

**Proposed sub-programme within the Theme Group under construction:**

**‘Connections and Transformations in Africa’,  
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# **CONNECTIONS IN AFRICAN KNOWLEDGE**



## *Vignette and background illustration*

- The vignette shows a girl at one of the many Qur'anic schools at Djenne, Mali; © Foto Morgana, courtesy [http://flickr.com/photo\\_zoom.gne?id=153714300&context=pool-88005469@N00&size=o](http://flickr.com/photo_zoom.gne?id=153714300&context=pool-88005469@N00&size=o)
- The same picture is seen in the righthand side of our background illustration
- The lefthand side is occupied by a picture of Professor Valentin Mudimbe, one of Africa's leading intellectuals today, literary writer, philosopher, and author of, among others, *The Invention of Africa*, in which he explores the appropriation of Africa in the construction of, mainly, North Atlantic knowledge; photo © 2005 V. Ling/V. Mudimbe
- The other two background illustrations have great antiquity on African soil, and have been argued (van Binsbergen 2006) to depict identifiable mythical content
- In the lower centre shows the red ochre block from Blombos Cave, South Africa, c. 70,000 years old; the incised pattern has been argued to be evocative of Lightning Bird as one of the oldest and most widespread mythemes worldwide; illustration courtesy: [ to be completed]
- The far righthand side shows a Zimbabwean rock painting, first described and interpreted by Frobenius, and here taken from Garlake 1995; the mytheme illustrated is that of the connection between heaven and earth, a major theme in African mythologies, as in West and Central Asian ones since c. 25000 BP





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12. *Some implications of the argument so far*

- (1) Pandora's Box as the baseline of connecting knowledge
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# 1. Introduction and background

- **The overall Research Programme and Theme Group ‘Connections and Transformations in Africa’,**
- **looks at Africa from a present-day perspective but with a strong *historical* awareness**
- **stressing *connecting technologies* as a major aspect of socio-cultural transformations**
- **whilst aware that connecting technologies are not just those in the obvious *material* sense**
  1. **The footpath, the caravan, sailing boat, railroad, airplane, cellphone, Internet, etc.**
- **but also ‘ways of going about connecting people’ through**
  2. **Strategies/technologies of space (conviviality/locality, or its opposite, mobility),**
  3. **Strategies/technologies of time (myth, tradition, ethnicity, religion, music)**
  4. **Strategies/technologies of management and conflict regulation (kinship, the economy, formal organisations, the state, law)**



## 2. Material technology as a difficult subject for anthropologists/Africanists



- Many (although by no means all) Africanists are anthropologists, or general social scientists
- Material technologies are rather difficult topics to be studied by for present-day Africanists:
- Technologies belong mainly to the study of material culture
- With the emergence of classic social anthropology (c. 1930s), the study of material culture was largely relegated to the periphery of the disciplines involved: ‘armchair and museum ethnography’ (to be pronounced with distinct disdain)
- As a paradigm, classic anthropology
  - with its emphasis on fieldwork, presentist and localist horizons, and the minutiae of *social* relations, and in varying degrees enlightened by the relativist notion of *culture*
- supplanted the once dominant paradigm of diffusionism
  - Diffusionism would trace the spatio-temporal connections
  - not so much between peoples, styles and institutions,
  - but particularly between objects
  - which brought material technologies within the orbit of the diffusionists
  - Even though their objects were largely conceived as detached from their historic local cultural setting
  - for which diffusionism had no theory yet
  - So that it never got round to the study, let alone understanding, of socio-cultural *transformations*

Above: A glimpse of the Royal Museum for Central Africa, Tervuren, Belgium





## *A paradox*

- **Modern Africanists are now in the process of re-inventing objects, their material technologies, and their spatio-temporal ramifications,**
- **and to develop a *professional feeling* for objects that was absent in the classic paradigm;**
- **But while they are thus recovering part of the ground once intensively studied, but since vacated, by diffusionism (NB. globalisation studies are often neo-diffusionist!),**
- **they are in principle much better equipped than their diffusionist predecessors,**
- **to *begin to appreciate* the cultural embeddedness, and the social relations involved in objects, material technologies, and spatio-temporal ramifications**
- **And to situate these in a theoretically informed context, not of mere displacement of objects, but of genuine social transformation**

**Our proposed Theme Group on Connections and Transformations is facing the challenges implied in this complex disciplinary history of ideas**

***Knowledge* is among the principal aspects of this challenge.**



## *A perspective on knowledge*

- **Within the proposed Research Programme and Theme Group ‘Connections and Transformations in Africa’, the present sub-programme concentrates on *knowledge*.**
- **Above I outlined four dimensions of our proposed research**
  - **Material technologies**
  - **Technologies of space**
  - **Technologies of time**
  - **Technologies of management**
- ***but this was not the list of our four sub-programmes; knowledge was not one of them.***
- **The point is that knowledge is a ubiquitous aspect of all human existence**
- **It is found in all these four dimensions (and in – probably – all others we can think of)**
- **‘Knowledge’ may be claimed to offer a particular, illuminating perspective on Connections and Transformations**
- **So we have at least two tasks:**
  1. **to identify the knowledge perspective**
  2. **To render the knowledge perspective amenable to concrete empirical research, by operationalising it into a few Africans research projects**





### 3. What is knowledge?

- I have called knowledge an ubiquitous aspect of the human existence
- Little wonder that the question as to *what constitutes knowledge*, is at the heart of academic life, science, philosophy
- An entire branch of philosophy, *epistemology*, deals with the nature of knowledge, and with the criteria by which to assess the validity and scope of knowledge claims
- We can scarcely summarise that entire, immensely complex and difficult field in a nutshell, but neither can we avoid the theoretical and conceptual exercise altogether in the present context
- The fact that our proposed research project is, per definition, a project of *specialist knowledge construction* in its own right, lends a double layer, a complicating and confusing element of reflexivity, to our endeavours here

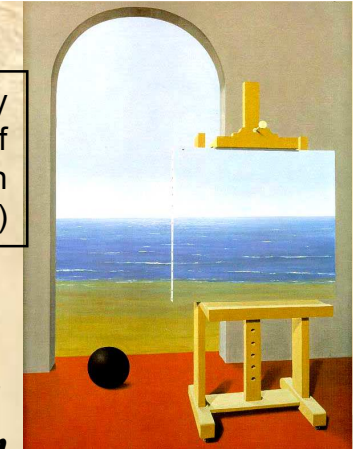


- **If we can agree that *action* is the event in which an human individual's material corporality makes itself felt (upon the world, other humans, and herself/himself),**
- **then *knowledge* may be said to be everything that makes up that individual's not-primarily-material, not-primarily-corporal, existence in so far as it leads up to, produces, and evaluates action.**
- **However, such a conception of knowledge is far too broad for a limited research project limited in space, time and personnel; far too vague and general for a research project that is to be empirical, in the first place; and not evidently rooted in a specifically African problematic.**
- **Further steps therefore are required to enumerate specific forms of knowledge, and to identify, among these, the ones that are most strategically situated to highlight our central problematic and to enhance our understanding of 'Africa', past and present**





Representation is inherently problematic even if suggestive of continuity with the original (cf. Magritte)



**In the most general sense (cf. Heidegger, Mall), *knowledge may be defined as the coincidence between human representation on the one hand, and Being on the other hand***

- – i.e. if we think, say, portray, act under the assumption, of what is in fact the case, then our inner world of mental representations is in concert with reality, in other words, then *we know*, then Truth is a quality of what we think, say, portray, and assume.



Kant

**However, such terms as ‘Being’, ‘reality’, ‘inner world’, ‘mental representations’, ‘truth’, ‘fact’, are extremely problematic, in many ways, including**

- the private, individual nature of such postulated inner knowledge (of which others have only hearsay evidence)
- as against the presumably convergent, presumably invariable, response from the non-human world outside us
- the potentially distortive effect of language, let alone of plurality of languages
- the inherently indirect and distortive nature of all representation (Kant)
- the mystical, aggregate nature of ‘Being’ and ‘reality’
- the evidently divergent nature of truths, from one individual to another, and from one group/culture/society/historical period to another



Heidegger



Mall





- A favourite definition of knowledge that avoids some of these issues, is the well-known adage **‘knowledge is justified true belief’**
- Gettier (1963) has qualified this definition in arguing that we may need not always believe what we know, etc., but in general the definition remains illuminating
- For us as Africanist social scientists, working *at the interface between continents and between cultures*, what is particularly useful in this definition is that it highlights the cultural embeddedness of knowledge:
- E.g. a witchcraft idiom such as
  - ‘my colleague is a witch, he made my computer crash by immaterial means and thus prevented me from finishing my book in time and earning the promotion he and I were both after’
- cannot constitute knowledge in our own North Atlantic academic circles, because no university council or disciplinary committee in this part of the world and in 2006 would seriously consider such individual belief true and justified
  - But change ‘witch’ into ‘communist’ (USA 1950s) or ‘terrorist’ (USA etc. 2000s), and see what happens!
- However, in the North Atlantic region in other periods (cf. *The European Witchcraze, Salem Possessed* etc.) there was no doubt that such an idiom addressed proper knowledge
- And the same is true for, e.g., most African settings attested in modern times
- The belief in God is an even clearer case
- And so is the belief, in Western Europe, in the mysterious illness-causing agent named ‘cold’, inhabiting especially drafty windy places, attracted by open windows, etc.





