

The high priest's two riddles

Intimations of *sangomahood* as a translocal idiom

8.1. Introduction

In the previous chapter I have considered *sangomahood* as a context for knowledge production, which, on the one hand, is continuous with (although somewhat peripheral to) the Old World history of science – but which, on the other hand, by acknowledging sources of knowledge not recognised in the dominant Western tradition of rationalist sensorialism, enables us to tap these sources and to find that the knowledge they yield is often valid. In the course of that argument we touched on historical continuities which link *sangomahood* to a widely ramified and perhaps ultimately unitary, esoteric specialist tradition. In the present chapter I conclude my discussion of *sangomahood* in this book by exploring two instances that stress the extent to which this Southern African cult represents, in fact, a translocal idiom. By doing so I hope to make further atonement for my initial, dazed reluctance (as expressed in chapter 5) at approaching *sangomahood* from an analytical perspective. However, for reasons explained in the Introductory chapter my discussion in the following pages will be kept very short – what was meant to be another chapter in this book has now grown into a book in its own right, *The Leopard's Unchanging Spots*.

In this chapter I will be guided by two perplexing pronouncements which the Nata high priest of the Mwali cult, Mr R. Sinombe, made when, during my second visit to his shrine (1991), I received my final confirmation as a *sangoma*.

He then revealed himself to belong to the Ila people of Zambia, the immediate eastern neighbours of the Nkoya people, among whom I have spent a considerable part of my adult life. Nkoya chiefs have lived in Ilaland, I have repeatedly visited them and written on them, and an Ila prophet from the early twentieth century CE, Mupumani (who in a short-lived but massive cult drew followers from within a radius of hundreds of kilometres), played a significant role in my earlier research.¹

¹ Van Binsbergen 1981a.

An important landmark in Sinombe's life's history is a Zimbabwean minor seminary for the Roman Catholic priesthood, where allegedly his great gift for herbalism was discovered and declared compatible with Catholicism. Specialising in the alleviation of great physical pain (for the treatment of which he sells to his professional clients, at an enormous price, a hollow black plastic rod tipped with two short copper sheaths and containing some wiring inside), patients would come to him from all over Southern Africa, including Whites. His main activity, however, was that of a traditional herbalist wholesaler, catering for the specialist pharmacological needs of other traditional healers.

He claimed great antiquity for the healing and oracular tradition which he represents. He volunteered that this tradition goes right back to Ancient Egypt, out of which, in a different direction, also the religion of Israel sprang, in his opinion. At that time I was ignorant of recent scholarship stressing similar links between Egypt and Ancient Israel,¹ had not yet discovered the writings of Martin Bernal, was still completely ignorant of Afrocentrism, and considered all varieties of Egyptocentrism, and of diffusionism in general, antiquated nonsense; as late as 1998 I drafted a book, *Global bee flight*, whose initial purpose was to disprove Egyptocentrism as an aspect of Afrocentrism, and only the specific research in preparation for that book taught me otherwise. Therefore I do not think that Sinombe's claims on this point were fed by something I contributed to the conversation, or by something he could have read from my conscious mind. However, already by that time, under the influence of Cheikh Anta Diop² and his Black American predecessors,³ Afrocentrist and Egyptocentrist ideas were beginning to percolate among African intellectuals and religious leaders, and therefore Sinombe's statements could very well have a contemporary twentieth-century source, rather than constituting millennia-old wisdom handed down through the Mwali cult and similar earlier cults. However, such antiquity is a distinct possibility where Sinombe's views are concerned; it will be further highlighted below, although in connection with South Asia rather than North-eastern Africa.

The high priest certainly gave an original and unexpected account of cult revenue. These moneys, Sinombe said, were going not so much to the central shrines of the Mwali cult but to China, where under modern conditions (i.e. Maoist Communism and its aftermath, but I do not recall Sinombe using those exact terms) elderly people are subject to such neglect and contempt that they need this financial assistance from Africa.⁴ But much of the paper money (of which the cult only

¹ Cf. Görg 1997; Redford 1992. For a dismissal of Ancient Egyptian influence on Judaism, and references to older literature that affirm such influence, cf. van Wijngaarden 1929.

² Diop 1955, 1959, 1960, 1962, 1974, 1977, 1981, 1987, 1993.

³ As extensively discussed in Fauvelle 1996; Howe 1999; Berlinerblau 1999.

⁴ This claim has an interesting counterpart. When I interviewed a Taoist priest (name and address in my possession) at the headquarters of the Taoist Association of China, the White Cloud temple in Beijing, in October 2002, the priest *volunteered* the information that Southern African traditional doctors are essentially

accepts the largest denominations) is left simply to be eaten by termites, which according to Sinombe is a very meaningful use of the donations, considering that insects too are creatures that need and deserve food. A Zen Buddhist master could hardly have come up with a more original approach.

