

# Notes on the fundamental unity of humankind<sup>1</sup>

by Wim van Binsbergen

Despite its impressive achievements and, by now, respectable age, African Philosophy has so far had remarkably little impact on mainstream cosmopolitan philosophy. Beyond the names of Mudimbe and Appiah, few cosmopolitan philosophers would be familiar with even the major exponents and debates that, over the last seventy years, have made African Philosophy one of the most exciting provinces of modern thought. The exchange of ideas has remained remarkably one-sided: Inevitably, transcontinental influences and tendencies have had their impact on African Philosophy (e.g. van Binsbergen 2008; or as far as the feminist turn is concerned, Osha c.s. 2006). But the fact that an African philosopher, Kwasi Wiredu, has been one of the few contemporary thinkers to pioneer the vital issue of cultural universals (Wiredu 1990, 1996) has gone largely unnoticed by those who a few decades ago were climbing, and by now are falling off, the fashionable band wagons of poststructuralism, mimicking Foucault and Deleuze in an alarming fixation on the North Atlantic urban experience of (post)modernity.

I occasionally pick up these noises, as the wind-blown sounds of a distant carnival procession I was too late to join. After identifying, during the larger part of my academic career, as a mainstream Africanist, anthropologist of religion, professor, and research administrator, such prolonged and intensive engagement with African social, cultural and religious life as is characteristic of anthropological fieldwork brought me to question, in the course of the 1990s, the subordinating nature of North-South knowledge formation; and to look for ways out – such as Afrocentrism, and Martin Gardiner Bernal's *Black Athena* thesis, to whose debates I contributed extensively. This preoccupation led to a number of publications which made it possible for me to trade, in 1998, my Amsterdam (Free University) chair in the social anthropology of ethnicity, for one in the Foundations of Intercultural Philosophy, within the Philosophical Faculty of Erasmus University Rotterdam. In the process, the Editorship was entrusted to me of *Quest: An African Journal of Philosophy / Revue Africaine de Philosophie*. Still most at home in essentially illiterate rural situations (as an ethnographic and oral-historical field-worker with a handful of African and Mediterranean cultures and languages more or less at his fingertips), I was keen to trace the history and the varieties of human thought beyond the frozen texts out of which most mainstream philosophy is distilled, and into regions and periods where few of my new philosophical colleagues would be able to follow me, where still fewer would be able to

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<sup>1</sup> Considerably revised and with a new bibliography, this argument restates and develops a position set out in the beginning of my book *Vicarious Reflections* (2015).

survive and function, and where hardly one of them would perceive any philosophy to speak of. Implicitly basing my attempts at intercultural philosophy not only on my descriptive and theoretical experience in anthropology and sociology but also on *the Postulate of the Fundamental Unity of Humankind* (at least, of Anatomically Modern Humans – the subspecies that emerged in East Africa c. 200 ka BP<sup>2</sup> and to which all humans now living belong), I misguidedly expected from further, transcontinental empirical research the firm substantiation of that postulate – without realising that on this point (as on many others) philosophers, however naïve in their approach to empirical data, yet in many respects had already thought far ahead of social scientists. I began to realise that any contribution I was to make to intercultural philosophy, would require that I develop an argument on the fundamental unity of humankind, in the first place – thus defining a context, a space, for such interculturality as might be precariously possible in theory and practice.

Rather more narrowly than encompassing the full extent of humanity, the fundamental unity of *African* peoples and civilisations has been passionately affirmed,<sup>3</sup> and denied.<sup>4</sup> Similar claims of fundamental unity have been made in mainstream anthropology for every major culture province, *e.g.* the Mediterranean (Gilmore 1987); Indonesia (de Josselin de Jong 1984); the Ancient Near East;<sup>5</sup> the Slavonic world (Maduniš 2003; Los 1969); the world of Islam;<sup>6</sup> and Western civilisation (Marvin 1915; Dawson n.d.). On the basis of the kind of considerations that led to the Whorf-Sapir thesis (Whorf 1969; Sapir 1929 / 1949; *cf.* van Binsbergen 2015: ch. 6, footnote 242, with further literature) concerning the over-determination of thought and life world by language, it has been particularly tempting (but often also unmistakably ideological and political) to claim the unity of large population groups because they turned out to be speaking branches of the same linguistic family, phylum or even macrophylum – a claim particularly made in regard of the Indo-European,<sup>7</sup> Austronesian, and the Bantu family of languages.

