

# African Divination across Time and Space: Typology and Intercultural Epistemology

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## **1. Introduction**

Divination is at the heart of many African societies, and increasingly at the heart of African Studies.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps this is no accident. As Amd Schneider wrote in 1993, citing the distinguished Italian historian Carlo Ginzburg whose transregional analyses (especially Ginzburg 1992) of Eurasian magico-religious practices greatly contributed (along with the rise of globalisation studies) to the recent revival of a diffusion perspective outside archaeology:

'Ginzburg (1990)<sup>2</sup> argued in a classic article that the humanities in general,

<sup>1</sup> Acknowledgements. The present argument is a greatly revised and shortened version of the keynote address (cf. van Binsbergen 2005b, with extensive illustrations) I was privileged to deliver (parallel to that of the distinguished researcher of African mathematical systems Paulus Gerdes) at the Leiden international conference *Realities re-viewed I revealed: Divination in sub-Saharan Africa*, Leiden, National Museum of Ethnology, the Netherlands, 4-5 July 2005, conveners: Philip Peek, Walter van Beek, Jan Jansen and Annette Schmidt. I wish to register my indebtedness to the following persons and institutions: the conveners; the participants, whose inspiring papers and discussions have considerably helped me to revise the present argument after presentation; the African Studies Centre, Leiden, the Netherlands, which over the decades has been a generous context for the research underlying the present argument; the Department of Philosophy of Man and Culture, Philosophical Faculty, Erasmus University, Rotterdam, the Netherlands, for providing, from 1998 onwards, a stimulating and critical environment in which I could explore the intercultural philosophical implications and dilemmas of my attempts, since 1990, at combining the role of North Atlantic social and historical researcher with that of a Southern African qualified diviner-healer (*sangoma*); the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities and Social Sciences (NIAS), Wassenaar, the Netherlands, where I spent a year (1994-1995) as member of the Research Group on Magic and Religion in the Ancient Near East, working full-time on the present project; diviners and healers in various parts of Africa, who have trustingly shared expert knowledge with me and have subsequently welcomed me as a colleague; clients, and their communities, mainly in Africa but also in Europe and (via the Internet) in other continents, who have often entrusted their most pressing problems to me as a diviner-healer; colleagues and friends who lured me to the academic study of divination: Rene Devisch, Richard Werbner, Sjaak van der Geest, John Janzen and Murray Last. Finally, I am deeply grateful to the editors for their patience, generosity and criticism.

<sup>2</sup> Original reference.

but anthropology, archaeology, and art history in particular, did not follow the Galilean paradigmatic shift of the natural sciences, but with their continuation of an inductive paradigm relate ultimately to ancient practices of divination.<sup>3</sup>

So we as contributors to the present collection may be caricaturised as diviners who, under the guise of the pursuit of anthropological science, use their divining skills to elucidate the nature and socio-cultural forms of African divination for a globalising (post-)modern audience. Little wonder that so many anthropologists, from Evans-Pritchard to Werbner, Stoller and myself, became practising African diviners themselves.

After pioneer approaches of about a century ago,<sup>3</sup> the middle of the twentieth century brought classic statements by E.E. Evans-Pritchard, William Bascom, Meyer Fortes and Victor Turner.<sup>4</sup> Building on this solid foundation, a next generations added further ethnographic detail, comparative scope and further theoretical perspectives to the study of African divination, drawing from such highly diverse fields as epistemology; mathematics; discourse analysis; the transactional study of social communication; the transformation and localisation of cultural items as they cross temporal and spatial boundaries, negotiating between language groups, classes and ethnic groups in the process; religious studies; history, (para-)psychology; the science of literature; and the study of conjuring tricks.<sup>5</sup> In the most recent decades also a number of impressive collective volumes have consolidated divination studies as a major subject within African Studies.<sup>6</sup> The specialist fields enumerated above were also well represented at the Leiden conference, on which the present collection is based. My argument will not try to do justice to this complementary diversity of approaches, nor to the sheer diversity of African divination systems on the ground. I will concentrate on two main themes that I have pursued in the course of my own two decades of divination research.

<sup>3</sup> E.g. Dennett 1906; Junod 1987, 1925, 1927/1962; Eiselen 1932; Coertze 1931; Dornan 1923.

<sup>4</sup> Evans-Pritchard 1937/1972; Bascom 1941, 1969, 1980; Fortes 1940, 1949, 1966; cf. Fortes and Dieterlen 1965; Turner 1961, 1975.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Abbink 1993; Abimbola 1977, 2000, Abimbola and Hallen 1993; Adedeji 1970; Adler and Zemleni 1972; Bauer and Hinnant 1980; Beattie 1964; Bohannon 1975; Devisch 1985, 1991, 1994, cf. Devisch and Vervaeck 1985, de Boeck and Devisch 1994; Eglash 1997, 1999; Fainzang 1986; Gebauer 1964; Grindal 1983; Jackson 1978; Jaulin, R., 1966, Jules-Rosette 1978; Mendonsa 1982; Middleton 1971; Ogbaa 1992; Prince 1963; Rasmussen 1991; Sekoni 1992; Shaw 1985, 1991, 1996; Shelton 1965; Stoller and Olkes 1987; Edith Turner 2004; van Binsbergen 1995, 1996a, 1996b, 1997; Werbner 1973, 1989; Young 1977; Zeitlyn 1990, 1993.

<sup>6</sup> Peek 1991; Pemberton 2000; Winkelmann and Peek 2004.

The first is the typology of African divination systems, with special emphasis on the forms and socio-cultural contexts (regionally, intercontinentally, and from a long-range historical perspective) of the Southern African four-tablet system as a major representative of the widespread family of geomantic divination systems. Despite this diversity, in the process, we will identify some of the most striking structural characteristics of sub-Saharan African mantics: their institutionalisation, boundary crossing and logocentricity

Secondly, having perused the ways in which Africans - and several anthropologists - take divination seriously, I will conclude by examining the intercultural epistemology of divination. The central puzzle is why African divination has to be constructed by a global reductionist scholarship as mere make-believe, yet so often appears to deliver truths that may be more than just figments of the imagination and that seem to have a grounding in empirical reality.

## **2. Varieties of divination in Africa in historical times**

Both in Africa and worldwide, a dazzling variety of divination methods and systems has been recorded, and any attempt to treat divination more systematically, from the complementary perspectives of long-term history and intercultural epistemology, must begin with creating some order in this complexity at the descriptive level. The first distinction that suggests itself is a familiar one:

1. 'Material' divination, which involves verbal divinatory pronouncements triggered by the outcome of the manipulation (usually in intersubjective, collectively defined ways) of an object (that is usually not unique nor idiosyncratic but defined within the repertoire of a local material culture) serving as a random generator;

2. 'Mental' or 'trance' divination, in which no external material apparatus is being used, but the diviner (or an assistant, translating the diviner's otherwise unintelligible utterances) produces verbal divinatory pronouncements that introspectively rely - in ways not dictated by external, objectified and verifiable epistemic procedure - on the diviner's subjective impressions, usually attributed to non-human agencies or impersonal powers as locally defined. This dichotomy *grosso modo* coincides with that proposed by that one of the major writers on African divination, Rene Devisch (2008), between geomantic (in the sense to be set out below) and shamanic divination. With this proviso, however, that many, but - as we shall see - by no means all, forms of material divination in Africa are geomantic. Moreover, according to widely accepted definitions of shamanism, what marks the shaman it is not so much the preference for mental divination over material divination (these forms may shade over into each other in concrete

practice), but the definition of his or her role by a local cultural idiom of reaching - certainly mentally, but by local belief and subjective experience also physically, and usually with the aid of highly repetitive, mainly musical motor patterns - beyond the here and the now, into and beyond the exalted or abysmal peripheries of the human life-world, from where unique spoils are brought back. Formally, this could be said of African diviners, too, but their powers and extraordinary states of consciousness tend to be locally explained by supernatural agents coming to them and taking possession of them, rather than by their travelling to their sources of power and information. Meanwhile, this dichotomy does not seem to exhaust the variety of divinatory phenomena in Africa, and I propose to add the following two categories:

