciliation therefore is not so much the alternative to conflict, but the transformation of conflict, and one that makes it possible both to define clearly the stakes of the conflict and to adopt a relative view of these stakes in the light of a larger good, pointing towards the future and towards a wider community than just the parties involved in the conflict.

Reconciliation is emphatically not the application of formal normative rules from a society's cultural orientation; it is not the result of a fixed procedure or a fixed scenario, but it consists in the creation of a framework within which those rules can acquire an added value of inclusivity, flexibility, transcendence.

In this process it becomes manifest what people feel to be the most fundamental basis of their social life. This can be many different things, for instance:

- the recognition of a shared humanity; then reconciliation implicitly implies that a particular conception of the human person is being mediated
- the recognition of the need to terminate the conflict in the interest of future generations

- recognition of a shared identity
- recognition of shared responsibility vis-à-vis the supernatural.

These themes do not in the least rule out an element of self-interest in bringing about, and accepting, reconciliation. Probably, on this point, the anthropological discourse on reconciliation takes a distance from the theological discourse, which centres on integrity and authenticity and considers self-interest in reconciliation disqualifying.

The shared humanity that is restored, and expressed, in reconciliation, also makes possible a return to other forms of contact, which in their turn foreshadow future possibilities of reconciliation. If the reproduction of society, to a considerable extent, takes place by means of reconciliation between groups, then it stands to reason that other reproductive elements may serve as an expression of such reconciliation as is being reached. Much reconciliation is accompanied by the consumption of food and drink, which often may be interpreted locally in terms of a sacrifice to supernatural beings overseeing the reconciliation process, but which may also be simply recognised as the conditions for the maintenance and the reproduction of the human body. Collective consumption in this manner is an expression of the same shared humanity that is being implied in reconciliation. On both sides of the Mediterranean massive annual saints' festivals display such commensality to a great extent. In practice they constitute a calendrical event of reconciliation in the midst of a year full of violence or the threat of violence between various villages, clans, etc.; during the annual festival the members of these rival social units have sanctuary to visit each other's respective festivals and saintly shrines as pilgrims, i.e. in an explicitly ritual context. Also here we see an element of biological reproduction as an extension of the shared humanity as emphasised in reconciliation. For such annual festivals are, among other things, informal marriage markets. And in general, in a large number of contexts the world over, reconciliation is symbolised by engaging in marital relations. As the Mae Enga<sup>1</sup> of New Guinea put it (a society of the segmentary type such as we shall discuss below):

‘We marry the people we fight’.

Also, a specifically sexual expression of reconciliation is possible, as is borne out, for example, in the numerous accounts and myths featuring marriages between the victors and the vanquished.

Moreover, reconciliation often involves the explicit verbalisation of the termination of a conflict. Such verbalisation is often public, and often depends on the intercession of a third party in the role of mediator. Reconciliation may be a public event, and important forms of social control derive from the public confession of a state of reconciliation.

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<sup>1</sup> Meggitt 1965, 1977.

However frequent though, neither the public nature of reconciliation nor the intercession of mediators is a universal feature of reconciliation.

### 11.2.2. Not always mediators

An oath, such as accompanies many contexts of reconciliation in North Africa, may invoke invisible supernatural agents in such a way that formally no specific intercession of mediating humans is required anymore. Here the collective oath is a central mechanism of reconciliation. Taking an oath by reference to a supernatural power (God, or a saint – typically one whose grave is in the vicinity) invokes a super-human sanction in case the sworn statement that is capable of terminating the conflict, turns out to be false or, if it is a promise, not to be honoured. Although the supernatural being and the latter's sanction are at the centre of reconciliatory oath-taking, such oaths are often taken before outsiders invested with religious powers: living marabouts, who are no party to the conflict and who – through their abstention from weapons and violence – have situated themselves outside the dynamics of secular social life. By contrast, ordinary life in that part of the world has tended to consist of a continuous struggle over ecologically scarce goods (land, water, cattle, trading routes), and over persons (women, children, subjects, slaves). Incidentally, the institution of these peaceful marabouts, who through their association with saints' graves that are fixed in the landscape have a special link with the land, is closely related, both systematically and – probably – historically, to the institutions of earth priests and oracular priests of West Africa, to the leopard-skin chiefs of East Africa, to the oracular priests and heralds of Ancient Greece, Italy and the Germanic cultures;<sup>1</sup> the themes of the herald's staff and of the Hermes-like mediator are widespread throughout the Old World.<sup>2</sup>

### 11.2.3. Not always public

However, different types of borderline situations can be conceived as far as the public and mediating aspects of reconciliation are concerned. The conflict may occur in such an intimate sphere that the admission of outside mediators involves great embarrassment if not shame – this often applies to the conflicts between kinsmen, which one tends to see through within one's own circle as long as this is still possible. In rural Zambia it is considered indecent to summon a close kinsmen to court – and this of course applies in many societies, including the North Atlantic one. Much reconciling and therapeutic ritual is in fact private.

There are several types of reconciliation. There is the reconciliation that although publicly confessed allows the conflict to simmer on, and, as a result, at least one of the parties involved continues to seek a genuine termination of conflict through the

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. van Binsbergen, forthcoming (e).

<sup>2</sup> Kristensen 1966; Eitrem 1966; Brown 1947; Boylan 1922; Fauth 1979; Schouten n.d.: 99f; de Waele 1927; Hoffmann 1890; Meyer 1928-1936: II 97f; Boetzkes 1913; Breuil 1938.

effective annihilation of the adversary. Then again there is the reconciliation that does constitute a total transformation of social relations in a way which may closely approach the Christian theological definition of reconciliation. The latter type of reconciliation cannot merely be described in terms of law and power politics. It involves nothing less than man's fundamental capability of creating a society out of symbols, and of dynamically guarding and adapting these symbols. The shared humanity that underlies any successful reconciliation does not only resolve the specific conflict that was at hand, but also inspires the people involved to embrace the social in many or perhaps all other contexts in which they may find themselves. It produces a purification (catharsis). However, the extent and the duration of such catharsis depend largely on the dynamics of social structure obtaining in that time and place.

