

**Part II. *Sacred / profane*
in Durkheim's *Les For-*
mes Élémentaires de la
*Vie Religieuse***

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Chapter 2. General observations; the problem

2. 1. General critical observations on *Les Formes*

In *Les Formes* Durkheim grapples with the most fundamental problems of sociology. The book offers a theory about the way in which individual attitudes and actions are shaped by the collective element in such a way as to make a society possible. *Sacred* objects (the basis of collective ideas and rites) acquire their meaning in that they symbolically refer to a moral and physical power that transcends that of the individual and that for this reason commands *respect*. In this way these *sacred* objects generate, in the individual, attitudes and actions by which the individual, utilitarian motives give way to non-rational, religious motives, – that is to say, *collective* motives, for the morally and physically superior instance is none other than society, albeit disguised (so as to be unrecognisable to the participant) in symbols which have taken on a life of their own, largely autonomous from that to which they refer. Not only religious representations are thus of collective origin: in fact, as we have already discussed at length in the previous chapter, all fundamental elements of our thought have been decisively shaped by society, including such basic categories as space, time, and force. The subordination of the individual to the collective is to be continuously renewed by rites (both ‘ascetic rites’ consisting in the observance of taboos, and positive rites: sacrifice, fertility rites, commemorative rites; by the same token, death ritual offers society the opportunity to constitute itself as a whole after the death of one individual member). Such rituals are necessary because of the constant tension between individual and collective tendencies in a human being. The individual is thus ‘called to order’. This sums up Durkheim’s interpretation as seen from the consciousness of the individual participant, in other words, subjectively. From a more objectifying point of view, this is at the same time the tension between social reality and societal ideal.

My rendering of Durkheim's book's basic ideas is in itself already an interpretation among many others, often dismissive ones. For instance, many others have had no eye for the subtle way in which Durkheim argues his insight in the connection between *sacred* objects and society; they have failed to appreciate that what is involved here is certainly not simple, direct reference. Such a reproach of simplistic reduction may be found with Evans-Pritchard (1965: 75) and with Goody (1961: 161) of whom we shall come to speak below; but also in Swanson's (1964) positive appeal to Durkheim for fairly blunt cross-cultural comparisons of forms of religion against forms of social organisation. Another common reproach directed at Durkheim has been that of group realism ('hypostasis', 'agelism', 'group mind fallacy', *etc.*): Durkheim is then chided for turning the group into a reality, which in principle would be independent from its members and which would keep its powerless individual members in its totalitarian clutches.⁹³ Bellah (1965: 169 *f.*) has offered an interesting refutation of this criticism, yet we will shortly see that there is considerable ground from the reproach that Durkheim appreciated the group above the individual. Another reproach has been (*e.g.* Goode 1952: 255) that Durkheim uses the idea of some *mentalité primitive*⁹⁴ as a distinct mode of thought and action which is to be absolutely distinguished from our own, *i.e.* from the mode of thought and action of individual members of North Atlantic society in the era of modernity (which is when Goode wrote). That such criticism is unfounded is already clear from the very conception of *Les Formes*: choosing the religion of the Australians as an illustration of the 'elementary forms' of all religion in general, was only possible for Durkheim since he attributed to those 'primitives' all mental capabilities which would make it meaningful to compare Australian cultures and their bearers with all other cultures including recent European / North Atlantic ones. Admittedly, Durkheim's book nonetheless does contain puzzling passages, *e.g.*:

⁹³ *E.g.* Sorokin 1924; Benoit-Smullyan 1947; Kruijt 1958.

⁹⁴ #15. ON PRIMITIVE MENTALITY. The concept of the 'Primitive Mentality' has been particularly developed in the work of Lévy-Bruhl (*e.g.* 1910 / 1951). It refers to a hypothetical mode of thought in which humans stress *participation* with the rest of the world and notably with Nature, in such a way as to avoid emphatic distinction between humans and the rest of the world, as otherwise would have been possible (as in modern North Atlantic society) through elaborate conceptions of distinct individuality and autonomy. One has often reproached Lévy-Bruhl for importantly contributing, in this way, to the ideology and the justification of colonialism: for, if the peoples of Africa and of Asia 'apparently' are not capable of thought as autonomous individuals, then their more developed big brothers from the North Atlantic region would, from a sheer point of charity, have no option but to do the thinking for them... Whereas the *logocentricity* characteristic of literate, statal society today makes *routinised transcendence* possible as a feature of modern world religion, such Lévybruhlian participation is an aspect of the *immanentalism* that is the default condition of humankind's spirituality. When, below, I shall define religion as the negotiation of the I and the Not-I, Lévybruhlian participation will take on a new meaning: it is one, implicit, and boundary-effacing, solution for the core religious problematic, uniting the I and the Not-I at the *emic* level. In other words, rather than in a 'politically-correct' manner denouncing Lévy-Bruhl, we may admit that he captured something of essence in 'the elementary forms of religious life'. Also *cf.* Horton 1973; van Binsbergen 2012c, 2012d.

'Il en va tout autrement dans les sociétés *inférieures*. Le moindre développement des individualités, l'étendu plus faible du groupe, l'homogénéité des circonstances extérieures, tout contribue à réduire les différences et les variations au minimum' (Durkheim 1912 / 1960 / 1990: 7; my italics – WvB).

Or the following passage, which goes to show how much Durkheim would have benefitted from the *emic* / *etic* distinction in order to appreciate that a different categorisation of the world than that imposed (since Early Modern times only) by North Atlantic science, is not necessarily a wrong or confused categorisation:

'De l'aptitude du primitif à confondre les règnes ['kingdoms' as the highest category of natural classes, e.g. the animal kingdom, the mineral kingdom – WvB] et les classes que nous distinguons.' (Durkheim 1960 / 1912: 336 f.)

The British social anthropologist Peter Worsley (1956), to whom we shall return below, did research into the Australians's folk botany and folk zoology. This brings him to vehemently criticise Durkheim on this point. Yet the following passage may still convince us:

'Quant à la théorie de Frazer sur l'origine du totémisme,⁹⁵ elle suppose chez le primitif une sorte d'absurdité foncière que les faits connus ne permettent pas de lui prêter. Il a une logique, si étrange qu'elle puisse parfois nous paraître: or, à moins d'en être totalement dépourvu, il ne pouvait commettre le raisonnement qu'on [i.e. Frazer – WvB] lui impute' (Durkheim 1912 / 1960 / 1990: 250).

However, I should not give the impression that all criticism of *Les Formes* is entirely or largely unjustified. Also for the most accommodating and least prejudiced present-day professional social scientist the book contains unmistakable traces of Durkheim's time and age, and of his personality, that would be difficult for us to accept today.

In this connection, we must face the following difficulty in the evaluation of Durkheim's book: not only does its author conclude that God and society coincide, but also he seems to have been personally convinced that society is above all criticism, and that there is an absolute contradiction between the social and the individual in this respect. We may cite striking examples, e.g.:

'On comprend ainsi que ce qui a été fait au nom de la société des hommes, c'est l'humanité qui en a recueilli les fruits.' (Durkheim 1912 / 1960 / 1990: 600)

This throws light on the emphasis, throughout *Les Formes*, on explanations based on the social and not on the individual (e.g. categories of thought, totemism, the

⁹⁵ Cf. Frazer 1887, 1899, 1910, and – long after the publication of *Les Formes* – Frazer 1937. Totemism was a pet topic of emerging anthropology, around 1900 CE, cf. Frazer 1899 (on Central Australian totemism, an influence on Durkheim), 1910 (on totemism and exogamy – and an obvious influence upon Lévi-Strauss's structuralist theory of kinship). In Durkheim's opinion, totemism is a very specific phenomenon, and not the heterogeneous concoction à la Salomon Reinach which the ancient historian Jules Toutain (1907, 1909) makes of Durkheim's approach (Besnard & Durkheim 1976).

limited place accorded to individual experience in religion; as well as on Durkheim's naïvety in considering the mob excitement of effervescence as a unique and unambiguous source of blessings instead of as also the source of much evil including non-democratic pressure, even lynching.

It is true to say that the contradiction between individual and society dominates *Les Formes* from beginning to end – and not only that particular book but Durkheim's oeuvre as a whole. In ways that are sometimes shocking, society is, time and time again, personified and discussed with reverence – as if never any wrongs, betrayals, atrocities even, were committed in the name of society. The most serious criticism which could be levelled against Durkheim's solution for the fundamental questions which he broaches, therefore seems to be that of his masterly commentator Talcott Parsons. In the latter's view, in Durkheim's observations on society and the individual, these two do not belong to the same level of abstraction: something that is concretely observable, the *individual*, is juxtaposed to something that only exists as an idea which no one has ever observed concretely: *society* (Parsons 1949: 363 f.).

We have already agreed that at many decisive points in *Les Formes* Durkheim engages in *verstehende* sociology '*avant la lettre*':⁹⁶

L'opinion, chose sociale au premier chef, est donc une source d'autorité et l'on peut même se demander si toute autorité n'est pas fille de l'opinion (...) Sans doute, on peut prendre l'opinion comme objet d'étude et en faire la science; c' est en cela que consiste principalement la sociologie'. (Durkheim 1912 / 1960 / 1990: 298, 626).

Moreover there is Durkheim's emphasis, in addition to everything society does for its members, on the dependence of society / the *sacred* upon the members of society / the worshippers of the *sacred* (Durkheim 1912 / 1960 / 1990: 491 f.); and finally, in a most conclusive passage:

'Car la force collective ne nous est pas toute entièrement extérieure; elle ne nous meut pas toute au dehors; mais, puisque la société ne peut exister que dans les consciences individuelles et par elles, il faut bien qu'elle n'entre et s'organise en nous' (Durkheim 1912 / 1960 / 1990: 299).

Yet we have to admit that Durkheim's prejudice in favour of the social did not allow him to consistently adopt the individual as point of departure for his analysis.⁹⁷ Meanwhile, however ambiguous still, Durkheim's position in *Les Formes* already means considerable progress as compared to his position in *Les Règles de la méthode sociologique* (1897 / 1967), where *le fait social* is still being defined as

⁹⁶ E.g. Parsons 1949: 661 f., 771 f.; also see my discussion, below, of Durkheim's definition of respect – Durkheim 1912 / 1960 / 1990: 298.

⁹⁷ Alpert 1961: 108 f., and Kruijt 1958, even manage to completely ignore the *verstehende* elements in *Les Formes*.

‘des manières d’ agir, de penser et de sentir, extérieures à l’individu; et qui sont douées d’un pouvoir de coercition en vertu duquel ils s’imposent à lui’ (Durkheim 1897 / 1967: 5);

as a result, the sociologist must allegedly attempt to describe the social facts

‘isolées de leurs manifestations individuelles’ (Durkheim 1897 / 1967: 45).

This earlier phase in Durkheim’s thought (cf. Goddijn *et al.* 1971: 135-145) has been criticised severely, for instance by the British sociologist Rex (1961). Commentators like Benoit-Smullyan and Parsons have clearly perceived the transition which manifested itself with Durkheim after 1900. In this connection, Parsons spoke of the ‘changing meaning of constraint’ (notably, from a form of coercion that was initially primarily conceived as external and physical / legal, to a form a coercion that was primarily internalised and moral).⁹⁸ And the attractive suggestion has been made that even the position taken in *Les Formes* might not have remained the end result of the evolution of Durkheim’s theoretical endeavours had he lived longer; but broken by the vicissitudes of World War I with its massive bereavements – including Durkheim’s son and many of his students – and political challenges he died fairly young, only a few years after the publication of his major religious monograph.

This ambiguity between types of coercion also has a blunting effect on Durkheim’s observations concerning the question as to the ultimate referent of religious symbols: is it

- a. concrete social reality, or it is merely
- b. the *idea / ideal* of society?

In the previous chapter we have considered Durkheim’s realism which would mean answer (a); yet in a way overlooked by many critics, Durkheim explicitly opts for the *ideal* as answer (b) (Durkheim 1912 / 1960 / 1990: 600 f.). He admits that that ideal is being carried by the individuals. But he does not stop to ask himself whence they did derive that ideal. Compelling and convincing as the ideal of society may have appeared to someone in Durkheim’s relatively attractive social position⁹⁹ we have to admit that the idealisation of society as such may have been far less obvious, conscious and inspiring to someone living under less

⁹⁸ Interestingly, one of the classics of American sociology shortly after World War II, *The Lonely Crowd* (Riesman *et al.* 1950 / 1965), sketched the essence of recent urban mass society to consist in a transition going in the opposite direction: from an ‘inner-directed’ reliance on internalised, more or less traditional values, to an ‘outer-directed’, social-control-driven bid for public conformism. I am not aware that the reversed Durkheimism in this paradigm was ever signaled in the sociological literature.

⁹⁹ As male, spouse, father, professor at the most prominent university in France, conversant with the conservative and Kantian philosophies then *en vogue*, and leader of an internationally respected new schological ‘school’ and journal), with his personality structure, and living in the relatively stable and ordered, urban class society of Western Europe before World War I.

positive circumstances in a different period, a different part of the world, as a member of an oppressed gender and subaltern class, and heir to a different, suppressed or persecuted cultural, philosophical and ideological tradition. Rather than considering this essential question, Durkheim hastens to assure us that

‘La société ideale n’est pas en dehors de la société réelle; elle en fait partie.’ (Durkheim 1912 / 1960 / 1990: 604).¹⁰⁰

This pushes under the table as secondary and irrelevant, not so much the individual as such, but that which Durkheim tends to associate with the individual: chaos, conflict, evil – everything that challenges the splendour of the allegedly benign, redeeming and creative social order.¹⁰¹ Moreover, it does not answer the question as to how the concrete forms of society could emerge in the first place, before they could inspire the individual members with the ‘ideal of society’.

It is very illuminating to find, in the texts of such commentators as Sorokin, Alpert, Benoit-Smullyan, and Nisbet, discussions of Durkheim’s predecessors and contemporaries who are likely to have informed his ideas concerning the relationship between the collective and the individual.¹⁰² Initially these were Jaurès, Fustel de Coulanges (Durkheim’s teacher at the École Normale Supérieure, Paris), Boutroux; later his reading of Renouvier, Kant, Comte (the latter to a considerably lesser extent than is generally suggested in the sociological textbooks);¹⁰³ and after Durkheim had completed his academic studies: Spencer, Schäffle, Espinas, against the *sostenuto* of the philosophical conservatism of de

¹⁰⁰ Although it is surprising, given Durkheim’s Jewish background, one is inclined to see this as an echo of a famous *New Testament* passage: *Luke 17:21*

τηρήσεως, ²¹ οὐδὲ ἐροῦσιν, Ἴδου ὡδε ἢ ἰδοὺ ἐκεῖ· Neither shall they say, Lo here! or, lo there! for, ἰδοὺ ἢ γὰρ ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ ἐντὸς ὑμῶν ἐστίν. behold, the kingdom of God is within you.

Above we already saw Durkheim refer to another *New Testament* passage.

¹⁰¹ Despite the far-reaching purification, transformation and addition which Durkheim’s insights underwent at the hands of Parsons, yet the German / British sociologist Dahrendorf (1965: ch. 3) manages to reproach also Parsons for neglecting conflict. Dahrendorf also rejects Parsons’ emphasis on the ‘action frame of reference’. It would take us too far to discuss this point more fully. Let me merely mention Rex (1961) and Coser (1956) as examples demonstrating that Parsonian analysis can be fruitfully combined with attention to conflict – although, of course, the more convincing examples of conflict sociology have to be sought outside the framework of structural-functionalism, with the Marxist approach of the class-conflict paradigm, and the Marxist-inspired Manchester School transactionalist paradigm (Werbner 1984; van Binsbergen 2007a). (Transactionalism is predicated on an actor frame of reference, in a perspective of Methodological Individualism (cf. special topic #8a, above), so that social structure remains inchoate and in flux, rather than appearing as a firm given.

¹⁰² Sorokin (1924: 438 f.), Alpert (1961: 21 f.), Benoit-Smullyan (1947: 499 f.) and Nisbet (1965: 23 f.).

¹⁰³ While Durkheim kept his distance from Comte, he did recognise him as the first modern sociologist, mentioned him twice in passing in *Les Formes élémentaires* (1912 / 1990: 302, 621) and was flattered when Lévy-Bruhl mentioned him in one breath with Comte (Durkheim 1969).