The juggling of vast correspondences in space and time, the suggestion of an intercontinental community of the wise – specialists in magic and religious wisdom – crossing all national and linguistic boundaries and persisting since time immemorial (a cherished idea – I touched on it in the previous chapter – of Sufism, of the Western esoteric tradition, and even¹ of science fiction), the resonances from several of the world's greatest spiritual traditions, acquaintance with which might derive from Christian missionary education early in life but which just might also be taken to suggest ancient currents of continuity and exchange all over the Old World, and the apparently absurdist attitude to cult revenue and intercontinental solidarity – all this made Sinombe appear to me as a highly enigmatic yet highly impressive figure. Even so I could feel the edge of the late colonial inferiority complex with which he had been brought up: insisting, as a seventy-year-old, on the recognition – more than half a century earlier – of his herbalist knowledge by what effectively can only have been the lowest, local hierarchy of a globally distributed world religion (Roman Catholicism), and on the fact that in more recent days affluent Whites came all the way from South Africa to consult him.

8.2. The high priest's first riddle: The Saviour

Asked what or who he was, Sinombe (in a manner not without parallels with other prophets and major religious leaders in twentieth-century Southern Africa, and with resonances of the biblical passage where Jesus was thus interrogated)² made no secret of the truly exalted parameters of his self-definition:

‘I am not God; I am not Jesus; I am Mbedzi, “the Saviour”.’

The implication appears to be that of a divine or near-divine being, a demiurge, situated not too far from the Christian tradition, and (like Jesus according to that tradition, or the *boddhisatva* in the religious tradition of South and East Asia) lingers on in a material, earthly existence for the benefit of the other humans, who are incomparably less exalted in the cosmic hierarchy. Since Sinombe evidently attributed divine powers to himself, perhaps it was on purpose that I was allowed to

the same as Taoist doctors, thus confirming fragmented indications of such similarities as my fieldwork and library research had accorded me (cf. van Binsbergen, forthcoming (e)). After a period of repression during the Cultural Revolution, the temple community and Taoism in general were revived in the late 1980s. Is it possible that Sinombe's claim of a cultic tributary link between Southern Africa and China was not mere flippancy?

¹ Cf. the *Foundation* books by Isaac Asimov (1951, 1952, 1953, 1972, 1986).

² Cf. Matt. 22: 41-42.

notice that the voice of Mwali when sounding from the holy of holiest of his shrine, bore a remarkable resemblance to the high priest's.

Considering that Sinombe was actually, at the time, one of the most powerful religious figures in a region extending over tens of thousands of square kilometres, we cannot simply dismiss his self-definition as a sign of megalomaniac religious delusion. Meanwhile his translation of his claimed epithet *Mbedzi* as 'Saviour' is utterly puzzling. He was mainly speaking in English, in northern Botswana where the dominant language is Tswana and the local languages Kalanga and Khwe (the variety of Central Khoi-San spoken here by the San, *i.e.* 'Basarwa' or 'Bushman'); he made reference to the Mwali cult (mainly a Zimbabwean cult largely administered in the Ndebele language although Zimbabwe's dominant language is Shona), to his own stay in Zimbabwe for many years, and to his village home among the Ila of Zambia, of which it is not sure if he ever returned there as an adult. In Tswana 'saviour' is *mmoloki*, in Kalanga *mpoloka*, in Shona *muponesi*, in Ndebele *umsindisi*,¹ all of which sound very different from *mbedzi*. Against the background of Sinombe's Christian education it is quite possible that his reference to the concept of 'saviour' exclusively draws on a contemporary Christian inspiration, but again I cannot rule out that more ancient ramifications are at play here, largely from outside the Christian realm. In cultic circles in the region, the exclamation *mbedzi* is sometimes heard from the mouths of adepts and clients in fond and humble reply to the cult leader's or diviner's words, more or less as an equivalent to *siavuma* ('we agree'), or to the Christian *amen*. In the Venda language, spoken in a considerable part of the Mwali cult's region, *Mumbedzi* designates a person from the north-eastern part (*Vhumbedzi*) of Vendaland,² and *Vhambedzi* an ethnic cluster of that name held to belong to the oldest Bantu-speaking inhabitants of the region.³ For Frobenius, whose insight into Zimbabwean esoteric knowledge was remarkable considering his expedition-type of data collection in the early twentieth century, *Mbedzi* was the name of a semi-legendary ancient kingdom established in the region by South Asians.⁴ Geographically this would tally with the connotation of *mbedzi* as 'north-eastern' (seen from Vendaland, distant India is to the north-east; and so is Sri Lanka, as a likely leg on the sea voyage from Indonesia to East Africa particularly Madagascar – the latter island was largely populated by sea voyages in the course of the first millennia BCE or CE). Could the word *Mbedzi* be cognate to *Buddha*,

¹ Matumo 1993; Hannan 1974; Doke *et al.* 1990.