3. 'Psychomotoric divination', in which the diviner produces verbal divinatory pronouncements on the basis of specifically defined non-speech motor patterns (e.g. specific co-ordinated dancing movements) which, in the context of the divination session, are produced in the diviner or the client in direct and more or less involuntary response to a variety of musical, olfactory or other sensory stimuli; and finally

4. 'Ominous and oneiric divination', in which the diviner bases verbal divinatory pronouncements on the client's reports concerning more or less exceptional conditions the latter says to have witnessed or experienced in an ordinary waking state, in visions and hallucinations, or in dreams; typically, such conditions are interpreted by a fixed, usually rather elaborate and intersubjective catalogue of meanings - the equivalent of the well-known omen repertoires of the Ancient Near East and South Asia, and of the dream manuals of Graeco-Roman Antiquity and Islamic 'secret sciences'.<sup>7</sup>

If divination is based on the motoric patterns of specific animals (birds, spiders, crabs, foxes), or of inanimate material phenomena such as clouds, drops of liquid, smoke, etc., we have in fact a rudimentary form of 'material' divination even though the random generator is not, or not entirely, man-made. In such

<sup>7</sup> The artificial nature of this, and any other, classification is borne out by the case of bier divination, which (cf. Bastide 1968 with extensive literature) is common throughout West Africa and hence was taken - like so many African divination forms - to the New World in the context of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. In the Manjaco case of Guinea-Bissau, a bier with the dead body is placed on the heads of two carriers, and these, in a trance-like state, proceed through the community until their movement is involuntarily halted in the presence of the person who is supposedly responsible for the death; the details of the killing can be ascertained by yes-no questions in which the same motoric pattern provides the answers (author's field notes, 1983). Since the bier with the shrouded body forms an object, this is material divination (1), but it also involves trance (2), notably with decided psychomotoric aspects (3). See Baerends, this volume.

cases, the random natural phenomena are usually framed within a specific man-made arrangement (a trench, grid, visor, container etc.) by which a manageable selection of clues is set apart from the rest of the non-human world, and subsequently interpreted by reference to a (usually oral) interpretative catalogue.

### **2.1 Types of material divination**

The four broad categories mentioned above are not always strictly distinguished, but they may serve to guide us through the maze of African divinatory complexity. In Africa, as in other continents, the varieties of material divination (1) include:

- Axe handle divination, and other forms of friction oracles especially in Central Africa, where the interpretation is based on the awareness of differential friction. The halting of the apparatus is usually interpreted as significant and affirmative, while the smooth uninterrupted movement is considered non-significant. Such a material oracle has a very simple interpretative catalogue, only consisting of the values 'yes' and 'no' - and the specific message the oracle delivers entirely depends on the nature of the input questions. See in this volume the contribution of Lamarche-Largentaye.

- A similar one-bit oracle that, likewise, can only yield the answer 'yes' or 'no', is the simple inspection of a chick's intestines, as practices for instance among the Manjaco of Guinea Bissau and Southern Senegal; the fowl's abdomen is dextrously cut open, and the gut is inspected for black spots - their presence have a negative implication, their absence a positive one.

- The 'one-bit' chick oracle is a form of extispicy, for which a rather more complex form has been described for Ethiopia (Abbink 1993), and which is also practiced in North African popular Islam (author's field notes, 1968). Domestic animals are the typical victims, but also game animals, and even human beings, are eligible in certain regions and periods. Usually it is dedicated, as a victim, to a supernatural invisible agent that provides the rationale for the claims of divinatory veridicity. One of the oldest divination systems known from written sources, that of Ancient Mesopotamia from the third millennium BCE on, was initially entirely based on extispicy (later to be complemented, than supplanted, by astral divination i.e. astrology), with very elaborate interpretational catalogues defining a large number of intersubjective physical clues to be found in the intestines.

- We have already alluded to divination based on inspection of the tracks and other random effects that (typically unpleasant, wild) animals (fox, jackal,

mouse, spider, crab) leave behind within a formalised, framed man-made setting. See van Beek and Pecquet, this volume.

- Cleromantic or lot divination, in which identical lots (e.g. nutshells, pebbles, cowry shells *Cypraea moneta*) are interpreted according to the microdramatic patterns they form (cf. Werbner 1989): having been thrown, the tokens through their conventionalised association with specific implements, social groups, social roles, and aspects of the natural world, produce as it were a little drama or *tableau vivant*, standing for the essential elements, and visualising (through their spatial layout) their interrelations in the real-life situation that is the object of divination. The straightforward microdramatic imagery is invoked on the spot, has only relevance for the here and now, and thus does not need any elaborate coding procedures or interpretational catalogue. Or, alternatively, in a more abstract and formalised format, differently marked lots are to be cast or drawn, and the outcome is to be interpreted by a fixed interpretative catalogue of clearly distinguished meanings. The most developed of African cleromantic divination systems are those that belong to the geomantic family, which is extremely extensive both inside Africa and outside. Highly reminiscent of the Ancient Chinese *yi jing* JI&S (*I Ching*, *Book of Changes*)\* system (Legge 1993), and sharing with the latter its reliance on powers of 2, and its notational system of n-grams (trigrams, tetragrams etc.) consisting of n levels of broken and unbroken lines,<sup>9</sup> the geomantic

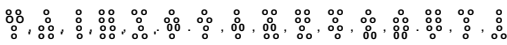
\* Wherever a proper name or term used in this argument was borrowed from a literate tradition outside the modern North Atlantic region, and is introduced for the first time, I have tried to use the original script - not in order to claim a linguistic competence I do not have, but as a reminder than any rendering in North Atlantic scientific prose is a defective, appropriative representation imposing upon the original. However, it is impossible to be consistent in editorial conventions, e.g. cuneiform cannot be thus rendered, and Greek proper names, usually in a distortive Latin / English rendering, are (by virtue of the construction of modern North Atlantic identity as Greek-based) hardly felt as foreign and it would be facetious to write them in the original Greek script.

<sup>9</sup> In the European derivations of *'ilm al-raml*, the apparent equivalent of / *Ching's* unbroken line is equivalent to two dots placed horizontally next to one another and standing for 'even' in the geomantic system. Both in the Arabian and the European system / *Ching's* broken line is equivalent to a dot, geomantically standing for 'odd'. Whereas / *Ching* has, as its basic notation, 64 hexagrams ('six-signs'), each consisting of six horizontal lines one above the other, with each line being broken or unbroken (in such a way that each hexagram consists of two superimposed trigrams - **Aih ba gua**: EE, EE, EE, EE, EE, EE, EE, EE, which have constituted central cosmological concepts throughout recorded Chinese history), geomancy has as its basic notation tetragrams ('four-signs') consisting of not six or three, but four superimposed levels, each a line or a dot:

which in the European notation became

family received its most influential formulation in Southern Mesopotamia (Iraq) towards the end of the first millennium CE / in the fourth century AH, under the name of  $J\langle jll \wedge$  *Him al-raml*. Originally the random generator was, not the cleromantic throwing of tokens, but the production of a random series of even or uneven indentures in the sand, with the aid of a baton, hence the Arabic name, 'sand science.' In the early second millennium CE this name was phonetically rendered as *rambolion* QapPoAiov in Byzantine Greek, and semantically conveyed as *geomantia* ('divination by earth') in the many Latin translations of treatises dealing with this divination system., which was to become a major divination technique in Renaissance Europe, and until modern times has survived in European popular culture.