Bonald, de Maistre, von Haller and others from the early 19th c. CE. Historical period and personality are difficult to separate on these points. The same truism may also apply to the way (today rather unacceptable) in which Durkheim, on the one hand, constantly insists on definitional questions and parades a great deal of ethnographic data and theoretical opinions and debates in the pages of *Les Formes*, yet, on the other hand, equally constantly starts out from premises without the slightest attempt to substantiating them, adduces *ad hoc* explanations that (because they are not, and cannot be, generalised) are devoid of all real explanatory power, uses circular argumentation, in short, in many respects appears to be a worse scientist than most present-day graduate students of sociology. Systematic discussion of this point would take us too far; relevant examples may be given below, and moreover a plethora of further examples may be found with Durkheim's commentators and critics. Considering the enormous growth of the empirical sciences and their methods since *Les Formes* was written, our judgment should not be too harsh. Yet it remains surprising that Durkheim should commit these methodological peccadilloes, whereas he had made such massive contributions to sociological method, of all topics, with *Le Suicide* (Durkheim 1895) and *Les Règles de la Méthode Sociologique* (Durkheim 1897a). With *Les Formes*, his last book, Durkheim certainly did not stick to his own admonition:

'il faut écarter systématiquement toutes les prénotions' (Durkheim 1897a: 139).

Below I shall discuss what appears to be an important viewpoint in this connection: the relation between *Les Formes* and the science of religion such as existed in his time. Typical for his time was also a stereotypical view of 'the primitive', and an array of now obsolete ideas such as unilineal evolutionism, clan totemism,¹⁰⁴ and the primacy of matriarchy and matriliney over patriarchal and patrilineal descent systems.¹⁰⁵ We cannot deny that Durkheim brought a measure of critical prudence to these topics (and the same prudence is noticeable in his handling of the abundant but often deficient and occasionally contradictory ethnographic data on the Australian Aborigines), yet he was not capable of protecting his book from obsolescence on these points.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ #16. ON CLAN TOTEMISM. I.e. the idea that, in preliterate societies, a particular type of segmented social organisation was necessarily combined with a specific relationship between any one societal segment with a specific species in the animal or vegetal kingdom. Not the concept of totemism (*emic* association between group and animal or vegetal species) is obsolete (it is very conspicuous in two societies I have studied in detail from the 1960s CE on, that of Ħumiriyya, Tunisia, North Africa, and that of the Zambian Nkoya (for references see the bibliography at the end of this book), – what is obsolete is to raise this concept to a necessary and universal feature of preliterate societies – to a 'fait social total' (Mauss 1924).

¹⁰⁵ Known as *Mutterrecht*, cf. Bachofen 1861 / 1948. The very conflation of patrilineal descent and patriarchy is now totally obsolete, as are the concepts of matriarchy and patriarchy in themselves.

¹⁰⁶ #17. QUEST FOR ORIGIN AND QUEST FOR ELEMENTARY FORM. Yet even indications of an unmistakably obsolete evolutionism does not absolve a critic from the duty to read carefully. Al-

These are only some among many objections that could be brought against *Les Formes*. In that light, would it still be meaningful to occupy ourselves with that book? I believe it is; even though some of Durkheim's answers may have turned out not to be tenable, in the century that has passed since his death the social sciences have not advanced very much in answering the fundamental questions which he posed:

- what is the basis of society?
- what is the nature and the function of religion? and
- why do we think the way we do?¹⁰⁷

ready in the very beginning of *Les Formes* Durkheim stresses that his quest for origins is merely relative and typological:

‘Certes, si, par origine, on entend un premier commencement absolu, la question n’a rien de scientifique et doit être résolument écartée. (...) Ce que nous voudrions, c’est trouver un moyen de discerner les causes, *toujours présentes*, dont dépendent les formes les plus essentielles de la pensée en de la pratique religieuse’ (Durkheim 1912 / 1960 / 1990: 10 f; my italics – WvB).

Compare this with Goode, who amply criticises the alleged, and allegedly unscientific, return to unknowable origins (Goode 1951: 255). More to the point is Lévi-Strauss's statement to the effect that Durkheim had difficulty choosing between

‘what would be called today (1) the functional and (2) the historical approach’ (Lévi-Strauss 1945: 517; numbered series added – WvB).

And indeed, what goes hand in hand in *Les Formes* is the quest for the ‘elementary form’ (*i.e.* a basic form that may be ubiquitously recognised) and the quest for the ‘primal form’ (*e.g.* the first historical – and preferably *attested* – form from which all other forms can be argued to have descended and developed). For Durkheim, Australian totemism is at the same time primal form, and illustration of the elementary form. When we put into Durkheim's mouth, or pen, statements that misrepresent his thought, criticism becomes too easy, and irrelevant. This for instance applies to the question of the social origin of categories of thought, which – as we have discussed at length in the previous chapter – constitutes a second major theme in *Les Formes*; for criticism see: Sorokin 1924: 474 f.; Benoit-Smullyan 1947: 516, 533 f.; Worsley 1956). Taken to their extreme, Durkheim's viewpoint would imply that human thought is not possible without society – perhaps a true statement, but one that (a) leaves unsolved the problem of *emergence* (*how could society have emerged without these categories already being in place among the individual that were to constitute society?*) and that (b) runs counter to the thrust of individualism that has characterised Western thought ever since the Ancient Greeks and the Fathers of the [Christian] Church. According to Durkheim's formulation

‘il est légitime de supposer qu’elles [*i.e.* les catégories – WvB] sont riches en éléments sociaux’ (Durkheim 1912 / 1960 / 1990: 14),

– which is far from reductionist, and constitutes (against the background of Kant's enigmatic *a priori* categories) nothing less than a revolutionary insight.

¹⁰⁷ Parallel with a conspicuous trend in modern archaeology (particularly manifest in the works edited by Colin Renfrew and his associates), the nature of human thought has remained a theme in my own research, seeking to reconstruct region-specific and period-specific thought processes already in my first major book, on long-term religious change in South Central Africa (1981); more recently, and in ways that will also be manifest from the present book, I have sought to reconstruct prehistoric and protohistoric modes of thought (notably the cosmology of cyclical element transformation, and what I have called ‘*range semantics*’ (where opposites are designated by the same

Before the avalanche of recent, positive reappraisals (considered in the previous chapter) that marked, or anticipated, the centennial of the publication of *Les Formes*, it looked as if Durkheim's last book with its formidable questions, in the light of the lavish praise sociologists have been used to bestow on his earlier work, created a sense of embarrassment, which was then addressed by pointing out some of the more blatant shortcomings, after which one could safely return, with a sense of relief, to the safer territory of 'theories of the middle range' (Merton 1967).¹⁰⁸

Yet for those open to its immense value, *Les Formes* has constituted an invaluable source of inspiration, in the study of both traditional and modern / industrial societies. The most convincing example on this point is the work of Warner (e.g. 1958, 1961, 1963). That author, who started out as ethnographer of remotest Northern Australia but then turned to path-breaking and comprehensive studies of the symbolic life of North American urban communities, demonstrates how important and illuminating a Durkheimian concept of the symbol (*emblème, représentation collective*) may be for the social sciences. And despite the incisive criticism which the American anthropologist Lowie has brought against Durkheim, he too praises the latter for his treatment of symbolism (Lowie 1928: 211). The symbol plays a pivotal role in the attribution of the predicate *sacred*: Durkheim's particular conception of the symbol allowed him to propose a solution (incidentally, in typically *verstehende* fashion, i.e. on the basis of the cognitions of a hypothetical local actor) for *the problem of intrinsic sacrality* – albeit only a provisional solution, as we shall see below. Meanwhile Parsons pointed out the difficulties attached to Durkheim's conception of the symbol (Parsons 1949: 422 f.). Thus it is remarkable that in a famous article the prominent American anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1966: 2) is prepared to derive from Durkheim the latter's 'discussion on the nature of the

lexical term; van Binsbergen 2012d; van Binsbergen & Woudhuizen 2011: 142 f.) Throughout the present book we shall return to these themes.

¹⁰⁸ #18. ON THEORIES OF THE MIDDLE RANGE (MERTON). Although constituting a central part of the international sociological canon in the middle of the 20th c. CE, Robert Merton's plea (1967a) in favour of what he calls 'theories of the middle range' must be considered to have an undesirable aspect. It seems an invitation to anti-intellectual, scientific shallowness. Citing in approval ('a science which hesitates to forget its founders is lost') Whitehead (1917: 115) to the effect that a science only comes of age when it dares forget its founders (like what happened to most natural sciences – which were Whitehead's point of reference), Merton exhorts his fellow-sociologists to concentrate on a widely accepted intra-disciplinary body of problematics and theories of lesser scope, without contemplating the intellectual background and genesis of such approaches within the History of Ideas. For Merton this is indispensable for the professionalisation and emancipation of the social sciences as a distinct academic field. For me it is a philistine denial of the philosophical and humanistic roots of all social science, such as cannot be detached from the existential concerns of what it means to be human, and from the history of theoretical including philosophical reflections on those concerns, for millennia. For better or worth, if I had heeded Merton's call, the present book on Durkheim would never have been written. In the eyes of many anthropologists, such an abstract, dehumanised, scientific orientation has been a characteristic shortcoming of sociology for most of the 20th c. CE.

sacred, but at the same time insists that only a conception of the symbol derived, not from Durkheim but from Susanne Langer,¹⁰⁹ Whitehead (1928; greatly indebted to Durkheim 1912), and others, which will enable him (Geertz) to design the theoretical framework within which the significance of religion for human action can be addressed (Geertz 1966: 4).

When all is said and done, and all ethnographic specificities and theoretical and methodological niceties have been duly considered, *Les Formes* presents in the first place a theory of how society both produces, and depends on, religious symbols.¹¹⁰ In the course of the present book, we shall have ample opportunity to do justice to this aspect of Durkheim's work. The analysis of symbolism has been of old a cornerstone of religious studies and of the anthropology of religion, and a full treatment from this perspective would require a comprehensive overview of a vast literature, ranging from such anthropologists as Vic Turner, Lévi-Strauss, Douglas, Sperber, Leach, Skorupski, Jarvie, de Heusch, Cohen, Boon, Firth, Devisch, van Baal,¹¹¹ Bettelheim, Tennekes, Bourdieu, Needham, Mackenzie; psychoanalysts like Freud, Jung, Fromm, Lacan, and Erikson; students of comparative religions such as Eliade, Scholem, Goblet d'Alviella; comparative literature students such as Todorov; archaeologists like Leroi-Gourhan, Renfrew, Frolov, Gimbutas, Marshack, d'Errico, Lewis-Williams, Insoll, Bednarik, Mithen, Goodison, Hodder, Anati; philosophers like St Augustin (*cf.* van der Meer 1957 / 1947), Feuerbach, Marx and Engels, Cassirer, Jaspers, Langer, Whitehead, Thiel, Ricoeur, Baudrillard, Ogden & Richards. Most of this vast literature (all to be found *in extenso* in the end bibliography of this book) did not yet exist by the time Durkheim wrote *Les Formes*, and not only to avoid anachronism but also to have a more focused and manageable subject, I propose to take that literature for granted and to concentrate on a related yet distinct and more manageable topic.

2.2. The paired concepts *sacred* / *profane* as central to Durkheim's religion theory

Durkheim wrote his book on *religion*, and realised that his first step should be to define that term. After rejecting some other definitions, he came to define

¹⁰⁹ And, via her, from German / Anglosaxon philosophy of the first half of the 20th c. CE: Ernst Cassirer (especially 1923-1929), *cf.* Barash 2008.

¹¹⁰ The concept of the *symbol* plays a considerable role in *Les Formes*, but it was already in wide circulation prior to Durkheim. It was first attested in English in 1490 (Shorter *et al.* 1978, s.v. symbol, p. 2220). In much the modern sense, it was already in use in Graeco-Roman Antiquity (Liddle *et al.* 1897, s.v. σύμβολον, p. 1458).

¹¹¹ When the once leading anthropologist of religion in the Netherlands, the late lamented Jan van Baal, summed up (1971) religion under the intriguing title *Symbols for Communication*, he, too, stressed in Durkheimian fashion the community-creating power of religion.

religion by reference to the paired concepts *sacré / profane*, in French, henceforth to be referred to in English as *sacred / profane*.

Geertz is not the only renowned social scientist to present Durkheim's paired concepts as a lasting and inalienable part of the conceptual apparatus for the social-scientific study of religion. Also many textbooks present the pair *sacred / profane* without specific criticism.¹¹² Warner's (1958: 412 f.) description of the funerary rites among the Murngin people (Arnhemsland, Australia) shows that interpretation in terms of *sacred / profane* can be very illuminating and meaningful. Parsons regards the paired concepts as one of the most important points in Durkheim's contribution. Even Malinowski who largely dismisses Durkheim's general theory of religion (1954: 57 f., 273 f.), yet himself applies the paired concepts without the slightest criticism (1954: 7, 36). And so on and so forth.

The paired concepts have also met with much serious criticism. Enough, to make it meaningful for us to present an exposition of these paired concepts the way they are used by Durkheim in *Les Formes*; to discuss the criticism they have instigated; and finally to try and assess whether the paired concepts are still viable from a present-day social-science point of view; on which points they need further elaboration, and how they may be used after such revision. Towards such a trajectory, my argument so far does not only serve as background information: by indicating the many difficulties and shortcomings adhering to Durkheim's last book, we begin to understand how necessary it is, for an investigation of the continued usefulness of certain of Durkheim's concepts, to detach them from all reference to the specific context of his own theory of religion; only thus may we ensure that, as analytical instruments, these concepts are not already predicated on hypothetical theoretical relationships whose investigation is precisely what these concepts are intended for in the first place.

Among the commentators to have struggled with his paired concepts *sacred / profane*, a recent one is the anthropologist and comparative mythologist Nick Allen (2012), also the co-editor of a centennial celebration of *Les Formes* (Allen *et al.* 2012). In regard of our paired concepts, Allen takes the shakily-grounded optimistic, though essentially non-committal, view:

'My conclusion is that it is at least a useful mental tool, capable of suggesting worthwhile questions.' (Allen 2012: 111)

and engages in a linguistic diachronic analysis comparable in orientation (though not in scope) with the one I present below, in Chapter 9. Summing it all up, Allen declares:

'Of the three main founding figures in sociology, Marx was not deeply interested in religion. Weber was, and he had much of interest to say, but his disenchanting and relig-

¹¹² *E.g.* Chinoy 1962: 270 f.; Johnson 1966: 406 f.; Firey 1963: 437; van Doorn & Lammers 1964: 248; O'Dea 1966: 12, 20 f.

iously unmusical¹¹³ rationalism is too close to the common sense of contemporary individualism to raise the deepest issues. Durkheim continues to challenge us, and the *sacred / profane* opposition lies at the heart of this challenge.' (Allen 2012: 120)

2.3. The ambiguity of the *sacred*

The paired concepts *sacred / profane* were truly at the heart of Durkheim's religion theory. However, this raises an important question: to what extent is Durkheim's treatment of the *sacred* in *Les Formes* to be faulted because it is prejudiced towards the positive *sacred*, and against the negative *sacred*? He does speak of 'the negative cult', of prohibitions, of 'the ambiguity of the *sacred*', yet by and large the *sacred* emerges from his writings as utterly benign, the only force that keeps society going. Not a word of Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*, of the *sacred* as formidable and destructive, at the local and regional level but also even (as recent decades of interreligious war have demonstrated at a global scale) at the global level. In a most illuminating piece on the study of the *sacred* in the Durkheimian tradition, Alexander Riley makes us aware of a fundamental one-sidedness in Durkheim's own discussion of the *sacred*, which only the work of his students Hertz, Mauss and Hubert managed to redress. In our own argument below we shall have to pay serious attention to Riley's point, which in fact concentrates on the appreciation and analysis of the *sacred*.