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<sup>2</sup> ka = kiloyear, millennium, 1,000 years; BP = Before Present.

<sup>3</sup> Diop 1959; Chami 2006; Maquet 1967 / 1975; Rowlands 2003; for the Afrocentrist Clyde Winters – 1980a, 1980b – that unity even extends to include South Asian speakers of the Dravidian linguistic phylum, and groups in East and South East Asia.

<sup>4</sup> Kaphagawani & Malherbe 1998; Appiah 1992; Howe 1999 and Fauvelle 1996 as devastating critics of Afrocentricity – also *cf.* van Binsbergen 2015: Ch. 12, on Mudimbe.

<sup>5</sup> Goedicke & Roberts 1975; Frankfort 1948, 1951a, 1951b.

<sup>6</sup> Geertz 1968; Hodgson 1974; Lewis 1976, 1993.

<sup>7</sup> It is difficult to be consistent in the rendering of the names of linguistic macrophyla. In general, I have followed the usage of state-of-the-art long-range linguistics as represented in the global *Tower of Babel* project (Starostin & Starostin 1998-2008), so while aware of the disparate nature of the underlying constituent languages or regions, I am writing ‘Afroasiatic’, ‘Khoisan’, ‘Sinocaucasian’, *etc.*, instead of Afro-Asiatic, Khoi-San or Sino-Caucasian; but with the exception of *Indo-European*, where I have inserted a hyphen and a capital letter, not for Eurocentric hegemonic reasons but in order to keep this composite word transparent and pronounceable.

Speculations on humankind's original language go back to classical Antiquity,<sup>8</sup> and suggest an underlying assumption of the *monogenesis* of human speech – in accordance with the Israelite claim made by roughly the same time, in *Genesis* 11:1 – although in *Genesis* 10:5, 20, and 31 a plurality of tongues is acknowledged. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century CE, when linguistic theory was reaching considerable levels of sophistication and comparison, similar ideas were formulated again, for the whole of humankind, by Johnes (1846; also cf. Bergmann 1869; Stam 1976).

But despite all these claims of the unity of *subsets* of humanity, the *unity of humankind as a whole* has comparatively rarely been subject of empirical scientific debate. Research and theory in the human sciences, including physical and cultural anthropology and the study of ethnicity, have concentrated on *differences*, not convergence or unity. The 19<sup>th</sup> c. CE was the century that saw the rise of the sciences of Man, but also the rise of quasi-scientific racism (e.g. de Gobineau 1853), and polygeny rather than monogeny fitted that regrettable paradigm better. Yet one of the greatest pioneers of the idea of prehistory, de Quatrefages, wrote on *Unité de l'Espèce Humaine / Unity of the Human Species* at an early stage (1861). But by and large, until recently, the very idea of universals of human culture or language has been abhorred.<sup>9</sup> The contemplation of especially the somatic diversity of humans, usually under the heading of 'race',<sup>10</sup> used to dominate handbooks of physical anthropology, and the question as to what humans have in common seldom came in. Even a great anthropologist such as Alfred Kroeber prided himself to have designed a new, even finer classification of races in what he considered his major work (1923 etc.). An exception were the writings of the Humanistic School of USA anthropology, with such authors as Margaret Mead and especially Clyde Kluckhohn – to the extent to which anthropology holds up a *Mirror for Man* (Kluckhohn 1949), it is here that we find one of the rare titles in the way of *Common Humanity and Diverse Cultures* (Kluckhohn 1959). A handful of other scholarly titles specifically addressing the unity of humankind focus on the much-researched topic of the origin of the populations of the Americas (Fewkes 1912). In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century CE, leading American anthropologists – predominantly Americanists – tended to be opposed to diffusion for much the same reason why (van Binsbergen 2012e, 2019) present-day Africanists dislike the idea that the African cultures they claim to cherish professionally, have always been part of the wider intercontinental world, and therefore, just like European