In reconciliation, not only society in general is formed or reinforced, but particularly the component conflicting groups constitute themselves in the process. We should not think of social groups as firm persistent givens that may or may not happen to be engaged in a particular conflict. Many groups have no previous existence before they form themselves in the very context of conflict, through the institutions of mobilisation of group members, through identification with the stakes of the conflict, and through the roles that are defined by these processes both during the conflict and in the reconciliation process. Part of reconciliation is that the conflict is explicitly verbalised; it is then that the conflicting groups need to have a name, a label, an identity. Even in Central African villages the following situation obtains: any individual has a considerable number of possible group memberships at the same time (of a number of villages, a number of clans), and it is only in concrete situations of conflict and reconciliation, when the social process intensifies, that one commits oneself, temporarily, to one specific group membership, allowing this to define who one is, which side one is on, and what one hopes to get out of the conflict; in a future conflict, however, that individual may turn out to belong to a different group.

#### **11.2.4. The role of the mediating outsider<sup>1</sup>**

In order for someone to be able to play the role of mediator, special characteristics may be needed. Usually the mediators are not themselves party to the conflict. If they are party in one respect, it is likely that in another respect they are between both parties – for instance, as political leader of a group comprising both conflicting parties, or as kinsman of one party but affine (kinsman through marriage) of the other party. We shall come back to this point. High status brings to the mediator authority and also protection. And protection he may well need, for as long as the conflict has not terminated intercession may not be without risk, certainly not if the conflict in question involves physical violence. Also, a religious status (as prophet,

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<sup>1</sup> The stranger as peace maker is also a major theme in Levinas; cf. Levinas 1993; Duyndam & Poorthuis 2003; Keifert 1991; Ogletree 1985; Raffoul 1998.

saint, scriptural specialist, priest), may confer authority and protection: the marabout, the griot (West African bard), the priest, the herald, who implicitly or explicitly are under the protection of supernatural forces and thence in a position to effect reconciliation in the lives of others. In addition, class differences may be expressed in the role of mediator: in many societies a high social position means, in the first place, the responsibility, the duty, and also the right, to bring about reconciliation between others; hence the politician or the boss is often the chairman and initiator of informal palavers, and so is the African village headman.

### **11.2.5. The social costs and benefits of reconciliation**

The great benefit of reconciliation consists in the fact that society is newly constituted, not only on the concrete basis of the regained unity of parties which before were at daggers drawn, but also on a much more general and abstract level: the reconstitution of any social community in terms of shared humanity. The confession of such shared humanity is the essence of reconciliation. It creates the conditions in which to arrange the concrete practical issues of the conflict, once terminated, on a basis of trust. But against this social benefit, what is the price of reconciliation? To resign from a conflict that one has once started, may not be totally advantageous. The formal normative structure of the local society may stress peacefulness or prowess, and depending on that context the termination of conflict may be either honourable or shameful, a sign of strength or of weakness. To the extent to which conflict, and the reconciliation that may follow it, have a public nature outside the narrow circle of the parties immediately involved, to that extent any reconciliation will have a social price, positive or negative, or a mixture of both in a plurality of aspects. But reconciliation will also have a price in the case of a conflict that is not public but that is fought out in the inner rooms of a kin group, or other face-to-face relationships. On the one hand, both parties are being glorified by the ritual, abstract, sharing of humanity that is being testified in reconciliation. But, on the other hand, the manifest readiness to accept reconciliation may undermine the credibility of either party in each other's eyes and in the eyes of outsiders; this will particularly be the case in a context where confrontation and conflict are the everyday norm – such as in a segmentary society, or in the world of organised crime, in the context of economic competition in general, or in a bad marriage. Below we shall meet another possible price of reconciliation: a pent-up sense of powerlessness, in a situation where the socially weaker party, in the interest of socially testified harmony, is left no choice but to resign in a public reconciliation, even though the underlying problem is still experienced as very far from being resolved.

### **11.2.6. The symbolic technology of reconciliation**

We have seen that it is not enough, in order to reach reconciliation, to bring to the fore the overtly available cultural contents of the situation, such as are manifest and self-evident to all actors involved. The very existence of the conflict points in the direction of a contradiction in the social process: positions exist side by side that are



each admissible in terms of the prevailing culture and of the system of social control, yet these positions are mutually irreconcilable. For the party occupying a particular position, that position is eminently valid; but to the other party, the opposite position is just as valid. Clearly social systems do not work in the same way as the axiomatic systems of symbolic logic and mathematics: it is common for social systems (as it is for biological systems) to arrive at more or less the same point from different starting points, along different routes, and to invest that point with the conflicting tendencies specific to the various points of departure. Contradiction is an inevitable and necessary condition of social life; and utopias in which such contradictions have been reduced to a minimum, or have been annihilated altogether, will be unliveable states of terror. Given such contradictions, it is not enough to summon to the fore what is already understood to be self-evident in the local society; instead, one has to appeal, relatively and selectively, to implicit possibilities that lie hidden in the culture and society. If one does not immediately succeed in making an effective (i.e. conflict terminating, actually reconciling) selection from this shared pool of cultural material, then the mediator in the course of his attempts at reconciliation, has to reformulate and transform publicly both the conflict and the underlying social and cultural material in such a way that it yet becomes possible, in the end, to come closer to one another and to confess publicly to this rapprochement.