'However, there is a clear distinction in the manner in which the notion is theorized by Durkheim, on the one hand, and by his three closest colleagues who also worked on religious topics, on the other. This distinction has to do with rather different emphases with respect to Robertson Smith's distinction between the pure and the impure sacred. In Durkheim, the emphasis is on the pure sacred, the sacred as positive rite and negative interdiction, *i.e.* the sacred as the moral. Though he acknowledges the impure sacred and the ambiguity of its relationship to the pure sacred, his concentration, both in his chef-d'oeuvre on religion and in his practical discussions of the role of the sacred in contemporary secular France, is clearly on the latter. In fact, a very difficult question concerning the origin of the impure sacred emerges from Durkheim's argument. The sacred is ultimately generated by the social itself, he argues, as a means for its constant reinvigoration. But why should society create a force, the impure sacred, that bodes ill for it, even threatens it with destruction? No clear answer is suggested in Durkheim's analysis (Pickering 1984: 129; Arppe 1995: 214). The real Durkheimian engagement with the left or impure sacred took place not in the *Elementary Forms* or in any other work of Durkheim himself, but rather in the work of his protégés Marcel Mauss, Henri Hubert, and Robert Hertz. The more or less simple reduction in Durkheim of the sacred to the social as moral bond is more problematic in their work. There is a concerted effort on the part of the three junior colleagues, in contrast to Durkheim, to attend to "the accursed part of the sacred," to acknowledge in its full theoretical and practical

¹¹³ Allen is not the first British anthropologist to express lack of affinity for the religious domain in musical terms. Decades ago Max Gluckman, the founder / leader of the innovative Manchester School of anthropology repeatedly declared himself to be 'tone deaf for religion'. Nonetheless, the Manchester School's significant contributions to the study of religion include the work of Victor Turner and Richard Werbner (see end bibliography, below).

complexity this notion that is at the same time the foundational principle of the system and a part of the system that needs explanation. As a synonym for communal force, it is the condition of possibility of social symbols; thus, its meaning cannot be exhausted in its own symbolic representation. (Arppe 1995: 210)

It is this attention to “the problem of evil” in the social that ultimately separates the two treatments of the sacred and of the social more generally. What precisely is the role played by the impure sacred in the generative processes of collective effervescence and revitalization that are so important in the Durkheimian sociology of religion? Clearly, some part of this sensitivity to the “other half” of the sacred in the trio Mauss / Hubert / Hertz comes from their great immersion as students in Indian religious history and structure, as there is a much greater treatment of these themes here than in the greater (Judeo-Christian) and lesser (*i.e.* primitive) religious traditions known better to Durkheim.’ (Riley 2005: 276 *f.*)

Jones (1981, 1986) explores the links between Durkheim, Frazer and Robertson Smith, reminding us that it was to the latter (writing not on Australia but on Arabic-speaking West Asia) that Durkheim owed one of the most surprising and important concepts in his religion theory: *the ambiguity of the sacred* (Durkheim 1912 / 1960 / 1990: 584). Kurakin (2013) seeks to elucidate a number of misreadings of Durkheim on this point, and especially articulates the distinction between the impure *sacred*, and the *profane*.

2.4. The problem: Is the *sacred* universal and eternal?

2.4.1. Pickering on modern Great-Britain

Having developed into one of the principal modern commentators of Durkheim’s religion theory, it was fitting that Pickering¹¹⁴ set out to explore the limits of that theory. *Is the sacred eternal? Is it universal?* Looking at the society of Great-Britain a quarter of a century ago (and *a fortiori* today) Pickering could not bring himself to answer these questions in the affirmative – all he saw was a form of humanism, a moral system, a cult of the individual – but is that all there is to religion? Not in terms of Durkheim’s own definition. Which appears to put the theory in jeopardy.

These are in fact some of the questions that also underlie my present book, and by strict methodological rules one negative case (today’s United Kingdom) would be enough to explode Durkheim’s entire theory. Yet we should not give up so quickly. For over a century, specialists and non-specialists have been captivated in large numbers by the force and pathos of Durkheim’s argument on religion, they have appreciated his genius and integrity (for, although no longer a believer in organised forms of religion himself, he spoke warmly of the

¹¹⁴ Pickering 1990; in his contribution to the special issue *Relire Durkheim* as instigated by the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS), Paris, France.

indispensable social merits, even reality, of religion). Whether there is a reality behind our religious representations, whether that reality happens to be society, and whether our religious experience brings us to communicate directly with that reality – these are philosophical questions that are not on the path of empirical science. *But at the level of institutions and religious forms, the retreat of traditional forms of the sacred is not the only thing that meets the eye.* What we have seen in the North Atlantic region in the last quarter of a century, or even much longer, is also the emergence of new forms of compelling and concentrated, collective or communicative attention that to an intelligent observer from another planet would be difficult to tell apart from the religious forms it might know from home: the cult of consumption with its shopping malls as places of salvation, the cult of design, of home-making and home-baking, of health food, of the cellphone, the motorcar, the television set, the ubiquity and compulsive nature of (especially pop, especially digitally transmitted) music, the cult of urban outdoor entertainment often with specific musical, dancing and pharmacological requirements, sports with their own places of salvation, holiday making involving car travel, air travel and relatively prolonged residence at a temporary destination, the small peer group recreating together, the (as compared to a century ago) excessive and monomaniacal attention for sexuality as, gradually, the main source of expression and metaphor. Some of these settings (sport arenas, discos) are unmistakably breeding spots of effervescence. Threaten to diminish or take away any of these central concerns of (post-)modern ordinary social life (even though their mercenary, commercial and politically disempowering opiate aspects are impossible to overlook), and the result is a religious reaction of intransigent defence, even violence. In all this, there is more room and more tolerance than ever, over the past few centuries in Western Europe, for trance, intoxication, ecstasy – the lower-class street scenes of *tarantula* dancing and the like (cf. Vandebroek 1997), and occasional ecstatic expressions within Christianity (e.g. mysticism, Pentecostalism), have given way to an industry of music-induced and pharmacologically-induced trance that touches millions of people and can be measured in percentages of the Gross National Product. ‘The elementary forms of religious life’ are among us,¹⁵ and they are probably closer to effervescence and to the *sacred* than Durkheim could even imagine (let alone: witness) for the distant Australians.

¹⁵ In 1946, the first motion picture to be produced in post-World War II and post-Nazi Germany was entitled *Die Mörder sind unter uns* – ‘The Murderers Are Among Us’, which later became the slogan of the self-styled prosecutor of Nazi war criminals Simon Wiesenthal (cf. Wiesenthal 1967). I apologise beforehand lest religious believers be offended that I use such a pejorative expression in relation with the potentially religious interpretation of today’s most conspicuous expressions of common culture. But, like war criminals gone underground, the potentially religious nature of such contemporary expressions as evoked in this paragraph, too, tend to assume a phantom character, in that their potentially religious nature is scarcely acknowledged. Personally, I have also engaged in these present-day intoxications, albeit only sparingly and selectively, so there is an element of self-irony here that may redeem me.

If my line of argument here cuts any wood at all, it would at least corroborate Durkheim's prediction (as emphasised in Terrier 2013), that (post-)modern North Atlantic society is not moving towards a total eclipse of the *sacred*; but the missing element here would be *an all-encompassing morality* to constitute the backbone of social life. In other, and still fairly Durkheimian, words: *although postmodern North Atlantic society arguably does not lack the sacred as a central category, it is anomic in the sense that no morality governs the social management of the sacred*. Commoditification, exploitation, abolition of labour laws, corruption, falsehood, irresponsibility, are elevated to levels previously reserved for the distorted North Atlantic perception of other continents – and what should have been the highest political office in the North Atlantic region has now, in the post-Obama period, become the central symbol of such decay.

2.4.2. Prades on the continued heuristic value of Durkheim's religion theory

Pickering (1990) is not the only Durkheimian specialist to thus question the accepted Durkheimian orthodoxy. Prades (1990), in the same collection,¹¹⁶ asks similar questions. While conceding the continued historical and theoretical interest of Durkheim, Prades focuses his misgivings on what I agree is a crucial point: *what is the continued heuristic value of Durkheim's theory?* My present book goes a long way towards an affirmative answer, not only in regard of the nice matching of social organisation and shrines in the highlands of North Africa, or in the extent of transcendent thought among the non-logocentric Nkoya people of Zambia, but particularly in the remarkable extent to which prehistoric religion can be brought to life when the Durkheimian argument is used to question the reconstructed Upper Palaeolithic vocabulary (Chapters 5-9).

However, before we turn to such questions of vindication, let us first continue to sketch the wider intellectual context of religious studies in which *Les Formes* must also be situated, and assess whether, with proper operationalisation, the paired concepts *sacred / profane* are suitable for continued use within the modern social science of religion.

2.5. A note on comparative religion

Agnostic and atheist arguments existed sporadically both in Graeco-Roman Antiquity (*e.g.* Protagoras, Lucretius) and in South Asia (*e.g.* the Buddha's contemporary Sanjaya Belatthiputta), yet most of the cultural history of the Old World until Early Modern times devolved in a context of theism – forcibly institutionalised since religious and political power tended to be closely allied, not only in the West (where the Christian church had inherited the globalised

¹¹⁶ *Relire Durkheim*: special issue of the *Archives de sciences sociales des religions*, 35, 69.

organisational structure, and many of the prerogatives, of the Roman Empire), but also in the worlds of Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and Confucianism. When, towards the end of the Middle Ages in the West, the occult fascinations of Hermetism and distant influences of Asian religious forms had produced a variety of heavily sanctioned heresies,¹¹⁷ and when soon Humanist critical text research c. 1500 CE (e.g. by Erasmus and Melachton, later Casaubon) cleared the way towards an objectifying, historical approach to religious traditions and alleged revelations, it took yet over a century for this achievement to lead to de Spinoza's radical theoretical denouncement (cf. de Spinoza 1882, 1906) of revealed religion, causing his dramatic expulsion from the Amsterdam Jewish community (1656). Another century was needed before this seed had blossomed into the first manifestations of an actual science of religion (Stroumsa 2010), at first philosophical and tending towards agnosticism¹¹⁸ – but meanwhile empirically fertilised by the constant stream of data which reached the West European academics – deriving from the study of Graeco-Roman, Celtic and Egyptian Antiquity, and from travelogues and monographs from all over the globe in the Age of European Expansion.¹¹⁹ This yielded massive and sometimes impressive early syntheses.¹²⁰ Only after yet another century, in a period more or less coinciding with the life span of Emile Durkheim, the Spinozist heritage spawned – triggered by Ludwig Feuerbach – the path-breaking materialist analyses by Karl Marx, Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno (Dobbs-Weinstein 2015).¹²¹

By the late 19th century CE, a scientific approach to the study of religion was firmly established in Western Europe and North America. As a result, it is not only in the social sciences that Durkheim's paired concepts *sacred / profane* have remained important – they have also played an ever greater role in comparative religion, subsequently often known as 'religious science' (cf. Eliade 1965) or 'science of religion'. It is not as if more or less by accident sociological concepts have managed to penetrate

¹¹⁷ E.g. Yates 1972; Needham c.s. 1954 / 1961 vol. 1; Bernal 1987.

¹¹⁸ E.g. Hume 1757, 1779, 1961 / 1748; Kant 1793; von Schelling 1804; with Diderot's revolutionary affirmation of atheism as a major milestone; *Lettre sur les Aveugles*, 1749 / 1951.

¹¹⁹ E.g. Leibniz 1994 / 17th c. CE; Beeckman 1718; Bövingh 1712; Carwithen 1817; Holwell 1771; Toland 1815; Vega & Hennepin, 1727; Vogel 1793.

¹²⁰ Thiers *et al.* 1733; de Brosse 1760; Dupuis 1794-1795; Dorville 1770-1772; Brigham 1835.

¹²¹ #19. *THE HISTORICAL EMERGENCE OF THE SCIENTIFIC STUDY OF RELIGION*. Although there is no lack of case studies of individual thinkers and movements, and an abundance of studies on the apparent conflict between religion and science, there are – rather to my surprise – only few studies presenting a comprehensive in-depth view of the emergence of the *scientific study of religion* as a protracted historical process transforming the West Atlantic region from Early Modern times. Some relevant works are mentioned in the preceding paragraph; also cf. Thomas 1971; Wiener 1973; Thorndike 1923-1958; de Vries 1961; Harris 1969 / 1968; Hays 1960 / 1964; Chryssides & Geaves 2013; Beckford 2000; Erikson 1958 / 1993; von Stuckrad 2014; Yinger 1970; Eliade 1978; Martin & Wiebe 2016; Hammond 1985; Taliaferro *et al.* 2010; Byrne & Houlden 2002.

in the science of religion, but rather on the contrary: in order to understand *Les Formes* it is necessary to realise that Durkheim wrote that book within the tradition (then half a century old) of the more or less objectively scientific, and more or less systematic, study of religion, both Christian and otherwise. It is not only that Durkheim's book contains numerous references to representatives of this movement: Fustel de Coulanges, Max Müller, Tylor, Robertson Smith, Frazer, Schultze, Lang, W. Schmidt, Kruijt & Adriani, Marett, Durkheim's own students Hertz, Hubert and Mauss, *etc.* What is more, Durkheim intended to make a decisive polemical contribution precisely within this context,

- not only in the sense of addressing specific theories and concepts then *en vogue* (such as animism, naturalism,¹²² totemism, *mana*, *taboo*, magic, High God),
- but particularly in the sense of the widespread pretension of the incipient scientific study of religion at that time, to the effect that such study would ultimately lead to the *demasqué* of religion as a mere figment of the imagination,¹²³ as a foolish obsession held by 'primitives' who were considered to be so very different from civilised Westerners, as a phenomenon in other words which would ultimately disappear as a result of the progress of society and of thought.

Clearly the latter pretension was not in the least shared by Durkheim, for despite his own agnosticism we have seen what a decisive and lasting role he attributed to religion as the very basis and *conditio sine qua non* of social life! Only in this light can we begin to understand how a major work by one of the Founding Fathers of an empirical science could be preoccupied with a search for the reality behind religion, which the author of that work is convinced must exist. This fundamental orientation of Durkheim's work cannot be swept under the carpet as if it merely constituted the personal value judgments which a individual author, regrettably and *malgré soi*, allowed to slip into his scholarly text. On the contrary: these leading ideas are at the heart of *Les Formes*, they can only be understood within the framework of religious studies at the time, and constitute Durkheim's answer to these studies.

Because of the way in which comparative religion came into being and the way in which it was accommodated within academia, its place was next to theology and philosophy. Exegesis, and not the collection of empirical data, is the main

¹²² Max Müller's (1873, 1894) approach, dominant by the end of the 19th c. CE, and stressing Nature as the ultimate referent of myth; there is no connection with the 20th-c. CE cult of nudity often designated by the same term 'naturalism', nor with the philosophical approach of that name, in which all appeal to a reality beyond that of the senses is shunned (Rouse 2002).

¹²³ Cf. Freud's *Zukunft einer Illusion / The Future of an Illusion* (1963a); Feuerbach 1841, 1846 / 1967; Marx 1845 / 1975; Marx & Engels 1975; Nietzsche's declaration of God's death (Nietzsche 1885 / 1973a, 1882 / 1973b); Vestdijk 1947. All these intellectual trends are bowdlerised and vulgarised towards today's naïve, coarse quasi-scientific anti-religionism of e.g. Dawkins 2006.

research activity in those fields, so one rather bases oneself on religious formulas transmitted across the mists of time, or on the description of rituals, largely detached from their social-cultural context, in a limited number of publications which today can only be considered totally obsolete.¹²⁴ One believed to be able to solve the problem of religion with the aid of intuition and with limited and eclectic knowledge from the field of empirical sciences: linguistics, psychology, sociology and anthropology – disciplines whose provisional findings only too often were uncritically taken for granted as if they constituted firm, immutable facts. Also the results of comparative religion were often overestimated at the time. Moreover one often sees the tendency towards a non-empirical point of departure: instead of shunning value judgments, arguments were often geared to value judgments, notably the (typically atheist) religious convictions of the scholars in question.

