Key note Sofia 2013 second version def

Comparability a paradigmatic problem.

Wim van Binsbergen, October 2013

Note. When considering the details of the Sofia 2013 confernece programme, it became clear to me that my paper was addressing specialist issues meant for a rather different audience – composed of historians, archaeologists, comparative linguists, comparative mythologists, and methodologists, the kinds of specialists I have been rubbing shoulders with at conferences for the past decade. However, the participants of the present conference turned out to be mainly drawn from educational sciences and legal studies – engaging in a rather different though equally legitimate forms of comparative work, and facing different methodological and theoretical challenges. I spent the day prior to the conference to entirely overhaul my original key note address so as to make it more relevant to the present audience. At such short notice, this could not immediately lead to a fully-fledged and balanced paper. What I present below is rather a set of notes around which I improvised my address at the conference

Opening words

Mme Chair, ladies and gentlement, dear colleagues

At the beginning of my keynote address I wish to express my gratitude to the organizing organisation, and to the convenor Prof. Nikolay Popov, for inviting me to Symposium, and for according to me the honour of being one of the two keynote speakers. My thanks also go to the African Studies Centre, Leiden University, for funding my participation in this conference; to my wife for accompanying me into a country hitherto unknown to both of us; to many colleagues, friends, and research hosts in Africa and Asia who over the decades have facilitated and inspired my comparative work (and whose names are found in the extensive acknowledgments sections in my books and papers); and to our Bulgarian friends who have gone out of their way, in the week preceding this conference, to introduce us to their immensely interesting country with its riches of history and culture – where I could practice my comparative gaze in fitting preparation for our conference.

Let me take the liberty of briefly introducing myself.

[personal introduction, off the cuff]

What will I try to do in the course of this argument?

1. **present an abstract definition of omparison and indicate some of the paradigmatic difficulties which arise in comparative work**
2. **‘How do we know that the comparison we engage in, is legitimate?’**

3. **concentrate on long-range approaches as a particularly counter-paradigmatic way of going about comparison**

4. **briefly introduce the various comparative fields that have , in recent decades, enabled us to greatly extend our scope of comparison and and greatly reinforce our basis for such comparison:**
    a. comparative linguistics (**Nostratic, Borean, Greenberg, Tow3er orf Babel'**
    b. compartive mythology (Witzel, van Binsbergen)
    c. comparative ethnography
    d. molecular population genetics

Ironically enough, these are not just new developments – most of them were subjects founded in the formalisation, institutionalisation and rapid expansion of North Atlantic academic knowledge in the 19th c. CE, when an enormous comparative effort was initiated – only to die down with the emergence of more detailed case studies in all these fields, e.g. field linguistics descriptions of single languages, the fieldwork model of anthropology

Trombetti, Bleek..
Frazer, Müller
Diffusionism

5. Show how my own work has gone in this direction over the past 20 years.

1. What is scientific comparison?

In the context of science, comparison seems to involve, as basic acts:

1. an individual researcher's observation
2. the individual observer's representation of that which is observed
3. the intersubjective streamlining and domestication of such individual acts of description into a collective idiom of classification peculiar to a collectivity of scientists – a research group, department, school, movement, sub-discipline, discipline. Typically, such an idiom comprises a number of more or less clearly defined variables $V_{1.....n}$ each of which can take a number of more or less clearly defined values $W_{1.....m}$. Each of these variables and values are intellectual constructs which in pure form may never be observed in reality – they are *ideal types* or *Gestalte*, and part of the individual researcher's craft consists in the recognition of such ideal types in the primary observations at hand, and in intersubjectively and methodologically arguing the applicability of such ideal types onto those primary observations.
4. the development, within such a scientific collectivity, of methods and procedures which are to govern, intersubjectively, the specific application of such a classification, to specific phenomena, by the use of increasingly intersubjective and formalised methods of observation. Here a continuous feedback process needs to be appreciated

where observation, method and classification are constantly assessed, evaluated, corrected, and hopefully improved, by the same and adjacent scientific collectivities

5. the *theoretically-informed* juxtaposition of two or more constitutive elements in such classifications, in a bid to identify both similarities and differences between these elements, and to generate hypotheses intended to explain such similarities and differences. Here again, such hypotheses are in themselves ingredients in a further feed-back process informing subsequent observation, representation, classification and theory.

Scientific comparison, then, is not so much an individual intellectual endeavour but a social process of progressive representation and analysis, characterised by eddies of feedback, forum assessment and forum approval or rejection, all along the way. Our present International Symposium on Comparative Sciences is a one of many steps in this continuous and worldwide process – an expression, therefore, of the – in principle -- unbounded aspirations (or pretensions) in space and time, of the research work in which we engage.