Here we hit on one of the paradoxes of reconciliation. Although reconciliation (at any rate, in the African societies that have inspired my argument) is perpendicular to institutionalised frameworks and procedures in society, yet reconciliation is unthinkable without all parties concerned recognising a shared basis of communality, something on which they agree. This basis need not be a totally explicit given from the very beginning of conflict and reconciliation onwards. It is ritual that enables us to produce, in preparation of reconciliation, points of view and bases for communality which so far had not been perceived consciously by the parties involved in the conflict. It is the task of the outsider who monitors and presides over the process of reconciliation to identify, visualise, and exploit for the ultimate good, such hitherto unsuspected, hidden potential bases for communality. Especially African healers/diviners, whose task it is to bring out interpersonal conflicts and guide them towards reconciliation, tend to be masters in what we could call praxeological bricolage. By means of ‘do-it-yourself’ (French: *bricolage*) they construct a temporary, improvised language of communality, that was not felt to exist before the session started but that is the result of the verbal and non-verbal exchanges during the session, under the guidance of the therapist. And the latter is capable of bringing this about by means of the free use and the reinterpretation of selected symbolic material that, strictly speaking, is available within the local cultural orientation but not exactly in that specific form and combination in which it is summoned up in the divinatory and therapeutic session.

#### **11.2.7. Reconciliation and time**

The time dimension of reconciliation appears to be of great importance.

Reconciliation has the character of a process but also of a moment. The ritual of reconciliation is of a condensed nature, both in space and in time. If the conflict involves large sets of people (for example ethnic groups, nations, creeds), typically only a selection of the members of the groups involved participate directly in the reconciliation process. Reconciliation makes it possible to arrive at a specific transformation of the conflictive matter, which may subsequently lead, in a much more diffuse way, to the reorientation of the everyday life of all group members concerned. Reconciliation, therefore, does not only mean the transformation of conflictive matter, but also means indicating the possibilities for the transfer of conflict-terminating factors from reconciliatory ritual to everyday life. It means, in fact, a transformation of the ongoing social process.

But not only need we make a distinction between reconciliation as a process (the terminal phase of a conflict that has already run a considerable course through time), and reconciliation as the concrete moment when the viewpoints informing the conflict are particularly clearly expressed, when the parties in conflict concretely constitute themselves, and when these parties do, in fact, arrive at reconciliation by reference to a creatively transformed representation of the conflict matter. It is more important to realise that reconciliation is in itself a thinking about time: the normal time, when conflict is taken for granted, is interrupted, and it makes way for an ideal time, one of reconstruction, purity, clarity, sociability, in which the conflict is no longer capable of occurring; and that moment looks forward to the future, in which the transformation implied by reconciliation, will – ideally – have caused the then normal time to have permanently shifted a bit towards ideal time. Even when reconciliation does not last and new conflict will continue to present itself in future, yet this reordering of time is the central idea of such transformation as is implied in reconciliation. In reconciliation eternity simmers through in a way which – even without Christian inspiration – occurs in African, Asian, Latin American and Oceanic societies just as well as it does in North Atlantic ones, under the inspiration of the Christian theory of reconciliation; yet that theology may be recognised as an impressive, classic expression of what is now gradually emerging as an anthropology of reconciliation.

Another temporal dimension of reconciliation has to do with its possibly cyclic nature. In many African societies reconciliatory events are not so much unique, once for all, but repetitive and circular. This is what Calmettes<sup>1</sup> points out in the context of the cyclical nature of witchcraft eradication movements in the villages of Northern Zambia in the twentieth century: these invariably occurred in a cycle of crises, a new crisis occurring once every ten to fifteen years. In my view, this cycle was produced by a combination of ecological and demographic factors periodically causing unbearable strain on the local community's natural and leadership resources. Reconciliation, then, is one of the predictable phases in the social process of the

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<sup>1</sup> Calmettes 1972.

small-scale local community, in a continuous pendulum-swing movement back and forth between the following positions:

- integration after, and through, reconciliation
- erosion of the communality thus produced;
- initial skirmishes;
- conflict

after which the cycle is repeated unless reconciliation proves impossible and the community (village, kin group, congregation, political party) falls apart.

In segmentary, acephalous societies (see below) this repetitive nature of conflict and its resolution is not even distributed over an extension of time, but occurs at one and the same moment of time. There, reconciliation and conflict coincide incessantly, in line with the constantly shifting, kaleidoscopic, segmentary perspective within which an actor in such a society has situated himself vis-à-vis other actors.

In those African societies that have an elaborate political system organised around a chief or king, the cyclic nature of reconciliation goes through a developmental process along with the person of the king himself. As long as the king is alive and well, a condition prevails according to which the political system, the human society in general, the land, the crops, game, the rain, the cosmos in its totality, know the greatest regularity and fertility. However, at the king's death – even when it is only imminent – an interregnum begins during which both the political, the social and the cosmic order is supposed to be fundamentally disturbed, so that illness and drought, infertility, conflict, violence, incest and sorcery may reign supreme. This state can only be terminated by the accession of a successor, who brings about the reconciliation, both politically, socially and cosmically, through which chaos is turned once more into order.

Conflict, revenge, feud, sorcery are the opposites of reconciliation, and it is to these alternatives that I shall return towards the end of my argument.