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<sup>8</sup> Notably the cruel experiment – raising newborn infants in total isolation so as to determine the specific language of the first word they would utter – conducted by the Late-Period Egyptian king Psammetichus / Psamtik as reported by Herodotus, *Historiae* II, 2 and 15; the first utterance happened to sound like 'bread' in the Indo-European language Phrygian. By an amusing coincidence of history or of scholarship (if it was just that; Hrozný must have known his Herodotus) it was also a word for 'bread' again, in:

<i>nu</i> [ n i n d a <sup>SUMEROGRAM</sup> ]	<i>an e-iz-za-at-te-ni</i>	'now PANEM you eat'
<i>wa-a-tar-ma e-ku-ut-te-ni</i>		'water then you drink'

(Gordon 1987 / 1971 / 1982: 93; Ceram 1955: 77) that offered Hrozný the clue to the decipherment of the cuneiform version of the Hittites' language, whose ancient empire extended westward to include Phrygia!

<sup>9</sup> Obviously, the issue of the fundamental unity of humankind is closely related to that of universals of culture and of language, such universals being the very hallmark of the proclaimed unity. In my recent work I have repeatedly returned to this question, e.g. van Binsbergen 2017: 542n, 2018: section 9.2, pp.331f.

<sup>10</sup> Which was only discarded after the tragedies associated with that concept during World War II; Montagu 1941 / 1974; Lévi-Strauss 1952; Poliakov 1979 / 1971.

cultures (and despite the historically understandable tendency towards the vicarious and pathetic essentialisation of things African) may be legitimately considered from a point of view of transcontinental continuities. One example from among many of the American stance: Spier (1929), when positively reviewing Dixon (1928) dextrously applied the point of 'psychic unity' as a negative argument for diffusion of geographically similar traits, maintained:

'The environmental discussion is but a preface to one of discovery and invention, which turns ultimately on the question of culture parallels. The factors that make novelties possible are opportunity, need, and genius, each a variable, hence in combination kaleidoscopic in results. Yet the more general the opportunity, the more widespread the need, and the lower the genius required, the greater the possibility of approximate duplications hither and yon. What the extreme diffusionists will not see is that the "psychic unity" necessary for culture parallels is little more than the most generalized forms of these three factors.'

Reconsidering the same question four decades later, Ford (1969) broadens it from a continental to a world-wide focus, and does so from the perspective of the well-known controversy between (a) cultural diffusion of region-specific culture traits, *versus* (b) the thesis that explains the similarities between geographically remote culture traits on the basis of *the fundamental unity of the human mind* (a point also made in more recent decades by Habermas – 1988), conceivably resulting in independent yet converging parallel inventions at different parts of the globe.

The topic of the fundamental unity of humanity has invited not only wild speculation along *e.g.* theosophical and *New-Age* lines; but also more scientifically informed extrapolation. Remarkably, the focus on humankind's unity was very vocal in Adolf Bastians's (1826-1905) contributions to German proto-anthropology (1868). Among the early, proclaimedly scientific, explorations of the unity of humankind we may also mention Bachman 1850. Another early example is the consideration of the possibility of extraterrestrial life by Darwin's counterpart in the discovery of evolution, Alfred Russel Wallace (1904) – but the unity of humankind implied by the latter is merely one by negation: non-extraterrestrial. Similar boundary explorations are offered in the growing literature on interspecies relationships and animal rights, but again they tend to offer an image of unity by negation, not by substance (*e.g.* Turner n.d., with extensive references). The palaeontologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, too, started out from personal natural-science competence but worked towards a cosmic vision of the unity and uniqueness of humankind, as forming a *noösphere on the way to convergence with the divine* – almost a poor man's and hear-say version of Hegel's (1807 / 1977) view of history.<sup>11</sup> In palaeoanthropology, the monogenetic versus polygenetic origin of humans (and of language; Trombetti 1907) has constituted the subject for passionate debate at least ever since Darwin (1871). While this debate still goes on in