*Ilm al-raml* was essentially a form of adulterated astrology. There is, in all divination systems, and perhaps in all systems of knowledge production including Africanist research, a constant dialectics between procedural integrity and purity (which warrants valid - but arduously produced - knowledge in terms of the assumptions of the system), and the lure of easy and cheap methods, which may allow the diviner/knowledge producer to play a larger and more lucrative market with minimum intellectual and temporal investment. The eminent Tunisian historian Ibn Khaldun  $UJ - \wedge Ca$  (1332 CE/732 AH - 1406 CE/808 AH), who took a great interest in *ilm al-raml*, explained the rise of that divination system, as adulterated astrology, from diviners' failure to conduct the complex astronomical calculations needed for a professional horoscope; the crucial and deceptive simplification being that (not for the first or the last time in the global history of astrology) a fall of dice or other form of random generation was taken as input in the divinatory process, and not the actual, ever changing, constellation of the planets and fixed stars in the sky above a specific location at a specific time. This type of adulteration is also endemic in African divination systems, both at the centre (with unskilled



The dominant conception of these foursomes is in terms of a human body, with the top line representing the head, the second line the body, the third the legs and the fourth the feet. From Ancient China (Pangu S i ' i ) to the Ancient Near East (Tiamat, Leviathan), Ancient Egypt (Osiris, with an echo in Ancient Greek Dionysus who was likewise torn to pieces by the Titans), and Ancient North Western Europe (Ymir) we encounter the cosmogonic myth - apparently often revived in regicide and other forms of torture and execution, also in Africa - of a primordial being who was defeated and whose fragmented being became the world as we know it. Could geomancy be a late echo of this idea, cast in the form of mathematical recursion as the basis for powers of 2?

and unscrupulous diviners) and at the periphery of the grand systems, and would constitute a splendid topic of research in its own right.

In Africa the geomantic family has as its main exponents:

- the *Sikidy* system of Madagascar and the Comoro Islands, based on 16 combinations whose essentially Arabic names still retain the unmistakable reminiscence of the late first millennium CE, Iraqi Arabian divination system of '*Urn al-raml*' from which it is clearly derived;

- the South Central and Southern African *Hakata* four-tablet system, producing (since all four are marked as different, and can fall facing up or down)  $2^4 = 16$  combinations whose symbolic connotations are still reminiscent of Sikidy; and

- the *Ifa* system of the West African countries on the Bight of Benin: Nigeria, Benin, Togo. This system, based on  $2^8 = 256$  named combinations, all incorporated, with their specific praises, in a coherent interpretative catalogue, is highly integrative of the West African worldview and ethics, hence it is understandable that many African writers have sought to identify a local, West African origin for Ifa,<sup>10</sup> whilst others have sought to derive Ifa from North East Africa and the Middle East via some postulated trans-Sahara connection to the Bight of Benin," yet the most likely explanation, concurring with the evidence of trade contacts, boat types, musical instrument, divining bowls, cowries, stray Roman coins, is that Ifa is a local West African transformation of the Sikidy system, mediated not overland through the caravan trade, but along the Atlantic Ocean, by coastal seaborne trade, in the first half of the second millennium CE.<sup>11</sup> In West Africa, the cowry-based cleromantic system of Sixteen Cowries (Bascom 1980) is a form of Ifa but served by sixteen unordered identical tokens, instead of the (mathematically very different) ordered sets of two times four cowries or coins strung

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Kassibo 1992; Traore 1979; Bewaji 1992.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Maupoil 1943b; Abimbola 1971; Turpin and Gleason 1992; *pace* Levtzion and Hopkins 1981, who show a map of trade routes in North-western Africa during the last few millennia, suggesting that such a connection is very doubtful.

<sup>12</sup> After pioneering work by de Flacourt (1658), the recognition of the identity of *ilm al-raml*, Sikidy and Ifa has been the work of a series of scholars in the 19th and the first half of the 20th century, including Burton 1856 / 1987, 1864 / 1893; Steinschneider 1877; Ferrand 1891-1902; Ardent du Picq 1930; Trautmann 1939-1940; Hebert 1961; Maupoil 1943. Further work along these lines was done by Jaulin 1966; Skinner 1980; Fahd 1965; de Surgy 1981. I had the privilege of demonstrating, by a detailed analysis of the notational system and the symbolism informing the interpretative catalogues, that also the Southern African *Hakata* belongs to this series (van Binsbergen 1995, 1996a). My ongoing research on Indonesian / African connections, now being prepared for publication, and the inspiration from Dick-Read 2005 in this connection, have meanwhile convinced me of the specific geomantic diffusion and transformation trajectory as detailed in the text.



together to constitute a *kpelle* or divining chain. See Ayala, Granjo, de Surgy and Baerends, this volume.

In addition to these highly developed, integrated and collectively administered geomantic divination systems, in the social and/or geographical peripheries of their distribution areas, and beyond, numerous minor, adulterated, fragmented geomancies are found (e.g. Itmann 1960), of which we shall encounter examples below when discussing the divination systems of African hunter-gatherers.

A totally different variety of cleromantic divination is basket divination, in which a large number of heterogeneous tokens is swirled out of a shallow basket (South Central Africa), or, as is more typical in Southern Africa, cast out of the pouch or bag in which they are kept (hence my expression 'mixed bag' for such oracles.<sup>13</sup> The tokens may constitute unmistakable representations of distinct elements in the nature and the man-made world (standing for implements, animal species / totems / clans, social roles, human products such as corn and metal, natural phenomena such as lightning), and their interpretation is usually largely microdramatic; see Granjo, this volume.

More restricted than the basket or pouch oracle, and more abstract and conventionalised as far as the interpretation procedure is concerned, with less reliance on concrete visualisation along microdramatic lines, is the astragal oracle, found in West, Central and Southern Africa; in the latter region, the 'mixed bag' oracle may in large part consist of astragals. The astragal or *talus*, a relatively large, elongated foot bone in quadruped mammals (usually ungulates like sheep, pig and roe are preferred), is used as a random generator / die for divination, gambling and gaming in many parts of the world (Africa, Asia, the New World,<sup>14</sup> Graeco-Roman Antiquity, the Ancient Near East, Bronze Age and Iron Age

<sup>13</sup> Available descriptions include Junod 1897; Werbner 1989; Rodrigues de Areia 1985, and Turner 1961.

<sup>14</sup> Possibly as a post-Columbian borrowing from the Old World, cf. Lewis 1988, although the divinatory use of bison astragals by Prairie Native Americans (Culin 1902/1975: 828f) has the ring of antiquity about it; for a depiction see Le Scouezec *et al.* 1965: 30. Below I will insist on the classificatory and dating importance of the parallels between African and North American divination. Such parallels, but also contrasts, laudably form of Ron Eglash's contribution in this book, but his formal mathematical approach, which earlier yielded us a splendid book on African fractals (Eglash 1999), has, in this latter article, a more narrow ethnographic basis in North American and Bamana divination. Yet his emphasis on recursion as the mathematical background of the emphasis on powers of 2 is very well-taken. See [http://www.ccd.rpi.edu/Eglash/papers/eglash\\_div\\_paper.doc](http://www.ccd.rpi.edu/Eglash/papers/eglash_div_paper.doc).

Europe),<sup>15</sup> nearly always taking four different possible values (i.e. 2<sup>2</sup>) depending on which side the bone faces upward after being thrown.