### **11.3. Reconciliation and socio-political organisation: Segmentarity and feud**

#### **11.3.1. Segmentarity and the Nuer**

One of the principal contexts in which the topic of reconciliation has come to the fore in anthropology is that of the feud and of the structure of acephalous societies – those of which feud is a characteristic per excellence. Evans-Pritchard – in his description of the East African Nuer, an acephalous society – defines the feud as follows:

‘lengthy mutual hostility between local communities within a tribe’.<sup>1</sup>

In Evans-Pritchard’s analysis, the entire (or rather, the entire male) social structure presents itself as a tree diagram (dendrogram), whose humblest, smallest twigs are formed by the individual members, united at the nodes into groups of brothers, the latter in their turn united at higher-order nodes into groups of cousins, groups of cousins in their turn into even larger groups, into still larger groups, into yet larger groups ..., until finally, at least in theory, the dendrogram encompasses the entire society. The branches of the dendrogram make for integration (for all twins under the same node constitute a united group), and for opposition at the same time: for the nodes at the same level, although united in their turn by a higher-order node at the next level, are still in opposition vis-à-vis one another. And, in fact, this also applies to all groups and individuals tied to each other by the node immediately above them. For this type of structure anthropology has coined the term of ‘segmentary system’. According to Evans-Pritchard,<sup>2</sup> Nuer society (which was alleged to be representative of many other societies both in Africa and outside) hangs together by the subtle play between segmentary opposition and segmentary integration, both of which invariably present themselves in complementarity. Whether in a particular situation a particular actor will stress opposition or integration, depends on the continually shifting perspective the actor may adopt; in the last analysis, from an *etic* perspective, both positions apply equally. In theory we can tell exactly where this structure meets its boundary: at the point where segmentary integration at the highest level is still possible because of the potentiality of reconciliation after violence.

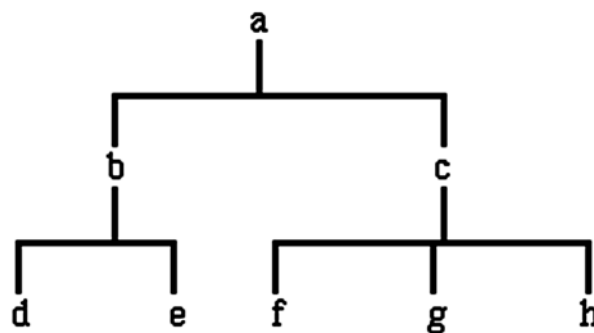


Figure 11.1. A simple system of segmentation

‘d’ and ‘e’ are in segmentary opposition vis-à-vis one another, but they are in segmentary integration as parts of ‘b’ when in opposition to ‘f’, ‘g’, or ‘h’; in the latter event, ‘f’, ‘g’, or ‘h’ will effectively identify as ‘c’ vis-à-vis ‘b’ and any of ‘b’'s constituent elements, i.e. ‘d’ or ‘e’.

<sup>1</sup> Evans-Pritchard 1967: 150. Few Africanist anthropologists today would still speak of ‘tribe’ in this connection, but that is immaterial for our present argument. For related studies of the societies in this region and their internal processes of reconciliation, cf. Greenberg 1971; Owen 1920; Titherington 1924; Simons 1992.

<sup>2</sup> Evans-Pritchard 1967; cf. Middleton & Tait 1958; Sigrist 1967.

If it turns out that such reconciliation is not possible and that only violence can answer previous violence, then by definition the segmentary distance between the adversaries is too large. One has no option left but to admit that one's adversary is not implied in one's own social order and cannot be approached using that social order's technology of reconciliation.

In the Introduction to this book I have stressed how reconciliation, as a African hermeneutical social technology, at the same time offers a model for intercultural knowledge production. Something very similar is at hand here: the model of complementary opposition, which is the backbone of segmentation as a model of social organisation, has a striking parallel in Derrida's *différance*, which comprises both the opposition and its resolution. It is unnecessary to remind the reader that Derrida hails from Algeria, whose social structure, like that of many Islamic countries, has retained strong elements of segmentation despite the rise of the centralised nation-state.

In Nuer society<sup>1</sup> conflicts were the order of the day, and they were usually accompanied by physical violence. In the case of violent conflict within the village, precautions were taken to prevent a mortal outcome (choice of weapons), but between different villages manslaughter did occur.

The system of segmentation in Nuer society revolved around the contradiction between two norms:

- (a) There is a moral obligation to settle conflicts through mediation, thus effecting reconciliation instead of retaliation. On the other hand, one of the pillars of the lineage organisation is
- (b) the obligation to revenge the murder of an agnate (a patrilineal kinsmen).

This is a typical social contradiction that cannot be resolved by normative or judicial means, but only through a process of reconciliation that transcends such institutional means. The function of the leopard-skin headman and his mediation makes it possible to alleviate these contradictory tendencies and to bring about reconciliation in the place of feud. These headmen (Nuer society is alleged to know no other types of headmen) have no effective material or military power, no great authority, but they do have a special link with the Earth, by virtue of which they may curse people. After killing a person the perpetrator flees to the headman and as long he is in the latter's sanctuary, he cannot be killed. The victim's kinsmen lie in ambush in case the murderer ventures outside his sanctuary. Meanwhile the headman ritually cleanses the killer (one is reminded of the *Oresteia* and dozens of other similar passages in Ancient Greek tragedy). At the same time he sets in motion a process of reconciliation: exhortations to forgiveness, and negotiations about the number of heads of cattle that the murderer's kinsmen are to pay. If this is settled after a few

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<sup>1</sup> In the 1930s (when Evans-Pritchard did his fieldwork).

weeks, the murderer can return home and although a general unease lingers on, no counter-murder will be committed.