**Contrary to what most (Western) epistemologists.... believe (!),**

- **whatever is a *justified* truth claim within a particular spatio-temporal socio-cultural setting,**
- **would not be so justified, or may often not be justified at all, in many other spatio-temporal socio-cultural settings we know of**

**By the same token, whether a particular belief may be considered true by the social environment to which it is communicated, depends**

- **Not only, and (except among professional epistemologists) not in the first place, on the formal validity of the epistemological procedures underpinning such a belief,**
- **But also, and particularly, on *the truth-producing, world-creating nature of any given spatio-temporal socio-cultural setting* (which comes close to Wittgenstein's concept of the life-world)**



## 4. Collective representations as crucial, connecting forms of knowledge



Durkheim

- **Collectivities (societies, cultures, world religions, classes, cults) are largely *machines for the production of self-evidence*, in other words for the production of collective representations (Durkheim 1912) that not so much secondarily *represent*, but that *create* in the first place, the local life-world.**
- **In that particularistic local world, God, angels, the devil, witches, ancestors, elementary particles, Extraterrestrials, UFOs and their Abductees, the Axis of Evil, race, ‘cold’, are made to exist,**
  - **not because they directly present themselves to the senses of the individual members of such collectivities (they do *not*),**
  - **but because these members are encoded (often through specific bodily strategies of discipline and repetition) to spuriously connect specific sensory perceptions of real events (illness, death, misfortune, meteorological phenomena, natural disasters etc.) , with these imperceptible agents.**

**And (but this is a mere aside immaterial to our argument) we do not even *know for sure* that this is a one-way process only:**

- **That, on the one hand, sense impressions based on real events are, spuriously, culturally patterned into collective representations, *but not the other way around* :**
- **That, on the other hand, collective representations bring about, not just (as is understood) sense impressions – as individual or collective hallucinations – , but that these collective representations have also some slight effect (in the form of *creatio ex nihilo*, psychokinesis, whatever) upon the very empirical materiality that then brings about these sense impressions**





***Intermezzo: not one world-picture is the correct one, and African world-pictures may in certain respects have a claim to greater truth***

**Perhaps the power of collective human imagination is such that it somehow, sometimes, manages to produce, in the real world out there, the illusory effects we believe in, turning them from illusory agents into genuine agents; this is, in other words, the faith that may move mountains: miracles**

**Of course, the belief in the possibility of miracles as against the belief in immutable natural laws, separates the modern world-picture from the premodern; but what about the postmodern one?**

**This is part of a much longer argument of which I can only indicate the bare outlines here – I am not even sure that it is opportune here, but it implies a vindication of African knowledges.**

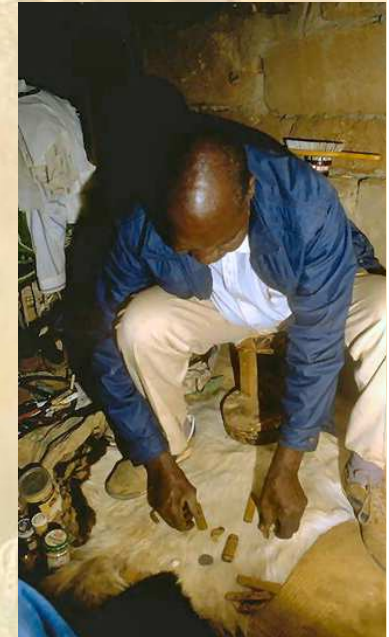
**As a trained spirit medium in the Southern African tradition (*sangoma*), as well as a senior North Atlantic academic, I have extensive experience in two disparate knowledge domains, each of which is constructed on the basis of fundamentally different premises as to how the world and the human existence are structured.**

- **Specifically, in (a) the North Atlantic context, our collective representations stipulate that (by virtue of the transcendent mode of thinking we will turn to shortly – one that invites sharp and insurmountable distinctions) the individual mind is a black box that has only one means of access: *our senses*, defined to be only five; and we have Kant's critical philosophy, over the past 200 years built into our very collective representations, according to which the mental image we build through the senses, is necessarily very imperfect and distortive.**
- **On the other hand, in the world-picture of (b) Southern African religious specialists (and in many other premodern settings in Africa and worldwide) the individual mind is considered to be porous, and may self-evidently share contents with other human minds living and dead, and with other, non-human existences.**





Working as a *sangoma*, and (with the aid of the ritual technology of *sangomahood*, in other words, with the aid of ancestors, whose illusory nature as active agents is then eclipsed from my mind...) temporarily stressing (b) in my own experience and self-definition, I have found the minds of my clients to be effectively porous, even across huge distances, and to be readable like a book in twilight, often with verifiable results. However, reverting to (a), to a situation where telepathy cannot be publicly acknowledged according to dominant North Atlantic collective representations (even though experiences reminiscent of telepathy are quite common also there), minds are closing around me, and so does my own, and even (or, especially) the will is incapable of producing the porousness with which I am so familiar under (b). *So it looks as if the world has various and variable faces, and that it turns to us the particular face that best matches the expectations with which we approach it.* In line with well-known implications of quantum mechanics (popularised to the macrolevel by Pauli and Jung, among others), knowledge about the world is not a constant based on the allegedly immutable feature of the world ('natural laws') alone, but is a variable product of a specific human observer (with personal and collective preconceptions) and the world. There is an objective, universal truth in *sangoma* knowledge that acknowledges an aspect of the world about which North Atlantic science is ignorant.



Mr Smarts Gumede, my principal teacher of divinatory technology, casts his divination tablets ('bones') in his surgery in Francistown, Botswana, 1989





## 5. Collective representations as social technologies of knowledge

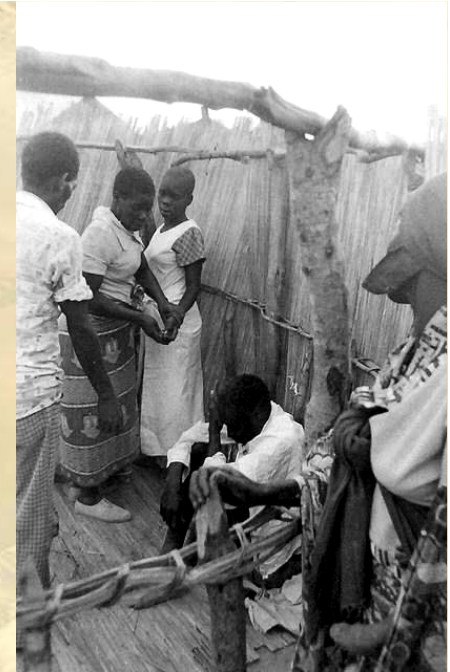
- **Collective representations, as forms of knowledge, have their binding effect upon the communities in which they are found through some process of *externalisation*, where the individual minds of humans, otherwise uncontrollable and wandering off in all kinds of directions where the imagination may take them, are disciplined in one direction by social control. The externalisation of collective representations, therefore, is among the most crucial aspects of the social technology of knowledge in premodern situations.**
- **How does this work? Durkheim's brilliant analysis in *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse* (1912), even though based on a total misreading of the Australian material, still seems to capture the essence. Below we will inspect a selection of well-known African situations of the production and management of knowledge (divine sanction, judicial process, divination) in which this question may be given concrete answers.**





Transforming collective representations from illusions into apparently tangible reality through the corporality of ritual: two scenes from the ushwana name inheriting ritual of the Nkoya, Zambia, 1977 – one of these people's most central technologies of forging social connection; top: *mu shitete* ('in the reed fence'): after a night of agony, the chosen heiress is dressed in white, while the widower waits in distress to meet his deceased wife's reincarnation; bottom: *ruhñwa* ('festive dance') -- but two hours later dance dispels whatever remained of the sorrow of bereavement

In general, we may say that the human individual's corporality, by social pressures of conformity, is made to engage, regularly or at crucial moments in life, in specific 'special events' instituted by the local culture, such as ceremonies, rites, sessions of a ritual nature such as divination, prayer, possession dance, musical performances, judicial protocol. These events are highly structured and highly controlled. Their corporal aspect is reinforced by the use of specific objects that mark these externalisations situations, and constitute their material technology: special rooms or edifices set apart for this purpose, musical instruments, garments, paraphernalia, divination and healing tools, etc. These events make explicit reference, also at the non-specialist level, to the contents of the collective representations in question, and in these public situations the individual has no option but to display obeisance vis-à-vis these collective representations. This equips the individual with at least minimum awareness of and deference vis-à-vis these binding elements, whose traces are stored not only mentally but also corporally. *The complex, externally controlled and stage-directed (in other words, highly performative) corporal experience within the 'special event', the confrontation between the body and the senses with the special space and the material objects, produces inevitably a sense of heightened experience of reality (that part of the experience is, in fact, real); and that sense of reality is then transferred, secondarily and illusory, onto the collective representations evoked in the 'special events' – endowing these collectiverepresentations, too (cf. Geertz 1966), with an impression of tangible reality they do not objectively possess.* The result is: social connection, or what used to be described by structural-functional sociology as 'normative integration' (Parsons 1937). The individual mind may still wander off in all directions, and will do so (religious anthropologists have often been amazed by the lack of consensus between their informants' conceptualisations of the sacred in private interviews), but the social technology of externalisation has enforced a minimum of consensus at least for that which is publicly mediated by their actors also outside ritual situations, e.g. in everyday informal conversations.