² Van Warmelo 1989.

³ Ralushai & Gray 1977: 11.

⁴ Frobenius 1931. Breuil (1933) however, despite his great admiration for Frobenius' work and their occasionally close collaboration, was very dismissive of the idea of such a legendary kingdom. Perhaps the kingdom must be sought not on African soil but in South Asia itself. At the time evidence for the Indus civilisation was already available. The idea may receive a new lease of life with the recent, controversial discovery of the (allegedly incomparably ancient) Gulf of Khambat civilisation off the coast of Gujarat, West India.

Buddhist? In the course of this chapter we shall encounter the amazing extent to which India has been a detectable influence upon the *sangoma* cult.

In the Ancient Near East and the Mediterranean the concept of ‘saviour’ (‘redeemer’, Greek: *sōtēr*) was originally employed for gods specifically coming to the assistance of men, either for physical survival hence healing among the living, or for salvation in the form of life eternal after death. In Ancient Egypt, such a usage dates back to the First Dynasty, and has many later attestations, particularly in connection with the gods Wepwawet, Horus, and Osiris.¹ In popular Ancient Egyptian religion, a god Shed was venerated whose name simply means ‘Saviour’.² While the possible indebtedness³ of archaic and classical Greek religion to Ancient Egyptian religion is not the point here, we see in Greek religion the concept of the Saviour repeatedly applied to gods like Zeus (especially Zeus Sabazius), Asclepius, Heracles, the Dioscuri, invoked for healing and personal survival.⁴ Later, from Hellenistic times onwards, the concept of divine rescue was transferred to humans in the context of the royal cult (particularly in Ptolemaic Egypt, i.e. in the last three centuries before the Common Era), and then merged with Stoicism, mystery cults and Iranian eschatology to produce the Jewish-Christian concept of the world redeemer.⁵ Also in Israel several prophets and a king bore a name meaning ‘Saviour’, ‘Deliverer’.⁶ Beyond this specific conception of the ‘saviour’, the concept of salvation is widespread in the traditions of Ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, West and South Asia, albeit with a wide variety of meanings, and of cosmological and ethical implications.⁷

My hypothesis is that *Mbedzi* as used by Sinombe is an ancient, religiously-inspired South-Asia-orientated political title, which was retained and redefined when the Mwali cult came to occupy the niche of interregional political and economic relations left by the decline of effective statehood in Southern Zimbabwe and Northern Transvaal, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries CE, prior to the foundation of the Ndebele kingdom in the *mfecane*⁸ aftermath.

With this hypothesis I am leaving open the possibility that the Mwali cult (even if locally captured by a Zambian expatriate like Sinombe, with a Christian background, someone whose feats of religious entrepreneurship are well

¹ Griffiths 1980, 1951; Brunner 1958.

² Bonnet 1971: 676f, s.v. ‘Sched’.

³ According to Bernal’s (1987, 1991, 2001) thesis, reviving the claims already made by Herodotus, *Historiae*.

⁴ Cf. Herzog-Hauser 1931.

⁵ Volkmann 1979.

⁶ I.e. Hoshea, Oseha, Osee (Num. 13; 1 Chron. 27; 2 Kings 15, 17, 18; Neh. 10; Hos.).

⁷ Blackman 1921; Casartelli 1921; Gardner 1917; Gardner 1917a, 1917b; Geden 1921; Joseph 1921; Kirkpatrick 1921; Pinches 1921; Rhys Davids 1921; Sell 1921; Stuart Jones 1915; Youngert 1921.

⁸ The explosion of violence and conquest emanating from Shaka’s Zulu state, resulting a scatter of related Nguni states (with Ndebele and Ngoni ethnic designation) throughout Southern and South Central Africa. Cf. Beach 1980.

documented, over several decades, by the files of the Botswana Registrar of Societies)¹ may yet constitute a vehicle for the traditional transmission of esoteric knowledge from the distant past and from distant places.

This takes us to the second and even more puzzling of Sinombe's pronouncements, when lending his voice to Mwali, this time made not in private consultation and in his own name, but as the medium producing the voice of Mwali from the holy of holies at Nata, before an audience consisting of MmaChakayile and MmaTedi, and two Nata female acolytes, besides myself.

8.3. The high-priest's second riddle: The leopard skin as a sign of identity

During my sacred conversation at the shrine Mwali, part of the time speaking Dutch (as distinct from Afrikaans, English or Shona) gave the impression of being very well informed as far as my personal life and its dilemmas were concerned (after all, my assistant Ennie went to the same typing course as the high priest's daughter Jane). Then how in heaven could Mwali claim that the leopard skin is

‘the traditional ceremonial dress of the kind of people [I] belong to’?

This claim was taken so seriously that, before I had acquired a leopard skin to add to my *sangoma* uniform, I could not receive the shrine's final confirmation, even if this meant travelling another 400 kilometres and spending what in Botswana at the time amounted to more than a skilled worker's monthly salary on the trophy alone.