Durkheim wrote partly within this tradition, but his polemics, however much extending beyond the boundaries of empirical science, yet testify to greater insight than most pursuers of comparative religion could call their own. Durkheim's superiority shows for instance in that he explicitly defines where others tended to rely on intuitions and consensus; or in his intelligent discussion of the relation between science and religion, and the future task of both (Durkheim 1912 / 1960 / 1990: 609 *f.*); or in that he did not opt for 'belief in spiritual beings / a deity' as the distinctive feature of religious, or 'the mysterious', but the paired concepts *sacred / profane*, which are more comprehensive. In this, Durkheim could benefit from his sociological understanding of the kindred nature of social phenomena with the same function even if on the surface they manifest themselves in rather different shapes: this approach enabled him to understand collective ritual even if the latter has not always a typical religious character in the usual sense. Of course, Durkheim shows himself the formidable sociologist he was in the first place through his insight in the nexus of society and religion; this allowed him to construct a fundamental theory of society. Here lies the great difference between Durkheim and other writers in this field of his own generation and one or two generations earlier (with the exception perhaps of Fustel de Coulanges and Robertson Smith) – writers who tended to limit themselves to the analysis of the formal utterances of a priestly cast as transmitted by tradition, and who on that limited basis sought to reconstruct the pattern of a religion and even of a worldview – apparently unheeding of the possible discrepancies between life and doctrine, of the possible effects of stratification within a society, *etc.*¹²⁵

¹²⁴ In the field of sociology and anthropology, the bibliography of Eliade (1965) only contains three works published after 1940: an article by the American anthropologist Clyde Kluckhohn from 1942, and two works by the German 'ethnologist' A.E. Jensen, from 1948 and 1951. These works are to be offset again *Les Formes*; as many as three books by Lévy-Bruhl, in editions dating from 1931, 1935, 1936; an article by Malinowski from 1926 (reprinted as Malinowski 1954: 93-148); and books by Mauss & Hubert (1909), Lowie (1924), Frazer (1911-18 and 1920), and even Webster's *Primitive Secret Societies* (1908). This only thing this can have looked like, even half a century ago in 1965, is the catalogue of a specialised antiquarian book shop!

cation within a society, etc.¹²⁵

When this was first drafted, half a century ago, specialists in comparative religion still tended to conform with the above, somewhat exaggerated sketch.¹²⁶ In a widely read book which appeared around that time, Eliade (1963: 153 *f.*) devotes a little chapter of two pages to ‘remarks on method’, which hardly encompasses more than a few lines of criticism of Tylor’s and Frazer’s approaches, alleged to pale into insignificance as compared with the insights of Graebner (1877-1934) and Father Wilhelm Schmidt (1868-1934); the remainder of that micro-chapter merely indicates the aprioristic points of departure from which Eliade analyses religious symbolism. In Goody’s words:

‘adequate as this may be for theological purposes...’ (Goody 1961: 151);

along such lines, the possibilities of making a lasting, empirically-grounded contribution to religious studies are very slim indeed! The following quote illustrates the overestimation of comparative religion’s own results, the tendency to overestimate the provisional findings of auxiliary disciplines subservient to comparative religion, and the self-evident reliance on personal value judgments:

¹²⁵ Even so, Durkheim missed one important dimension of religion especially in its organised, logocentric forms from the Bronze Age on: as a system masking material and political exploitation – what Mart Bax (1987, 1988) has called ‘the religious regime’, but already clearly exposed in the works of Marx and Engels.

¹²⁶ #20. *PHENOMENOLOGY OF RELIGION AS A TOUCHSTONE?* This state of affairs makes it somewhat risky to appeal to comparative religion as an argument in criticism. Kruijt (1958: 17) does just that and it yields him the following nonsensical argument against Durkheim:

‘De moderne godsdienstfenomenologie [d.w.z. godsdienstwetenschap beïnvloed door Husserl en andere fenomenologen; vgl. Bleeker, 1943: 2 *f.*] maakt duidelijk dat de hogere godsdiensten naar object en intentie anders zijn dan de lagere, waaruit blijkt dat een verklaring van deze hogere uit lagere religies ongerechtvaardigd is.’

‘Modern phenomenology of religion [*i.e.* science of religion influenced by Husserl and other phenomenologists; *cf.* Bleeker 1943: 2 *f.*] demonstrates that the higher religions are fundamentally different from the lower religions, which goes to prove that an explanation of these higher religions from the lower ones is unjustified.’

Bleeker (*cf.* 1929, 1943, 1956, 1960, 1963, 1967, 1973, 1975, 1979, 1983) was a prolific Egyptologist and phenomenologist of religion in the mid-20th c. CE; I attended – with manifest and lasting beneficial effect – his lectures at Amsterdam University in 1964-1965; like I did H. Oldewelt’s, who after my adolescent grappling with the works of Teilhard de Chardin and his commentators such as B. Delfgaauw and N.M. Wildiers (*cf.* van Binsbergen 2018) provided my first introduction to academic philosophy. (In passing we see how Kruijt insensitively ignores one of the most sympathetic, counter-ethnocentric, and counter-hegemonic features of Durkheim’s approach to religion: *the absence of any racialism or Eurocentrism, which enabled him, at the height of European colonialism, to base a theory meant as universal, on the example of the remote, exotic and powerless Australian Aborigines.*) But what are the criteria for Kruijt’s distinction between high and low religions? And to what extent is Kruijt’s criticism justified (and what does Kruijt offer in its stead?) At any rate Kruijt’s criticism is not to the point, for the essence of Durkheim’s book is not an attempt to try and explain one religion from another, high or low, but to argue the connection between any religion with the society in which we find it.

'Pas in onze eeuw verwierf men zich een meesterschap in het gebruik van deze hulpmiddelen, en wist men met behulp daarvan het centraal godsdienstige op te sporen. (...) Al mag zij [de godsdienstwetenschap – WvB] niet gebonden zijn door een bepaalde dogmatiek, zij is toch ook niet bestaanbaar zonder geestelijke en godsdienstige congenialiteit met haar materie' (Bleeker 1943: 11-12).

'Only in our [i.e. 20th – WvB] century did we achieve mastery in the use of these auxiliary disciplines, and did we manage, on their basis, to identify whatever is centrally religious. (...) Even though [comparative religion – WvB] ought not to be bound by a specific dogmatic orientation, it cannot exist without spiritual and religious congeniality with its subject matter (Bleeker 1943: 11-12; my translation).

Within the present scope, I must limit myself to this short note on comparative religion. What it at least makes clear is that it was no unforgivable omission not to take into account, in my present argument, whatever career the paired concepts *sacred / profane* have subsequently gone through within comparative religion. This is not the opinion of O'Dea, who in his introduction to the sociology of religion discussed not only Durkheim and many other sociologists, but also such authors as van der Leeuw, Otto, and Buber – well-known names in comparative religion. The purpose of my present chapter has been to assess whether it is possible to forge useful analytical tools out of Durkheim's paired concepts *sacred / profane*. Here comparative religion cannot help us to define our points of departure – although I cannot rule out that they could suggest some further minor fine tuning of our concept.

Yet there is a viewpoint from which comparative religious religion might still be fruitful for the social-scientific study of religion and kindred phenomena. In addition to the study of the interdependence between religious and other social phenomena Geertz (1966: 42) suggest that we should also engage in

'an analysis of the system of meanings embodied in the symbols which make up a religion proper',

and he expresses his dissatisfaction that such engagement is still relatively rare. This is not the same question as the one of the ultimate referents of the religious symbols – which is the question asked, and interestingly answered, by Durkheim. On the contrary, what Geertz is insisting on here is the internal analysis of symbolism, notably the internal interconnectedness, within the system (we might say: at the same level of abstraction), of such symbols as 'lamb', 'blood', 'bread', in Roman Catholic liturgy (which in space, time, worldview and ecology / economy / mode of production is very far removed from the Bronze Age Levantine setting of early pastoralism and horticulture from which these symbols sprang originally), or of 'communism', 'people' and 'soldier', in Maoist ideology. In Geertz's opinion, it only becomes possible for us to determine the impact of

- a. cultural systems (such as religion, art, science, and ideology) upon
- b. social and psychological systems,¹²⁷

¹²⁷ On this distinction see van Doorn & Lammers 1964: 23.

once our theory formation on phenomena of type (a) no longer lags behind so blatantly the theory formation on (b). In this we may certainly benefit from comparative religion's tradition of the analysis of texts and of ceremonies, and also from the science of literature and from psychoanalysis – for whatever the merits of the conclusions which these three fields of scholarship are yielding, all three have unmistakably much experience in the analysis of spontaneous human symbolic systems. These benefits would be all the greater if one could avoid what Geertz calls so eloquently

'the kind of jejune cabalism in which symbolic analysis of exotic facts can so easily fall'
(Geertz 1966: 42).

2.6. Durkheim's attempts at operationalisation of *sacred* / *profane*

Throughout the elaboration of the paired concepts *sacred* / *profane* in *Les Formes*, Durkheim adduces a plethora of ethnographic data to substantiate his assertions. Again, that testing is unsystematic: like in the work of his contemporary Frazer, data from different cultures, also from other continents than Australia, are haphazardly presented next to one another. The data are thus deprived of their original context in space and time. This must have led to errors, whatever the merits of Durkheim's fundamental insight in the relationship between the various part systems (including religion) within a society. However, these attempts at substantiation do offer us the opportunity of ascertaining how Durkheim attempted to find back his concepts in concrete social reality, in other words, how he went about operationalising them. If his paired concepts *sacred* / *profane* still have a role to play in present-day social science, this will largely depend on the possibility of deriving working hypotheses that can be phrased in the concrete terms of actually observable social phenomena. Let us consider Durkheim's attempts in this direction.

It then turns out that he the specific and elaborate grounds for attributing the predicate *sacred* to the various items that feature in his ethnographic account. I shall discuss them one by one, and number them for clarity's sake.

2.6.1. Why Durkheim considers (a) the bullroarers to be sacred:

the bullroarers are designated (Durkheim 1912 / 1960 / 1990: 167 *f.*) with a lexical equivalent for *sacred* in the Aranda language.

This is a moot point. Durkheim uses a very specific and idiosyncratic definition of *sacred*, which is unlikely to be identical to the one employed by lexicographers of the Aranda language, or by ethnographers (Spencer & Gillen, Strehlow) writing on that Aboriginal people of Central Australia. Moreover, however great Durkheim's

merits were as a Founding Father of sociology, he was not in the least a linguist, and his logocentricity made him fairly insensitive to the dynamics of translation and linguistic representation across space, time, and cultural boundaries.

We are fortunate to have, in the account by the Lutheran missionary Strehlow (1907), a first-hand description of Aranda religious notions, by someone who on the basis of prolonged local residence and mastery of the local language must be considered an ethnographic authority, much more so than the armchair analyst Durkheim, and even more so than the latter's favourite source Spencer & Gillen, who even in the following relatively short passage are criticised repeatedly for having things wrong; I quote Strehlow's text extensively because as no other it offers a glimpse of what religion meant for the people of Central Australia by the turn of the 20th c. CE:



Strehlow 1907: 4 f.: 'Diesen Totem-Göttern gehören gewisse Plätze zu eigen, wo sie gelebt und ihre Totem-Tiere hervorgebracht haben. Diese Plätze befinden sich meistens entweder in der Nähe eines hohen Berges, einer Quelle oder einer Felsenschlucht, wo die ihren Namen tragenden Totem-Tiere gewöhnlich in größerer Zahl angetroffen werden.¹²⁸ So befindet sich ein Eidechsen [lizard]-Totem-

¹²⁸ #21. 'ELEMENTARY FORMS OF RELIGIOUS LIFE' IN THE LANDSCAPE? Strehlow implies a naturalistic explanation for the specific association between the totemic animals and elements in the landscape: those are allegedly the places where such species appear in relative abundance. However, Comparative Mythology shows that mountains, sources, rocky crevices (along with trees / forests and streams / stretches of surface water) are considered, practically universally in space and time, to be epiphanies of the powerful non-human. They belong to the symbolic / mythical repertoire of the Pelasgian cultural package in Western Eurasia (and far beyond) from the Neolithic on (van Binsbergen & Woudhuizen 2011), and most likely even belong in Pandora's Box, i.e. the pre-Out-of-Africa collective heritage of Anatomically Modern Humans (van Binsbergen 2006a, 2006b). Thus by implication they form part of the 'elementary forms of religious life' on which Durkheim focused. Why these elements in the landscape should be singled out as epiphanies of the sacred is another question, which we cannot hope to answer in the present scope. The question has been much debated (cf. Douglas 1970; Eliade 1952); it is akin to the question as to the selection and utilitarian value of totemic species, to which we shall turn below. Possible answers, neither of them very convincing, cover a wide range from Jungian innate archetypes to species-specific neurological response patterns to environmental resources. Meanwhile we note, in Strehlow's summary of totemic mythology, remarkable parallels with specific mythologies in North Africa (part of the Pelasgian realm), the Aegean world; and even South Central Africa (around the Bemba's white culture hero Luchele (Roberts 1973; van Binsbergen 1981), perhaps once a creator god; and in Southern Africa (Jacottet 1899-1901 in his description of Mwendanjangula, also cf. van Binsbergen 2010a, 2010b): the staff wielded, in Strehlow's account, by the 'totemic chief' has parallels in the staff or club wielded by the Aegean demi-god Heracles, the Ĥumiri saint Sidi Mĥammed, and the god Mwendanjangula. Wielding his club, Sidi Mĥammed allegedly performed the major miracles (*karamat*) proving his sainthood: controlling the cattle he was herding although asleep on the hilltop where today his major shrine is situated; I take it that his shrine, now nominally Islamic, was once a Hellenistic Heracles shrine. The concept of the *sacred precinct* with taboos on hunting and killing, so manifest in Strehlow's account of the totemic places, is also a central idea in the folk religions of North Africa, the Aegean, the Ancient Germanic and Celtic world, and in the shrine cults of West Africa. Possibly all of this is a heritage from a common cultural origin in Central Asia in Upper Palaeolithic times (from where c. 15 ka BP Anatomically Modern Humans spread to North America – not for the first time – and back into Africa, among other directions – resulting in uncanny similarities between Native American and sub-Saharan African patterns of puberty initiation, divination, gaming, basket making etc.; van Binsbergen 2012d: 260 f.). Yet the parallels have remained so close, and the attending mechanisms of cultural transmission and inertia

Platz in der Nähe von Hermannsburg bei Manangananga) wo es viele Eidechsen gibt.¹²⁹ Ein Fisch [fish]-Totem-Platz findet sich nur an fischreichen Wasserplätzen, z. B. in dem Ellery Creek. Einige dieser Totem-Götter blieben in ihren angestammten Wohnsitzen; diese werden *atua kutata*,¹³⁰ d. h. die immer an einem Ort lebenden Männer genannt. Andere *altjirangamitjina* dagegen machten weite Reisen und kehrten später mit einigen jungen Männern in ihre Heimat zurück. Auf diesen Reisen unterrichteten sie ihre Novizen, führten fast alle Tage Kultushandlungen auf, die den Zweck hatten, ihre Novizen in die Geheimnisse der Männer einzuweißen, als solche werden diese Handlungen *intjiuma* [= einweihen, unterrichten (to initiate, to educate)] genannt, und das Gedeihen und die Vermehrung ihres Totems zu bewirken; in dieser Beziehung werden sie *mbatjalkaljuma* — in guten Zustand versetzen, fruchtbar machen, wie z. B. der Regen [rain] das dürre Land fruchtbar macht —

are so conspicuous, that I am inclined to think here in terms of a far more compressed time scale, and attribute the extensive parallels between Australia and Western Eurasia to more recent population influxes from South and South East Asia into Australia, only a handful of millennia ago. (In passing we wonder at Strehlow's use of the word 'Wunder / 'miracles' – which is predicated on the *emic* assumption of an immutable natural order determined by natural laws and occasionally upset by divine intervention – logocentric ideas familiar to the Lutheran missionary Strehlow, but probably spuriously projected by him upon the worldview of the Aranda around 1900 CE.) Also in North Africa saints and the Prophet Muḥammad (although the latter never actually travelled there in historic times) allegedly left a trail of lesser shrines behind wherever they paused or spent the night (van Binsbergen 1971a, 1985b, forthcoming (b)). In the last analysis the staff / club may be the celestial axis around which (also clearly observable to people in the Upper Palaeolithic) the circumpolar stars revolve every night – which is often considered to be the pole along which shamans (another near-universal 'elementary form of religious life') are considered to travel up and down to the sky and the underworld. Such parallels between various parts of the old World, and Australia, are important because they remind us that, far from being isolated primitives, the Australian Aboriginals share of world of cultural and religious tradition with the rest of Anatomically Modern Humans.