Evans-Pritchard stresses that the larger the social distance (i.e. the segmentary distance, as measured in terms of the number of distinct elements of the dendrogram connecting them) between the social groups involved, the smaller the chance that the conflict may be settled in this way. Feud characterises the relationships between distant groups, whereas between closely neighbouring villages that by virtue of their proximity share all sorts of ecological interests, the conflict cannot be allowed to persist in its original violent form, and reconciliation is imperative.

### **11.3.2. Alternative interpretations of the reconciliation process among the Nuer**

On this point the Manchester School, as founded by Gluckman in the late 1940s, has explicitly engaged in polemics with Evans-Pritchard's analysis of the political system of the Nuer. Gluckman claimed that we have only learned to understand the dynamics of the reconciliatory process from Elizabeth Colson's study on 'Social control of revenge in the society of the Zambian Plateau Tonga'.<sup>1</sup> According to Gluckman and Colson the key to an understanding of feud and its reconciliation would lie in conflicting loyalty on the part of third parties, who would have equally strong ties with both warring parties especially through affinal relationships. As a result of clan exogamy (the obligation and the practice of marrying outside one's own clan) the entire local community, both among the Nuer and among the Zambian Tonga, is a network, throughout, of affinal relationships. An outburst of conflict, especially in the case of manslaughter, brings a number of individuals to a point where their affines and their consanguineal relatives seek to mobilise these individuals to two camps at the same time. Torn between conflicting loyalties, it is clearly in the interest of these people to solve their personal role conflict by seeking to terminate the conflict as a whole; they can do so by setting in motion the institutionalised mechanism towards reconciliation (through compensatory payments), and by exerting their influence on both parties, persuading them to cease hostilities.

An important step in the understanding of reconciliation in the context of segmentary societies in South Sudan was set more recently by Simon Simonse in his book *Kings of Disaster*.<sup>2</sup> For Simonse, mediators of the type of the Nuer leopard-skin headman are not merely catalysts, whose contribution to the social process is only indirect and inactive. With the support of a wealth of case material derived from Nilotic societies other than the Nuer, Simonse shows how the dynamics of the relationship between 'mediator' and 'followers' can take all sorts of forms. In many contexts the mediator himself becomes a key figure, charged with the task of giving symbolic form to the social in his capacity of rainmaker; but, on the other hand, if he

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<sup>1</sup> Colson 1960; Gluckman 1955, 1965.

<sup>2</sup> Simonse 1992.

fails in that task, he will become the literal victim, the literal scapegoat, of that same society that is tied to him by a love-hate relationship. The schemes proposed by Frazer and Girard<sup>1</sup> would thus appear to have, albeit in greatly revised and updated form, an applicability that makes us see beyond the mere neutral role of reconciliation processes, and that make us appreciate, in the African context also, the less sociable and less ethical side of the conciliatory role of earth priest, marabout, saint, herald, bard, as well as king – vital social roles in African life whose intercontinental historical dynamics (all intimately connected with the leopard whose skin they tend to wear as a sign of office) I shall explore in my forthcoming book *The Leopard's Unchanging Spots*.

#### **11.4. Reconciliation and the law**

In more centralised African political systems the social order results not only from an insecure balance between opposition and integration, nor only from the conflicting loyalties of kinsmen in the course of an informal social process, but also from that eminently African institution, litigation, that is often under the direct patronage of the chief or king.

In purely local litigation, at the village level, it may happen that for the sake of the shared interests of male kinsmen and affines, more profound personal and group conflicts are being dissimulated, and that the socially weaker party in the conflict (women, children, ex-slaves, and, in general, people of low social status) are forced to yield to these interests.<sup>2</sup> This constitutes a situation of incomplete reconciliation that calls for a continuation of the conflict with other extra judicial means: sorcery, poisoning, slander, suicide. This kind of local litigation does not stand on its own, but is embedded in the total social process of the local community; it may lead to a situation where, just as in the Gluckman/Colson reinterpretation of Evans-Pritchard, litigation may also work towards reconciliation in the context of a small-scale society whose members are tied to each other by multiplex relationships and therefore cannot afford to push a conflict to its extremes merely in the interest of just one group member. In other words, a totally independent court of law is not a probable phenomenon in such a context.

However, if the judges have a greater distance vis-à-vis the local community, if they are linked to a royal court or to a central modern state to which the local village society is subjected, and if the judges identify more with the political order and the legal ideas and ideals of the court and the state than with the ongoing social and political process at the village level, then the insistence on reconciliation at all costs and at the expense of individual interests may be rather more limited.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Frazer 1911-1915; Girard 1977, 1978.

<sup>2</sup> For a case in point, cf. van Binsbergen 1977.

<sup>3</sup> On the legal dynamics of reconciliation, cf. also van Rouveroy van Nieuwaal & Baerends 1981, 1984.

In itself the termination of conflict through adjudication may imply reconciliation. A context for such reconciliation is already provided by the fact that the parties have agreed to put their case before the court (which thus constitutes the shared point of departure whence reconciliation may be obtained), and that a verdict is being pronounced. Lest the parties be held in contempt of court (an offence that is normally heavily sanctioned), such a verdict implies that the conflict must henceforth be considered to be terminated. In such a case the underlying, shared judicial system furnishes implicitly the framework within which reconciliation may be reached.

Such a formal reconciliation, that amounts to the decision not to continue the conflict now that it has been formally adjudicated, may however often be too formal and too distant to convince as a form of genuine reconciliation. In the context of South Central Africa, it is a common phenomenon that after such a formal legal verdict, when the conflict is no longer actionable in court, the conflict is yet carried on, notably with extra-judicial means. If this happens, the judicial termination of conflict manifestly did not produce reconciliation in the meaningful sense of the word. This forces us to look further for such a definition of the concept of reconciliation that would enable us to express why in these cases we are not dealing with genuine reconciliation, contrary to some other cases that also involve the intercession of the courts. It appears that, both at the purely local level and as part of an elaborate national judicial structure, effective reconciliation and the judicial process are far from coterminous. This we could already expect on the basis of our earlier insight that reconciliation begins where the rule of law has been exhausted and does not offer a solution.