2. 'How do we know that the comparison we engage in, is legitimate?'

In the light of my above definition of scientific comparison, this central question as to the scientific nature of our specific comparitive endeavours, may be answered from a number of different and complementary angles:

1. the quality of our primary *observations*
2. the quality of our *rendering* the data of our primary observation
3. the theoretical knowledge and especially the theoretical imagination with which we bring to bear existing scientific idioms of classification onto the data at hand, expand and innovate such existing classifications, and convincingly argue their applicability to the data at hand. Here a major problem is that of *operationalisation*: the categories we are comparing are our individual or collective mental constructs which only under certain, rare circumstances could be found back in just that form in observable reality – so we need to define strict procedures by which the myriad varying forms of reality could still be classified as falling under our more or less clearly defined variables $V_{1.....n}$, taking a specific value among the more or less clearly defined values $W_{1.....m}$. I will come back to this point shortly.

4. the theoretical knowledge that, in close consultation with our own and adjacent disciplinary and interdisciplinary scientific forums, may suggest and highlight the significance of particular similarities and differences as brought out by our comparison, and that suggests further questions to be answered by subsequent, more sophisticated comparison in conjunction with a refined methodological, classificatory and interpretative-theoretical apparatus.

In the title which I proposed for my present keynote address, I have stressed *comparability a paradigmatic problem*. That means that I will not address *all* the various, highly important aspects of the scientific comparative process outlined above (let alone the many aspects which I have overlooked in my truncated enumeration of major aspects of scientific comparison). Instead, I will concentrate on the extent to which our comparative endeavours are inspired, assessed, domesticated, often censured, by

a. the explicit and tacit assumption as to the nature of reality, as held by the scientific forums that are closest to our work, and
b. by the explicit theories and methodologies held by such forums.

Since scientific comparison, in the light of my above definition, is not an individual but a social process, we cannot simply ignore the forum and get away with the results claimed by our individual comparative endeavours, however inspiring and impressive. Without the forum's involvement, our results cannot claim any scientific status whatsoever – although we can always peddle them as works of belles lettres or of art. The forum need not massively approve of our results, may even cast serious doubt upon them (it will, if the forum's paradigm is not respected), but in order for our results to qualify as scientific at least the forum must be prepared to recognise the integrity of the methodology and theory upon which these results are based. This calls for a minimum of conformity on the part of the comparative research – for a considerable degree of submission to the forum's dominant paradigm or paradigms.

On the other hand, if we docilely follow the tacit and explicit assumptions held by the forum as the core knowledge of our disciplines, than we may spend our scientific career diligently but predictably adding to the sum of well-described and well-compared cases in terms of the existing theoreties and methodologies – but we will be prevented from taking such bold flights of imagination and of innovative theorising as would allow us to discern and explore new scientific horizons – flights that would allow us to profoundly criticise existing paradigms and to move on to uncharted territory not yet thought of in the paradgms of our teachers and senior colleagues.

As a social process, the collective scientific undertaking of comparison is, like all social processes, subject to power relations, to unequal distribution of resources (libraries, funding, institutional elaboration, publication resources, access to national and international bodies, the educational background on which, indirectly, all significant specific research work rests). This means that the paradigmatic forces towards continuity, conformity, domestication, routine, in our comparative work do not work for all of us with the same strength, and the same inescapability.

Young scholars are in an interesting though contradictory position: in order to build themselves a career for which they are dependent for income and security, they initially need to comply with dominant paradigms of their discipline as upheld by their professors and other senior colleagues – but by the freedom of thought and sense of innovation that is the privilege of youth, and by the oedipal rebelliousness that fortunately is often youth's attitude towards established institutions (I am not being ironic – I have always been young, shifting from discipline to discipline a number of times in my career in order to prevent entrenchment), young scholars are likely to explore the limits of existing paradigms, and stumble on new ones – whose subsequent establishment and elaboration may them become the mainstay of their own, more independent, successful careers.

The position of more mature scholars may be equally interesting: if they have already successfully built a career and an institutional position, they, too, may be sufficiently secure to confront the dominant paradigms of their times and propose new ones. Access to publication resources, institutional power, and a following equally prone on innovation and exploration, may help the innovators in these processes – yet may also constitute as many dangers of domestication and predictability.