¹²⁹ Manangananga heißt: die Mutter mit ihren beiden Kindern, sie ist mit ihren beiden Söhnen in die dortige Steinhöhle eingegangen. (original footnote).

#22. THE MYTHICAL MOTHER AND HER TWO CHILDREN. This echoes a familiar and very ancient, in principle cosmogonic, theme in global Comparative Mythology: in the beginning the (typically virgin) mother and her male offspring are trapped by the ogre (perhaps symbolising the state of non-being or not-yet-being, the primordial chaos?), but heroically the son defeats the ogre and escapes into the light, sometimes with other humans already there. In historic times, this mytheme surfaces in the myths surrounding Isis hiding her child Ḥorus or her princely children Tefnut and Šu from the adversary, her brother and brother-in-law Seth / Suteḥ, in the thicket of  or , *Aḥ-bît* / Chemmis, later replicated in the Aegean context by Leto with her children Apollo and Artemis (cf. Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, VI, 370; Aristotle, *Historia Animalium*, VI, 35; Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistas*, XV, 701; Apollonius Rhodius, *Argonautica*, II, 707; Iamblichus, *De Vita Pythagorica*, 10; Strabo, *Geographia*, XIV; Atsma s.v. Leto; Fontenrose 1980 / 1959; Helck 1979, with references). In my attempt to reconstruct Anatomically Modern Humans's oldest mythological repertoire, based on a close reading and formalisation of African cosmogonic myths (van Binsbergen 2006a; in general superseded by Witzel 2012), I proposed that this ogre mytheme belongs to humankind's pre-Out-of-Africa package, developed inside the African continent between 200 and 80 ka BP, and subsequently spread over the other continents, and substantially transformed in the process. I found traces of this mytheme among the Nkoya (van Binsbergen 2010a). There may be an echo of this mytheme even in Plato's famous Parable of the Cave (Plato, *De Re Publica* [*Republic*], 4th c. BCE / 1975), and the widespread mytheme of the Hidden Sun (Witzel 2005) may also be related.

¹³⁰ *atua* — Mann, Männer, *kutata* — immer (original footnote)

genannt.¹³¹) An welchem Platz sie aber eine *tjurunga* verloren, entstand ein Baum [tree] oder Fels [rock], von dem Kinderkeime in vorübergehende Frauen eingehen, so daß alle diese Plätze, wo sie sich zeitweilig aufgehalten haben, als kleinere Totem-Plätze angesehen werden. Daneben erlegten sie auf diesen Reisen vieles Wild und der Totem-Häuptling verrichtete mit seiner langen Stange [staff, club], *tnatantja*¹³²) genannt, die er auf seinen Wanderungen über der Schulter trug, [p. 5:] Wunder, [miracles] bahnte Wege über steile Gebirge usw. Ganz erschöpft (*borka indóra*)¹³³) kamen sie in ihrer Heimat¹³⁴) an, wo sie von einem dort ansässigen Totem-Gott erwartet und gerufen wurden (*raiankama*).¹³⁵) Er sowohl als auch die Ankömmlinge gingen in eine dort befindliche Steinhöhle, *arknanaua*¹³⁶) genannt, warfen sich vor Müdigkeit auf den Boden nieder (*iwulama*) und ihre Leiber wurden zum Teil in Hölzer, zum Teil in Steine verwandelt (*altjamaltjerama*)¹³⁷) die *tjurunga*, d.

¹³¹ Falsch ist es, wenn Spencer [&] Gillen die letzteren Zeremonien als *intijiuma* bezeichnen; die Darstellungen, die den jungen Männern bei den Einweihungsfeiern gezeigt werden, sind es vielmehr, die *intijiuma* genannt werden. (original footnote)

¹³² *tnatantja* ist eine lange, mit Garn umwickelte und mit Vogeldaunen [bird down] beklebte Stange [staff, pole, club], die bei den Beschneidungsfeierlichkeiten den jungen Männern gezeigt wird. Dieselbe stellt den Speer der Totem-Vorfahren dar. Spencer [&] Gillen nennen sie *nurtunja*. (original footnote).

#23. CULTURAL CONTINUTITY BETWEEN AUSTRALIA AND WESTERN EURASIA? Considering the wide, nearly global, distribution of bull-roarers (Matthews 1897; Roheim 1926), of throwing-sticks (Fig. 2.3), and of possible indications of totemism, throughout prehistoric and pre-modern cultures, some authors have suggested (especially in the era of arch-diffusionism, round about the time when Strehlow and Durkheim were writing) that there has been genuine continuity between the Aboriginal cultures of Australia, and the European Upper Palaeolithic. For such a claim the painted caves of the Franco-Cantabrian Upper Palaeolithic offer some iconographic clues (e.g. Fig. 2.1). As rendered by Strehlow, the long, threaded pole to which bird's down has been glued, is strikingly reminiscent of one of the most famous and more frequently discussed images from the Cave of Lascaux, the bird-topped pole lying next to the human victim near a depiction of bison and rhinoceros; cf. Rappenglück 1998; van Binsbergen 2012d: 183 f.; and references cited there.

¹³³ *borka* = müde, *indóra* — sehr (original footnote)

¹³⁴ Heimat bezeichnet den Ort, wo der *altjirangamitja* zuerst aus der Erde hervorgekommen ist und wo er nach Beendigung seiner Wanderung nieder in die Erde eingeht, wo er sich jetzt noch aufhält. (original footnote).

#24. FIRST HUMANS'S MYTHICAL EMERGENCE FROM EARTH. The emergence of the first humans from the Earth constitutes another mytheme with near-global, and especially African reminiscence. In several regions of Africa (including Cameroon and Uganda; author's personal fieldnotes), the belief exists that the first humans thus appeared (Berezkin 2010), and that the spot of this emergence can still be indicated today. The peregrination of the land as a culture hero's action is also known from South Central African mythology, where notably the mythical character of the mythical figure Luchele is described in these terms.

¹³⁵ *raiankama* = die hohle Hand vor den Mund haltend vibrierende Laute hervorbringen. (original footnote) ululating, the *zaghrīt* of Arabic-speaking cultures, which is known as a ceremonial utterance in many parts of the Old World especially Africa and the Islamic world.

¹³⁶ *arknanaua* = geschützter, heiliger Ort, Aufbewahrungsort der *tjurunga*-Hölzer oder -Steine. Spencer [&] Gillen nennen ihn *ertnatulunga*. [*arknanaua* = protected, sacred place, storage place of the *tjurunga*-tablets of either wood or stone. Spencer & Gillen call them *ertnatulunga*.] (original footnote)

¹³⁷ *altjamaltjerama* – ein verborgener Körper werden, d. h. eine andere Gestalt annehmen. [*altjamaltjerama* – to become a hidden body, i.e. assume a different shape] (original footnote)

There seems to be an echo here of the globally widely distributed pre- and protohistoric mytheme of the cyclical transformation of elements (also cf. Tables 9.50 and 9.51, below).

h. der „eigene, verborgene“ Leib, genannt werden.

Andere Totem-Götter, insbesondere diejenigen, die an dem Totem-Platze blieben, gingen nach Ablauf ihrer irdischen Tätigkeit mit ihren Reinen in die Erde hinein, worauf ihre Leiber in Bäume (*inna*) oder in Felsen (*patta*) verwandelt wurden. Der Baum, in welchen sich der Leib des Totem-Gottes verwandelt hat, wird *inna ngarra* (der ewige Baum [the eternal tree]), der Felsen *patta ngarra*¹³⁸) (der ewige Felsen [the eternal rock]) genannt. Ein solcher Baum oder Felsen ist unverletzlich. Wer einen *inna ngarra* umhaut oder nur beschädigt, wurde in früheren Zeiten mit dem Tode bestraft; ein Tier oder Vogel, der auf solchem Baum Zuflucht sucht, darf nicht getötet werden; nicht einmal das Gebüsch in unmittelbarer Nähe desselben darf umgehauen, noch das Gras abgebrannt werden. Auch die „ewigen Felsen“ müssen mit Ehrfurcht behandelt werden; sie dürfen weder von der Stelle gerückt, noch zerhrochen werden.

Die Seelen der Totem-Götter gingen in die Erde, man nennt sie *iwopata*, d. h. die im Inneren Verborgenen, die Unsichtbaren, die östlichen Aranda nennen sie *erintarinja*. Diese in die Erde gegangenen Seelen der Totem-Götter leben dort mit einem roten Leibe bekleidet [wrapped in a red body] in großen unterirdischen Höhlen und werden auch *rella ngantja*¹³⁹) [verborgene Menschen] genannt; in der Nacht kommen sie aus der Erde hervor, um ihre früheren Leiber, nämlich die *tjurunga*-Hölzer oder -Steine in die Hand zu nehmen und zu betrachten; auch wollen sie auf der Erde *aroa* (Wallaby), *tjilpa* (wilde Katzen [wild cats]) oder *ramaia* (Eidechsen spec.) erlegen; das erlegte Die Plätze, wo sich die *altjirangamitjina* in *tjurunga* oder in Bäumen resp. Felsen verwandelt haben, werden *mbatjita* (großer Totem-Platz [great totem place], auch *tmarutja* (ewiger Platz [eternal place]) oder *takuta* (immerwährender Platz [ever-lasting place]) genannt. Die Lagerplätze dagegen, wo sie sich nur zeitweilig aufgehalten haben, wo sie auf ihrer Reise geschlafen haben, heißen *takapa* [zeitweiliger Aufenthaltsort]. An letzteren Plätzen, die an Wichtigkeit den erstgenannten nachstehen, ist entweder ein Totem-Vorfahr ermüdet zurückgeblieben, der dann in einen *inna ngarra* verwandelt wurde, oder der wandernde Totem-Gott hat eine *tjurunga* an letzterem Orte verloren, die in die Erde gesunken und ein *ngarra*-Baum oder Felsen geworden ist. Im allgemeinen werden die Totem-Plätze mit Rücksicht auf die dort entstehenden Totem-Abkömmlinge *knanakala*¹⁴⁰) (von selbst entstanden [*sui generis*] genannt.

Elsewhere (van Binsbergen 2012d, 2010c) I have argued that the peculiar features which are narratively attributed to heroes, are in fact narrative adaptations of the mechanism of the cyclical transformation of elements, where under the impact of one element another element may be destroyed or may come into being, with again other elements possible playing a catalytic role.

¹³⁸ *inna* = Baum, *ngarra* = ewigstehend. *patta* = Felsen, Stein, Berg. (original footnote)

¹³⁹ *rella* — Mensch, *ngantja* der in der Erde verborgene, auch unterirdisch. So wird das in den großen Wasserläufen, unter dem Sande verborgene Quellwasser *kwatja ngantja*, d. h. das in der Erde verborgene Wasser genannt. (original footnote)

¹⁴⁰ *knanakala* = ist von selbst entstanden, d. h. Empfängnis-Platz *knanakala* = *sui generis*, i.e. place of conception' (original footnote).

#25. THE TRANSITION FROM NON-BEING TO BEING IN MYTHICAL COSMOGONY. One of the great puzzles which any mythical cosmogony has to solve is: *how to explain the transition from non-being to being, and the generative powers of the first being from whom all other aspects of the world are supposed to have sprung*. Virgin birth is one obvious way out, which has frequently been employed, and not only in the Graeco-Roman and early Christian context of the virginity of Mary mother of Jesus / mother of God. This is not the place to explore these connections any further, but it may be clear that, rather than constituting the earliest primordial forms of Anatomically Modern Humans with the most primitive culture imaginable (a stereotype also, equally erroneously, projected onto the San of Southern Africa; cf. Wilmsen 1989, 1993, 1995; Wilmsen & Denbow 1990), the Australian Aboriginals are in many ways continuous with other Old World civilisations; they have



source : Rappenglück 1998

Fig. 2.1. The bird-topped stick in Upper Palaeolithic iconography from Le Puits, Grotte de Lascaux, Dordogne, France

Strehlow also presents extensive graphic material on the bullroarers, for instance his Plate I, p. 105, of which I now offer a selection:



'Flache gestreckte, nach den Rändern zu verdünnte Holzlamelle. Die vertieft eingegrabenen Figurenlinien sind mit gelbem Ocker ausgefüllt. (...) (Katalog No. 8047.):

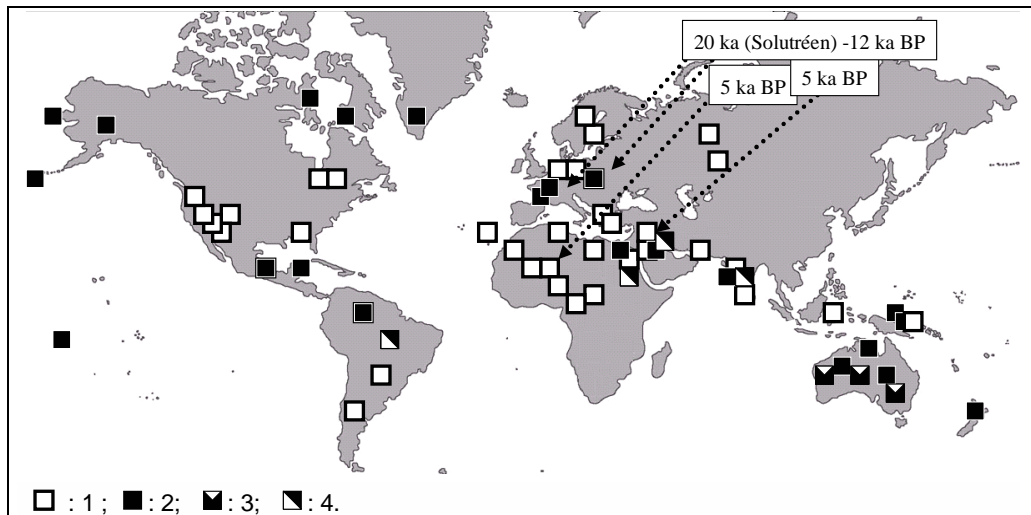
'Figur 2. *Tjunba tjurunga*, stammt von Parantenta am unteren Finke-Flusse. *Tjunba* ist eine große Eidechse (*Varanus giganticus* Gray [Varane lizard]), a. bedeutet den großen Lagerplatz der Eidechse; b. kleinere Lagerplätze; c. die Wege, die die Eidechse gegangen ist; d. sind gebogene tjurunga-Hölzer, mit denen die Eidechse ihren Lagerplatz gereinigt hat; e. die Eidechse in sitzender Stellung; f. die Fußindrücke und g. der Schwanzindruck, die die Eidechse aus ihren Wan-

been recognised to be so by Tindale & George *et al.* 1978, who, rather than essentialisingly assuming that the Australian Aboriginals exist outside time and history, recognise three distinct waves in the pre-European-conquest demographic and cultural history of Australia, 1. Negritos; 2. Murrayians (in the South East); 3. Carpentarians (in the North) – the latter being most recent and having the greatest Indonesian / South Asian influence. South Asian. Nonetheless there is ample genetic evidence that the oldest layer of Australian human habitation, responsible already for some of the surviving rock art, derives from the first Out-of-Africa Exodus, 80 – 60 ka BP. That oldest rock art has been alleged (Stubbs 1978: 20 f.) to have become meaningless to present-day Aboriginals, and most likely the relevant Australian rock art that suggests correspondences with Old World iconographies, is no older than c. 6 ka BP. Despite attributing 'elementary forms of religious life' to the Australian Aboriginals, Durkheim was well aware that 'like all known peoples' (Durkheim in Poulat & Durkheim 1970) they had millennia of cultural history behind them and (despite the intellectual climate of evolutionism in his time) was scarcely guilty of essentialising them as utterly primitive.

derungen hinterlassen hat”

Fig. 2.2. *Chirunga* totemic representations (after Strehlow 1907)

For an appreciation of the large extent to which Australian Aboriginals must be counted as continuous with the other populations of the world and especially with those of the old World, let us have a look at the modern and prehistoric distribution of some of their principal material objects, throwing sticks – with which the *tjurunga* bear an considerable likeness:



1. 'throwing stick', unspecified; 2. 'throwing-stick' = *atlatl*; 3. returning boomerang; 4. returning boomerang claimed but doubtful; data points: mainly Lenocho 1949; *atlatl*: Hrdlicka 2004; after van Binsbergen 2007c.