At the time I was only aware that, among *sangomas*, the leopard skin was considered a sign of high rank with undisclosed military connotations, and was certainly not a common item of paraphernalia. In fact, in the Francistown context I have only seen *sangomas* donning leopard skins in the specific context of Mr Sithole's lodge in the Masemenyenga suburb, where adepts were claimed to be possessed by Zulu warriors of the *mfecane*, from the first half of the nineteenth century. Sithole had given me my first *sangoma* consultation, but there was never any question of me or my wife joining his lodge. Shortly after MmaNdlovu's suspicious death, and months before I joined MmaChakayile's lodge, Sithole retired to Zimbabwe, leaving his thriving lodge in the hands of his female adepts who were effectively his wives. I maintained an infrequent and friendly visiting relationship with the latter, but there was never any suggestion that they were ‘my kind of people’ to the same extent, or even more so, than my fellow lodge members at MmaChakayile's. Was a rivalry, not between individual *sangomas* belonging to the same lodge, but between lodges, the root of the aggression which my leopard skin aroused at MmaChakayile's? I have no Zulu connections, neither are such connections claimed for the spirits reportedly coming through in my trance, and the

¹ Cf. van Binsbergen 1993b.

idea that the leopard skin was some sort of divine acknowledgement of Sithole's initial claim on me may be dismissed.

Speaking with such insistence and authority as it did, we can rule out the possibility that the oracle was consciously uncertain of the historical, ethnic and symbolic associations it yet pointed out and even made a condition for my entry and confirmation. The question remains: *what identity then had Mwali in mind for me?*

We have a number of options. In Southern African languages of the Bantu linguistic sub-family (a division of Niger-Congo), and also in the local English spoken by native speakers of Bantu, designations of specific collective identity (the equivalents of, for example, clan, tribe, nation, class, caste, race, species, phylum, etc.) tend to be used indiscriminately, so that the expression 'kind of people' does not elucidate whether the speaker is referring to an ethnic identity, a somatic identity, class identity, cultural identity, etc. The identity that was ascribed to me could in principle be intended to be:

- (a) *European identity*
- (b) *South African Afrikaner identity*
- (c) *A South Central African identity*
- (d) *A non-regional collective identity such as gender, religious denomination, class or caste.*

Which one could it be?

8.4. The leopard skin in the context of three socio-political identities

8.4.1. European identity?

Since I was being addressed in Dutch by the oracular Voice, a Dutch, Afrikaner, or general European, even White, identity is the first to come to mind.

Leopards are largely absent from West European, and by extension North Atlantic, culture today. In military marching bands the player of the principal kettledrum may occasionally wear around his waist the skin of a large feline predator, even in present times, when the background of such a custom is practically lost to all spectators, at least on the European mainland. The association between ceremonial display of martial prowess and the wearing of leopard skins was found in military circles throughout Europe in the Middle Ages and early modern times, when, for example, Central and Eastern European hussars' uniforms were adorned with leopard skins.¹ To this day this association may be more pronounced in Great Britain. Probably emulating a Sassānian model of nobility, William the Conqueror

¹ Exhibition n.d.

kept cheetahs as feline hunting dogs, and other kings and aristocrats throughout the European Middle Ages followed his example. Right into Napoleonic times the leopard has been the heraldic beast of the kings of England, and of England as a whole.¹ Hence it is eminently fitting that the British man-of-war that initiated the Chesapeake incident before the USA Virginia coast in 1807, was named *The Leopard*.

In former British colonies in Africa it is quite common among the uneducated to perceive all Whites implicitly as British, so there is the remotest possibility that the oracle took me for an Englishman; but if this were the case, why should I be addressed in Dutch at the shrine? This line of inquiry does not appear to solve our riddle, although the military association will have a surprise for us to be revealed towards the end of this chapter.

8.4.2. South African Afrikaner identity?

If a contemporary European more specifically British identity is to be ruled out, how about an Afrikaner one? The occasion that had brought me to become a *sangoma* was my exclusion from Francistonian African society on the grounds of my Afrikaner connotations as a White Dutchman. One of the spirits reported to come through in my trance is Afrikaans-speaking; he claims to be a collateral ancestor of mine (though undocumented in what small fragments of family history have come my way) and to have died in 'the' Boer War; probably the second war of that designation was meant, 1899-1902. In the Afrikaner context leopards are favourite hunter's quarries, and their skins (as among the Roman upper class in Antiquity)² are commonly seen as expensive ornaments for the Boer home. There they signify the capitalist farmer's triumph over the forces of nature, as well as his having effectively taken possession of the land even though this emphatically did not belong to his remote ancestors. At least one South African university (that of Witwatersrand) grants its doctoral alumni the right to wear a leopard skin as part of their academic dress. In doing so, this university (whose commendable intellectual and political record in the struggle against apartheid does not take away the fact that until the early 1990s it was largely White-orientated) is merely emulating a dress pattern which for centuries has been established among the Khoi-San-speaking and the Bantu-speaking segments of the population of Southern Africa: the leopard skin, worn as a *kaross*, i.e. fur cloak, is the prerogative of chiefs and notables.³ Among the Tswana (the dominant ethnic cluster and language group in Botswana), the leopard (*nkwe*) is a well-known totem.⁴ A totem is a natural species, natural feature or

¹ Barren 1961. Heraldic use of the leopard also in the famous Italian novel by di Lampedusa, *Il gatopardo* (1958).