- **We are now in a better position to appreciate the relation between knowledge and action.**
- **Action is where the human existence, through its corporality, engages in direct contact with the givens of reality (in one's own body, in and through other humans, in and through the non-human world). To Marx we owe an inspiring materialist theory of action and knowledge whose continued relevance is, of course, not eclipsed by events in recent social history such as the collapse of state communism in 1989. Action ('praxis') is the only source of valid knowledge, for it is in Man's engagement with the world (in Marx's too narrow view: through production) that the human existence takes shape, and from which it depends in the most literal sense.**
- **This is at the back of my affirmation (1999/2003) that philosophy is much more of an empirical knowledge than most philosophers admit; in the development of an original yet intersubjective language forged to articulate crucial aspects of the contemporary experience (usually with extension to the past and the future) – for this is how I define philosophy – philosophy usually does not just dwell on formal procedure but also seeks to state 'what is the case' (Wittgenstein). Only knowledge procedures ultimately based on action (research, measurement, experience, debate) can tell us what reality is like. Only kites that have been tested on a windy beach, can make a claim to flying.**
- **This also drives home the vital significance, for knowledge, of (a) objects and of (b) our having a body: without being able to constrain and harness knowledge entirely, at least these two givens allow us, nay force us, to ground our knowledge (they occupy space we do not, and if we touch, hit, eat etc. them our body registers that) and thus to lend practical validity to our knowledge**
- **Yet the socio-cultural construction of a life-world never stops at that which is empirically validated by the interaction between body and objects; typically, that construction endows with self-evidence, (1) many products of knowledge that have stood the empirical test of body-object interaction and (2) many more that have not. *As long as we are inside that life-world, we cannot tell the difference between (1) and (2)!***
- **The anthropologist is privileged in that his/her boundary crossing occasionally affords him the possibility to discriminate between (1) and (2), but usually at high costs of cultural learning investment, subjectivity, disorientation, social penalties in either reference group (at home or in the field), and hence homelessness.**
- **The epistemologist seeks to formulate surer, safer, more readily available and more objective procedures for such discrimination**





## 6. Conflictive versus connective modalities of knowledge

- Against this background, ‘true or false’, ‘justified or unjustified’, ‘local or universal’, are only secondary attributes of knowledge.
- These attributes (labels) divide: they indicate some of the several axes along which knowledge invites confrontation, conflict, subjugation/hegemony, and rebellion
- a culture, a society, is a web of knowledge, interwoven, yet immensely varying, and contradictory
- Given the initially private and uncontrolled nature of individual knowledge, and the capability of the human imagination to fly off in all directions, knowledge is a potentially divisive and centrifugal force
  - Little wonder that in many societies, especially in the African context, collectively recognised superior knowledge (such as that of ritual, divinatory and therapeutic specialists) was closely associated with outsidership and (like the main other positions of outsidership: kings, backsmiths, traders) have often had connotations of sorcery, of utter evil – connotations that might lead to ostracism and lynching
- So within the context of our proposed sub-programme we have to ask the central question: *under what conditions can knowledge be a connecting force, and a force of social transformation, in the African context?*





*'...Are some collective representations, possibly including our own, truer to reality than others? Missionary of the White Father's congregation combines medical care and Christian instruction in his contact with an African leper, undated postcard, first quarter 20th c CE*



**1. *Knowledge as a connecting force:* The answer to this part of the question has already been indicated, and (from what we flatter ourselves to be our privileged position, which I will soon criticise) it is slightly depressing: socially connecting knowledge is in the first place knowledge contained in collective representations, that are generally shared within a community, and that produce a self-evident 'world-picture' (*Weltanschauung*);**

**the depressing aspect lies in the fact that, as modernist academic outside observers, of our own society and especially of African societies, we have often found the contents of the collective representations *of others*, once reinterpreted into our own external discourse and then taken literally, to be so much at variance with our own collective representations (those that are informed by modern science, secularisation etc.), that we can only consider the others' collective representations to be, not valid pictures of reality, but merely instruments of social domination, of a stultifying tradition, of a patently untrue conception of the world, nature, the human body, etc.**

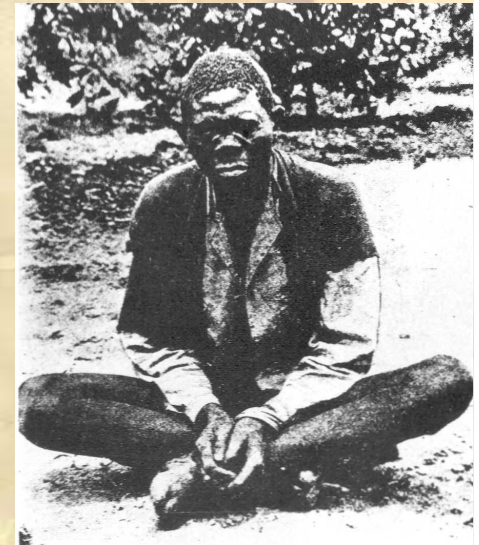
***However, do we have the right to impose our own collective representations to that extent? Or is more involved – are some collective representations, possibly including our own, truer to reality than others?***





**2. *Knowledge as a force of social transformation:* If knowledge as collective representation is clearly a force, both of connection and of conservatism, it is the rise of new knowledge that can act as a force of social transformation.**

**Such know knowledge often comes from the outside, from North Atlantic modernity, and this is largely and rightly also the perspective of our proposed programme. However, there are also endogenous forces at work. Some of my first research was on C African prophets (Mupumani, Lenshina, Shimbinga, Lubumba; van Binsbergen 1981), and I found that they had managed to fundamentally shake local collective representations by presenting new knowledge, dreamed up on the basis of their own personal creative struggle with the contradictions of the times. Braving tradition (as well as colonial and missionary oppression), after their inner struggle these prophets were involved in a struggle with public opinion, in which they were partly successful to the extent to which they succeeded in securing, and retaining, a following, and build an organisation managing and spreading the new knowledge. The story of early Christianity and early Islam is scarcely different.**



The prophet Mupumani,  
Namwala district, Zambia,  
1915



The prophet and witchfinder,  
Lubumba, Kaoma district,  
Zambia, 1973





## 7. Ways out of the uncertainty of knowledge

**We have seen that knowledge is precarious, contested, that there is no obvious, universally binding distinction to be made between ‘factual knowledge that is in agreement with the fact, with reality’, and private and collective flights of the imagination. ‘Reality’, ‘facts’, are in themselves disparate constructs of our lack of an Archimedean fixed point. We usually take recourse to use our own self-evidences, our own collective representations, in order to judge the knowledge of others outside our own community, but that does not free our own self-evidences from the suspicion that these, too, are largely or wholly illusory.**

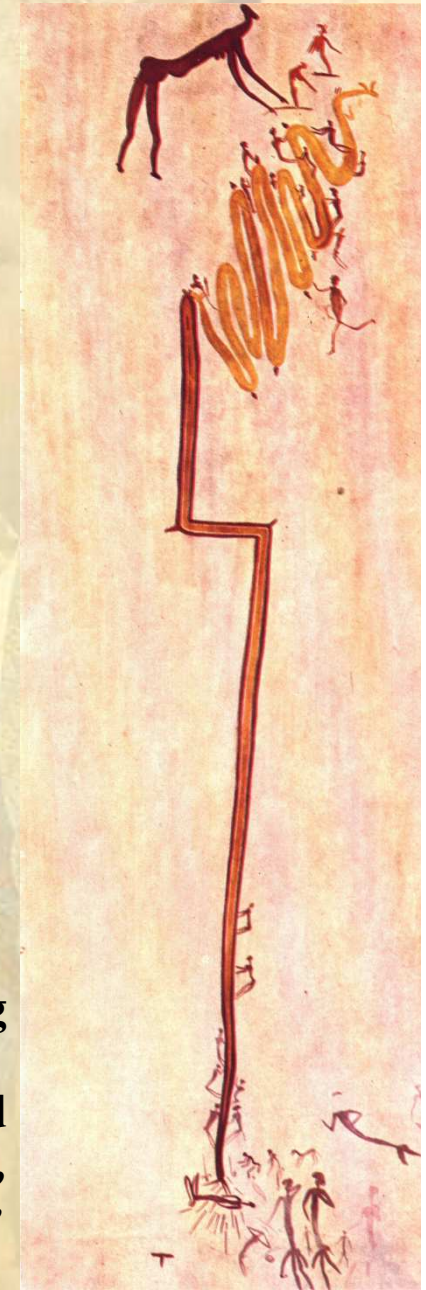
*Are we then forever to be impressioned in sham knowledge whose truth value we cannot determine? Is there no way to know the truth – a truth that is more than a private or collective illusion?*





## ***(a) Divine sanction***

Prehistoric rock painting depicting the connection between heaven and earth, Zimbabwe; see slide 2



**The appeal to ancestral tradition or (as among the ancient Sumerians, Etruscans, Hebrews, Christians, Muslims, etc.) a specific personal revelation (often divine), is a sign that people in many different spatio-temporal contexts have often felt the need for a solid foundation that put their truths beyond doubt – that afforded them true knowledge.**

**As far as Africa is concerned, the mytheme of the connection between heaven and earth (initially self-evident in the time of the beginning, then disastrously destroyed, then partly restored by rain, kings, animal messengers, tools and seeds dropping from heaven etc.) has been one of the central themes in mythology.**