Fig. 2.3. Provisional distribution of throwing-sticks in space and time

Let us now continue our discussion concerning the operationalisation of the *sacredness* of the bullroarers:

it is forbidden for certain sections of society (the uninitiated: women and children) to see or touch the bullroarers; they are kept in a special place which is a sanctuary for humans and animals; special healing powers are attributed to the bullroarers; they play a major part in ceremonies; they are collectively owned, while being managed by the head of the group; they are surrounded by all sorts of curative acts: polishing, applying fat, handling them invariably takes place with the greatest pomp and awe; special ceremonies are performed when they are being transferred from one place to another.¹⁴¹

¹⁴¹ #26. *DIVINATION IN AUSTRALIA AND WORLD-WIDE*. Following my initiation into the Southern African ritual status of *sangoma* diviner-healer-priest (in / near Francistown, Botswana, 1990-1991), I made an extensive study of the attending divination system and of its associations in space and time. Against the Islamological / Arabic background established early in my career, I soon hit on the link with علم الرمل *ilm al-raml*, a specific form of so-called geomantic divination clearly invented in ʿAbbāsid Iraq by the end of the first millennium CE in the *Iḥwān al-Ṣafā* ('Brethren of Purity') milieu. But while this was a major step towards tracing the Francistown's divination system's global history, it remained for me to try and identify the origin and history of the specific material form and decoration / iconography of the four divination tablets (*Hakata*, *Ditlaola*) used by the *sangomas* and other divination and healing specialists throughout Southern Africa – the original Iraqi system (which already had

a world history of several millennia, cf. van Binsbergen 2012d) was also based on the numbers 4 (and 16, in other words on 2^n), but the specific figures that determined which item in the system's interpretational catalogue was at stake, were arrived at by counting and manipulating indentures deliberately made on the ground (hence geomancy, 'divination by Earth', as the generic name for this family of divination systems), not by the throwing of tablets or (as in other Southern African divination systems) heterogeneous divinatory tokens. Although many parallels with the Francistonian system could be identified in present-day sub-Saharan Africa, the probable nature and immense time depth of these material items was only brought out by their close resemblance with North American gaming and divining pieces, and with bone implements from the European Upper Palaeolithic (van Binsbergen 2012d: 276, Fig. 8.6, and references cited there). The Southern African tablets are also in use (normally in leather rather than wooden or bone form) among the San hunter-gatherers, whose mode of production is rather comparable with that of the Australian Aboriginals, and who according to the leading geneticist Cavalli-Sforza (*et al.*, 1994) had had ancestors in South Asia c. 10 ka BP. The same can be said for part of the ancestry of present-day Australian Aboriginals, although their earliest influx into the Australian continent dates from the time shortly after the Out-of-Africa Exodus, c. 60 ka BP. Not so much the oblong shape, half-round cross-section, and iconography, but particularly the manner of ritual treatment of the Australian totemic representations as described in the main text here, is very similar to that of Southern African divining tablets, and with all the converging evidence cited here (and below, in connection with the 'Horned Serpent' mytheme) I am inclined to conclude to a genuine historic link – at least a common origin in Upper Palaeolithic Western Eurasia, and probably an even more recent connection via pre-Neolithic South Asia. *This interpretation would at the same time suggest an explanation for the amazing inertia of the format and use of such tablets:* if initially they were the most sacred items within the Upper Palaeolithic / Mesolithic / pre-Neolithic cultures in which they occurred, their sacredness, despite inevitable transformations yet more or less immutably transmitted ritually from generation to generation, would guarantee the inertia which otherwise would not adhere to material items. It would clench my hypothesis here if the Australian totemic representations themselves had been found to be used in divination. This is still not impossible (and might also explain the ethnographers' silence on Australian divination: they were primarily focussing on these representations as objects of veneration); however, the only mention combining divination and totem representations I could find (Thomas 1908) reveals *that in Australian divination* (much like in Southern African divination, I hasten to add!) *the identification of the perpetrator's totem is a primary goal* – which is very different from divination making direct use of the power attributed to the totem itself. Remarkably (in a culture area where reading tracks is extremely well developed), and unfortunately, data on divination in Australia are extremely scarce; in the absence of synthetic overviews, the few sources include: Young 1998 (a dentist! who mentions in passing divination by arrows, *i.e.* *belomancy*, a time-honoured variety especially known to be practiced by the Ancient Arabs, cf. Fahd 1966); moreover Thomas 1908, with references; he briefly discusses several methods to divine the cause of death (1. *divination by ashes*, cf. Earth 2. *divination by the uncontrolled movements of an insect* (cf. spider divination in West Africa); 3. *divination by examination of the deceased's intestines* – cf. Ancient Mesopotamian and African extispicy; 4. *bier divination* – lying on a bier the corpse is carried around and involuntary movements are interpreted as significant, widespread in West Africa and the Caribbean; 5. *divination through incubation*: one next of kin sleeps with his head upon the corpse and is allegedly informed of the identity of the murderer by the deceased's spirit (cf. the Mediterranean); a variant of the latter method is described for the Torres Strait region, where the sleeper is to be in contact, not with the full head but with the skull of the deceased (Rose 1909-1921: 776; Haddon *et al.* 1901-1908); for the same region Rose (1909-1921: 779 *f.*; Haddon *et al.* 1901-1908) mentions a form of material divination by means of a mangrove branch in order to determine the gender of an unborn child – as well as the belief that a small misfortune forebodes a bigger one. Stanner (1933) acknowledges one or two of these methods in passing. Rose (1909-1921: 777) explicitly claims that divination by ordeal is not found in Australia. All these methods are eminently familiar from the intercontinental comparative literature on divination (Rose *et al.* 1909-1921; Le Scouézec *et al.* 1966; Bouché-Leclercq 1879), and confirm my general impression of very considerable cultural continuity between Australia and the Old World. Durkheim himself (1960 / 1912: 232; after Roth 1903) mentions in passing – and in relation not to the Aranda but to the

2.6.2. *Why Durkheim considers (b) the totemic representations to be sacred*

The totemic representations are considered to be *sacred* (Durkheim 1912 / 1960 / 1990: 174 *f.*) because they are central in many rites; they are objects of religious respect; they are being produced and erected with the greatest solemnity; they play a major role in mythology.

2.6.3. *Why Durkheim considers (c) the totemic species to be sacred*

That totemic species are considered to be *sacred* (Durkheim 1912 / 1960 / 1990: 181 *f.*) is clear from the following: they give the totem its name; under specific ceremonial circumstances they are not being eaten; or, if they are being eaten, clear restrictions do apply, and consumption is prohibited to the uninitiated; violation of these rules is being punished by the group, or is considered to punish itself; there is a prohibition on killing (or harvesting, in the vegetal case), sometimes also on touching; should one happen to kill and eat an item belonging to a totemic species, one takes extra magical precautions, and one excuses oneself before the *sacred*; they play a major role in mythology.

2.6.4. *Why Durkheim considers (d) the humans involved to be sacred*

The humans involved are *sacred* (Durkheim 1912 / 1960 / 1990: 189 *f.*) because of the following: mythology states a relationship with the totemic species (which in itself was already *sacred*); this relationship is also believed to persist in the here and now; sacrality is enhanced in certain parts of the body: human hair (which constitutes a reciprocal gift whenever one has

Aboriginals of North Queensland – one divinatory method in which old women, in search of a suitable name for a baby, while reciting possible names let the placenta with a portion of the umbilical cord attached, violently spin in the air like a bullroarer, the moment of divinatory truth being when the cord snaps; but Durkheim does not seem to grasp the enormous symbolic significance of women, with a product that only their own bodies could produce, thus mimick one of the most sacred acts privileged to men: the handling of the bullroarers; surprisingly, one is reminded of the Ancient Babylonian myth we shall discuss below, of the male sun god Marduk, as a sign of his superior powers in the battle against the chaos goddess Tīamat, is required to produce a garment (a product privileged to women as spinners and weavers) by the power of his word. In many cultures (*e.g.* among the Nkoya) the placenta is metaphorically considered to be tissue / textile.

borrowed a bullroarer; ceremonial haircutting takes place in spots associated with the ancestors; a dead man's hair is prohibited to the uninitiated; musical instruments used in ceremonies are packaged in hair) and human blood (to be applied to bullroarers – and so is red ochre, which is explicitly recognised locally as an equivalent to human blood; totemic drawings are made in sand that is saturated with human blood; blood is used in many ceremonies; the blood which flows at subincision – a ritual surgical treatment¹⁴² – is buried which makes that spot forbidden to women); from the viewpoint of sacrality not all humans are equal: the women's encampment is kept separate from the man's, uninitiated are not allowed to attend the ceremonies; old men are considered to be extremely *sacred* therefore many taboos are lifted for them.

2.6.5. *Why Durkheim considers (e) the individual totems to be sacred:*

For the 'individual totem' (Durkheim 1912 / 1960 / 1990: 223 *f.*) Durkheim states, in addition, that its name cannot be used in everyday life; in fact, the entire religious sphere is shunned in everyday language. In his treatment of the 'ascetic cult' he enters into a fuller discussion of the various types of prohibitions which may surround an object (Durkheim 1912 / 1960 / 1990: 432 *f.*). In general there is a prohibition on contact, which may be broken down in: eating, touching, seeing, speaking to or speaking about, hearing; and moreover a prohibition of everything that reminds one of everyday life: clothing, daily occupations, ordinary language.

2.6.6. *Discussion: Durkheim's operationalisation of the sacred*

Clearly, these attempts at operationalisation are very unsystematic, and do not meet our present-day methodological standards. For the latter, a large part of Durkheim's implicit criteria would have to be redefined: the paired concepts *sacred* / *profane* perhaps allow us to demarcate the domain of the religious, but in doing so one cannot simply depart from such terms as 'ceremony' or 'mythology' – for how would the latter be defined unless in direct connection with the

¹⁴² Notably an extreme, and extremely painful, form of male genital mutilation (see Fig. 3.1): the penis is operated upon in such a way that from the *glans penis* down it takes a split shape over a distance of a few centimetres; this result is locally explicitly considered to be equivalent to the vulva.

religious or the *sacred*?

Moreover it would appear that in the five categories (a) – (e) of *sacred* objects the concept *sacred* is not used consistently. Durkheim posits that the totemic species are less *sacred* because they cannot isolate themselves from everyday life, for instance, they are visible to everybody. Durkheim's argument on this point does not cut wood and fails to convince: the totemic species cannot help it that they

'vivent sur le terrain profane et sont mêlés à la vie commune' (Durkheim 1912 / 1960 / 1990: 188).

Of the categories considered, the totemic species constitute the only category which is not entirely embedded in, defined by, not produced by, *culture*. For the species as distinguished by the Australians, or by modern global science for that matter,¹⁴³ *already constitute natural units* which manifestly and exclusively dissociate from other such species for all sorts of observable behaviour (*e.g.* conviviality, mating), regardless of whether they are under the human gaze or not. Then what in this context is *sacred*:

- *the observable animal in nature, or*
- *the conception of the animal,*

and what role is play by which in Australian religion? *And under what conditions will the attributed characteristic of being sacred really become relevant?* Is there really a dramatic transition from (i) the animal as object of a food taboo and name-giver of a totem, to (ii) the animal as potential quarry? It appears as if the concepts *sacred / profane* as used in *Les Formes* are too static; below we shall adduce grounds for attributing to the totemic species a more central place in Australian religion, *pace* Durkheim, in whose opinion their sacrality has a touch of hybridity. This will bring us to reconsider his paired concepts *sacred / profane*.

Durkheim draws rather far-reaching conclusions from the distribution of sacrality which he derives from the ethnographic data:

'Le nombre et l'importance des interdictions qui isolent une chose sacrée et la retirent de la circulation correspondent au degré de sainteté dont elle est investie' (Durkheim 1912 / 1960 / 1990: 188-189).

This is a most interesting hypothesis, strongly reminiscent of the natural sciences in its emphasis on quantitative difference, but Durkheim does not define a 'unit of prohibition' nor a 'unit of importance of prohibition' – and without such units we are not really in a position to assess the number nor the importance of any such prohibition. How does one count prohibitions unless by reference to the hopelessly artificial, logocentric means of a well-organised, printed *Penal Code*? On the grounds of Durkheim's

¹⁴³ Even if Australian Aboriginals, and modern global science, may employ different demarcation criteria resulting in more or less different species as conceptualised by humans – that is not the point here.

impressionist overview as above, he concludes that the bullroarers and the totemic representations are more *sacred* than the totemic species; this view is decisive for his (admittedly so very fertile) theory of symbolism and of religious sociology in general, but in itself it is not convincingly substantiated, all the less so because it reflects a number of Durkheim's manifest presuppositions which I highlight throughout my present argument; among these presuppositions the most important is the one that holds a symbol or emblem as necessarily as the more *sacred*, the more useless it is for everyday practical purposes. Clearly, Durkheim operates from his armchair in Paris and never shared the productive challenges of Aboriginal life.

From a perspective of operationalisation many more difficulties arise. Thus norms (e.g. prohibitions), values and representations are hard to employ as operationalisations because they are not directly observable by empirical, sensory means: in determining the existence of norms, values and representations the analyst bases herself or himself, indirectly and interpretatively, on her or his knowledge of externally observable behaviour (in which the norms and values are borne out, and also opposite tendencies may come to the fore) and of the local language (in which the *explicit* norms are stipulated, and in which the participants can explain their behaviour). What we have here, therefore, is data which in themselves are already etically constructed, notably the product of the investigator's own inference. Moreover, language is difficult to use as a criterion, for the theoretical reason that it does already immediately presuppose interpretation, and for the practical reason that usually a foreign field-worker has scarcely an adequate command (Durkheim, for one, had none whatsoever) of all the subtle nuances which are especially important in the religious and ceremonial sphere (and this point often applies even to fieldwork in a sub-culture of one's own society). Moreover, is it really imperative that for every culture under study we try and find indigenous equivalents for the concepts *sacred* / *profane*?

In Durkheim's theoretical arguments on the *sacred*, the complementary leading ideas are 'utter respect' and 'non-utilitarian point of view'.¹⁴⁴ I believe that both 'respect' and 'non-utilitarian point of view' may be meaningfully operationalised, although again not without difficulty: for we must first have considerable knowledge of the culture in question before we can identify whatever is considered there as utterances of such respect – and then the danger of circular argumentation is far from imaginary. Moreover the usefulness of a certain object, the utilitarian viewpoint which one may occupy *vis-à-vis* that object, totally depends on the selection with the society under study has made of the myriad intrinsic possibilities of use which are present in every object (to which range of possibilities we have again to add individual differences from person to person:

¹⁴⁴ Here an important qualification is needed in correction of Durkheim's position: whatever is to be considered as utilitarian *in this connection is defined from the position of the investigator only*, and not of the participant; for the latter normally does consider magic and religion as eminently effective and therefore as useful to attain a desired effect or result.

skill, practical sense, aspirations for power – these too are socially structured but nonetheless they vary from person to person); we have to take into account the fact that the ways in which a certain usefulness may be effectuated, may not be the same always and for every one – and in that case it becomes rather difficult to distinguish between ‘pseudo-science’¹⁴⁵ and ‘non-utilitarian thought’. The point boils down to this: according to outsiders, in other words etically, the special ritual objects have no material use whatsoever because the powers attributed to them by the local actors, are considered merely imaginary and non-existent by the outsiders; but according to the participants, emically, they have, on the contrary, a very great material use.

Perhaps one day it may be possible to meet these difficulties. Durkheim did not clearly perceive them. In his attempts at operationalisation reviewed above (and they derive in large part from a point in the argument of *Les Formes* where the fundamental theory had not yet been presented) most emphasis is laid on the absolute distinction between *sacred* and *profane*. As handled by Durkheim this is a static conception which does not take us very far. In his argument, *setting apart* objects that are endowed with eminent respect does seem to constitute an interesting perspective; perhaps that very act of separation can serve as operationalisation precisely of ‘respect’, especially if we manage to specify in which context, in which way and how acutely the setting part takes place.

However, as a general criterion ‘setting apart’ cannot help us out, for *all elements in thought, culture and society exist by virtue of being distinguished from one another*. Giving a name, using something for a specific purpose, roles, relationships, social groupings, are all forms of the differentiation, the structuring, which we can perceive in any human behaviour, whether it is public and external, or private and implicit.