## 2.2 *Types of trance divination*

Trance divination is rather less common than material divination in Africa. Hammond-Tooke (1998, 1999, 2002) even makes a case for the exceptional nature of *sangoma* trance divination - typically involving music as a vehicle, cf. the common Bantu word *ngoma*, 'drum, musical session' - among the Nguni-speaking peoples (Zulu, Xhosa, Swazi, Ndebele) of Southern Africa, where their neighbours such as the Tswana, Pedi, Tsonga etc. have stood out in the ethnographic literature for very elaborate forms of cleromantic divination, either of the 'mixed bag' variety or in the form of four-tablet divination - an offshoot of the transcontinental geomantic family encompassing the entire Old World.<sup>16</sup> In the course of the 20th century, however, cleromantic divination (especially the four-tablet format and the nutshell oracle) has been widely adopted by the *sangoma* trance diviners, as additional resources in the highly competitive therapeutic market. Considering my suggestion, below, concerning the more primitive for less iogocentric' (Derrida 1967) nature of trance divination, such a shift towards cleromancy may simply be read as a giving in to the modernity-inspired insistence, on the part of the diviners' clients, on an objectified, intersubjective method that is largely in line with the rationality of procedural knowledge pro-

<sup>15</sup> The archaeological, classics and ethnographic literature on this topic is extensive and dispersed, and its review is regrettably outside our present scope. As far as Africa is concerned, astragals appear in divinatory contexts in West Africa (e.g. among the Tallensi, Fortes 1966: 420), Central Africa especially the divining basket of the Chokwe and related peoples (Rodrigues de Areia 1985; Turner 1961), and in the Southern African 'mixed bag' oracle (Hammond-Tooke 2002; Junod 1897. According to the missionary to the Barotse, Yalla, *apud* Wiedemann 1909: 32, this type of divination also occurred in Barotseland, Upper Zambezi valley, although I never encountered it there during my extensive fieldwork since 1972; cf. Reynolds 1963. A map of the distribution of astragal divination in Southern Africa in: van Binsbergen 1996: 5, Diagram 2, cf. Wiedemann 1909: 28f, Figure 31. Wiedemann (1909: 37) claims astragal divination to have extended, from today's South Africa into today's Malawi and Western Angola.

<sup>16</sup> As we shall see below, my solution to Hammond-Tooke's comparative puzzle is to suggest strong influences from Asia on divination in Southern Africa, taken there (a) by the Asian ancestors of Khoi-San speakers (recent genetic research has found them to be an African-Asian hybrid population some of whose ancestors still lived in West Asia less than 10 ka (*kiloi/ears*, millennia) BP (Before Present), as well as (b) by Buddhist and Hinduist inroads from South Asia (probably less than 1 ka ago), to which Nguni *sangoma* trance divination turns out to be considerably indebted.

duction in the public sphere of South Africa's highly urbanised industrial society today (cf. van Binsbergen 1995, 1996). See Mlisa and Ndaya, this volume

Apart from cleromantic divination, trance diviners - in Africa as elsewhere - may induce trance by the contemplation of mirroring surfaces, for instance a bowl filled with water, or a modern manufactured mirror. Divining bowls are known from many parts of Africa more or less in continuity with their use in Ancient Mesopotamia, Graeco-Roman Antiquity, and Ancient China. Both in Southern Africa (especially among the Venda) and in West Africa on the Bight of Benin, strikingly similar types of wooden bowls are in use whose rim, adorned with several dozen of realistic or fantastic animals, suggest zodiacal connotations: not so much with Ancient Near Eastern or Graeco-Roman connotations (*pace* Davis 1955), but with Ancient China, where divining bowls with a rim of 3x12 zodiacal animals were in use in the middle of the first millennium CE, later to be replaced by the better-known twelve animals of the 12-year Chinese zodiac (Walters 1987 / 1989: 80).<sup>17</sup> In recent centuries in Southern and West Africa, such bowls were pressed into service in the context of varieties of geomantic divination, but initially they probably served trance divination in their own right, and without the elaborate notational symbolism and interpretative catalogue typical of Southern and West African forms of geomancy (the Hakata and Ifa systems, respectively).

Indeed, the most typical form of African trance inducement for divination is through music (especially drumming) and dance, which may either lead to mental divination (2), or bring clients to a particular motoric response pattern peculiar to a particular, named possession agent as locally recognised (3). Music, especially if it is highly repetitive, is widely used as a vehicle to induce an altered state of consciousness, as a basis for diagnosis and healing. Music and dance not only induce trance but, through (3), are also frequently used as divinatory devices in their own right. The *cult of affliction* is a model found in many parts of Africa in historical times. The basic formula of such cults is that they deal with a spiritual disorder by formally, as part of a cultic process, acknowledging the

<sup>17</sup> It is beyond our present scope to consider, and reference, the several other indications of Chinese influence upon African divination and therapy, e.g. the ritual stance (to be adopted by clients during divination sessions) which in Chinese is called 'sitting winnowing-basket fashion' (*zuo ji*), on the ground with legs rigidly stretched forward; evidence of knowledge of Chinese tortoise-shell symbolism (the famous *lub shu* square, essentially a magic square) among South African diviners; parallels between the Chinese and the Southern African pharmacopoeia; and, in addition to the main text's suggestion of adopting Chinese divination bowls, the possible transformation of Chinese nautical instruments notably the compass ladle and bowl, into an African divinatory apparatus.

possession spirit held to be responsible for the affliction; such acknowledgement means that the patient joins the cult, and receives the power to diagnose and heal other such cases; a chain reaction ensues, patients becoming doctors in search of other patients, which is the reason why these cults spread very rapidly over vast areas - like Tupperware and pyramid investment games in the North Atlantic today. In cults of affliction, being afflicted by a particular spirit usually is revealed in the following way: all locally recognised possessing agents are supposed to have their own music and dance, and when this varied repertoire is played consecutively at a cult session, undiagnosed patients respond only to one particular song and begin to dance - a form of psychomotoric divination.<sup>18</sup> See Duchesne and Devisch, this volume

Finally, especially in Central and Southern Africa *smelling out* is a common form of mental or trance divination relying on the diviner's trance-like subjective introspection (often enhanced by music and dance). Deriving its forms and local rationale from the hunter's skills, this form of divination is especially used to detect evil and witches.

### ***2.3 Across diversity: institutionalisation, boundary crossing, and logocentricity***

A number of structural aspects of African divination should be mentioned at this juncture. In the first place, we should recognise the *highly institutionalised nature* of African divination. The diviner in Southern Africa is not just a marginal man or woman in the local community, ethnic group, nation, gender, age group etc. The diviner is also member of a profession. And although diviners tend to take great liberty in customising and personalising the knowledge imparted to them during their training, and of transforming it (often adulterating it!) according to their own tastes and needs, often there is a basic package managed by all diviners collectively in a particular community or region. With their long training, their formal graduation before an audience of diviners and often a general public, their continued allegiance to their original mentor or mentrix, their collective care for the initiation and graduation of novice diviners, African diviners often constitute a guild. Recognition as a diviner often depends on formal examination by the senior members of such a guild; then the novice diviner's knowledge of techniques, procedures and ethical codes is tested, while also the mentor puts his

<sup>18</sup> In this sense also African spiritual churches including the now dominant form of Pentecostalism in effect function as cults of affliction; as my colleague Rijk van Dijk stressed in his contribution to the 2005 Leiden conference, being seized by the Holy Spirit counts as a form of divination as well.

or her reputation at stake. Epistemologically this means that the procedures held to produce veridical divination are formalised, collectively managed and transmitted, objectified and intersubjective - they are a form of proto-science. Under modern conditions, these guilds may slightly reorganise themselves so that towards the state they can turn the face of a voluntary organization registered and protected under modern national law. Such formalization and (apparent) bureaucratisation also facilitates the integration of diviners in modern health services.