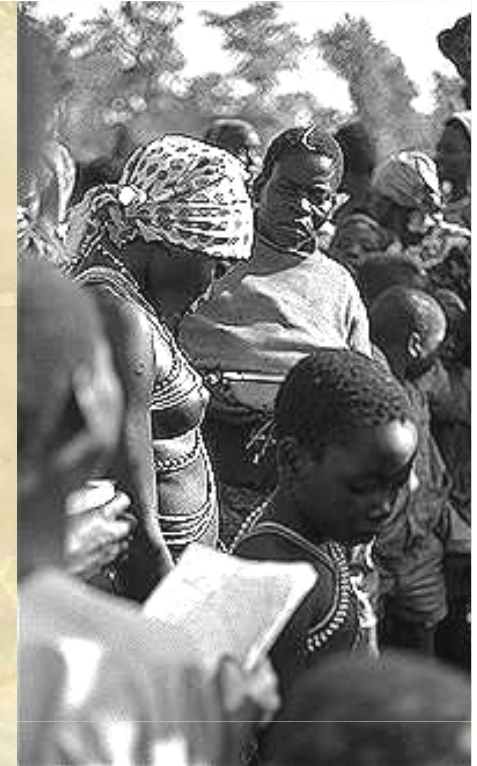
**And for the early historic African past, we are vaguely informed on the Ancient Egyptian Houses of Life (*prw ʿkh*), temple colleges where specialist knowledge from ritual procedure to law, divination, healing and procedures securing the afterlife was managed (often also in written form), always under divine dispensation, especially of the god Thoth – but already as a *form of the path-breaking package of writing, the state, organised priesthood, and science, that was to bring about the first knowledge revolution in history* – see below.**





## ***(b) Initiation***

**In Africa and elsewhere, *initiation* has constituted a major way of imparting fundamental knowledge that, as collective representation (even if not general but privileged, e.g. to initiates of a particular gender and grade), is a major connecting force in society. The secrets imparted at initiation may appear to be empty to the outsider (de Jong 2000), but they do bind the initiates nonetheless. An usually there is a real and invaluable contents, in the form of central myths establishing and grounding the local life-world, major intrasocietal rules and divisions, often in combination with a profound physical experience (mutilatory or otherwise) powerful enough to imprint initiation as crucial connecting event in the body and in the personal experience.**



Female puberty rite,  
Nkoya people,  
Zambia, 1978





## ***(c) Judicial procedure***

**But these collective mythico-religious strategies are not the only ways out of the uncertainty of knowledge. There are other methods that because of their lack of reliance on collective representations, are quite promising from the point of view of our own academic perspective.**

**There is, for instance, the judicial methods of deliberation and cross-examination as found in most African and West Asian local-level courts of law – one of the sources, I am inclined to think, of specialised philosophical dispute. What is interesting here is the attempt to establish the validity of statements, not by an appeal to a shared collective representation, but by a painstaking reconstruction of a course of concrete events known to some but not to all. Of course, court cases are in order when the community balances between *connection* and *disruption*, and when the appeal to collective representations alone has evidently failed to bring all persons concerned into the societal harness of consensus. Then, knowledge specific not only to the spatio-temporal features of the community as a whole, but to the concrete persons involved and the concrete matter at hand, is taken recourse to in order to re-connect, sometimes also in order to negotiate a situation of such fundamental social transformation that the existing collective representations have lost their compelling connecting power.**



The royal kuta (assembly hall, where also law cases were tried), Barotseland, Zambia (Northern Rhodesia), early 1940s





## ***(d) Divination***

**Other methods, often remarkably close to deliberation and cross-examination typical of the court of law, comprise *the quest for divinatory revelation*, that all other Africa constitutes a major way in which notions of truth and validity are locally conceptualised.**

**Some forms of divination (e.g. trance divination) rely on altered states of consciousness induced by respiration and musical techniques, rather than by an elaborate material apparatus to be used with great specialist knowledge.**

**Most forms of African divination however are of the latter type, and the constitutes African technologies of knowledge production whose detailed comparative and historical study has occupied me since the late 1980s. Interestingly, both the proper handling of the apparatus, and the management of the elaborate interpretative catalogues (of specific configurations produced by the apparatus, coupled to specific verbal interpretations in terms of individual and/or collective predicaments), are predicated on the idea that proper technical and conceptual procedure will produce truth – even though ultimately thought to be sanctioned by the oracular god, ancestor or spirit held to preside over the oracle.**

**Again, it is not the general condition of society that is administered by an appeal to generally held collective representations, but the production of a specific truth, made to the measure of a particular individual or group at a crucial moment in their existence.**

**Here we have proper African procedures to produce, by formal material technologies of knowledge, knowledge that, however tailor-made to the persons and the situation, is yet considered to be validated by proper procedure. Typically, the knowledge of divinatory procedure is collectively administered, by a guild of diviners, and apprentices after their training with an individual diviner are to be tested by a committee. The parallels with North Atlantic, or global, academic procedure are not accidental and anecdotal, but go to the heart of the matter.**



**Sangomas (two sisters) demonstrating tablet divination in Francistown, Botswana, 1989**





A formal model of a sheep's liver, used as a matrix for expicy interpretations, Mari, central Mesopotamia, 2nd mill. BCE



**We need not quibble, in the present connection, about the allegedly uniquely African nature of such material divination systems, or alternatively (as a presumably scientific truth although unwelcome to many African ears) their undeniable ramifications over vast areas of space and time, from Southern Africa to West and Central Asia, even Northern America, and from the Upper Palaeolithic rise of shamanism to the noble art of geomancy at Renaissance courts in early modern Europe. I have spent a very long time collecting, analysing, and provisionally publishing the available evidence, the case is made, and the final book is being compiled.**

**One thing is uncontested, meanwhile. It is in the Ancient Near East, particularly in Ancient Mesopotamia in the third millennium BCE, that we find our first, and massively documented, attestation of the *type* of procedural truth production that we find in African divination, as a procedural way out from the prison of uncertainty of knowledge that would not centrally appeal to collective representations. Mesopotamian divination (initially especially for the king and the state, and in the form of expicy, soon also astrological, and finally also for commoners, individuals) emerged as the first form of science, governed by procedures in direct response to concrete findings 'out there'. The statements are of the form still remotely echoed in the interpretative catalogues of African material divination, e.g. of the following types**

**'If the liver is found to exhibit a black spot near the gall bladder...the king will be victorious'**

**'If Venus resides in the moon's domain... the royal marriage will be disastrous for the state'**

[ the examples are somewhat fictitious but true to type; they will be replaced by authentic ones from the Assyriological literature]

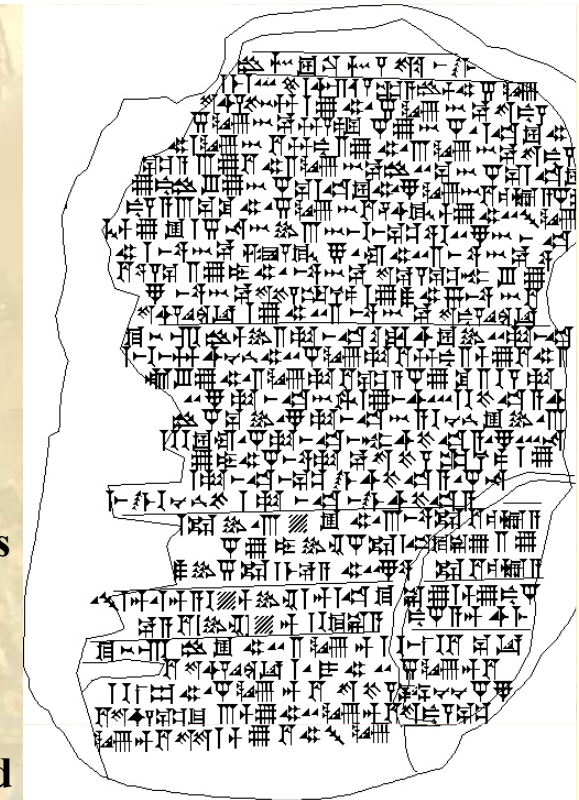




**Diviner-scientists would be the king's principal advisers, and their catalogues would constantly be revised, tested in the light of similar observations accumulated over centuries, and augmented. We are here in the realm of science.**

**Its hallmark is not the lasting validity of its assumptions and procedures (in the North Atlantic region, astrology has been considered a pseudo-science since the Enlightenment), but *the fact that it is formal, intersubjective, specialist procedures that establish truth, and not recourse to generality mediated as collective representations.* The procedural knowledge that is thus being produced is *sui generis*, and whether it will prove to connect or to disconnect, to reinforce the status-quo or to bring about fundamental transformation, -- these are not questions that are allowed to determine the nature and the contents of the knowledge that is thus being produced.**

**Ancient Mesopotamian divinatory science must be understood as a crucial element in *the path-breaking package of writing, the state, organised priesthood, and science, that was to bring about the first knowledge revolution in history.***



A Seleucid astrological text in cuneiform script, 2nd c. BCE, Syria (this is a so-called 'hand copy', i.e. the standardised rendering, by a present-day Assyriologist, of the far less standardised and far more problematic actual writing, which was effected by imprints of a stylus onto wet clay)





Writing for eternity  
(the opposite of living  
in the here and now)  
on an Ancient  
Egyptian sarcophagus



## 8. The First Knowledge Revolution

What the First Knowledge Revolution consisted of can be appreciated in many different ways. For some the invention of the state is crucial, for others the one-sided activation of the left cerebral lobe by the continuous processing of texts rather than the more musical and emotive elements residing in the other lobe.

For me, the crucial thing is that the package writing-state-organised priesthood-science greatly enhanced, revolutionarised and transformed a tendency that had always been inherent full speech from its very beginning: *the capacity to vicariously refer to aspects of the world that were not given in the situation at hand* – to start out on the path of *transcendence*, beyond the here and the now.

The First Knowledge Revolution was a move, not towards centrifugality, more imagination, more uncertainty, the uncontrolled private proliferation of knowledges – but towards control, not only over the here and now, but also over that what was not here and not now (legal texts, a tax register, a royal genealogy legitimating a heir, the hundred names of God), in the hands of a select literate elite with – inevitably – hieratic powers.