Despite all these objections Durkheim does offer a few hints at operationalisation which may remain of value, especially where externally observable behaviour is concerned. In principle the difficulties which I signal may not be insurmountable (to the extent to which a systematic, objective science of human phenomena is at all possible). Let us now consider whether from a purely theoretical point of view the objections against Durkheim paired concepts *sacred* / *profane* are not so decisive that we can spare ourselves the trouble of seeking suitable operationalisations of his approach.

¹⁴⁵ ‘Pseudo-science’ is the term the methodologist Popper (1959) famously uses for ancient divinatory bodies of knowledge such as extispicy and astrology. But already a century ago the classicist H.J. Rose (1909-1921) used the same term for divination in general. Ironically, in the *History of Ideas*, Ancient Mesopotamian astrology and extispicy provided the proto-forms of all later systematic bodies of grounded knowledge, *i.e.* sciences.

Chapter 3. Specialists's criticism of Durkheim's paired concepts *sacred / profane*

In this chapter I will discuss, from the vast literature that *Les Formes* has generated since 1912 (much of which we have already considered above), some of the major criticisms that have been levelled against Durkheim's argument on *sacred / profane* by established specialists in the field of the social science of religion. I will start out with the famous British anthropologist Jack Goody, who early in his career already published an incisive and lasting critique of Durkheim's paired concepts *sacred / profane*. I will then proceed to a few specialists in the field of Australian Aboriginal societies, notably Radcliffe-Brown, Worsley and Stanner. A leading structuralist anthropologist, and as student of Durkheim's student Mauss himself a product of the French tradition that produced *Les Formes*, Lévi-Strauss comes to Durkheim's rescue (*pace* Tarot 2009; see below), but cannot silence Stanner's very compelling critique especially of the paired concepts *sacred / profane*.

3.1. Jack Goody

The most drastic criticism of Durkheim's opposition *sacred / profane* is to be found in an article by J. Goody: 'Religion and ritual, the definitional problem' (1961). At the time, this British social anthropologist was mainly known as an ethnographer of the Dagaba of Northern Ghana; in later decades he would win

international fame, especially outside the anthropological discipline, with his comparative studies on the impact of literacy on traditional cultures. Goody's 1961 article soon became a frequently cited minor classic; as we shall see it will however turn out to be of only limited importance, yet its polemic positioning will cast revealing light on some of our central issues. Central in Goody's argument is the problem of the analytical position:

- do we, as scientific analysts, depart from the (*emic!*) frame of reference of an hypothetical actor,
- or do we deem this impossible and do we limit ourselves to an analysis simply in line with our own (*etic*) frame of reference, *i.e.* that of members of North Atlantic modern society, and as pursuers of what that society defines as social science?

Where the problem of the definition of religion is concerned, Goody dismisses the former approach, along with the entire

'Weberian insistence on *Verstehen* analysis' (Goody 1961: 155),¹⁴⁶

He adduces a number of grounds. In the first place a general ground: when attributing such qualifications as 'rational' and 'non-rational', one relies on what our own (North Atlantic, increasingly global) science has meanwhile accepted or rejected as causal relationship, which therefore is not in the least in terms of the actor's frame of reference.¹⁴⁷ Goody wins only a Pyrrhic, apparent

¹⁴⁶ Goody's dismissive position comes close to that of Abel 1948.

¹⁴⁷ #27. *GOODY'S LACK OF EPISTEMOLOGICAL CHARITY*. Here we encounter a typical mid-20th c. CE instance of the lack of *epistemological charity* such as used to characterise much of the social sciences, and especially religious anthropology, in the century of its greatest triumphs so far – the 20th c. CE. Goody implicitly claims that the only way for humans to be rational is by adopting the logocentric rationality which allegedly governs modern North Atlantic life but which in fact governs, not so much modern North Atlantic life in politics, sports, entertainment or love-making, but only formal utterances in abstruse and formal settings. In Goody's position, lost are the insights (admittedly, from a rival anthropological camp than Goody's: the Manchester School) concerning 'the rational man' in non-Western, specifically sub-Saharan African, judicial situations, where emically the test of truthful and morally laudable behaviour is not so much to act in accordance with some fixed and impersonal rule, but in accordance with what 'a rational man' would think and do in the given situation (Gluckman 1955: 83; Epstein 1973). Admittedly, even such independent African rationality in the course of the 20th c. CE probably has become increasingly influenced by, even subjugated to, patterns of formal rationality derived from the North Atlantic region and mediated via the state, formal education, the capitalist mode of production, world religions, and globalisation; yet initially it may have been quite distinct from the Western formats (as excellent ethnographies from the mid-20th century demonstrate; *e.g.* Evans-Pritchard 1937; Fortes & Dieterlen 1965). Moreover, as my reference to political, amorous and sportive behaviour and its choices meant to convey, it is an illusion to pretend that most of individual's life in today's North Atlantic region is governed by formal rationality. On the contrary, Lévi-Strauss's (1962) very illuminating category of *pensée sauvage* / 'savage thought', 'wild thinking', *i.e.* *not the thought of 'savages', but* everyday, non-specialist, non-technical, undomesticated, thought, applies to most thinking of most humans whenever and wher-

victory, over an approach which certainly no longer has to prove its relevance for scientific analysis (on this see Weber 1985 / 1919, 1969 / 1947; Rex 1961).

Goody concentrates on the attribution of non-intrinsic symbolic characteristics, such as happens with the concept *sacred*:

'The action frame of reference is partly set aside and the method of investigation is likened to that of the psychoanalyst. In other words, the reference of the sign is necessarily hidden from the actor' (Goody 1961: 152).

If Goody had limited himself to pointing out that such an approach entails

'serious problems of evidence' (Goody 1961: 153)

that would have been a worthwhile reminder not to jump to such interpretations too rashly. However, he concludes that the approach which started with Durkheim is devoid of all meaning and that we had better return to a British pioneer anthropologist targeted in Durkheim's argument: Tylor, who defined religion simply as *the belief in supernatural or non-human beings*. Goody admonishes us

'not to be afraid of subscribing to the "intellectual, rationalist view" held by nineteenth-century writers in the field' (Goody 1961: 161).

Apparently Goody does not realise that 'non-human' or 'super-natural' is not a feature open to immediate scientific observation and verification; therefore, this part of his definition will yet have to be redefined, in turn, in terms of the frame of reference, the cognitions, of the actor not to mention the fact that in Goody's proposed approach religion is entirely reduced to a system of ideas, forgetting the action and emotive components which are at least as important.

So far Goody's argument concerning the interpretation of religious symbols, which according to him despite all appearance to the contrary merely uses the analyst's frame of reference. However, he levels a few further criticisms against Durkheim's approach, to which we will now turn.

Amazingly enough, Goody first 'proves' that the paired concepts *sacred / profane* do not occur – *emically* – in all cultures, and subsequently pretends to try and salvage the pair by assessing whether it may yet be used – *etically* – as analytical tools. So he reverses the matter. For Durkheim, the paired concepts were only a means to define religion; therefore it stands to reason that *every* religion displays them, which is the case *by definition*, not a matter for empirical verification. Apparently, what Goody tries to do is to demonstrate that there are *cultures* as distinct from religions without *sacred / profane*, hence without religion.¹⁴⁸ Goody's arguments against the universality of

ever, even if intellectuals.

¹⁴⁸ #28. *SOCIETIES WITHOUT RELIGION? THE CASE OF CHINA*. This remains an important point of criticism. Durkheim is very clear on this point. He claims that no societies without religion have been attested:

the paired concepts are mediocre: he does not attempt to make use of Durkheim's (implicit) operationalisations which we have discussed above, but neither offers any operationalisations of his own invention. So we have no idea as to how he processes his data in terms of the hypothesis ('in every culture we find the paired concepts *sacred / profane*') which he tries to falsify. He cites Evans-Pritchard's famous book *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* (1937), but Goody's discussion on this point only serves to demonstrate that our North Atlantic scientific concepts 'magical', 'empirical', 'natural' and 'supernatural' do not correspond one-to-one with Azande categories – which no one would have expected to be the case anyway. On Goody's own LoDagaa ethnographic data nothing concrete is being advanced. He fails to convince on this point.

However, in all fairness I have to discuss another important point. Above I pointed out some methodological shortcomings of *Les Formes*. One was that Durkheim does not clearly distinguish between *sacred / profane*

1. as abstract scientific *etic / analytical* categories, and
2. as *emic* 'folk' categories, in other words as phenomena which must be concretely demonstrable in the verbal and ritual culture of the people under investigation.

'il n'y a pas de société connue sans religion' (Durkheim 1912 / 1960 / 1990: 343).

Are there no exceptions to this sweeping generalisation? If religion is claimed to be indispensable for society, such exceptions would explode Durkheim's entire theory. Certainly, the question whether classic, imperial Chinese society did or did not have what, comparatively, could be considered 'religion', has long been a subject of debate (e.g. de Groot 1909-1921: 549). Palmer (2017) offers one of the most recent statements in the question, in the following terms

'...China is widely considered to be the least religious country in the world or a country where "religion" has never existed. The historical, anthropological, and sociological evidence makes it clear that religion is not absent from China and that, indeed, the vast majority of Chinese people have some type of belief or practice that anthropologists or sociologists would define as religious. However, most Chinese people do not consider such beliefs or practices to be religious. (...) I formulate a substantive definition of religion and adopt a bottom-up methodology to demonstrate that, in everyday practices and conceptions, as shown by historical and ethnographic data, the basic building blocks of religion in China are much the same as elsewhere. It is at the higher-level modes of organization of these basic building blocks – institutionally, conceptually, and politically – that we find unique patterns in different cultures and civilizations, in China as elsewhere.'

That this is essentially a fair and valid assessment, is clear from the existing, very extensive literature on (yes!) religion in China. Here one constantly finds the contradiction between the unmistakable (*folk*) religion of the masses, and the ethics-, wisdom- and esthetics-driven restraint of the elite, for which Max Weber did not hesitate to use the term 'puritanism' (Weber 1951, cf. Su-Jen Huang 1994 and Eisenstadt 1985; Feuchtwang 2001; Bruun 2003). Several authors have reported on the post-Mao-Ze-Dong public revival of religion in China (e.g. Kipnis 2001). Under such conditions (as I was fortunate to witness myself in 2002 and 2006) even the headquarters of organised Taoism (白雲觀 *Bái Yún Guān*, the 'White Cloud Temple', once scorned by the Chinese communist regime) were restored to former glory, Confucianist and Lamaist / Buddhist temples in downtown Beijing turned out to be flourishing, and the mountaneous 五台山 *Wu Tai Shan* complex of over fifty Buddhist temples near the city of Datong attracted thousands of internal, national tourists *a day*.

In other words, the actor's frame of reference and the analyst's frame of reference are not clearly distinguished by Durkheim.¹⁴⁹ He makes no effort to demonstrate that as folk categories *sacred / profane* are indeed universal: universal pretensions are justified in the first case, for *per se* a definition applies to all members of the category which it defines. So admittedly, since Durkheim's treatment on this point is blurred and to be faulted, we can hardly defend Durkheim by pointing out that what is involved is merely a definition, not an empirically verifiable statement. Does this put paid to the possible usefulness of the concepts he has introduced?

Goody does make the distinction between *emic* and *etic*, although not in exactly these terms. He believes to have demonstrated that the paired concepts *sacred / profane*, *because they are not universal*, are not useful for analysis departing from the actor's frame of reference; yet, even if we could be convinced that folk categories corresponding with *sacred / profane* are not universal (*cf.* Part IV of the present book on this point), then still he would have to assess whether not all for all cultures (including the Azande and the LoDagaa), in the actors' frames of reference *emic* elements might be identified which could meaningfully be interpreted in terms of the *etic*, scientific concepts *sacred / profane*.¹⁵⁰ What we are concerned with here is their usefulness as analytical instruments – something that is secondary for Goody. Whether the paired concepts *sacred / profane* (*which is fact is derived from folk categories of modern Western culture*)

1. have unmistakable equivalents in the categories in use among the members of other cultures,
2. whether such equivalents may be demonstrated in their language, and
3. whether we may even go so far as to claim that such equivalents are universal,

these are points that we cannot determine in advance and *a priori* but that require painstaking and methodologically sound comparative analysis. Goody's critique of the claim of universality might be justified, but is it not properly grounded methodologically, and does not touch the heart of the matter.

How does Goody contest the usefulness of the paired concepts as an analytical instrument? He bases himself on Parsons's (1937) summary, and that is the

¹⁴⁹ The absence of a clear, conscious distinction between *emic* and *etic* perspectives was clearly one of the handicaps of social analysis in Durkheim's time

¹⁵⁰ If he had managed to assess this (but he does not get to that point), Goody would have found a powerful argument to undermine Durkheim's theory as to how the collective penetrates into the individual. For in that case we would have to explain how it is possible for societies to exist without sacred objects, without extreme respect, and thus we would have to admit that Durkheim's theory (which we would already be inclined to reject for other reasons) offers no explanation here. But have such societies without sacred objects been attested? Above we considered the case of China, but in vain. And is religion indispensable, if at all, because of some Durkheimian / Parsonian 'normative integration', or because it makes possible the inertia of institutions – as I will argue below.

reason why spuriously he sharply distinguishes between the two aspects of Durkheim's analytical, *etic* concept of the *sacred*: (a) extreme respect, and (b) non-utilitarian value. Durkheim's definition of respect encompasses both (1990 / 1960 / 1912: 296). Goody does not tell us what he means by respect, but from the fact that respect is not always the same thing, and that we also find it outside the religious sphere *e.g.* in family relationships, he concludes that it does not satisfy as an analytical concept. However, Durkheim is unequivocal concerning the nature of respect as meant by him, and because what is involved here is a *definition*, there is no reason whatsoever to refuse to speak of sacrality in case such respect would be manifest in the context of family relationship; whether or not religion always involves such an extreme respect, is a different matter.

The second feature stressed by Goody is *non-intrinsic value*, and here his arguments have deeper consequences. Even if he overplays his hand as far as the *Verstehen* analysis is concerned, yet he is right with his objections against Durkheim's kind of symbol analysis – the latter's verification is very difficult, not to say impossible. Admittedly, the paired concepts *sacred* / *profane* cannot be regarded as useful analytical tools as long as we continue to attach to them a specific, albeit implicit, *explanation* of the phenomena they are meant to describe – for instance, the explanation that if *sacred* objects, even although they are viewed from a non-utilitarian perspective, are commanding respect, this is because they symbolically refer to society.

However, what Goody fails to appreciate (and this regardless of Durkheim's methodological errors) is that it is very well possible, that it is even a requirement of all scientific work, to classify phenomena on the basis of an adequate conceptual apparatus, before we impose an explanatory theory on these phenomena. In other words, provided we forge satisfactory nominal and operational definitions for the features 'respect', 'non-utilitarian' and even 'symbolic' as aspects of the *sacred*, there is no need for us to prematurely decide what is being referred to in those aspects, and we can postpone the question as to the 'reality behind religion': such questions do not belong to the definitional problem of religion. This amounts to a deviation from Durkheim's position, just like I propose to deviate from his *a priori* assumption to the effect that all cultures display categories equivalent with *sacred* / *profane*. The real problem then becomes the following: is it possible, on the basis of reliable and adequate operationalisations, to identify in other cultures such characteristics in the beliefs and attitudes of the participants, as could be considered indications of the extreme respect defined as being at the basis of the scientific, *etic* concepts of *sacred* / *profane*. Formulating such operationalisations may still be difficult enough (although *Les Formes* itself contains a few hints in this respect), yet Goody's critique has not convinced me that it would be futile to try and formulate them anyway.