² Richter 1979: 476.

³ Anonymous 1961b. However, caracal and wild cat share this honour with the leopard.

⁴ Schapera 1952. The more common modern rendering of the Tswana word for 'leopard' is: *lengau* (Matumo 1993), so with the noun class prefix *le-* attached and ending *-au* instead of *-we*.

abstract concept after which a well-defined set of local people have been named; association with a totem is usually acquired by birth, and imposes on the member of the totemic group not just a surname, but also lifelong obligations and prohibitions vis-à-vis both the totem and the other human members of the group.

Could Mwali, who on an earlier occasion (when I came as a supplicant to the Matopos Hills in 1989) allowed her senior cult personnel to turn me away on the grounds that I was White, in Nata, two years later (even though in the meantime Nelson Mandela had been released from prison) have come to dissimulate the considerable cultural discontinuity between Afrikaners and the other inhabitants of the Republic of South Africa, so that the leopard skin as a prerogative of prominent Blacks would be extended to White Afrikaners as a matter of course? This, again, is hardly to be believed, especially since on the same day that I was ordered to bring a leopard skin, the high priest had specifically talked to me about the surprise my fellow-Whites would demonstrate

‘when they would see me dabble in ‘*kaffir*’ [i.e. ‘‘nigger’’, ‘‘Black’’] things’, as a *sangoma*.’

8.4.3. A South Central African identity?

A third possibility is that with the leopard skin the ceremonial dress was meant, not of South African chiefs and notables to whom I clearly do not belong, but of South Central Africa and other parts of the continent to the north of Southern Africa. To this day leopard skins, worn *kaross*-style as cloaks or tied around the waist, have *in principle* formed important regalia among the Nkoya, into one of whose royal families I have been adopted. King Mwene Kahare Timuna (who died in 1955: my adopted father’s father) is the other ancestral spirit reported to speak through me when in trance, alternating with the Afrikaans-speaking one. Although since 1930 (when Sinombe was already a schoolboy) the uninhabitable Kafue National Park has created a massive psychological boundary between the two regions, Sinombe’s original home is in fact less than 100 km east of the Kahare royal capital, and among the Ila largely the same court culture prevails as among the Nkoya.¹

But again, the association is not very convincing.

With the enormous decline of the splendour of ceremonial court culture in the course of the twentieth century, the first time I set my eyes on a cured leopard skin in Nkoyaland was *nearly twenty years* after I began work there, during which time the royal court was my principal place of local residence! I saw this leopard skin during my first attendance at the Kazanga festival in 1989, when a handful of successful urbanised Nkoya, having formed the Kazanga Cultural Association a few years earlier, had come to organise an annual festival where Nkoya culture was put on display, including the four royal chiefs in state dress that had not been worn in public for decades.² Could Mwali have been so generous as to formally reinforce me (a

¹ Smith & Dale 1920; Fielder 1979; Jaspan 1953; Tuden 1970; van Binsbergen 1992b, 1986, 2003a.

² Cf. chapter 9.