To the extent to which the history of the North Atlantic region, since the Ancient Near East, has been the history of transcendence ('connective control through disconnection from the here and now'), the fundamental conditions of this process are to be found in the First Knowledge Revolution.





**It took two and a half millennium of growth, innovation, and cross-continental influences, before the inchoate procedural divinatory science of Ancient Mesopotamia could spawn, as its distant offspring, the logic of Aristotle (largely compiled in his *Organon*) in which the outlines of formal, specialist epistemology become clearly visible for the first time. In that logic, the truth of a statement is to be assessed, not by intuitive appeal to common sense or to sense data, but by complex formal procedures informing the construction and evaluation of syllogisms. It was still only the foundation of science which, as transforming knowledge, has changed the modern world more than anything else.**

**We are now at a point where we can pinpoint the relevance of particular forms of knowledge, for an understanding of Africa's past and present.**



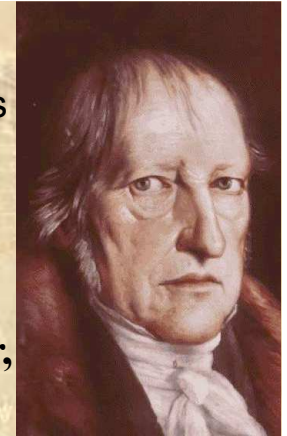
An lavishly embellished page from an early (incunable) printing of one of Aristotle's texts (*The Nicomachean Ethics*), Europe, late 15th c.; note the worm holes)





## 9. Beyond relativism

Hegel, c. 1820s



**Cultural relativism emerged in the middle of the 20th century (Herskovits, Kroeber, Kluckhohn)**

**Somewhat surprisingly: the USA that had few colonial possessions but many client societies in Latin America, as well as, domestically, an extensive fringe of racially informed colour bar and reservation life. (Probably European intellectuals emigrating to the USA especially from Nazi Germany brought an injection of continental philosophical echoes to USA anthropology, however, the roots of cultural relativism are immaterial in the present context.)**

***Cultural relativism* has been one of the most precious fruits of the anthropological endeavour. It has tempted us to consider all knowledge as in principle equivalent and sacrosanct, as to be respected in its own right as the product of a particular culture.**

**Yet, African knowledges have not been thus respected, but almost per definition despised, rejected as fundamentally invalid.**

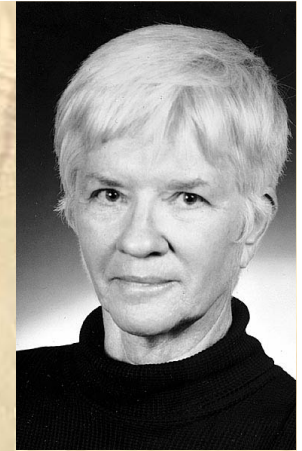
**Ever since early modern European expansion, and especially since Hegel's formal exclusion of Africa from the communion of history, African knowledge has suffered under *hegemonic* exclusion, ridicule, suspicion.**

**By the same token, Africa has attracted (probably also to its further detriment, in part) the well-wishing attempts of North Atlantic advocates of African knowledge like myself.**





## 10. Sandra Harding and the foundations of modern science: hegemony or sound epistemological procedure?



Sandra Harding

The combination of epistemology and cultural relativism is dynamite, as the radical feminist epistemologist Sandra Harding showed when she asked the question ‘is Western science an ethno-science’ – in other words,

1. Is that what the North Atlantic, and many people elsewhere worldwide, consider as the universal, objective and rational qualities of modern (especially natural) science, merely at a par with other specialist knowledge systems in Africa and elsewhere – equally illusory, equally uncertain, but merely by accident favoured by the superior military and economic power of the North Atlantic region
2. Or, whilst admitting these hegemonic elements to some extent, is the success of the knowledge claims of modern science *yet not to be reduced to the accidents of power in the world today*, but is there instead *also a real epistemological foundation* for the truth claims of modern science, in the sense of valid procedures, methodologies of data collection, theory formation and hypothesis testing?

Much as she would have liked to expose modern science as purely hegemonic and nothing more, Harding’s position is *reluctantly* that of (2). This is in accordance with everyday common experience: an airplane built after the principles of modern science, does not drop from the air as soon as it leaves North Atlantic fly zones and begins to fly over countries whose population is not supportive of North Atlantic collective representations, and may even (as a result of their negative perception of North Atlantic hegemony) be inimical to them. Motor cars imported to or assembled in Africa, follow the same mechanical and thermodynamical principles as effectively and demonstrably apply in the North Atlantic, as well as elsewhere in the world.

**Give or take a margin of hegemonic overkill, modern science can yet substantiate its claims as to rationality, universality and objectivity fairly well.**





# 11. What does this mean for African knowledge?

## *(1) Disconnection*

At first sight, this does not look so good for African knowledge.

- **1. *Disconnection*.** If modern science is not, essentially, an ethnoscience, does that mean that it is fundamentally different, and at an incomparable higher plane, than other fields of knowledge, however specialised and systematic, outside the North Atlantic – e.g. African knowledges, some of which we have briefly looked at? Here we would yield totally to the disconnecting tendencies inherent in modern science: it disconnects those ‘to whom it seems to belong’ (the North Atlantic) from ‘those to whom it does not belong and who have only acquired it second-hand’ (African). In the field of knowledge production, and particularly of academic knowledge construction, the only place left for Africans is that of imitators and facilitators of North Atlantic knowledge, *in casu* scholarship.

To avoid all misunderstanding, let me declare emphatically (though redundantly) that I totally disagree with the *disconnection* position (1).

Fortunately there are alternative ways of constructing the argument.





## ***2. Equivalence***

- ***2. Equivalence.*** We could try to make the complementary case for selected African knowledge systems, claiming that these, too, cannot be totally relegated to the prison of uncertainty and local collective representation typical of collective representations. If we could argue that certain forms of African knowledge also deserve the epithets *universal, rational and objective*, that would mean that we have discovered, on African soil, forms of knowledge production that could be considered inalienable contributions to the universal knowledge heritage of humankind, and that by implication these knowledges could meaningfully be exported to other parts of the world, and remain valid and true there. African knowledges would then be connective with the rest of the world.

**This is the argument I have advanced for Southern African divination and healing systems (van Binsbergen 2003), seeking – with considerable success -- to translate them into a global format.**

**But we need not reach for something so abstruse and so repulse to the Sceptical establishment in our North Atlantic midst. There are at least two, very convincing, arguments for the position of equivalence advocated here (see next slide):**



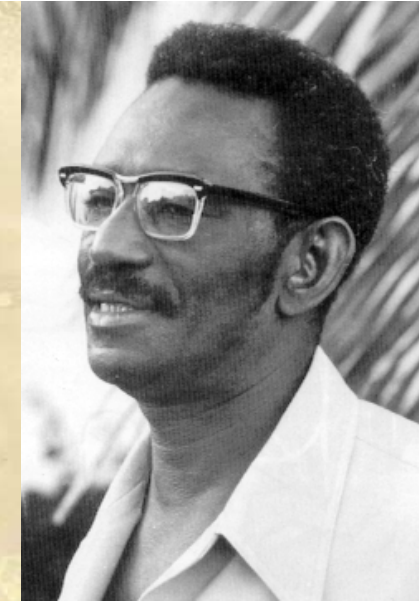


- a. Any society can only survive if its members have a sufficiently valid knowledge of the world (the human body, human society, but especially the non-human world that surrounds us) to sustain vital life processes of production and reproduction. This involves a very considerable body of valid knowledge about the world. Anatomically Modern Humans have emerged in Africa 200 ka BP, have survived uniquely there for 120 ka, and (in addition to the Out-of-Africa movement) have continued to massively live and thrive there until today. So Africa must always have saturated with valid, endogenous knowledge about reality. Case concluded.**
- b. Not all knowledge is scientific, not all knowledge is even verbal. The vast knowledge of corporality, rhythms, moods and altered states of consciousness enshrined in African music and dance has undeniably conquered the world in the last few centuries, as another argument for the *equivalence (2)* claimed here.**

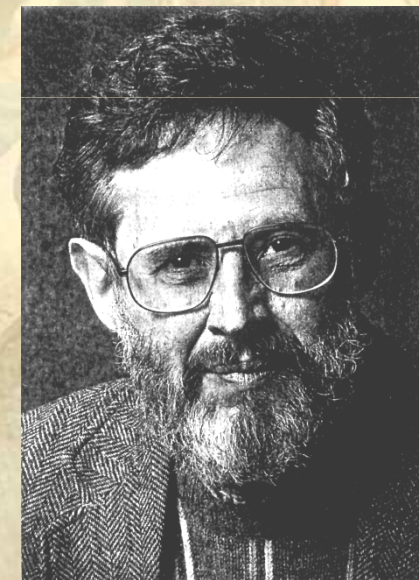




Cheikh Anta Diop,  
Senegalese nuclear physicist  
and cultural philosopher, one  
of the principal inspirers of  
today's Afrocentricity  
movement



c. **Radical, 'strong' Afrocentrists would reverse the *disconnection (1)* argument and claim that everything that constitutes the North Atlantic, was ultimately taken ('stolen') from Africa – not in the utterly remote times of the 'Out of Africa' movement (when all Anatomically Modern Humans were in effect Africans, but not at all Africans in the modern sense), but only a few thousand years ago. Long before, and also after, the *Black Athena* debate (initiated by Bernal 1987) Ancient Egypt was appropriated as the channel for such one-way transmission. Besides the growth of modern science on African soil in the hand of African scientists, and the reluctantly-African universalism of the Mudimbe type (van Binsbergen 2005), Afrocentricity is one of the three major African responses in the global anti-hegemonic struggle in the domain of anti-hegemonic scholarship. So we cannot dismiss the Afrocentrist position lightly, but we need to engage critically with it, especially since it is based on incomplete internalisation of the epistemological canons of global scholarship (but to what extent is that a hegemonic argument?), as well as on a fundamental, wishful misreading of the (pre-)historical data especially on the 'Back-into-Africa' movement (from 15 ka BP onwards).**