In the second place, we ought to recognise the great potential for African divination systems, as formal cultural systems with a high degree of standardisation and internal coherence, to cross cultural, linguistic, social, ethnic and geographical boundaries. The diviner, in his or her explorations and pronouncements, continuously transcend the here and the now, assessing the client's connections with distant places and toggling between present, past and future. In the South Central and Southern African context, however, predicting the future tends to be less central a concern than understanding the present in view of the past. Divinatory systems themselves (like other formal systems, such as writing, board games, music and its instruments) turn out to have travelled massively across cultural, linguistic and religious boundaries. In the process they inevitably undergo a measure of what I have called *transformative localisation*, yet usually the outlines of the original, distant form and meaning remain somehow attached to the local final product. This means - and this flings in the face of classic anthropology's holistic, presentist and localist tendencies - that usually the symbolic structure of a divination system cannot be understood merely, or even primarily, from a contemplation of the local culture. Being translocal, often, divination systems afford a distancing and relativising view of local socio-cultural structures and the typical dilemmas these produce, and as such they help to negotiate otherwise unsolvable contradictions. Often such translocal divination systems are also locally, emically recognized (or at least suspected) to be alien and to have come from afar, both in space and in time. I suspect such emic connotations of alienness, however implicit, constitute an important basis of the authority of such divination systems, and of the respect that is according them. Many diviners attend to clients from adjacent cultures, in a *lingua franca*. Diviners' guilds often welcome cultural, linguistic and somatic strangers in their midst. All in all, divination systems offer excellent examples of connections and transformation in time and space, in other words of proto-globalisation. This feature is especially marked in the case of African geomancies, which turn out to belong to a transcontinental family of divination systems, and to bring out the great extent to which Africa (despite the excessive othering to which it was subjected on the part of the inhabitants of other continents in colonial and postcolo-

nial times) has always been an integral part of a transcontinental, ultimately global, network of contacts, ideas and procedures for knowledge production.

Finally, we must appreciate (cf. Parkin 1979) the central and decisive role that articulated verbal pronouncements play in all forms of African divination, although in certain forms (cleromancy, especially of a geomantic nature: Sikidy, Hakata, Ifa) the encapsulation of the vicissitudes of the real world in a tightly integrated web of divinatory terminology is much more developed than in other forms. The geomantic family clearly bears the mark - indelible despite successive stages of localising transformation in largely illiterate African environments - of a distant, literate origin in relatively recent times, when the package writing-state-organised priesthood-(proto)science had already been firmly established (see below). All the other African cleromancies amount to elaborate, systematic verbal encoding of social and natural realities, where

- the more or less man-made and more or less mechanical random operator produces the raw random outcomes, which subsequently

- are coded as named and systematically defined configurations, often to be encoded in an elaborate notational system (such as that of geomancy, with its well-known tetragrams; cf. note 8 above)

- after which each named configuration activates a specific, unique divinatory meaning as listed in the elaborate interpretative catalogue, even though under African conditions the latter mainly or exclusively exists in oral format.

Other, less elaborate forms of material divination may lack the explicit notational system, may have very simple random generators which may not even be man-made, and may have a very simple interpretative catalogue to match. Yet all material divination systems share with the most elaborate geomancies their logocentricity: their sheer emphasis on verbal domestication of the human experience and of the non-human world. Ominous and oneiric divination is very similar to material divination in its reliance on an elaborate interpretational catalogue (although it does not involve a random generator nor, in most cases, a notational system). It is only in trance divination and in psychomotoric divination that verbalisation and logocentric, procedural rationality with the aid of an objectified, intersubjective system, are limited to a final pronouncement, whereas in these mantic forms the divinatory process itself is mainly non-procedural, personal subjective, unaccountable, uncontrollable, largely defying intersubjectivity.

Elsewhere (van Binsbergen 2008) I seek to develop this emergent typology into an historical perspective, so as to further explore African divination in space and time, and cast some uncertain light on the prehistory of divination in Africa and beyond. Here we must concentrate on the present and the future, and ask ourselves how is it possible that African divination survives despite the fact that, from the viewpoint of dominant North Atlantic rationalist presuppositions, its

truth claims can only be imaginary, and cannot fail to be found out to be just that. Are African actors excessively credulous? Or is there a form of truth in divination that mainstream anthropological arguments may have overlooked?

### **3. Does African divination 'work', and if so, how can it? Divination as a puzzle in intercultural epistemology**

#### **3.1. How can divination survive**

How can divination survive, and even go through a process of resilience, especially in societies in the process of modern, electronic globalisation? Most clients of diviners would answer: 'because divination allows the diviner to see through space and time, and thus to assist the client in his predicament'. Most anthropologists however would give a very different answer:

'Divination survives, not because it has any justified claim to veridicity (it has not), but because it produces local meaning and even truth, and it does so tautologically (as any detailed analysis of diviner-client communication would reveal), in such a way that error and sleight-of-hand are never found out by the actors themselves'. For instance, one of the most perceptive non-African students of African divination has been William Bascom. In one of his earliest publications on Ifa, he believed he has found the key to the impression of veridicity Ifa divination creates in the average client. It is an answer that most anthropologists would find inherently convincing, and that can be summarised in the following terms: In divination, the dynamics of interpersonal communication between client and diviner in divination make any counter-paradigmatic recourse to the extrasensory, paranormal transfer of knowledge unnecessary.

'Mr. Clarke implies that it is the diviner who determines which of the several verses associated with each figure is appropriate to the client's problem. Had he realized that it is not the diviner, but the client, who does the selecting, it might have been possible for him to explain the accuracy of the diviner's predictions in more realistic terms than 'telepathy' or 'hyperesthesia.' On the other hand, Clarke is one of the very few writers to make the important point that if they (the diviners) are honest we must exclude the hypothesis that, through their associates, they inquire into the affairs of their clients and thus know the probable subject of an inquiry and are enabled to prescribe the measures which should be taken.' (Bascom 1942: 251)

Meanwhile the most common anthropological explanation of divination remains the following: 'Divination survives, not because it has any justified claim to veridicity (it has not), but because it negotiates existential crises and intra-

community conflict, and hence offers an essential social service, regardless of the inherent truth of the divinatory pronouncements'.

While these two explanations satisfy the common sense of anthropologists and their readers, they do not do justice to the common sense of African diviners and their clients. The discussion is an old one: how can the scientific knowledge we produce as students of African divination live up to its promise of revelation and liberation, if it is predicated (like so much in religious anthropology has always been) on the denial of the experiential and mental competence of the people we study (van Binsbergen 2003a)? Thus, after the counter-paradigmatic long-range perspectives in space and time that made up the previous section, we must prepare ourselves for an even more counter-paradigmatic exploration: one that, from an epistemological point of view, calls into question the very rationality on which anthropologist's scientific approaches to African divination are based. For clarity's sake I will concentrate on the case of material divination.