White man who had stumbled into *sangomahood*) in my membership of the (Black) Nkoya people and especially of one of their royal families? In 1989, guided by Nkoya praise-songs and other oral traditions that I was to analyse extensively in my *Tears of Rain* (1992),¹ I considered *Conus* shell ornaments and the royal orchestra as the central insignia of royal power (incidentally both of them traits with Indian Ocean and Indonesian connotations – the ‘Mbedzi’ link does not stand on its own in South Central Africa). Having found that Mwene Kahare no longer possessed a *Conus* shell (Nkoya: *mpande*), and fearing that this state of affairs would embarrass him when making a public appearance at the 1989 Kazanga festival, I then formally presented him with the specimen I had received as a graduation gift from my doctoral supervisor Matthew Schoffeleers. I was still scarcely conscious of leopard skins in the Nkoya royal context, and although Mwene Timuna was manifesting himself in my trances in the Botswana *sangoma* context, the tangible, definitive confirmation of my adoption by the Nkoya royal family, 700 kilometres away from Nata, was only to take place a few years afterwards. It was at his deathbed in December 1993 that Mwene Kahare willed me his bow and arrows, and these I received half a year later from the hands of his successor and younger brother Mwene Kubama, who calls me *mwanami* (‘my son’, ‘my brother’s son’) and in protocolary acknowledgement of my status has insisted that in state processions I walk immediately behind him. Only close kin can inherit, *a fortiori*, when such personal and symbolically charged items are involved as a man’s bow and arrows. Besides representing a man’s life force, reproductive powers and organs, and hence rightful access to his wives, a king’s bow and arrows also symbolise rightful ownership of the land, which is ceremonially proclaimed by shooting an arrow into a tree.² However, the inheritance only made tangible what had for years been a public fact. Already in 1978 Mwene Kabambi insisted that I slept in the palace, vacating his bed for me. Whereas my eldest daughter daily played on his lap in the early 1970s, it was my middle daughter (born 1987) who was to receive, with official approval, the name of his ancestress Mwene Shikanda, and in Nkoyaland that daughter is generally treated as Queen Shikanda’s incarnation. In 1989, at a time of great petrol scarcity in Zambia, I had to drive my family to Lusaka and thence to Botswana, where we then lived; Mwene Kahare sent me to the nearest petrol station at the Kaoma junction of the Lusaka-Mongu road, 80 kilometres west of the Njonjolo palace and outside the area of his jurisdiction, with a stamped note in his own handwriting that read, in English:

‘Help this man. He is my son.’

Quod erat demonstrandum.

But again I do not think that here we are on the track to the solution of our riddle. In the struggle of multiplex identities that my ‘becoming a *sangoma*’ has been, one

¹ Van Binsbergen 1992b: *passim*.

² Van Binsbergen 1981a, 1992b.

of the most important moments for me was when, after graduation and after officiating at the ancestral shrine of MmaChakayile in Matshelagabedi, I was chided for speaking Tswana there: I should have spoken Dutch for I was speaking to my own ancestors, not hers. Could Mwali have overlooked what (although it has taken me many years, and Part III of this book, to find out) to the lesser, mortal members of the cult was so obvious – notably, that my primary identity was and remained outside Africa and that my ‘becoming a *sangoma*’ was part of a process not of losing, but of finding that identity? Again, I am inclined to dismiss as unconvincing the South Central African solution. But it remains possible that from my mind¹ Mwali, or his spokesman, has picked up what was certainly a latent desire then: to identify as a Nkoya prince.

Another possible but unlikely connection is along the following lines. In the middle of the nineteenth century CE, as part of the *mfecane*, the Lozi kingdom was taken over by Sotho-speaking Kololo from South Africa. The Kololo king subdued the Nkoya kings, so that even after Lozi restoration the Nkoya remained a subject group, perceived by the Ila as Lozi, especially since it was the Nkoya vassal King Shamamano who raided the Ila for cattle on behalf of the Lozi king at the end of the nineteenth century.² The Sotho ethnic and linguistic cluster is very distinct from the Nguni cluster, to which the leopard-skin-wielding kings belong that are celebrated at Sithole’s Masemenyenga lodge in Francistown. Admittedly, with a large degree of historical myopia and telescoping, Mwali, assisted or impersonated by the high priest Sithole of Ila extraction, might possibly transform my Nkoya association into a Lozi, therefore Kololo, therefore Nguni one; but that makes very little sense.

8.4.4. A non-territorial collective identity such as gender, religious denomination, class or caste?

Having failed to find convincing answers in information closely at hand within the original context of northern Botswana where the riddle of the leopard skin originated, it seems as if we are compelled to explore more fully the association with the leopard skin throughout the Old World cultural traditions, before we can decipher our riddle, or resign ourselves that solution is beyond our powers. What we are looking for is a historical cultural context that could have been known, in whatever indirect and distorted form, not only to the High God but also to the latter’s human representatives in the Mwali cult, and in which the leopard skin appears as the sign of an identity that could be argued to be mine.

So for over a year I plodded, in an exciting quest that kept me occupied night and day, through a large number of references to leopard-skin symbolism in ritual, cults and myths all over the Old World, from the remotest times to the present, in Africa, Asia and Europe. The leopard occurs in most of Africa and in the southern half of

¹ An extensive discussion of telepathy in the *sangoma* context is given in chapter 7.

² Van Binsbergen 1992b, and references cited there.

Asia, and only became extinct in Europe less than 10,000 years ago. The oldest recorded (at least, claimed) use of leopard skin turned out to be in a Mousterian, i.e. Late Neanderthaloid, context in southern France, more than 50,000 years Before Present.¹ So it stands to reason that many cultural and religious traditions throughout the Old World have been inspired by this beautiful predator. Retrieving most of the relevant archaeological and iconographical evidence through library research, and identifying the leopard's names throughout the Old World's language families, gradually afforded me a detailed, well documented, and amazingly coherent pattern of continuities through more than ten thousand years of cultural history – with greater depth and clarity than even my previous research on geomantic divination and general patterns of animal symbolism had provided, yet along much the same lines. Blind spots and puzzles in those previous projects gradually cleared up as, in the context of the leopard quest, I familiarised myself with state-of-the-art results of genetic and linguistic macrofamily research. This chapter outgrew its allotted size as a chapter, and became a book in its own right. However, while the general argument on leopard skin symbolism as a perspective on the world history of shamanism expanded, only one bit of evidence came up that seemed to answer the high priest's second riddle, helping me to identify the kind of people I allegedly belonged to, people whose ceremonial sign of office was the leopard skin.