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. Hegel 1977; Teilhard de Chardin 1955, 1965 / 1956. That his scientific competence was acquired relatively late in life (in accordance with the typical Jesuit career) is clear from his blundering (if not more guilty role) in the Piltdown forgery case. But despite his unitary vision of the origins of humanity, yet his palaeo-anthropological work led him to suggest 'la probabilité d' une bifurcation précoce' in the earliest phase of humankind, close to its place of origin – a primordial split allegedly separating once for all the putative African and Asian branches; Teilhard de Chardin 1956: 257-261. Half a century later we still find the (then, in the pre-molecular-biology phase) leading geneticist Luigi Cavalli-Sforza toying with the same idea of a fundamental split, see Fig. 1.

regard of the earliest genesis of Man, some three or four million years BP, present-day physical anthropology has largely accepted the fundamental unity of the much more recent Anatomically Modern Humans (emerging in East Africa only c. 200 ka BP) on overwhelming anatomical and genetic grounds – to which work on human universals (Wiredu 1990, 1996; Brown 1991), linguistics (Bengtson & Ruhlen 1994; Starostin & Starostin 1998–2008), comparative mythology,<sup>12</sup> and comparative religion notably in regard of shamanism (Eliade 1968; Lommel 1967), has added impressive socio-cultural arguments. Even a century ago the comparative study of humankind’s major symbols (Goldsmith 1924; cf. Lauf 1976) and religious forms (Williamson 1899; von Bunsen 1870) had led to similar suggestions, but on empirically, methodologically and theoretically far less convincing grounds. Yet as a potentially central concern in the social sciences, and one of the greatest possible political relevance in a time of globalisation and intercontinental conflict, the paucity of attention the fundamental unity of mankind has received in recent decades can only surprise us.<sup>13</sup>

At this point, let us make a transition from empirical-scientific to philosophical (and theological) approaches to our topic. Baldry (1965) brings together what the Ancient Greeks thought on this point. These did not explicitly have the notion of an all-encompassing humanity (othering in terms of βάρβαροι *Barbarians* was their dominant discourse); yet their common discourse on the distinctions between humans, gods and animals implied an underlying awareness of human unity; and so did, for instance, the fact that in order to explain the antecedents of a regional and, at the time, recent phenomenon, the Persian Wars, Herodotus (1963 / 5<sup>th</sup> c. BCE) saw himself compelled to spin a broad tale encompassing the entire known world, one chapter for every major region – Egypt, Persia, Scythia, etc. Yet instead of such implied universalism, particularism won the day: the Greeks’ victory in the Persian Wars – although for the Persians almost a backwater skirmish – came to be celebrated as constitutive of the unique identity and quality of the (Eurasian) West, the myopic exaltation of the Greek genius against which the *Ex Oriente Lux* movement (early 20<sup>th</sup> c. CE) and the *Black Athena* debate (from the mid-1980s CE on) have battled right into our time and age. The notion of the unity of humanity we only see emerge with the Romans, notably Cicero (Redaktion 2001) – under the proto-globalisation conditions of the growing Roman Empire. However, in this connection we need to keep in mind that, even when an explicit application to humanity can not be readily attested, a struggle with the more general problem of *unity in diversity* has been a constant in Ancient thought, both among the Greeks<sup>14</sup> and among the Ancient Egyptians.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Witzel 2012; van Binsbergen & Venbrux 2010; cf. the extensive discussion, below, of the theonym Nyambi as an example of transcontinental comparative mythology going at least some way towards suggesting the *fundamental unity of humankind*.

<sup>13</sup> A notable exception has been the pioneer collection by Morin & Piatelli-Palmarini 1974, to which some of the greatest minds in that generation of anthropologists have contributed (e.g. Sperber – cf. 1968, 1974, 1975, 1980, 1981, 1982a, 1982b, 1996; or de Heusch – cf. 1958, 1971, 1972); yet its impact has remained limited.

<sup>14</sup> Heintel 1972; Stokes 1971; Adkins 1970; also Empedocles’ four-element system, the much more general cyclical cosmology of element transformation may be regarded as solutions to this problem – van Binsbergen 2012d; and in the same light may be regarded the ideas underlying alchemy – Jung 1956.