Martin Bernal, author of  
*Black Athena* (1987- )





### ***(3) Multicentered universalism as the ultimate form of global connectedness***

Another way out of the hegemonic dilemmas of *disconnection (1)* could lie, again, in the following argument:

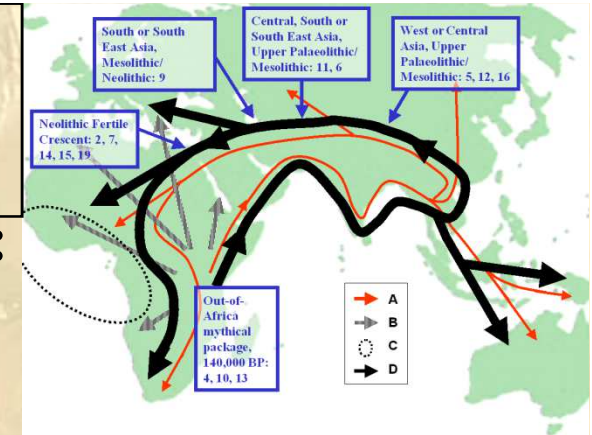
- ***3. Multicentered universalism as the ultimate form of global connectedness.*** Only by hegemonic sleight-of-hand could the North Atlantic region appropriate modern science as being ‘North Atlantic’. Modern science is demonstrably the product from many cultures in all continents, grown over five millennia of more. It is only by historic, geopolitical accident that Europeans, Africans, Asians etc. have come to be distinguished as broad ethnic categories. Especially for the appropriation and innovative use of science, continentality or regionality has no meaning. If it is largely by virtue of the proper epistemological procedures that modern science produced a truth that is somewhat more valid, somewhat more lasting (let us be prudent) than the truth of collective representations (or the truth of material divination, for that matter), than these epistemological procedures are the proper heritage of humankind as a whole. If they do make modern science universal (as even the initially sceptical Harding has agreed), then African participating in scientific knowledge are simply discharging their common humanity shared with all other humans – at a par with shared joy at childbirth, or shared grief at death.

*We have now almost completed our task of setting the framework, within which our specific concrete projects on Connections in African knowledge can be presented and justified. But before we make that final step, let me bring out four more implications of the argument so far.*





The basic outline of global mythological process starting in Africa 80 ka BP; the red lines traced the diffusion of AMHs; the blue arrows identify regions and periods of intensified mythological innovation and transformation; the blue numbers refer to major complexes of mythemes ('Narrative Complexes') transmitted or engendered in the process (van Binsbergen 2005, 2006)



## 12. Some implications of the argument :

### (1) Pandora's Box as the baseline of connecting knowledge

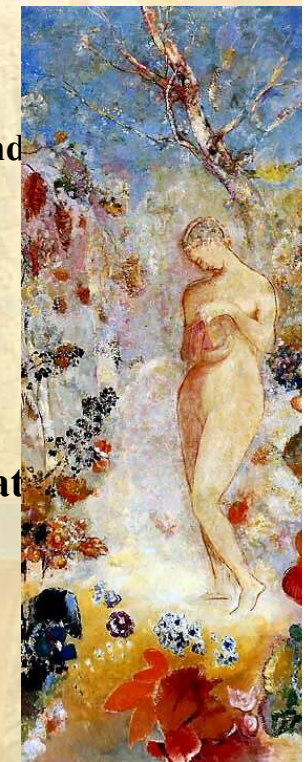
1. In the first place, we have characterised the rise of the package 'writing—the state—organised priesthood—science' as the First Knowledge Revolution. We will not quibble over the world 'first' – but surely, as we seek
  - (as others and I myself have been doing over the past few years, in a Harvard-centred network on comparative mythology and long-range approaches, not only anthropologists and historians but also geneticists, linguists and archaeologists)

to penetrate the mists of time to understand something of the knowledge systems of Anatomically Modern Humans (AMH) in the long period from 200 ka to 5 ka BP, such a claim of 'first' is bound to need qualification.

When a handful of AMHs left Africa, it was after 120 ka years of cultural and linguistic development, and they brought with them a considerable knowledge package (testified by the long list of cultural (near)universals in humans cultures today), what I have termed 'Pandora's Box', that has since been spread, transformed and innovated all over the world.

This is (for as long as the 'Out of Africa' thesis holds...) the fundamental given of socio-cultural connectedness, the basis of intra- and transcultural interaction, of all globalisation and proto-globalisation.

We are now beginning to discern the various crucial steps in this substained process, in, out of, and back to Africa, and this emerging picture, however dim, inevitably informs our reading of intra-Africa connections and transformations.



Redon's Pandora





## ***(2) How to characterise the second knowledge revolution, that of today?***

**2. In the second place, we have to do some further thinking as to what constitutes, in the knowledge-centred terms of the present argument, the essence of today's 'Second' Knowledge Revolution?**

- The word 'mediatisation' has been used in the overall Theme Group Programme, and this may well be an apt way to define the further transformation of a knowledge evolution initially characterised, I repeat, as the history of the global rise of transcendence. In today's Second Knowledge Revolution, through the multiple, electronically supported ways in which man-made devices totally affect our corporality, take possession (!) of it and seek to reduce it to just a passive appendice of the device, *such a sense of immediacy and inescapability is created that the fanciful, imaginary recourse to God, the ancestors and other evocations of ultimate meaning can be largely dispensed with.***

Soil scientists in Niger







**What are the implications of this perspective for the field of academic knowledge production in the African context? I am not altogether sure yet, and again, further reflection is needed. Perhaps in this field the equivalent of mediatisation is a situation where the hegemony produced by the (materially supported) inescapably massive display (evidently in collusion with state, economy and military) of North Atlantic forms of science is so inescapable that in fact the *disconnection option (1)* gains absolute dominance – so the only way out for the African scholar is to emulate North Atlantic models, and the only alternative for the North Atlantic Africanist is to expect our African colleagues to reproduce what we are doing ourselves.**

**It then becomes revealing to see have a leading African intellectual like Mudimbe display increasing difficulty in appreciating African, especially Afrocentrist, knowledge production, or to make contact with historic African religion – instead he teaches French literature, Latin and Greek, and begins to admit that ‘the Colonial Library’ (his famous term for North Atlantic Africanist scholarship) may be a valid source of knowledge after all**

***If the above analysis makes some sense, this sub-programme on knowledge will have the critical function of exploring what space exists for non-hegemonic African scholarship, and seeking to enlarge that space. This is the main rationale of the first project I will be proposing.***



Valentin Mudimbe, see slide 2





### ***(3) The First Knowledge Revolution never really took root in African soil before the 20th century CE***

**3. If the West's path of scientific knowledge was opened with the Neolithic invention of the package of writing—the state—organised priesthood—science, then for an appreciation of the predicament of knowledge in Africa today we need to remind ourselves that the first knowledge revolution never really took root in African soil before the 20th century CE, when it came in the trappings of colonial and missionary domination.**

**This is of course the kind of overstatement one would make in a provisional presentation like the present one,**

- **Admittedly, it does not do justice to, for instance, African Islamic scholarship throughout the second mill. CE; or to the very wide popular spread of Islam and Christianity, with unmistakable notions of transcendence, in sub-Saharan Africa in the second half of the 2<sup>nd</sup> mill CE**
- **Nor to the fact that (probably in stimulus invention triggered by Sumerian examples) one of the most influential literate societies of Antiquity, that of Ancient Egypt, arose in the African continent albeit not in sub-Saharan Africa;**
- **Nor to the fact that large (through largely or fully illiterate, and economically precarious) states did arise in the interiors of West and South Central Africa in the course of the second millennium**
- **Nor to the fact that (as we have seen) organised priesthoods managing some form of endogenous (proto-) science are certainly found in West Africa (Ifa etc.) and Southern Africa**

**Yet the statement to the effect that *the First Knowledge Revolution never really took root in African soil before the 20th century CE* does contain a fair measure of truth**

**Think of the African reluctance of explaining human death by reference not to guilty human witchcraft but, transcendence-fashion, to supernatural powers; of the great difficulties of establishing and maintaining formality in formal organisations, the state, the economy, etc.**





I am tempted to illustrate the implications of the limited penetration of the First Knowledge Revolution by a present-day (i.e. last quarter of the 20th c. CE) example from rural western central Zambia.