8.5. Conclusion: The second riddle's solution

References to the leopard are virtually absent from the *Sacred Books of the East* (an incomplete but representative, hugely comprehensive body of formal religious literature encompassing the whole of Asia). The only exceptions are the following. Both the female and the male panther² feature in the sweetly edifying *Questions and Puzzles of Milinda the King* (dealing with the Greek king Menander/Milinda of Bactria – second century BCE – in conversation with a Buddhist sage), which however lack all shamanistic connotations.³ Those relating to the cat⁴ clearly only refer to the domestic cat, not to felines in general.

The tiger skin features prominently in the Ancient Hindu literature in a form that often suggests shamanistic themes – one that would be highly reminiscent of Ancient Egyptian and sub-Saharan African contexts if only leopard skin were substituted for tiger skin. In Ancient India, the tiger's skin is used at coronations.⁵ Here a shamanistic motif appears in connection with the god Indra: he becomes a tiger

¹ Cf. de Lumley 1972.

² Again, modern zoological taxonomy makes no distinction any more between leopard and panther, both being *Panthera pardus* or *Felis pardus*.

³ Rhys Davis 1988: II (vol. XXXVI) 285f.

⁴ Rhys Davis 1988: II (vol. XXXVI) 326f.

⁵ *Satapatha-Brahmana* V, Eggeling 1988: vol. XLI 81, 91-93, 96, 105, 105n; *Atharva-veda*, Bloomfield 1988, vol. XLII, 111f, (king is tiger), 378-380.

when *Soma* flows through him.¹ *Soma* is a sacred liquid pressed from a particular plant; it is also mead (honey-beer); the moon (whose speckles – said to form a human face in European folk traditions – associate it with the speckled leopard); and a god (of fairly controversial and transgressive behaviour) in his own right. A shamanistic sacrificial ritual of creation or rebirth is described;² if in this rite the entrails are not cleaned out it produces – as an undesirable result – a tiger³ or a jackal.⁴ A tiger is also produced from the contents of Indra's intestines when drinking *Soma*.⁵ Mention is made of the equally shamanistic concept of the man-tiger; the prescribed sacrifice to the latter happens to be 'the mono-maniac' (? , *sic*).⁶

And having learned to read 'leopard' for 'tiger', in a text whose redaction dates from the early first millennium CE in South Asia,⁷ thousands of kilometres away from Nata, Botswana, I finally stumbled on what is without the slightest doubt part of the answer to the Nata high priest's leopard-skin riddle:

In classical Hindu ritual it is

'the skin of a black antelope, a tiger, and a he-goat,'

which is stipulated for religious students of the three castes, the *Brâhmanas* (priests), the *Kshatriyas* (warriors), and the *Vaisyas* (commoners), respectively!⁸

Interestingly it is also the skin of a he-goat on which the sacrificer steps at the *Vâgapeya* (a form of *Soma* sacrifice). The antelope is singled out as 'one of the five animals' (the others are bee, elephant, butterfly and fish, they represent the five senses).⁹ Especially, the skin of a black antelope, representing the earth or (if in a pair) earth and heaven, plays a major role in Ancient Indian sacrifice (including the important *soma* sacrifice) and burial; relevant passages are to be found throughout the *Sacred Books of the East*.¹⁰

So through the injunction of wearing a leopard skin Mwali and the high priest were simply identifying me as a member of the *Kshatriya* warrior caste! If I had

¹ *Satapatha-Brahmana* V, Eggeling 1988: XLI 81.

² *Satapatha-Brahmana* V, Eggeling 1988: XLIV 203.

³ According to the index to vol. XLIV (*Satapatha-Brahmana* V, Eggeling 1988), p. 577 s.v. 'tiger'; and Winternitz 1988 s.v. 'animal'.

⁴ According to the actual text (as distinct from the index reference to this passage, cf. previous note) in Eggeling 1988: 203.

⁵ Eggeling 1988: 215.

⁶ *Satapatha-Brahmana*, Eggeling 1988: vol. XLIV 414.

⁷ Jolly 1988b: xxxii.

⁸ *Institutes of Vishnu*, XXVII 15-17: Jolly 1988a: 115.

⁹ Telang 1988: 155n.