<sup>15</sup> Hornung 1971 / 1983; with an interesting parallel among the Zulu of Southern Africa: Jafta 1992, perhaps consciously intended / imposed by the latter author: in recent decades, an Afrocentrist-inspired Egyptocentrism has become, once more, a dominant interpretative model among African intellectual and religious elites. Once

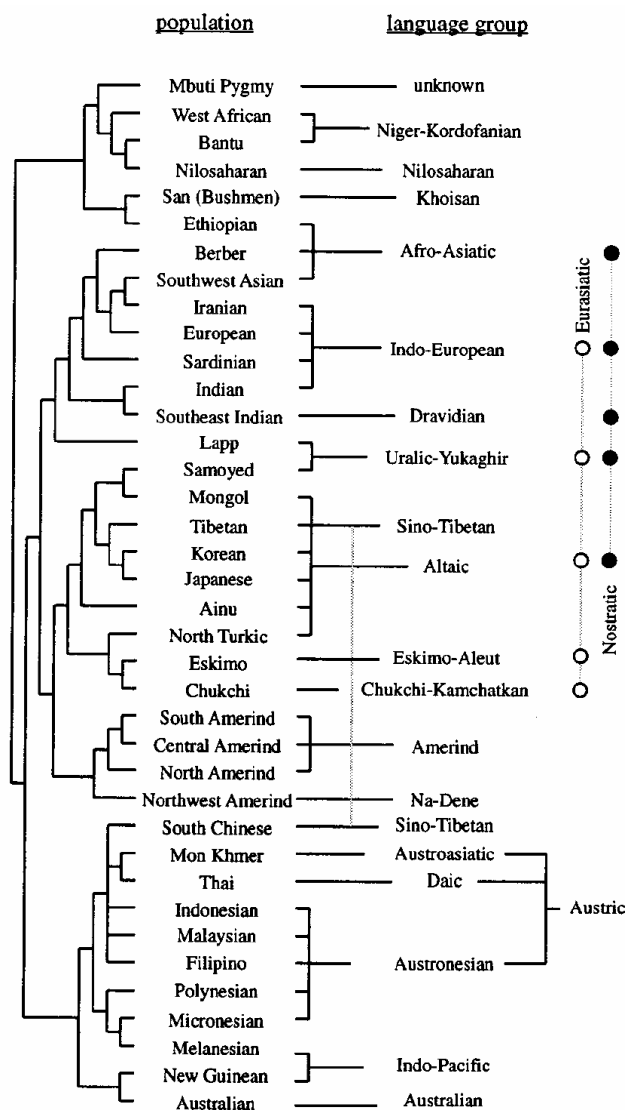


Fig. 1. The othering of Africans disguised as inescapable scientific truth: African genes and languages are places in one dendrogram branch on its own, while the rest of humankind is claimed to cluster massively together; a much cited diagram from Cavalli-Sforza 1997: 7722.

Through the centuries, Jewish and Christian theologians and Biblical scholars have often been inspired by the suggestion of fundamental unity of all of humankind as emerging from the Biblical account(s) of the Flood concerning the one surviving family.<sup>16</sup> This implication almost extends to a global scale, since flood myths are among the few mythical near-universals of Anatomically Modern Humans.<sup>17</sup>

more, for at least, Bernal 1987 claims that such an Ancient Model was also standard in the West from Antiquity to the 17<sup>th</sup> c. CE.

<sup>16</sup> Genesis 7-10; Anderson 1977; Habel 1988; Ross 1981; van Binsbergen & Woudhuizen 2011: ch. 6.