My first prolonged stay at the Njonjolo royal capital of King Kahare of the Nkoya Mashasha people was in the early 1970s. It soon became clear that in the myths and legends circulating in that community, the royal figure of Kapesh Kamunungampanda ('Kapesh who Joined the Forked Branches') was very prominent: in order to steal the moon from heaven so that his child might wear it as a royal ornament, Kapesh ordered his people to build a very high tower (or ladder) out of forked branches – common building material but also the format of a common type of cult shrine. After much hardship and protest, the tower collapsed, many people died and the survivors were scattered -- the beginning of the diversity of nations and of languages. The story is familiar from the Bible, and also occurs elsewhere in Zambia, the Mozambican-Angolan belt, and sparsely throughout Africa. Elsewhere I have demonstrated (van Binsbergen 2005 and in preparation) that this distribution is not due to the spread of Christianity, and that specifically the name Kapesh (without Bantu etymology) goes back to the Sanskrit word for 'forked pole, gable' – but that is not the point here. When, over the decades, I returned to Njonjolo to collect ethnographic data and oral history, it turned out that King Kapesh had been given a place in the Kahare genealogy. The national archives revealed the existence of a hereditary title Kapesh in neighbouring Kasempa district, and also in Kahare's area Kapesh was the hereditary title of a village headman, some 30 km from Njonjolo. In 1989 I was pressurised to go and visit the latter: he was a nonagenarian, and might die any day, taking the most precious historical information into his grave, for he himself had been among the builders of the tower, who had only survived by sheer luck and presence of mind – stepping aside when the tower collapsed. Of course I realised that in SC Africa, incumbents of a title when stating the official history of their dynasty, will speak in the first person singular also when describing events many generations before the present incumbent. However, that obviously intelligent and nominally literate others, with extensive urban experience, and with whom I had been in intensive discussion for decades, apparently perceived complete continuity between mythical times and the present, was a great surprise to me. Not only had Vico's and Hegel's historicity failed to penetrate Nkoya consciousness – even the First Knowledge Revolution seemed to have left Nkoyaland untouched.







**There is an important and sustained debate on *African rationality*. It started, negatively, with Hegel (or was it the author of Genesis, with the curse of Ham, who has traditionally been regarded as representing Africans? Or with the Talmudic and Islamic traditions to the effect that Ham, of all travellers aboard the Ark, sought to secretly utilise Adam's bones or leopard-skin clothing – also on board – for sorcery purposes?). Livingstone's dialogue with the Southern African 'witchdoctor' was another, more positive early instalment –to be taken over, in time, by African contributions, from Kagame to Hountondji, Sodipo and Mudimbe, with North Atlantic contributions from, e.g., Evans-Pritchard, Gluckman, Horton and Hallen. We cannot meaningfully summarise that debate here. Suffice it to say that the denial of standard rationality to Africans has been the single most hurtful form of exclusion of Africans from the domain of knowledge; therefore we must watch our step very carefully before rushing to conclusions that can easily be misunderstood. Yet the implication of having missed, partly or largely, the First Knowledge Revolution, *seems to imply that the particular, transcendent, formal format in which rationality tends to be predominantly cast in the Western tradition, probably remained largely alien to Africans until the massive popular spread of the world religions Islam and Christianity in the second half of the second millennium CE*. The relative absence of the transcendent format may well be a blessing in disguise: what has captivated many non-Africans in modern times, and has produced in them a love at first sight for the African continent and its inhabitants, is precisely the absence of that impersonal, formal, transcendent rationality that has meant both the triumph, and the doom, of the North Atlantic region.**

**As a result, and despite such African parallels and prototypes as I have identified in judicial procedure and divination, the formal language of science procedure has remained somehow an alien language for Africa, and for most Africans.**

**Given the relatively recent, and hegemonically affected, advent of the First Knowledge Revolution in Africa, to be followed within a century by the global Second Knowledge Revolution which is now hitting also Africa with considerable force, makes African knowledge a particularly complex and contradictory field of study, full of pitfalls also from the viewpoint of political correctness.**





#### ***(4) Myth as transregionally continuous knowledge***

**4. Collective representations constitute a major form of knowledge throughout premodern societies in Africa and elsewhere. We have had the tendency to consider them as highly connective, but also as primarily local.**

**This in contrast with the universality of, particularly modern science.**

**In her initial, radical (but ultimately abortive) attempts to play down the epistemological underpinnings of modern science, and to play down as sheer hegemonic power its claims to universality, rationality and objectivity, Harding pointed to the practical, concrete ubiquity of modern science – available or implied in every school, hospital, motorcar, telephone, television set, airplane etc. wherever in the world. She suggested that the impression of modern science as universal might well derive primarily from that ubiquity. As we have seen, she would soon trade that point for an affirmation, on second thought, of the epistemological underpinnings of modern science which seem to make for real, grounded, meta-cultural universality.**





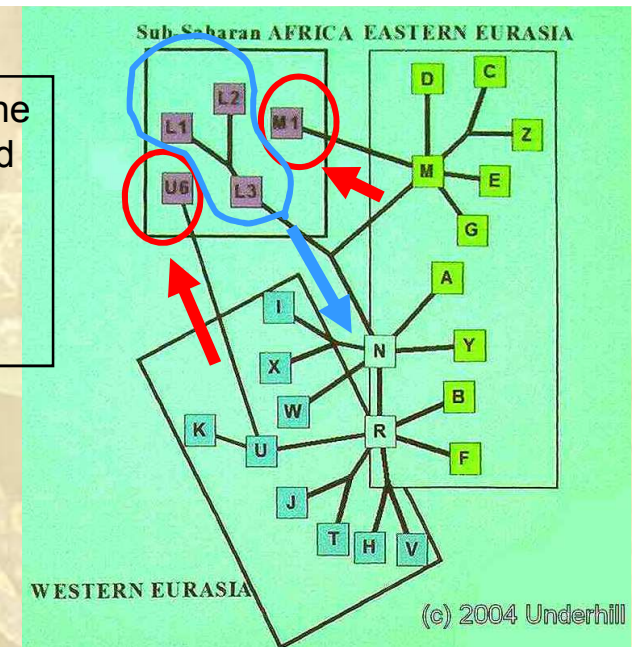
**However, I took her argument as an invitation to explore the transregional nature, if any – perhaps even the ubiquity – of collective representations as a form of pre-modern knowledge.**

**I soon found enough to make me overcome the disdain and fear of diffusionism in which I had been educated at the University of Amsterdam, 1960s, and to elaborate the notion of ‘transformative localisation’: the more or less superficial transformation formal systems (such as writing systems, languages, divination systems, (board) games, iconographies) undergo whenever they cross what classic anthropology – from its presentist and localist perspective – considered to be ‘cultural boundaries’.**





The 'Out of Africa' movement (blue) and the 'Back-into-Africa' movement (red) depicted in a nutshell after leading geneticist Peter Underhill 2004; note the massive Eastern Eurasian contribution to modern African genes



**My first case was, as said, geomantic divination, with a near-global world-wide distribution. Followed board-games, especially mankala. Clan nomenclature in Southern Africa, the naming of markers in divination sets, and astronomical terminology, were the next, equally promising (though utterly bewildering) topic. Leopard-skin symbolism (inside and outside Africa intimately linked with the rise of shamanism) turned out to be a diffusionist's dream topic, with fairly immutable iconographies, semantics, and even lexical forms (!) constant, it seemed, over two dozen of millennia and over the entire Old World and part of the new. Only seeing is believing. Finally, I set out to tackle comparative myth, especially cosmogonic myth, on a grand, global scale, with immensely gratifying results (van Binsbergen 2005, 2006 and in preparation) – this brought home to me the vision of the cultural history of AMHs, ever since the Out of Africa migration (80 ka BP), as a coherent, systematic, and (with genetic and linguistic help) essentially reconstructable process of diffusion, transformation and innovation of basic mythical material originally contained Pandora's Box, ultimately, during the last 15 ka, reverting back into Africa in order to have a feed-back effect upon whatever had been left to percolate locally after Out of Africa migration.**





**The conclusions on this point of ‘Myth as transregional continuous knowledge’ are inevitable, at least to me, and they are the main inspiration for the *second project to be proposed below*:**

- 1. premodern knowledge systems, in the shape of mythical collective representations (which shade over into religious concepts, initiation, notions of power and legitimacy etc.), in terms of constancy and transcontinental distribution are far more comparable to modern science than has met our eye so far – even though their format is that of a narrative, mythical, rather than a procedural, transcendent rationality**
- 2. Such premodern systems therefore turn out to be powerful forms of transregional connection, in addition to the connecting effect they have, socio-culturally, at the local and regional level.**
- 3. In the origin and unfolding of such mythical knowledge systems, Africa takes pride of place**
  - as origin,
  - initial laboratory (200 to 80 ka BP),
  - point of departure for the Out of Africa migration,
  - destination for the Back into Africa movement,
  - and, subtly, as a place where pre-Out of Africa notions have percolated and from where these may have gradually seeped through into Europe, West, and Central Asia.