### ***3.2. African material divination as procedural, intersubjective, objectified knowledge production***

I submit that what distinguishes scientific knowledge from nearly all other forms of knowledge production is primarily a matter of procedure. The truth of a scientific statement resides in the explicit, intersubjective procedure (method, in other words) through which that knowledge has been produced. The same emphasis on intersubjective procedure as the decisive basis for valid knowledge production is, however, found in the arts of the diviner and the healer, the astrologer, the metallurgist, the navigator etc. These trades are now found all over the world. The oldest texts at our disposal documenting these trades derive from the Ancient Near East over four thousand years ago. They are expressions, not so much of traditional wisdom (although they may contain lessons to negotiate the practical difficulties of life), but of proto-science. The hallmark of such procedures is that knowledge appears as the necessary implication attending an intersubjectively (professionally, often) recognised limiting condition whose occurrence is implied to be not unique but repetitive, so that a standard rule can be established:

'if the lob of the liver turns out to be darkened, then...', (Ancient Mesopotamia; cf. Bottero 1974; Jeyes 1989)

'if the goddess Aphrodite 13 (i.e. the planet Venus) and the god Ares 0 (i.e. the planet Mars) are in conjunction in the heavens, then...', (Ancient Greece; cf. Bouche-Leclercq 1879; Tester 1987)

'if the chick's gut turns out to have black spots, then...', (Guinea-Bissau, au-



thor's field notes 1983)

'if the patient displays an insuppressible urge to dance to the singing tune peculiar to Sidi Mohammad but remains indifferent to the tunes of other local saints, then...'. (Tunisia, author's field notes 1968)

'if the patient displays a insuppressible urge to dance to the singing tune peculiar to a particular invisible possession agent (e.g. *Bituma*, *Moba*, *Mwendapanzi*, *Vindele*, etc.) but remains indifferent to the tunes of other such agents, then...'. (Zambia, author's field notes 1972; the striking parallel with the previous item, across a distance of over 5,000 km, is deliberate and no mistake)

'if the throw of the *Hakata* divination tablets brings up the tablets *Kwame* and *Shilume* face up ||J&J|||P|, but the tablets *Lingwana* and *Ntakwala* face down, then...'. (Botswana, author's field notes 1989).

Although such expressions are likely to be informed by a traditional worldview, they cannot be reduced to such a worldview; they properly belong to a specific, procedural, intersubjective and objectified mode of knowledge production - one that leads directly (although along a long and bumpy road) to today's science. By contrast, the expressions of traditional wisdom as the predominant alternative form of knowledge found all over the world (in myths, proverbs, prayers, social etiquette, therapeutic conventions, ceremonial and ritual prescriptions, etc.) typically lack the reliance on standardised, hence repeatable and generally available intersubjective (e.g. professional) conditional procedures to underpin their truth claims. The underpinning of expressions of traditional wisdom lies in human (especially ancestral) or divine authority, fed by revelation, a past charter, or diffuse, life-long experience. Such underpinning cannot be summoned, at will, repetitively, and instantly, in every specific situation as is the case for the limiting conditions underlying (proto-) science.

The art of the African diviner-healer usually - if he or she relies on material divination and not on exclusively on trance and visions - includes specific technical procedures, which are well-defined, managed and transmitted among the specialist owners of such wisdom. In Southern Africa, as we have seen, these procedures are considered to be highly objectified and intersubjective, and administered by a guild of diviners which (ever since the lifting of the colonial ban on divination) work together with the national government concerning the issuing of diviners' licences; any novice diviner-healer aspiring a state-recognised licence (which is good for competition but especially offers protection in case of client fatalities) is tested by a committee of senior diviners other than his or her own teacher(s). We have established that such divination is largely procedural, determined by the specific conventionalised interpretations of conditions defined by explicit limiting conditions, of the type 'if then...'.

If they were in fact so determined for the full 100%, such formal procedures would in principle produce (proto-) scientific knowledge. However, to the extent to which the implication triggered by the limiting condition (for instance: '...then the king will die') in reality - under the regime of truth construction that informs our present-day science - can only be said to be totally unrelated to the limiting condition, such implications are false and such science can, under the dominant scientific paradigm, only be called pseudo-science.<sup>19</sup> On the other hand, if the diviner-healer's lay client (and often the diviner-healer himself) consciously finds that he believes in the diviner-healer's pronouncements, this is so not only on the basis of the latter's authority (as in wisdom knowledge), but also and particularly because of the client's belief in the objective infallibility attributed to the divinatory procedures followed, as patent truth-producing techniques of a repetitive, objectifying, technical nature. We are left with a puzzle, an aporia, for if the material instruments of divination (e.g. four tablets, a collection of bones or figurines, the chance traces left by nocturnal visitors from the animal kingdom, the painstakingly calculated chart of the position of planets at a particular place and time) are strictly applied following the rules, which formally do not leave any degrees of freedom, they could not - under today's global scientific assumptions - possibly produce veridical divination. Yet they do, in my experience.

Two different solutions present themselves at this juncture. The first is in line with the mainstream anthropological approaches to divination, the second is in defiance of such approaches.

### ***3.3. The mainstream solution: African divination as normal wisdom production beyond strict procedure***

My first solution to our epistemological puzzle is that in fact the procedures are *not* strictly followed, and cannot be. Every divinatory outcome displays what the divination specialist Werbner (1973) has called 'the superabundance of understanding': there is never just one clue but there are always several, and these are always more or less incompatible and contradictory. For instance, in Southern African four-tablet divination,<sup>20</sup> every fall of the four tablets (and with back and

<sup>19</sup> As today's astrology is justifiably called pseudo-science today (Popper 1959 / 1935, De Surgy, this volume), although 3,000 years ago it was in the forefront of (proto-)science, and less than 300 years ago it was still taught at West European universities. Probably, and hopefully, the paroxysms of today's science (the theory of relativity, quantum mechanisms, and neurobiology) will end up as pseudo-sciences within a few centuries, to be replaced by better science...

<sup>20</sup> Cf. van Binsbergen 1995, 1996, 2003a: chs. 5-8.

front of each tablet being marked as different there are  $2^4 = 16$  different outcomes possible, which are coded as sixteen different named configurations) can be interpreted in very complex ways. In addition to the polysemic semantic connotations of the configuration's name, a general abstract meaning and a standard interpretation, all three of which are also hinted at in the conventional praise proper to each of the sixteen configurations, there are seven dimensions that may or may not be implied and activated whenever a particular configuration comes up in the course of a divination session: ancestors, the body, witchcraft, generations, social relations, property, and the animal world. The conventionalised praise texts are ambiguous and dark, just like the pronouncements of the Delphi oracle in Ancient Greece (Fontenrose 1978), or those of the *I Ching*. By the same token, a full astrological theme ('horoscope') in the - historically closely interdependent, cf. Pingree 1978 - Near Eastern, Graeco-Roman, or South Asian traditions, is an array of immense complexity. The astrologer has to take into account all the possible so called 'aspects' (in degrees, with each cohort of degrees having its own conventional benefic or malefic connotations), with very specific meanings and elaborate correspondences - of colour, musical tone, geographical location, gender, mood, moral quality, etc., each of which very specific to each of the various planets and to several secondary astrological points. Invariably, what the diviner ends up with is a bundle of contradictory and incompatible associations from which not one unequivocal outcome can ever result, unless through drastic selection and weighing i.e. by sleight-of-hand (even if performed in good faith).

Therefore, the diviner simply engages in the production, not of scientific procedural truth, but in the production of manageable, interpersonally relevant and practically applicable wisdom. In doing so, the diviner will juggle the abundance of clues, many of them mutually contradictory, which the oracular procedures provide in combination with the diviner's background knowledge of the client and of the latter's situation, and pressing all the loose ends into an increasingly coherent complex narrative, which (due to the intensive interaction between diviner and client during the session) the client will increasingly recognise as revealing and as relevant, and to whose articulation the client herself or himself often makes major contributions. Thus the diviner can be said to work along lines that are not essentially different from the creative skills (of selective synthesis and massaging over contradictions, and rhetorical persuasiveness) allowing a scholar to produce a convincing and publishable argument.