<sup>17</sup> Isaak 2006, who offers a nicely referenced overview of many hundreds of flood myths, half of which happen to

*In philosophy* the idea of humanity and the theoretical and conceptual elaboration of its unity has received extensive attention (Redaktion 2001; and Bödeker 2001, to whom the following paragraph is much indebted). With St Paul, and again prompted by the mounting proto-globalisation in the Roman Empire in the 1<sup>st</sup> c. CE, Christianity took a radical distance from the parochialism of Judaism where the unique Supreme God had been largely particular to the Israelites; instead, St Paul formulated and propagated the idea that all of humankind is in principle sharing in the same salvation history. In the world of Islam the emerging idea of one humanity was to some extent mirrored, like so much else in Judaism and Christianity, by the concept of الدين *ad-dīn*, ‘the community of all believers’; however, *not* thus transmitted into Islam was St Paul’s most seminal idea: that this community also comprised the non-believers, effectively the whole of humankind, and not just by first principles through a logical operation, *but more dynamically through a universally shared history of salvation*. Hence Islam tends to lack both a sense of a collective, secular history of accumulative, qualitative change (Islam’s sense of history seems to be limited to eschatology, which today the terrorist movement of Islamic State is enacting with human decapitation, mass slaughter, destruction of ancient monuments, and sacred battle-fields named in the الحديث *hadith* traditions from the Prophet Muḥammad’s time), and also lacks a sense of the *non-theocratic* dimension of human society.

The Paulinian idea did inspire Western philosophy with the idea of the fundamental unity of humankind, which after a chequered trajectory in Late Antiquity, the Middle Ages and Early Modern times, was elaborated especially from Herder on (Herder 1877-1913), with emphasis on Man as a historic subject. Kant<sup>18</sup> largely situates that unity in the shared *Vernunft* / Reason and in the human community that the aesthetic judgment creates by implication (Kimmerle & Oosterling 2000),<sup>19</sup> although it also plays a pivotal role in Kant’s pre-critical pioneering of cultural and physical anthropology (Sussman 2001). Also in general, in Western philosophy during the Enlightenment and Romanticism, the emphasis was more on the rational and aesthetic potential of the human condition than on the awareness of its cultural and somatic diversity – even though the populations of the South still remained largely outside the scope of Western philosophy during that period. In Hegel, the unity of humankind is gradually born out by the universal *Geist* / Spirit, with emphasis on historical rather than spatial unity, and ominously, explicitly, leaving room for the possibility that certain sections of humankind, *e.g.* Africans, do not participate in that unity. Foreshadowing Durkheim’s (1912 / 1960) theory of religion as society’s veneration of itself (*cf.* van Binsbergen 2018), Comte’s positivist project (Comte 1830-1842) proposed a ‘religion de l’humanité’ implying the latter’s fundamental unity. A philosophical view on world complexity in unity is found in the thought of Marx and Engels (1975b-1983b), with the implication that not the myriad dimensions of somatic or cultural difference but only the handful of distinct class positions have mattered in history, and with ultimately the utopian possibility of a future dissolution of all divisive class

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be from North America; van Binsbergen with Isaak 2008; Witzel 2010; and extensive sources cited there.

<sup>18</sup> Kant 1983a / 1781 / 1787, 1983b; *cf.* Korsgaard 1986.

<sup>19</sup> For, in Kant’s view (1983b), when I call a thing beautiful, I imply that it should be beautiful *to all people*. For a critical African application of this idea, see my own contribution to Kimmerle & Oosterling 2000, barely tolerated, and graded down, by the editors to ‘a social-science comment’.

differences and contradictions. This continually inspiring view of human unity was almost diametrically opposed to Nietzsche's (1973a / 1885) subordinating and implacable emphasis on the internal segmentation of humanity in an elect minority of *Supermen* versus a despicable majority. From the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century CE on, the unity of humankind is perceived, by Neo-Kantianism, in a religious or ethical sense (Cohen 1904). In Scheler (1954) it takes a planetary dimension. The perception of a common humanity<sup>20</sup> is often argued to be at the heart of empathy, altruism, reconciliation, and interculturality (Monroe 1996). The question of the fundamental unity of humankind continues to inspire philosophical investigation.<sup>21</sup> It is however ignored in Spengler's (1918-1922 / 1993) tragic vision of world history. Later conceptual developments in the course of the twentieth century CE kept pace with the growth of globalisation, of international social, economic and political organisation, and of inter-statal conflict. Here the Indian / German intercultural philosopher Ram Adhar Mall stands out as a particularly sensitive and broadly orientated guide;<sup>22</sup> while the Nigerian philosopher Eze (a stern critic of Kant's and