As indicated, sound comparison does not spring from the data themselves, but from the frame of classification and theoretical interpretation we impose upon the data – in close intersubjective consultation with the forum. In the complex, feedback-centred process of comparison, it does not seem to be very meaningful to make a distinction between classification, theory and methodology – these are, in my opinion, different aspects of the same intellectual challenge. Comparability as a central question, meanwhile,focuses not so much on the theory and methods we hold as comparativists, but on the classication to which we subject the data as our stepping stone to comparison. *How do we now that we are comparing what is comparable, rather than comparing the p r o v e r b i a l apples with pears?* This is one way in which the operationalisation problem of the comparative sciences presents itself.

The proverbial formulation suggests that all we have to do if we want to assess comparability, is to find the inherent, given nature of what we wish to compare. Pears grow on pear trees, apples on apple trees, *and never the twain shall meet* (to paraphrase Kipling). Admittedly, at the level of practical horticultural experience, or of plant biology, molecular genetics, ecology etc. there may be no danger of confusing the two species of fruit trees, nor their products. But this is mere self-deception. Even if backed up by the impressive achievements of modern biology and horticultural science, there is no way in which the classiciations invented (as 'folk classifications' of a particular, North Atlantic, would-be global professional group of scientific specialists) could claim to be an untimate, essential truth that can function as the unshakable foundation of our comparative work in other sciences, including comparative mythology (where fruit trees and their fruits play an important role), ethnography (where fruit trees of various descriptions may be distinguished or merged into one category regardless of modern science), or domestic use of timber from around the house for wood carving, construction work etc. *There are apparently hardly any natural categories on which we can legitimately and reliably found our comparisons as scientists – we largely have to define and intersubjectively negotiate our own categories.*

The position I express here, is exaggerated. We need be slightly more specific. Take the natural sciences, where one of the great achievements of *comparison* the last few centuries has been Mendeleyev's Periodic System of Elements. Pure elements hardly occur in nature but they tend to occur in amalgamations and mixtures; moreover, most elements comprse several isotopes, so that the empirical atomic mass tends to differ from the rounded figures of the Periodic System. Yet the very formulation of the System allows us to recognise these variations and imprecisions as surface phenomena, underneath of which lurks the gradiose beauty of a man-made classification system that yet seems to have a one to one correspondence with non-man-made nature. However, if I am not mistaken the natural sciences are not at the heart of our Symposium, and for all human sciences it is true to say that they occupy themselves with phenomena that reflect, and largely or entirely were produced by, the interpretative and signifying efforts of the human mind in individual or collective endeavours.

Here our operationalisation may be of two kinds, which are aptly rendered by the now classic anthropological paired concepts emic and etic. *Etic* refers to the analytical definition with which we render human phenomena without bothering to render the historic actors' own classifications; a may speak of a class society, exploitation, injustice, where the historic actors themselves, perceiving the world in terms of their religion and caste system, only see a divine, just and immutable order of things. Etic (or *nominal*) operationalisation is easy because it can

be entirely of the analysist's own invention, without bothering to engage in discourse analysis of original and evolving historic meanings in space and time. Emic does just that, seeking to render (still in analytical, streamlined, explicit terms) the historic actors' own classifications and significations, and therefore emic operationalisation is far more complex – involving discourse analysis, therefore requiring profound knowledge of the culture and the language in question, requiring also a prfound awareness of the way in which historic discourses tend to be internally diverse and to evolve over time etc. Etymologivally the distinction emic / etic tallies with that in linguistics, between phonology (the systematic knowledge of elements of speech as defined within a specific language and as implicitly recognised and handled by the native speakers themselves) and phonetics (the analytical, external study of speech sounds regardless of how sounds are constructed into Gestalte, and thyus heard and appreciated by speakers).

Etic comparison is less likely to be accused on comparing apples and pears, because the analyst herself or himself simply defines what the variables and values in the analysis at hand are. Some of these analytical choices may be argued to be more strategic or economical than others, but none can be dismissed as patently wrong. Emic comparison, in history, comparative mythology, sections of anthropology, etc. is a totally different undertaking. The analysts implicitly seeks intersubjectivity with the original historic actors whose cultural forms are being compared, but the analyst has no monopoly on the rendering and understanding of these real-life cultural forms – the historic actgors themselves, if still around, will be good judges of the results of the comparison, and so are other analysts who happen to be familiar with the same or related cultural forms in space and time. Here we may make, and often do make, the accusation of comparing apples with pears (in other words, of aligning for comparison cultural forms that are so widely divergent in space and time as to make any underlying connection unlikely, absurd, counter-paradigmatic. Yet even such accusations, while pertaining to the tasks and functions of the forum, have an element of paradigmatic power struggle in them: submitting to the paradigmatic expectations of the forum may be prudent and conducive to a stable career, but does not necessarily bring us closer to the truth of human culture and it history. Quite on the contrary, I would be inclined to say, after a long career dedicated to the Comparative Sciences.