In the process, the diviner makes intensive use of the multi-interpretability and of the degrees of freedom which the oracular apparatus provides. Yet at the same time he derives his own authority from the fact that he can nonetheless let this sleight-of-hand pass as the immutable, unequivocal, authoritative outcome of technical oracular procedures. We may suspect that the authority attributed to

such divination is already predicated upon a proto-scientific wider context, where (even in the eyes of the individual lay client, having somehow adopted the specialists' proto-scientific outlook) it is procedures rather than supernatural authority that produces oracular truth. But even though the diviner and the client believe that the oracular pronouncements are compellingly determined by the strict application of the intersubjective, standard oracular procedures, in fact they are not. From complexity and contradiction, via techniques of negotiation, weighing and selection, to meaningful pronouncement - this is the path of wisdom, not of science. What the diviner does, is the production of unique, bricolaged practical wisdom under the disguise of the production of systematic and unassailable knowledge by means of repetitive standard procedures that enhance the authority of his pronouncements.

#### 3.4. *The radical alternative solution: African divination as paranormal, veridical knowledge production*

The second solution is more radical, and more to my liking. As a social scientist, historian and philosopher, who for decades has studied religious and ethnic ideologies in modern Africa, I know full well that collective representations, and the practices based thereupon, need not be true in order to survive - all that is needed is that they are endowed with social power by being socially instituted; and we have above stressed the highly institutional nature of African divination as one of its major structural characteristics. So let us admit that the survival of divination is not proof of its veridicity. Yet I wish to defy the mainstream solution, and insist on the fact that divination often has a qualified, limited, yet justified claim to veridicity; as such it does produce enough truth that is verifiable to the client, so as to lend redeeming authority to the rest of the diviner's therapeutic revelations. In other words, the clients are to a certain extent acting rationally in taking divination seriously. Although I understand (and use, as a diviner) the technique of picking a client's mind surreptitiously by ordinary (including non-verbal) communication methods, my years of work as a practicing diviner have convinced me that part of what the client experiences as oracular truth, is often in fact just that, and is based on knowledge acquired by extra-sensory means.

Philosophers, epistemologists, psychologists and physicists have given much thought to the possibility or impossibility of paranormal knowledge. Motivated in part by a healthy dislike of charlatans, ignoramuses and naive New Age dreamers, the powerful and vocal Sceptic Movement, especially in the USA, , with several Nobel laureates among its members, seeks to discredit all suggestions to the effect that the world may be more complex and less mechanistic

than assumed in the materialist, optimistic days of scientism, from the late 18<sup>th</sup> to the early 20<sup>th</sup> c. CE. Considering the epistemological and political naivety of many present-day Sceptics, their close links with the military, political and industrial establishment of the North Atlantic region, and the fact that the science they blindly defend has become the central legitimating force in the modern, post-religious world (Foucault 1969), their strong opposition can only be an additional reason for us to take a different view from theirs in regard of divination. Like the ancient astrologists, the Sceptics show uncritical allegiance to a form of scientific rationality that, far from being universal and eternal, is only specific in space and time, and that, despite the power and legitimacy with which that specific form is invested in their own time and age, can only - by the very nature of science - be expected to be recognised as obsolete in the very near future.

In the Western philosophical tradition, the philosophy of mind has faced aporias for a number of reasons:

- the heritage of Platonic / early Christian / Cartesian body-mind dualism (critiqued by, for instance, Ryle 1949),
- well-known but difficult to avoid pitfalls of the 'other minds' problem;<sup>21</sup>
- the Western stress on the concept of the individual, undivided self-conceived not as a socio-cultural construct peculiar to a particular time and place, but as a self-evident given of the human condition in general - as the central cosmological and ontological entity.

The latter point claims that it is impossible for minds to communicate directly with one another, leaving only the indirect transmission of mental contents via material signs (including speech) received through the senses. Such an individualistic and atomistic conception of the mind, whilst a basic tenet informing most publicly mediated secular and religious thought today, leads us into some difficulty, since the actual direct communication between minds (as implied in the ideas of divination, precognition, and telepathy) is, at the subjective level, simply an everyday experience to many people from all cultural orientations, wherever in the world, and all times. Admittedly, neuroscience (as touched upon above) allows us to construe such experiences as illusory and offers an explanation as to why they should occur at the subjective level; however, most African worldviews offer a totally different explanations. Are these obviously wrong? Philosophers have given some attention to (the claim of the existence of) paranormal phenomena.<sup>22</sup> An authoritative synthetic overview of the vast empirical

<sup>21</sup> Bilgrami 1993 and references cited there.

<sup>22</sup> E.g. Eisenbud 1982; Brier 1974; Mundle 1964; Grim 1990. I have elsewhere discussed these themes in connection with my work as a diviner (van Binsbergen 2003b), presenting what I consider remarkable indications of the four-tablet oracle's veridicity.

evidence for paranormal phenomena, in the face of the Sceptics movement, is offered by Dean Radin (1997, with an extensive bibliography). Radin holds a PhD in physics. One of his further contributions to this field was that, together with R.D. Nelson, he persuaded an authoritative, mainstream physics journal to publish a discussion of nearly a thousand cases of consciousness-related anomalies in random physical systems, e.g. computers whose internal functioning was demonstrably influenced by the presence of humans seeking to influence these electronic process mentally without any demonstrable material contact (Radin and Nelson 1989). If modern physics can seriously consider the question (which admittedly is very different from positive affirmation) whether digital random generators can be tilted out of randomness by sheer human consciousness, then students of African divination systems must be prepared to entertain the same question for the random generators that are at the heart of African systems of material divination, even though these happen to be analogous instead of digital. The point is very relevant, for as divination sessions using the four-tablet oracle develop (in interplay between diviner and client, where they take turns in throwing the tablets and where the diviner, in his comments to throw after throw, progressively weaves an increasingly detailed, relevant, and coherent story explaining the client's predicament and its remedy) the diviner is professionally supposed to be able to throw, at a crucial point in the session, precisely that particular one of the sixteen combinations that happens to best fit the evolving narrative. Many diviners claim they can, and my personal experience as a diviner is that I, too, am capable of influencing the complex random generator that a set of four hand-held wooden pieces constitutes, and of thus producing the required combination - not by any conscious training in sleight-of-hand that I am aware of, but by what I take to be psychokinesis.

A fundamental insight from quantum mechanics is that there is no objective reality out there waiting patiently and immutably to undergo the probing of our measuring instruments. Instead, (a) the human observing subject, (b) the measuring instrument, and (c) the world at large are inextricably caught in the clutches of collusion, so that each of these three terms produces the other two in the most literal sense. This is the mainstream, state-of-the art physics basis for what I have experienced as a diviner-cum-scientist numerous times: depending on what face we turn to reality, reality will encounter us accordingly - as a world in which veridical divination is not only thinkable but becomes a reality, if we approach that world with our diviner's mind set and trained skills, and dressed in full diviner's regalia; or alternatively as a world in which veridical divination (or other paranormal feats of the types claimed by African ritual and therapeutic specialists) remains merely a figment of the imagination and cannot be produced under controlled experimental conditions, if we approach it with the white coat

and the measuring instruments of modern North Atlantic / global natural science.<sup>23</sup> There is no saying how many more modalities the infinite, ultimately divine, possibilities of the universe may put before us (us, as the privileged self-reflective exponents of that universe, both belonging to it and capable, by our very powers of discursive thought, to dissociate from it).

Anthropologists working on African divination and trance often have similar phenomena to report which seem to go against the dominant, 'sceptical' natural-science paradigms of today's globalising world culture under North Atlantic hegemony. It must be emphasised that there are huge epistemological and methodological difficulties inherent in such claims of extrasensory and otherwise paranormal phenomena in the African context.<sup>24</sup> On the other hand, contrary to what most modernist sceptics, seem to realise, the mainstream physics theory of non-locality as an aspect of quantum mechanics does provide an excellent theoretical basis for the possibility of such paranormal phenomena.<sup>25</sup> Since such insights, in locally encoded cultural forms, are common-place in many African contexts but repressed from public circulation (especially among non-specialists) in the post-Enlightenment North Atlantic region, paranormal phenomena may constitute a domain where the truth claims of African knowledge producers are not just valid within the African space of culturally-created self-evidence, but may deserve to be globally mediated as a statement of a challenging transcultural truth, an alternative to current collective representations in the West.