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<sup>20</sup> In this connection, I might have pointed to African philosophies of 'humanity' (under such headings as *muntu* and *ubuntu* (Tempels 1955; Jahn 1967 / 1958; Eboussi Boulaga 1977; Ramose 1999), but usually their referent can be demonstrated to be not so much *universal humanity through space and time*, but *Black people in Africa under circumstances of colonial oppression* – in other words, a usage predicated on Whites' misuse of the word *Bantu* as directly or indirectly tributary to, or secondarily assimilated to, colonial practice, and therefore no longer sharing in the universalism which 'humanity' as a philosophical term implies. This is also how the term *botho / ubuntu* was spontaneously understood by our informants during exploratory interviews which Mogobe Ramose, Vernie February and I myself conducted in South Africa in early 1999. Cf. van Binsbergen 2001b, reprinted in 2003b. An interesting argument was developed in the work of an African cleric who for Valentin Mudimbe has been one of the heroes of what the latter has called 'clerical intellectualism' in the African context, and which Mudimbe sees (see van Binsbergen 2005b, reprinted as Ch 12 of 2015) as one of the most important spiritual mutations taking place on the African continent in the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> c. CE: I am referring to Vincent Mulago, whose 1962 dissertation (published in 1965 by *Présence Africaine*) contrasts two forms of 'vital unity' – that of 'Bantu culture' and that of the Roman Catholic Church – but again one suspects that Mulago's referent is primarily the *muntu*, not of several millennia of Bantu-speaking culture, but of colonial condescension and oppression. (The struggle to have the word *muntu* ('fellow-human', and *a fortiori* 'fellow-Black') unreservedly applied to myself, and to be allowed to share in the common social practices of respect implied in that term (*e.g.* *not* being seated on a chair in the presence of a king, *not* dining with one, but on the affirmative side being recognised to have a clan / totem, and being allowed to share in the ribald joking between specific clans) has constituted one of the main strands in my participant observation among the Nkoya people – Western Zambia, South Central Africa – over nearly five decades.) In other words, in the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> c. CE the use of the Bantu root *-ntu*, 'human', was contaminated to the point of perversion by its appropriation by racist and colonial political systems of oppression. This root was perhaps originally borrowed from the linguistic phylum called Austronesian (today only found in South East Asia, Oceania and Madagascar), yet it belongs to the world-wide 'Earth / bottom / human' complex – one of the few truly global etymologies scholarship has identified; cf. van Binsbergen 2018: Appendix IV, pp. 535 f.). Within a long-range regional, African horizon, this root can be considered to define the category of all humans as distinguished from the rest of the visible world – thus in the standard Nkoya expression *Nyambi balengile bitondo na bantu*, 'Nyambi [ the High God ] created the trees [ by implication: all non-human things ] and humans' – cf. *Genesis 1:1f.* where the creation consists in the first place, not just of Trees and Man (although those too, emphatically), but of Heaven and Earth. In the Nkoya world-view, Nyambi appears especially as an awesome mythical presence in the deep forest. where only specialist hunters penetrate. Also among the Lele of Kasai, Nyambi has this close association with the forest (Douglas 1963; Cotterell 1989: 228). On the extensive modern influence of the Bible on Nkoya conceptualisations, see van Binsbergen 1992b: ch. 3.

<sup>21</sup> *E.g.* Williams 1995; Badiou 1982, 2003, cf. Ashton *et al.* 2006.

<sup>22</sup> Mall 1984, 1985 – with specific application to hermeneutics and the unity of humankind – 1994; Mall & Lohmar 1993; cf. van Binsbergen 2003b: ch. 12, pp. 375-395.



Hegel's racism – Eze 1997a, 1997b) has explored how the very concept of a common humanity allows us to overcome the subordinating particularism of racism (Eze 2001).