**This is not a ‘strong Afrocentrist’ argument in disguise – it is rather, once more, a plea for recognition of the ultimate, primordial connections between AMHs, on which all other regional and local connections ultimately depend.**





## **13. Conclusion: Two projects**

**Having indicated some of the salient conceptual, analytical and historical aspects of connections in African knowledge, and having suggested where some of the crucial contradictions and dilemmas in this field may be identified, I can now simply announce the two constituent projects within the ‘knowledge’ sub-programme without much further commentary (and in fact with some overlap with the preceding text):**

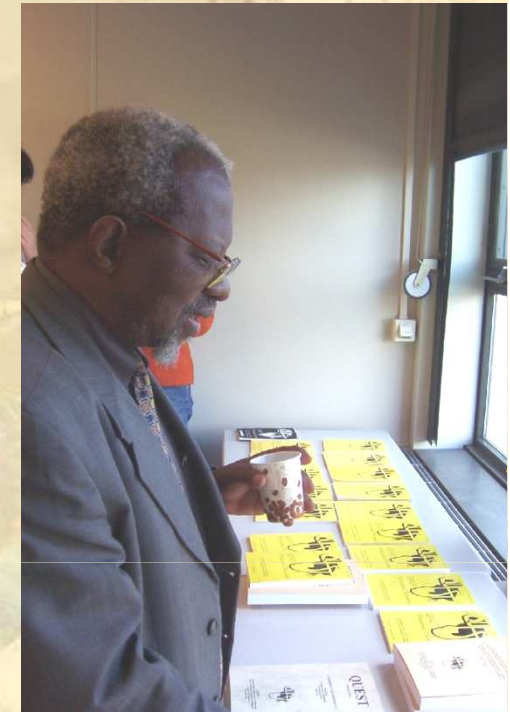
- **Project 1. The current South-North collaboration in the production of Africanist knowledge**
- **Project 2. Old and new formats of connection in African knowledge**





## *Project 1. The current South-North collaboration in the production of Africanist knowledge*

- ***The current South-North collaboration in the production of Africanist knowledge is an intercontinental project of connectedness, both in the use of social and technical technologies (disciplinary organisation, technologies of research, data processing and publication), and in the critical construction of a shared knowledge domain that -- considering increasing North-South contradictions in the world today -- may well be considered a unique achievement.***
- ***Work on this topic makes us aware of the epistemological and knowledge-political presuppositions of Africanist research in the past (e.g. the alleged geopolitical and cultural distinctness of Africa and of Africans; and of the alleged superiority of North Atlantic theories and methods).***
- ***The hierarchical dimension to be considered in this connection is that of (real and imagined) North Atlantic hegemony – increasingly challenged not only by Islamism but also by Afrocentrism.***
- ***It forces us to reconsider the place of Africa as massively connected with other continents in an increasingly connected global world.***



Professor Hountondji, one of Africa's leading philosophers and member of the Advisory Board of *Quest: An African Journal of Philosophy*, inspects volumes of the journal during its re-launching, Leiden, April 2004. In 2002, Hountondji organised the Colloque International sur le Rencontre des Rationalités, Benin, now in press with Karthala, Paris; my contribution deals with Harding





- **The forms of hegemonic exclusion and rejection, the disdain (often also among African elites) vis-à-vis African forms of knowledge and their rationality, makes us select the production of African/Africanist scholarship by Africanist a particularly strategic point to concentrate our research on**
- **This is a form of action research, in which the possibilities for South-North co-operation in scholarship are explicitly considered and pursued,**
- **Not only out of loyalty with the South and of awareness of the historical shortcomings of an Africanist production dominated (numerically and in terms of means of production) by northerners**
- **But also because such collaboration constitutes a concrete setting in which the contradictions of African knowledge production today can be experienced and negotiated**
- **The project will be executed by Wim van Binsbergen in conjunction with the other members of the editorial team (Editorial Board and Advisory Editorial Board) of *Quest: An African Journal of Philosophy***
- **Its proposed products are**
  - **the continued publication of the journal *Quest***
  - **a series of articles (including editorials) in which the research topic is explored**
  - **An international conference – preferably in West Africa – on the research topic, and the publication on an edited collection based on that conference**
  - **Initiation of a series on African philosophy and society with a reputable publishing house, in association with *Quest***

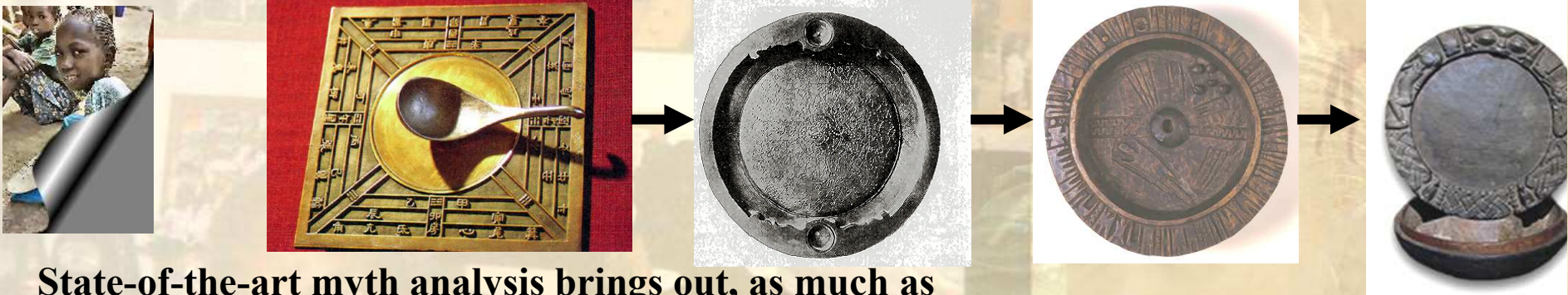




## ***Project 2. Old and new formats of connection in African knowledge***

- ***Old and new formats of connection in African knowledge.*** New, electronic and digital technologies of connectedness, however exciting and important, only exist in continuity with older technologies of connectedness through knowledge. In the latter, ethnic and religious myths of identity, difference, and fundamental meaning (in other words, everything that is constitutive of society) have always played a major role.
- **These forms of connecting knowledge have been conveyed through older formats of communication such as story-telling and initiation rites.**
- **Do modern communication technologies destroy these older formats?**
- **Or may they also lead (in a way parallel to the near-ubiquity of global science, which to Harding is a major factor in the latter's claims to universality) to the articulation, circulation and (re-)invention of ancient myths – and if so, why and under what conditions?**
- **Is it even possible that ancient myths gain a new lease of life through these new technological means? Wide supralocal connectedness now becomes an everyday experience through modern technology; but is that experience perhaps already implied in the deep structure and the (often very wide and persistent) distribution of ancient myths? Is this a context in which even the sacrosanct distinction between Africa and the other continents begins to dissolve?**
- **The last point needs some clarification: (see next slide)**



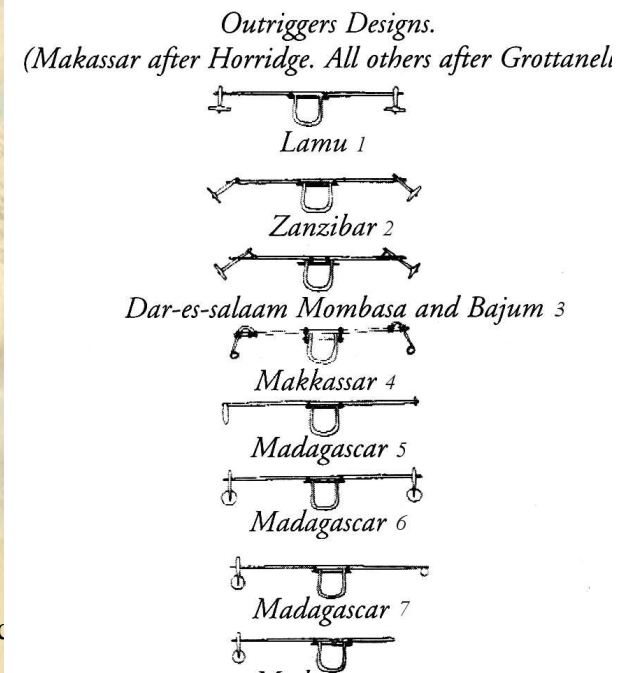


**State-of-the-art myth analysis brings out, as much as genetic and linguistic analysis, two crucial forms of connectedness between Africa and the wider world:**

- Africa as the cradle of all of modern humankind (with an entirely African habitat from 200,000-80,000 years Before Present, after which ‘Out-of-Africa’ trickle populated the other continents), and thus the starting-point of cultural history, and
- Africa as, much more recently (from 15,000 years Before Present onwards) affected – both genetically/demographically, and culturally, by the ‘Back into Africa’ return migration from Asia, which created considerable linguistic and cultural (including mythological and religious) continuity between West Asia (and hence Europe) and much of the African continent.

A specific part of that ‘Back-into-Africa’ movement was not overland but seaborne, and involves, particularly (but far from exclusively) the ‘fathom’ (Dick-Read 2005) ‘Sunda migration’ (Oppenheimer 1998); this offers an interesting context to study the interaction between knowledge systems and technology, since nautical technology (seaworthy vessels, with or without outriggers, capable of braving the Indian and Atlantic Oceans) are a necessary condition for this influence of South East Asia upon Africa – most manifest in the case of Madagascar. Interestingly, nautical material technology (especially navigation bowls as proto-compasses) would appear to have been appropriated, in Southern and West Africa, to be transformed into apparatus for another form of knowledge production we have considered above: divination!

Top: from left to right: replica of a Chinese navigation ladle, based on a prototype from ca. 1000 CE; Chinese navigation bowl, c. 1000 CE; 19th c. Venda divination bowl, Zimbabwe; early 20th c. Yoruba divination bowl  
Bottom: the continuity of outrigger designs between SE Asia and Africa (after Dick-Read 2005)







**In general, in this sub programme we seek to explore the boundary conditions under which new technologies of connectedness are both reshaping and preserving Africa.**

**This project will be executed by Wim van Binsbergen**

- **in association with Eric Venbrux (Radboud University Nijmegen) and Daniela Merolla (Leiden University)**
- **the Harvard Round Table on Comparative Mythology**
- **And the International Association for Comparative Mythology**

**Its envisaged products are**

- **Several articles**
- **An international conference 2008 on Connections in global mythology (provisional title), to be convened by Wim van Binsbergen, Eric Venbrux and possibly Daniela Merolla on behalf of the International Association for Comparative Mythology**
- **An edited collection based on that conference**
- **A book on comparative world mythology from an African long-range perspective**
- **A four-volume (or four-part) book on transcontinental connections that has been long in the making and that will sum up much of my related research into African knowledge systems since the late 1980s**





## 14. References

- Still to be compiled