3. pose the central question as to the scope of our comparison in time and space – as an extreme solution to the paradigmatic problem of comparability

as a historian and transregional compaprativist of divination systems, I could accept limitations of space and time, commensurate with my own limits of linguistic and cultural knowledge – but as an intercultural philosopher I needed more – I needed properly, empirically grounded arguments for my inkling as to the fundamental unity of humankind (aganst the background of todays's globalisation) – this brought me to LONG-RANGE comparison across vast expanses of space and time, defying even the traditional boundaries of continents , and the distinction between history and prehistory

4. briefly introduce [of the cuff] the various comparative fields that have, in recent decades, enabled us to greatly extend our scope of comparison and and greatly reinforce our basis for such comparison:

a. comparative linguistics (**Nostratic, Borean, Greenberg, Tower of Babel'**
b. compartive mythology (Witzel, Berezkin, van Binsbergen)
c. comparative ethnography
d. Black Athena debate – transcontinentality
e. molecular population genetics

Ironically enough, these are not just *new* developments – they were subjects founded in the formalisation, institutionalisation and rapid expansion of North Atlantic academic knowledge in the 19th c. CE, when an enormous comparative effort was initiated – only to die down with the emergence of more detailed case studies in all these fields, e.g. field linguistics descriptions of single languages, the fieldwork model of anthropology

Trombetti, Bleek..
Frazer, Müller
Diffusionism

5 Show how my own work went in this direction over the past 20 years

In addition to my argument of *Before the Presocratics* my recent comparative work focussing on Africa's transcontinental continuities with the other continents brings out many other examples:

- divination systems especially geomantic divination, worldwide
- boardgames
- the Black Athena debate
- Bronze Age ethnicitg
- The amazing rapprochements between the mythology of Western Eurasia and that of Oceania (with an excursion into West Africa), concerning such mythemes as Land being fished up from the Sea; Delayed Cosmogony as a result of Incessant Mating between Heaven and Earth as Primordial Gods; the Invention of the Sail.
- The reduction to junior status of a chain of Neolithic goddesses from West Africa to West Asia, with the rise of male celestial gods in the Bronze Age (van Binsbergen & Woudhuizen 2011: Table 6.4, p. 142)
- the amazing continuity between random generators including tahlets in divination in three continents (van Binsbergen 2012: Fig. 8.6, p. 276, and Table 2.3, p. 66)
- the globally converging symbolism of the speckled leopard-skin, and the even more amazing convergence of its lexical expressions across the world's linguistic phyla and macrophyla (van Binsbergen 2004 and in preparation (c)
- the amazing continuity between female puberty rights in sub-Saharan Africa and North America
- the evidence for a transcontinental cosmology, hinging on a transformative cycle of elements, and found throughout literate Bronze Age Eurasia (resonating in the Presocratics), with ramifications to sub-Saharan Africa and to North America (van Binsbergen 2012X; a summary / postscript of this book will be circulated during the conference.
- The converging patterns of animal symbolism, even apart from the leopard, in astronomical terminology, clan names, and divination systems all over the old world – as brought out by my first

systmatic explorations intoglobal symbolism, around the year 2000

- briefly review Before the Prescoratics as an example of the above.

In the face of the apparently insurmountable paradigmatic difficulties I have outlined in this paper, one would be inclined to say ‘the proof of the pudding is in the eating’. As comparativists, we are Anatomically Modern Humans, engaging – to the extent to our fields are social, cultural and linguistic– in the comparative analysis of the achievements of Anatomically Modern Humans. However abstrusely we may define our variables for comparison, and however crudely we may force the underlying historically lived reality of our data into the straightjacket of these variables, we would still not be comparing totally unrelated phenomena (‘apples with pears’), because in the last analysis what is involved is all fruits from the same tree – that of the cultural history of a fundamentally one humanity. (Biblical scholars and comparative mythologists would have a lot to say about that tree – it is the tree of knowledge of good and evil, underneath we attained our status of being human…) Let us be tempted to take our results somewhat seriously – even if our comparisons cannot take into account the local details of the historical actors original conceptualisations and expression, a spirit of conmunality links them and us.