### **11.5. Reconciliation, ritual and therapy**

In all this it is important to realise that African village societies – not only those of pastoral semi-nomads like the Nuer, but also those of sedentary cultivators – in general tend to be fairly unstable social units, with a limited time-span.

For instance, among the Zambian Nkoya<sup>1</sup> a village is nothing but a core of kinsmen which, merely because of the members' temporary and somewhat accidental co-residence, happens to stand out among the wider kin group; the latter overlaps with other such groups anyway. Also, because of their limited number of members, their low fertility, their high child mortality, and the prolonged stay of some of their members in urban areas, these localised kinship cores are involved in an incessant, often sinister, competition over members. Someone's position in Nkoya society is primarily determined by the village where he or she dwells at a particular moment in time – but this is only a temporary choice privileging one village and kin core from among several villages and several kin cores to which that person may reckon himself to belong. There are nearly always alternative choices,

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. van Binsbergen 1991a, 1992b.



and often these are effected in the course of time. The village is a spatial given, but in the first place a kinship-political given.<sup>1</sup> One is a 'member' of the village, rather than just an 'inhabitant' of the village. Very frequently this membership is discontinued, trading it for an alternative, by moving house to a different village. On the spur of personal conflicts, illness and death, fear of sorcery, and the ambition to gain a headman's title for oneself, virtually any person in this society continually proceeds, in the first half of his or her life, through a kind of musical chairs, from village to village, in the course of which process ever different villages, kin cores, and senior kinsmen figure as protectors and sponsors. (The pattern is not very different for women and men, albeit that women may also chose non-kinsmen as patrons by marrying them, while over the past hundred years or so they have no longer been eligible to compete for royal and headmanship titles among the Nkoya, contrary to the situation in the more remote past.) In this process, the villages themselves, as concrete localised sets of dwellings, are also far from stable: most villages, as physical conglomerates of dwellings in a specific place, have only a lifespan of ten to twenty years. In practice, therefore, Nkoya villages are temporary sets of relative strangers, who usually have not grown up together, and who are unlikely to die as co-resident neighbours of one another. In their mutual relationships the people concerned are constantly conscious of the optional aspect of their state of co-residence, and they are constantly looking around for opportunities to improve their personal security, mainly through intra-rural moving; here security is defined both in terms of supernatural protection – against illness, death and misfortune – as mediated by the elders (provided these are not exposed to be witches themselves), freedom from sorcery-generating, interminable conflict, and such freedom from hunger and exposure as is provided by ecological plenty.

In order to counteract the chaos that constantly threatens the close relationships between members of this – fairly common – type of African village societies, artifices are needed that deny or dissimulate the opportunist nature of the village as merely a temporary meeting place of relative strangers – artifices that turn these villages into a social context of a much more permanent and inescapable nature, so that their members will be domesticated into consensus and unity. How can this be achieved? Mainly through collective rituals, in which the localised kin core, augmented with members who stay in town but have come over for the occasion, construct their unity and celebrate it through music, dance, sacrifice and prayer. Many African village societies boast an extremely rich repertoire of ritual, and attending forms of music, dance and verbal expression. These forms range from the solitary prayer at the village shrine of the hunter setting forth in the evening or the early morning, via reconciliatory rituals in the restricted circle of close kinsmen around the village shrine after a conflict, to massive life crisis rituals marking a girl's attainment of maturity,<sup>2</sup> a person's culmination of life in the form of funerary

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<sup>1</sup> For the anthropological concept of the politics of kinship, cf. van Velsen 1971.

<sup>2</sup> See above, chapter 3.

celebrations, and finally the crucial ritual of name inheritance a year or so after the demise of a senior kinsman or kinswoman.

Ritual creates the possibility of reconciliation even if, or precisely if, the law cannot be involved because subjecting to external adjudication is seen as a breach, from the public social space, into the intimacy of the secluded social space of solidarity and of face-to-face relationships, such as exist in the family, the village, the small group of solidary neighbours in an urban ward, a circle of friends or co-religionists. In the African context, therapy and ritual can scarcely be told apart: to every ritual a therapeutic effect is attributed, and although there are pragmatic therapies whose religious component is merely implied and does not become overt, yet outside the sphere of cosmopolitan medicine there are few African therapeutic situations that do not have a predominantly religious component. Reconciliation with the supernatural is a central datum in African ritual and therapy:

- with the ancestor through prayer, libation and other offerings at an ancestral shrine;
- with a spirit – ancestral or otherwise – which manifests itself through possession and is subsequently propitiated by the possessed person joining the specific cult of that spirit;
- with the High God in a historic local religious idiom;
- with the Holy Spirit, Christ, God, peace with whom is made through conversion to African Independent Christian churches; and, alternatively, with Allah through the intercession of Islamic specialists and saints.

Usually reconciliation with the supernatural implies an idiom in whose context also, and particularly, the reconciliation between living participants in the ritual can be achieved. We note a triangular relationship: conceptually, if not in reality, the supernatural mediates between human A in conflict with human B, and this opens up the following specific possibilities in the context of ritual, religious reconciliation: by contrast with judicial and socio-political reconciliation, the indirect mediation between two humans via the supernatural third party makes it possible for the reconciliation process to be cast in purely religious and symbolic terms. As a consequence, the precise contradictions and conflicts having caused the conflict in the first place, may remain unarticulated, implied, even dissimulated. In ritual settings the cosmology derived from the religious world view tends to be the source of common redressive understanding. However, the dramatic re-recognition of each other's shared humanity may remain at the ritualised, pious, even bigoted level, without effective transference from the ritual setting to situations of everyday life, and if that is the case, ritual reconciliation would not be the most effective and lasting form of reconciliation in the long run.