Yet most anthropologists with such experiences hide in anthropology's mainstream explanations that make the diviner merely a skilful manipulator of plain sensory information derived from the client or the community at large. Of course, there is no denying the ordinary psychology of the interpersonal information flow, by virtue of which clients often sensorially transmit information to diviner-healers without the client being aware of this, thus allowing the diviner-healer to spuriously claim paranormal sources of knowledge. Yet I have grown convinced that these normal processes of communication, coupled with the techniques of trans-individual sensitivity that one is taught as an African divinator and therapeutic specialist, create fertile grounds also for non-sensory forms of knowledge transmission.

Such transmission is eminently accounted for in the worldview of African

<sup>23</sup> This is why the Sceptics will always have it their way in the sense that no scientific proof under the kind of laboratory circumstances they would insist on, can ever be offered of the very phenomena that are common-place in the diviner's art when performed in its own congenial setting.

<sup>24</sup> Olivier de Sardan 1988; however, cf. from the African side: Hebga 1998; set in a wider framework by Amougou 2006.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Einstein et al. 1931, 1935; Bell 1964; Walker 1977; Bohm and Hiley 1993; Aerts 1985.

wisdom. In the Southern African divinatory idiom, extrasensory production of what appears to be valid knowledge is explained by the (in that cultural context) self-evident intercession of possessing or guiding ancestors. A West African alternative view is contained in the local philosophy of mind, such as articulated by Gyekye and Wiredu, for instance, in their rendering of the ontology of the Akan ethnic and linguistic cluster in West Africa.<sup>26</sup> In the Akan version, individual minds are, as forms of what is locally called *sunsum*, considered to be semi-autonomously subsumed in a universal World Soul, *okra*, and it is this interconnectedness which eminently accounts for telepathy, precognition and veridical divination.<sup>27</sup>

Part of the problem here has been brought out by the philosopher of science Sandra Harding<sup>28</sup> in her critical writings (first from a feminist, then from a Third-World and intercultural-philosophical perspective) about the extent to which dominant modern, North Atlantic but effectively globalised, science can be called an 'ethno-science', just as local and as limited as all other forms of systematic knowledge production found in the world today - including astrology, African divination, etc. Harding extensively states the case for the view that it is especially North Atlantic global hegemony that supports science's claims of being objective, rational, and universal. However, on closer analysis she yet sees no alternative but to admit, somewhat grudgingly, that this power constellation is not the only factor in rendering North Atlantic scientific knowledge valid. The valid-

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Wiredu and Gyekye 1992; Gyekye 1995; Wiredu 1980. The accounts of these two philosophers of the Akan system do not completely match. Cf. Müller 2002.

<sup>27</sup> Of course, the idea of the World Soul is not limited to African worldviews as recorded in historical times. It is found in the literate, specialist traditions of the East and the West. The idea of the World Soul is associated with the concept of Atman 3TTT / Brahman 3E-T of in South Asian Advaita Vedanta 3ftH cici-cI philosophy as formulated by Adi Sankara 3fMT 7s-4> (c. 800 CE). In the Western philosophical tradition the idea of the World Soul is associated with such names as Heraclitus (e.g. fragment D. 22, A, 17), Plato (*Timaeus* 29f), the Stoics, Plotinus, the early St Augustine, the alchemical tradition from Late Antiquity onward, to re-surface with Spinoza, Leibniz, Newton, Lessing, the Theosophical movement around 1900, and (on the borderland between philosophy, the life sciences and New Age) most recently with Lovelock's *Gaia* hypothesis. Considerable correspondences between Akan and classical Greek culture have been pointed out (cf. Graves 1964:1, 22f), and it is not impossible that one is indebted to the other, or that both partially derive from a common African source (cf. Arnaiz-Villena *et al.* 2001). But whereas in the Western tradition the idea of the World Soul has become a specialist and minority idea without vital anchorage in popular collective representations, in West Africa it has been an expression of widely held traditional wisdom as recorded in the 19th and 20th centuries.

<sup>28</sup> Harding 1997, 1993; cf. van Binsbergen 2007; Harding and O'Barr 1987.



ity of science, and hence the substantiation of its claims to objectivity, rationality and universality, are found by Harding to be largely based, after all, on internal epistemological and methodological conditions, that are in principle independent from power and hegemony in the modern world. This means that the Sceptics, however unsympathetic we may find them and however much we may be tempted to accuse them of Eurocentric intellectual hegemonism, yet have a point: not all types of knowledge production can lay a claim to truth, and in the scientific realm such claims are recognised by reference to explicit, state-of-the-art epistemological procedures governing the method by which knowledge is generated and expressed. Modern science thus deserves to be taken seriously, while divination (as the proto-science of a remote past of the same tradition) by the same criteria does no longer so deserve.

Still, this does not necessarily mean that the epistemological underpinnings of modern Western science make the latter the only possible path to truth. There could be alternative criteria that have been so far overlooked, and that the study of knowledge systems outside the North Atlantic may help us to identify. Could African divination play such a sensitising role towards an intercultural epistemology? Involving what would be 'apparently irrational behaviour' from a naive North Atlantic viewpoint, African divination systems activate the epistemological 'principle of charity'<sup>29</sup> to the effect that whatever others consider true, we may try to consider true as well, instead of simply dismissing it without serious reflection as to how and why others have come to their conviction, strikingly different though it may be. African divination systems represent knowledge claims not supported in the North Atlantic (hegemonically global) mainstream popularised science (although they turn out to be supportable by state-of-the-art North Atlantic research into quantum mechanics, philosophy of mind, and parapsychology). Among these knowledge claims made by African divination systems, the one allowing non-sensory sources of knowledge appears to be the most striking. Perhaps by virtue of explicitly allowing non-sensory sources of knowledge (and thus creating a wider socio-cultural framework as well as a specialist environment where it is much easier to lower the threshold blocking out non-sensory sources of information), African divination systems occasionally make these knowledge sources work and, again occasionally, may produce valid knowledge even though such is impossible by North Atlantic standards. We are reminded of the fact that epistemological conventions, both in the North Atlantic science and in African divination systems, are to some extent not universal but local and one-sided, and that a greater truth, beyond North Atlantic hegemony lies in the admission of the complementarity of knowledge production in different cultural

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Davidson 1984; Malpas 1988; McGinn 1977; Lepore 1993.

traditions.

Finally, this qualified epistemological relativism (not the postmodernist denial of the possibility of truth, but the intercultural-philosophical admission of the equal rights of multiple, even contradictory truths, and the attempt to negotiate these contradictions by ways of practical wisdom that derive as much from Africa as from the North Atlantic) also constitutes a context for what would otherwise appear as contradictory: that in the present argument I have both lavishly employed the findings of state-of-the-art science (in genetics, linguistics, archaeology, and anthropology), whilst at the same time advocating an epistemological framework in which such science would have to tolerate, next to it, alternative forms of knowledge production with different, but equally valid, claims to truth. In such a framework, the North Atlantic professor who becomes, and remains, a practising African diviner is no longer a desperate case of cultural and epistemological self-denial or self-hatred; it is an attempt at intercultural humility and at a transcultural learning process, not just about an African culture specific in time and space, but about the human condition and the structure of the universe. Thus the present epistemological section of my argument complements the preceding, prehistoric section in affirming Africa's rightful and original place, both in global cultural history and in global knowledge production.

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