¹⁰ See Winternitz 1988 s.v. antelope, p. 54, for detailed references. We may be reminded that in the Chinese tradition, the legendary ruler, culture hero and inventor of the eight *kua* (trigrams) Fu Hsi (modern rendering Fu Xi) wears both a leopard skin around his knees and an antelope skin around his shoulders; since Fu Hsi is doubtlessly shamanistic, the presence of the antelope skin in the South Asian tradition, too, may reflect a shamanistic vein. This is confirmed by the shamanistic elements in Hindu ritual involving the tiger skin.

come across this text passage at the beginning of my inquiry into the puzzling pronouncements of the Nata high priest, I would have stopped here: what he said about the leopard skin being the proper garment for ‘my kind of people’ echoes this stipulation from the sacred laws of India, and its caste system, of which no publicly recognised traces are ever affirmed, to my knowledge, in Southern African society today – while another caste system, that of apartheid, was about to be wiped out there in the early 1990s, when the high priest pronounced his second riddle. And now for the first time I can make sense of a bit of information that I received in the lodge milieu when I asked why I should get a leopard skin: *the leopard skin was understood to be a sign of military rank* – but I could not see the obvious, given the reliance, at the lodge, on unarticulated teaching through example rather than through words,¹ given the general secrecy that surrounded the Mwali cult in Francistown and the Northeast District except at the *sangoma* lodges, and given my own resistance vis-à-vis the military implications of the specific details of my *sangomahood*. The envy of my fellow-*sangomas* at MmaChakayile’s lodge is now understandable: whereas to me the relatively exalted rank of the warrior caste was granted, all the others had been found to be merely of commoner status, condemned to the he-goat skins of the victims they sacrificed at their coming-out ceremony as *sangomas*. It is now also clear why either of my two possessing spirits – one a Boer soldier, the other a Nkoya king known for his fondness of hunting rifles – wanted me (in MmaDlozi’s interpretation) to carry a ceremonial gun.

It is illuminating, though disconcerting, to find a riddle generated within a Southern African cult that has no explicit or conscious South Asian links, solved by an ancient South Asian text.

But this by no means exhausts the South Asian parallels in *sangomahood*: the name Mwali (cf. Kali) for a formidable mother goddess whose sacred colour is black, the use of scapulars crossed over the breast as a sign of studentship (*utwaza*), the beaded string as a marker of earlier sacrifices, the format of the lodges as cultic centres (cf. *ashrams*), the collective chanting of hymns, the performance of menial tasks during studentship (cf. *seva*), the use of black cloaks and of rods as signs of religious office (although the black cloaks are in fact even more reminiscent of Taoism!), prostration as a ritual gesture, processions of lodge members as a public appropriation of space, the imposed celibacy during the training period, the belief in personal reincarnation, the use of fly-whisks as paraphernalia, etc. The hymn ‘*Sala-Salani*’ cited in chapter 5 has a close parallel in the well-known Heart Sutra of South Asian Buddhism;² although the wording of the *sangoma* hymn is sufficiently general and of all times to allow for apparent parallels without actual historical connections.

¹ See section 6.10.

² Cf. <http://cres.anu.edu.au/~mccomas/heartsutra/index.html>. This was pointed out to me by my student Luca Domenichini, at a time (2000) when the thought of detailed South Asian parallels in *sangomahood* still struck me as utterly fantastic.

But the solution to our riddle, although undeniable, is only partial, for the high priest was emphatically not speaking within an Indian frame of reference, and he gave no reasons for my being classified as a member of the warrior caste. We shall yet have to continue our quest, if we want to explain how an Indian cultic idiom featuring tiger skins could possibly install itself as an African one featuring leopard skins. Having cast my net very widely, I did catch the fish I was originally after, but unexpectedly a treasure was found tangled in the net that I would be a fool to throw back into the sea. While *Intercultural encounters* goes to the press, I have already drafted *The Leopard's Unchanging Spots*, which relates the full details of this further quest into the ramifications of Old World symbolism, spirituality, and shamanism.

Thus the intercultural encounter that my 'becoming a *sangoma*' consisted in, turned out to be not just between me and the local ritual traditions of Southern Africa – it revealed, in itself, other similar encounters, between Africa and Asia, against the background of an evolving cultural history of mankind characterised by the dynamic interplay between sameness and difference, continuity and innovation, diffusion and transformative localisation. And the two World Wars which, in the first half of the twentieth century, had shaped the fate of my ancestral family in Europe, warping the lives of my parents, wrecking the family into which I was born, and adding (since both my grandfathers, and my mother's ex-husband whose name I bore for purely administrative reasons in the first year of my life, had been soldiers) a decidedly military dimension to my ancestry which for most of my life I could only reject, – it had all come back through the *sangoma* cult's transformative power, elevated to an emblem of high office, election, interculturality, understanding, resignation, acceptance.

We are ready now to continue our intercultural philosophical lessons, on a less personal plane.