Under certain conditions, including the strict demarcation of space and time as specifically ritual and therefore no longer general or ordinary, ritual produces the possibility of proceeding to reconciliation as a temporal but repetitive phase in a

context that is otherwise marked by conflict and violence. Examples of such altered, no-longer-general, space and time are: annual fairs, saints' festivals, pilgrimages in the world of Islam and Christianity as well as elsewhere – as we have already discussed above.

It is the symbolic technology of ritual which offers the conceptual possibility of resolving, against all odds, otherwise unsolvable contradictions, opening up a repertoire of cultural elements that are available for bricolage and that allow the skilful mediator to bring out, often by sleight of hand, such unexpected communality and shared humanity as may strike the conflicting parties as revelatory, and exhort them to terminate their hostilities. The symbolic technology achieves this by forcing a breach into the spatio-temporal rationality in which rules and facts are supposed to be sacrosanct, immutable, well-defined, inflexible, bounded, and where, for that reason, conflicting positions, once logically and conceptually based, cannot be shifted. The social technology of reconciliation, therefore, is capable of negotiating hard binary oppositions; it is a shield or a sanctuary from the sheer violence of conceptual rationality.<sup>1</sup> Such technology yet allows, against all odds, the termination of conflicts that otherwise would be deemed irresolvable, in view of their solid anchorage in accepted, but mutually exclusive, social values of the two groups of participants involved. The advantage of appealing to a supernatural being for conflict resolution is that such beings – contrary to ordinary objects and persons – are infinitely flexible and plastic as regards the empirical manifestations allegedly marking their presence in the world of the senses; the human reconciling agent (a religious specialist) makes use of this plasticity in order, creatively, to bring the manifestations to be attributed to the invoked supernatural being in line with the case at hand. By doing so he makes reconciliation a possibility precisely when such reconciliation would have been ruled out on purely human grounds, at the strictly concrete and rational level. In many parts of Africa, ritual, especially under the experienced guidance of a diviner-priest-therapist, offers the possibility of externalising and sublimating the conflict between humans, transforming it into a conflict between humans and the supernatural. And most human cultures know how to handle the latter kind of conflict – through sacrifices and other rites. Such a way of dealing with conflict between two human parties by invoking the supernatural as a third party would still amount to reconciliation, but, as it were, over the top of their heads. Therapy and ritual are the means *par excellence* for the production of reconciliation in an extra-social, extra-human framework: reconciliation, not with humans (who may be dead, unapproachable, inconsolable, hurt beyond repair – the twentieth century has regrettably offered striking examples: the Holocaust, the Palestinian case, the apartheid state, the Rwanda genocide of 1994) but via symbols, in which the supernatural presents itself so that a judicial or politicised solution, which would no longer work, is rendered unnecessary. In this respect, such

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<sup>1</sup> On the violence of rationality, cf. Schroeder 1996; Schott 1988; McKenna 1992; Derrida 1967b: chapter 4 (on violence and metaphysics with reference to Levinas); Wyschogrod 1989.

reconciliation as is achieved in the ritual-therapeutic context is of a fundamentally different nature to that achieved in the judicial and socio-political domain.

### **11.6. Sorcery and social conflict at a macro scale: Two limits to the African symbolic technology of reconciliation**

Now, let us not lull ourselves to sleep, as if everything in historic African societies in the fields of law, therapy and ritual were only geared to bringing about and maintaining beautiful, pure and perfect social relationships as a result of reconciliation. This is a romantic, nostalgic image, which emerged in response, both to the atrocities of the contemporary African experience and to the realisation that North Atlantic, increasingly global, society, has also, despite its economic, political, military and symbolic hegemony, totally failed to provide us with a meaningful and humanly profound future. So why not follow the lead of the Afrocentrists and cherish historic African alternatives for North Atlantic culture? Of course, that is what we should do (in the present book, chapters 7, 8 and 14, among others, offer extensive guidelines in this respect), but we should do so only on the basis of grounded knowledge about African socio-cultural realities, not on the basis of mere wishful projections of our own, African or North Atlantic or global, personal predicaments. The only convincing form of Afrocentrism is the one based, not on semi-intellectual myth, but on the methodologically underpinned representation of present-day African practices and modes of thought, and of a painstaking empirical reconstruction of Africa's past.

African societies did develop extraordinarily effective means in the judicial, therapeutic and ritual domains, through which to prepare reconciliation and to bring it about. But, on the other hand, these societies did need these very means precisely because the social chaos, the distress and the annihilation that were constantly present as a threatening undercurrent. More so than in other societies? That is a question outside the scope of my present argument.

The sinister side of the short-lived euphoria of harmony in the African village during or immediately after reconciliation is the constant suspicion of possible witchcraft, especially on the part of close kinsmen and neighbours.<sup>1</sup> Without conflict there is no reconciliation, and the alternative to reconciliation is conflict that does not lead to reconciliation but that instead mobilises to the full extent man's destructive capabilities and fantasies. Parallel to the group process (with its tendency to a cycle of reconciliation, conflict, fission) there is a cosmology, a system of thought defining the world of and around man in such terms as:

- order, sociability, mutual reciprocity, peace, or alternatively
- disorder, anti-sociability, conflict and violence, both overt physical violence and violence in the form of sorcery and poisoning.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. van Binsbergen 2001b.