So far a few highlights on the fundamental unity of humankind as a prerequisite for any intercultural philosophy. However, in current global politics the idea of such unity, however irrefutable, *appears to be of little practical value unless we manage to have it implemented by other than philosophical means.*

Although the ex-Marxist Huntington's (1996) pessimistic, Spenglerian idea of the *Clash of Civilizations* is to be faulted on many counts, what it does convey is the awareness that the present-day violent and massive conflicts between militant Islamists and the North Atlantic region are not so much about scarce resources including power, mineral oil, and hegemony, but about models of thought that constitute reality in such fundamental, and such fundamentally different, ways that, to the actors involved, they appear to justify murder, and dying for. When I started out as an intercultural philosopher, in the mid-1990s, I was convinced that intercultural philosophy could make a positive contribution to solving this kind of problems of identity and communication in the modern, globalising world. In this spirit I wrote, shortly after '9/11', a passionate though intended as impartial interpretation of that tragic event (van Binsbergen 2005; reprinted as Ch. 5 of van Binsbergen 2015). Meanwhile however, the aftermath of '9/11', both in the Middle East and in the North Atlantic region, has totally robbed me of such confidence and left me disgusted, which has been a factor in my retreat from intercultural philosophy as my major field of intellectual endeavour. While the final editing of my 2015 book was done the IS carnage at the Bataclan Theater, Paris, France, 13 November 2015, took place, three kms from my middle daughter's hotel room; and it brought home once more the futility of intercultural philosophy in the face of terrorism. The violence-drunken actions of IS reflect even less a nation's culture than that a Mafia clan's subcultural reliance on violence to regulate economic and political transactions reflects 'the culture of Southern Italy'. In the hands of IS as an eschatological millennialist movement, the appeal to Islam seems in the first place a pretext to perform the logical operation (Girard-fashion; Girard 1977) of separating in-group from out-group, constituting the in-group through act of violence, and through that violence committing the out-group to a horrendous fate. To understand the broad mechanisms of the current situation, an appreciation of the technological and logistic vulnerability of modern, urban industrial society is helpful, but between Weber's theory (1969 / 1919) of the state's monopoly of violence, and Girard's insistence on the constituent nature of violence, our toolkit is fairly adequate, without reserving an unduly large role for intercultural philosophy as a relative newcomer on the intellectual scene. Beyond elucidating how IS's mode of thought puts that movement outside the human order, outside the latter's self-evident appeal to fellow-humanity, I cannot perceive any more how intercultural-philosophical debate is to have any impact on this state of affairs; in the best Diltheyan / Weberian tradition intercultural analysis is predicated on the operation of *Verstehen*, but how futile is the determination to understand, and to communicate with, a section of humanity that has deliberately and radically defined itself as outside the common human order, and that totally rejects the empathy that a sense fellow-humanity is supposed to produce? Alternatively, military action might have such an impact – analogous to the morally neutral action of leucocytes eliminating viruses from the living

organism.

But perhaps I am simply being too pessimistic. For after all, it was in the first place philosophers (Giordano Bruno, Erasmus, Descartes, Spinoza, Kant, Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, Gandhi), rather than natural scientists, technicians or soldiers, who created the framework for modernity and indirectly inspired the mass movements that, within scarcely two centuries, totally changed the socio-political face of the earth – in anticipation of the even more profound changes which the most recent technology of information and communication were to bring about. (As a central feature of its orientation, militant Islam has missed (not to say: rejected) this modernist framework – yet it is available in today's Islam, e.g. in the works of the Iranian philosopher Abdulkarim Soroush –, and instead draws its obsolete inspiration from medieval Muslim theologians.) But today's Islamic thought may be a case apart. For the rest, and whether philosophers like it or not, they may yet have a vital prophetic role to play, even in our time and age. Here I take prophetic in the original, Greek sense of 'speaking on behalf of...' (in other words, 'vicariously!') – on behalf of God, perhaps, in the Israelite and Christian conception, but especially on behalf of contemporary society, whose contradictions the prophet feels like anyone else, and manages to express as guidance towards change (cf. van Binsbergen 1981b). And although I am aware of the futility of the contribution I could make in this respect, yet it is in this sense that I have realised my considerable recent output of texts and books, passionately, and diligently, as if desperately clinging on to seemingly arbitrary precepts of scholarship in the face of apparent barbarism.

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