In addition to the image – so welcome in a superficially nostalgic view – of Africa (of course, an Africa aggregated into an artificial, undifferentiated whole beyond recognition) as a specialist domain for the technology of reconciliation at the micro level, there is the equally widely broadcast image of Africa as the homeland of witchcraft, of humankind's sinister daydreams aimed at the desire for extravagant powers, riches and knowledge, and of the cynical manipulation of humans and their so very vulnerable bodies in order to reach these goals. The African leader who on the outside is supposed to be the master of palaver and reconciliation, according to a complementary but equally vocal local social discourse, may be the greatest witch around. The reconciliation that to outsiders makes the African village appear one-sidedly as a site of innocent peacefulness, is in fact a reconciliation in conflicts that are in the most literal sense mortal.

Sorcery, at least in large parts of Africa, constitutes an instructive limiting concept for the study of reconciliation. Sorcery is, in a nutshell, those forms of anti-social transgression that are not self-evidently eligible for reconciliation; in other words,<sup>1</sup> it constitutes the boundary conditions of the kinship-based social order. Hence people's resorting to private execution, violence, lynching of alleged witches, as alternatives to reconciliation – and when such distressful and tragic means of conflict resolution are chosen, the actors legitimate their choice by reference to their adversary's real or alleged acts of sorcery, by which they have allegedly placed themselves outside the collectivity of a shared humanity. The fundamental thought behind African sorcery might be described as the collective recognition of the fact that humans may occasionally act in an absolutely egoistic, absolutely anti-social manner. The witch (who does not have to be a real person but may mainly exist in the form of his suspected victims' anxieties and rumour) is supposed to have opted out of the social and symbolic world of humans, and therefore cannot readily be reconfirmed as participant in that world through reconciliation. However, the African judicial, therapeutic and ritual practice is, most fortunately and instructively, not one of iron consistency. Even in the sphere of sorcery, mechanisms of reconciliation and reintegration may be found: the ordeal, redressive purification, submission to punishment, or neutralising of the accusation. Procedures exist through which the person suspected of sorcery may seek to prove beyond reasonable doubt that he or she is not a witch, and hence that he or she, on second thoughts, does deserve – albeit only after reconciliation – admission once more to the world of humans. If this should fail, what awaits the sorcerers is their diabolisation: the confirmation of their inhumanity by the most inhuman mutilation and killing.

While thus sorcery, as the opposite to reconciliation, is built into the very model of the African village society, there is, as I said, another limiting concept to the African technology of reconciliation. This is the fact that such reconciliation can seldom be seen to be effectively applied at the meso and macro level, i.e. at more

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. van Binsbergen 2001b.

comprehensive levels than the small-scale communities of village and urban wards. In the study of reconciliation we must distinguish between various levels of scope and relevance. The African technology of reconciliation at the micro level has so far not shown itself to be capable of containing the most destructive conflicts at the meso and macro level, such as tend to occur in the modern, post-colonial state. Ethnic violence, genocide, civil war, banditism, the total falling apart of the state in at least a dozen contemporary African national territories, are sufficient indications of the truth of this depressing statement. Less dramatic instances of the failure of African reconciliation at the meso level may be recognised in the continuing fission of African Christian churches (so that, usually after conflicts over leadership and finance, new break-away churches originate all the time from more established churches), and in general in the relatively limited success of African formal organisation in the economic, bureaucratic, medical and educational domain.

Is this fairly negative record really due to the lack of potential and applicability of the African social technology of reconciliation? Or is it that, with the inroads of globalisation through colonialism, education, world religions, formal organisations, global media, and universal aspirations for personal commoditised consumption, we have not even tried to exploit this potential fully, transforming African reconciliation and making it work in the modern setting that is so much more explosive, and on which so much more depends, than was foreseen when this technology of reconciliation was first instituted in a village context. African reconciliation, in principle, contains the potential of creative, selective reformulation for whatever context, whatever level, whatever conflict.

This argument was written with a very specific macro-level contemporary African situation of reconciliation in mind: the redress of social relations within South Africa, after the advent of democracy has terminated the inequalities and atrocities of the apartheid state. In this connection the shared humanity, to which my argument on reconciliation has appealed repeatedly, has a clear-cut local vernacular equivalent in the concept of *ubuntu*, i.e. ‘being human’, ‘humanity’, ‘the art of being human’ – a concept to be explored further in chapter 14. Over the past decade, South Africa has seen the emergence of an African philosophy of *ubuntu*, in which the historic cultures of Southern Africa are selectively scanned for ideas and principles that may inspire social and managerial problem-solving in the transition from a racist to a democratic conception of the urban mass society of South Africa. Here, and in many other African contexts, we can see the dynamics of a local *emic*<sup>1</sup> conceptualisation of the concept of ‘humanity’ in concrete situations of reconciliation.<sup>2</sup> Over the past few years, South African managers, constitutional lawyers and other intellectuals have dabbled in a largely nostalgic rekindling of the concept of *ubuntu* as a means of massaging current transformation processes away from open conflict and open confrontation, no matter what the inequalities and injustices that may be

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<sup>1</sup> For the paired concepts of *emic* and *etic*, cf. section 15.3.1.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Prinsloo 1998; Mbigi & Maree 1995; Ramose 1999; Louw n.d.

involved. Contemporary South Africa is a society that has more to forget than it can possibly, humanly forgive. It has just gone through the exercise of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission on the basis of a Christian model of confession and forgiveness, for which I do not see many roots in the African technology of reconciliation as I have tried to understand, apply and describe it. Here fundamental lessons may be learned from the African tradition of a social technology of reconciliation.





PART V.

EXERCISES IN INTERCULTURAL PHILOSOPHY