3.2. Selected specialists in the field of Australian societies

3.2.1. Australia in the ethnographic literature

Ever since the late 19th c. CE, Australia (Dawson 1881; Spencer & Gillen 1904) has been a rich field for anthropological research and teaching, and numerous are the first-class ethnographic studies of Aboriginal life and its adaptations to modern urban and statal conditions. Durkheim benefited from this state of affairs when writing *Les Formes*, and, alternatively, for decades this book had a decisive impact on subsequent studies of Aboriginals studies, even though these were conducted under modern fieldwork conditions rather than, as in Durkheim's case, from an armchair in France. In terms of Morphy's 1988 review of aboriginal religious studies:

'The 1961 conference on Australian Aboriginal studies came at a turning point in research into Aboriginal religion. As far as theory is concerned, writings on religion had been dominated by Durkheim, directly through the Influence of his work and indirectly through the influence that he had on Radcliffe-Brown. Durkheim's arguments had won out in debates with the intellectualists¹⁵¹ Tylor and Frazer and the evolutionist Lang. Much of the agenda for research and many of the terms of debate over the forty years following publication of *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* were set by Durkheim, even if in some cases the framework was set by disagreements with him over particular aspects of his theory (cf. Kaberry 1939).¹⁵² The few who followed different lines of argument, such as Father Worms, tended to appear at least in retrospect somewhat parochial, being isolated from the mainstream of research. For heuristic purposes it is possible to define somewhat tentatively three main focuses of research, or perhaps more loosely, sets of writings, in the period between 1915 and 1961.

One set consists of writings in an ethnographic-exegetical tradition which is characteristic of much Australian anthropology. it had its roots in the ethnographies of Sir Baldwin Spencer and F.J. Gillen, and was continued in the works of Warner, Strehlow, Roheim, Kaberry, Thomson, Catherine Berndt and Ronald Berndt. From Warner on it was characterised by the extensive use of exegesis, which often carried or demonstrated the argument of the work. From early on in Australian anthropology Aborigines were present as people.

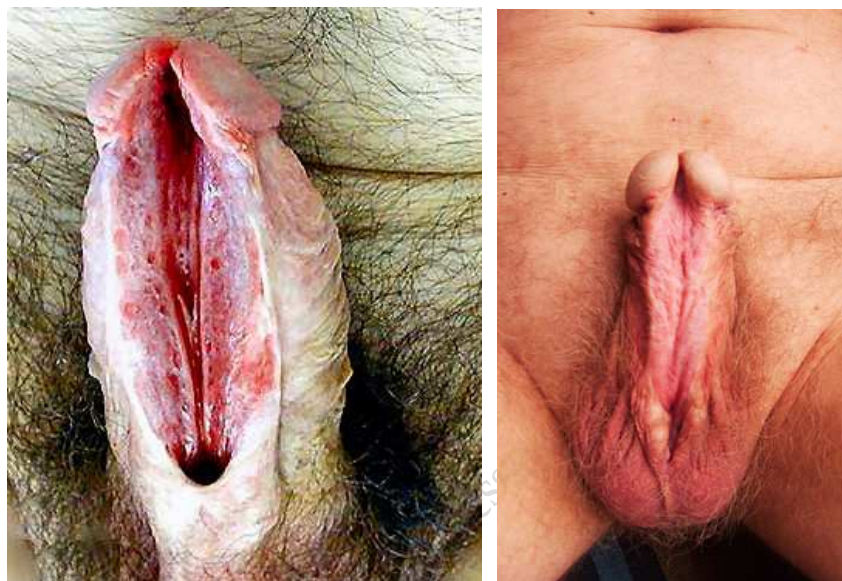
The second tradition was a descriptive, typological, synthesising one that produced a picture of regional differences and formal variation between types of organisations and sets of practices. This tradition, which had its roots in the work of Howitt and to a lesser extent Spencer, influenced many of the anthropologists working in the first tradition. But it is particularly exemplified in the writings of Radcliffe-Brown and Elkin. Both of these traditions, the ethnographic-exegetical and the typological-descriptive were for a long time couched within an overall Durkheimian paradigm, though they

¹⁵¹ 'Intellectualist', because Tylor and Frazer approached religion as devices through which the actors sought to understand their world.

¹⁵² Phillis Kaberry, who later excelled in the ethnography of Cameroon, West Africa (e.g. Kaberry 1952). As a feminist *avant la lettre*, in her study of Australian Aboriginal women (Kaberry 1939) she exposed a gender bias in Durkheim's classic analysis: taking the male perspective for granted, the sacred was automatically identified by him as associated with men, but from a women's perspective the equation turned out to be reversed.

had their origins in an earlier period and continue to the present.

The third tradition can be labelled comparative religion or perhaps cosmological particularism. This tradition pursued many of the questions raised by earlier theorists such as Frazer and Lang, and was represented in the work of Worms and Eliade, though in Eliade's case the goals broadened to include as a central concern a hermeneutic understanding of the basic metaphysical position of Aboriginal religion.' Although by 1961 Worm's work was lateral to the concerns of most other researchers, it was he who gave the summary paper on Aboriginal religion to the conference on Aboriginal studies.' (Morphy 1988: 241)



sources: (a) <https://wiki.bme.com/images/9/92/Subincision-4.jpg>;
(b) https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Genital_modification_and_mutilation#/media/File:Full_subincision.jpg

Fig. 3.1. Close-up of Australian Aboriginals's penises subjected to subincision

Given the rapid erosion, to the point of destruction, of Aboriginal life in the last two centuries, and the changing visibility and global politics surrounding such 'Indigenous Peoples' as the Australian Aboriginals, the ethnography, reconstruction and protection of Aboriginal cultural life have given rise to a voluminous literature, from which I can only very selectively cite.¹⁵³ Here a central role is given to the mythical complex of the *Dream Time* (Cowan 1989), the mythical timeless realm where humans and totemic animals live in close association, and human life has a meaning and direction which European conquest has totally destroyed. A vocal author in this appreciation of Aboriginal cultural life has been W.E.H. Stanner,¹⁵⁴ whose reflections on Durkheim we will consider below. The art of *churinga* totemic representations (so emphasised by Durkheim), and of bullroarers, was allegedly studied by Rogers (1977) in an untraceable publication. Much related work is done not by anthropologists but by archaeologists (Morwood *et al.* 2002; Murray 1998) and linguists (Leitner & Malcolm 2007). The

¹⁵³ For overviews, cf. Clarke 2003; Berndt & Tonkinson 1988; Berndt 1974; Berndt & Berndt 1951, 1970, 1988, 1989, 1993.

¹⁵⁴ Cf. Hinkson & Beckett 2008; Keen 1986.

transcultural psychoanalyst Geza Roheim offered (1945) a psychoanalytical interpretation of Australian myth and ritual. Psychiatrists, physical anthropologists and even urologists joined forces with anthropologists to study some of the Aboriginal practices that, from an ethnocentric modern North Atlantic point of view, may seem to be bewildering: circumcision and particularly subincision.¹⁵⁵ That such medical contributions are not always a boon may be clear from the opening sentence of a relevant urological article:

‘Aboriginal culture is one of the oldest on earth dating back up to 125,000 years. It is interesting that ritual circumcision has become established in a country with no apparent contact until recent times to the other communities / countries from the rest of the world that have similar traditions.’ (Thomson & Bultitude 2010)

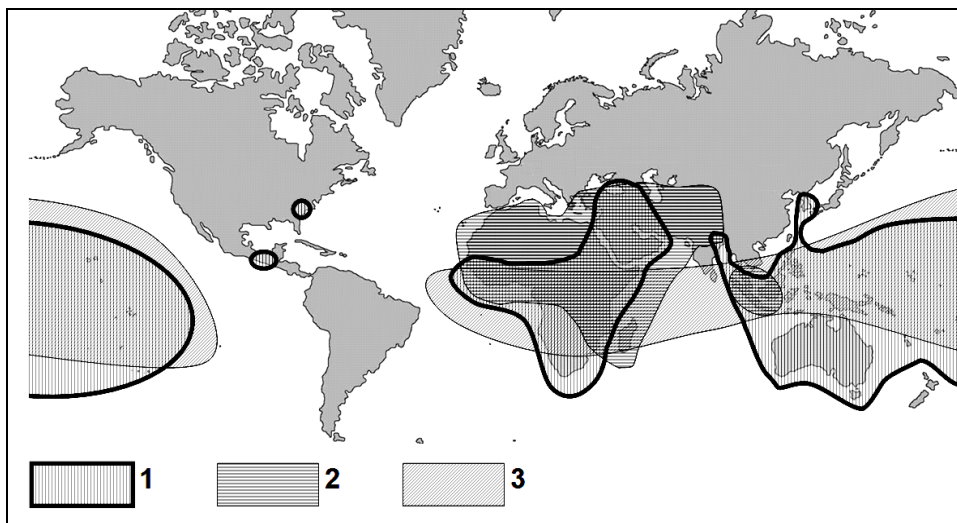
A little digression is called for here. Transoceanic contacts including seafaring have, of course, been at the heart of the world-wide expansion of the culture of Anatomically Modern Humans (to which all humans now alive, including Aboriginals, belong). Anatomically Modern Humans did not originate in Australia but in Africa, and reached Australia only c. 60 ka BP (rather than twice that time depth, as claimed by Thomson & Bultitude 2010), as part of the Out-of-Africa exodus – and in the process they had to cross dozens of kms of open sea between the Sunda region and New Guinea / Australia.¹⁵⁶ Could they have brought the institution of circumcision as part of the cultural inheritance of *Pandora’s Box*? Possibly,¹⁵⁷ but not necessarily – according to my own reconstruction (Fig. 3.2)¹⁵⁸ male genital mutilation is likely to be, not so much a Palaeolithic, but an Early Bronze Age, proto-Pelasgian trait. Even in the latter hypothetical capacity, so fairly recent (c. 5 ka BP), it may well have ended up in Australia, since in the most recent millennia two more population waves came to invade Australia in addition to the time-honoured presence of the Negritos: notably the Murrayans and the Carpentarians, with South Asian and South East Asian background (Tindale c.s. 1978). In other words, the urologists’s idea of Australia’s absolute continental isolation is a naïve nostalgic illusion – a reification of the Australians as the primordial, unchanged survivors from the Stone Age, a stereotype which we know only too well from Southern Africa, where Khoisan-speaking hunter-gatherers have until recently been reified in the same manner (Wilmsen 1989, 1993).

¹⁵⁵ Ashley-Montagu 1937; Singer & Desole 1967; Thomson & Bultitude 2010.

¹⁵⁶ The work of Robert Bednarik leaves little doubt as to human seafaring capabilities as far back as the Middle Palaeolithic (Bednarik 1995, 1997a, 1997b, 1997c, 1997d, 1999a, 1999b, 2003). Also cf. Fig 8.13, below.

¹⁵⁷ However, without involving specialist archaeologists and their methods, but merely on the basis of inspecting a few dozen prehistoric representations of what they believe to be human male genitals, the urologists Angulo & García-Díez (2009) claim evidence of erection and of retracted foreskin, and on this rather flimsy basis conclude to a widespread practice of circumcision. If more convincing, this would explode my Pelasgian interpretation. Ancient Egyptian iconography suggests at least an Early Bronze Age dating for the emergence of male genital mutilation / circumcision. Ancient Egypt has, with West Asia, the highest incidence of Pelasgian traits.

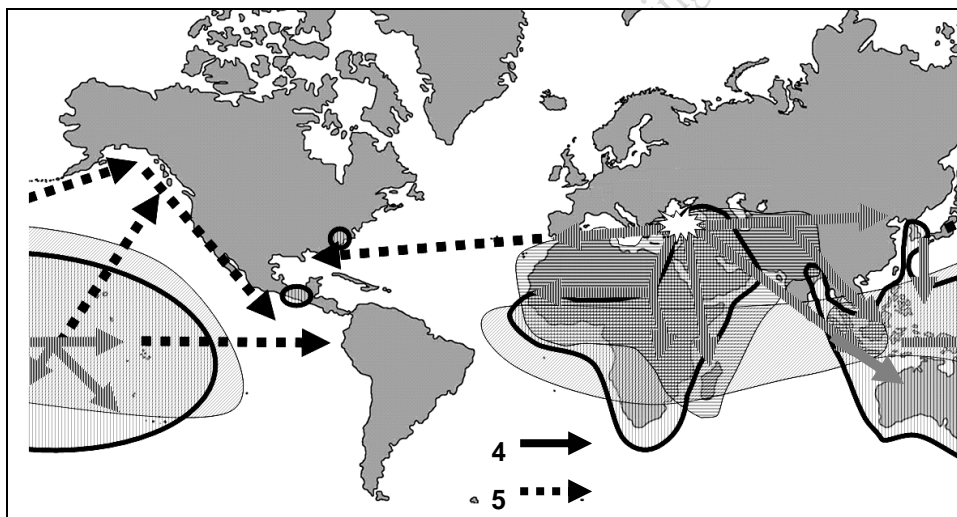
¹⁵⁸ Cf. van Binsbergen & Woudhuizen 2011: 336, Fig. 28.1; with extensive references.



source: van Binsbergen & Woudhuizen 2011: 336, Fig. 28.1, with extensive references.

1. Regions where male genital mutilation has been practiced 'traditionally' since pre-modern times
2. Diffusion of male genital mutilation in the context of Islam from 7th c CE
3. Hunched statuettes (Lommel 1976) as an index 'fossil' of Sunda expansion (van Binsbergen 2007b).

Fig. 3.2. Male genital mutilation ('circumcision'): Global distribution



4. Proposed diffusion from a West Asian Early Bronze Age origin
5. Conjectural proposed diffusion

Fig. 3.3. Male genital mutilation ('circumcision'): Proposed global historical reconstruction taking male genital mutilation as a proto-Pelasgian trait

3.2.2. Durkheim reception in Australia

That it is necessary to avoid all implicit *a priori* explanation in the definition of *sacred / profane* will become all the more clear now that we are turning to the critique of Durkheim as advanced by a few specialists on Australian societies. This will raise viewpoints which on the one hand cast serious doubt upon Durkheim's insights, but on the other hand may contribute to improving the paired concepts *sacred / profane* as analytical tools.

In large part, Durkheim's religion theory did not compellingly spring from his reading of the Australian material, but was simply an elaboration of his own emerging sociological system, with all influences from earlier writers to be detected there. In nearly all basic concepts of *Les Formes* we detect the influence of Robertson Smith, who based himself on the premodern societies of the Middle East.¹⁵⁹ Yet the fact remains that Durkheim's first exposé of the paired concept *sacred / profane* took place on the basis of the Australian material;¹⁶⁰ this suggests that the ethnography did not merely serve to illustrate already pre-established theories, but, on the contrary, that the facts which Durkheim derived from his library study, nudged his theory in a certain direction. His command of this material has been generally praised, but that did not improve the quality of that material in itself – based as it was on pre-classic anthropology, when the methodology of fieldwork (including formidable conditions concerning length of stay and language acquisition) had not yet been established, and the theory of kinship and social organisation was only *in statu nascendi*. For these reasons it is important to pay attention to later interpretations of data on the same cultures by specialists who, contrary to Durkheim, have known Australian societies from their own, prolonged and professional fieldwork.

When this was drafted, in 1967, there was no comprehensive study in which *Les Formes* was tested against the ethnographic facts gathered in the half-century since *Les Formes*; Stanner (1967: 239) promised one, but initially had to limit himself to a shorter account (cf. Hinkson & Beckett 2008). Meanwhile some doubt has been cast upon Durkheim's attempt to substantiate his theory through interpretation of a Central Australian society in terms of that theory. Not as one mode of classification among many;¹⁶¹ but as a Maussian 'fait social

¹⁵⁹ A consequence of this state of affairs became clear to me when, shortly after this was drafted in the late 1960s, I did my first fieldwork in the highlands of North-western Tunisia: Robertson Smith's generalisations for Arabian societies were still so pertinent to the Tunisian situation, that a theory which had been largely informed by Robertson Smith, like Durkheim's, proved eminently inspiring to analyze and explain the links between social organisation and religion that I observed in North Africa; cf. chapter 5 of the present book.

¹⁶⁰ In 'La prohibition de l'inceste', *L'Année Sociologique*, I 1896-7: 9 f.). Already the first, theoretically so decisive, annual volume contained an article on Durkheim's grappling with the Australian material. This shows how seriously he took it, By that time we are still one and a half decades away from the publication of *Les Formes élémentaires*.

¹⁶¹ #29. *CLAN TOTEMISM ONCE MORE*. Once a cherished hobby-horse of anthropology (cf. Harris 1969), the 'elusive' (Hultkrantz 1972) concept of 'clan totemism' is now totally out of fashion. A *Google Scholar* search conducted in April 2018 returned only 'about 9590' results, of which the most recent properly anthropological title was Morphy 1990 – over a quarter of a century old already. By haphazard comparison, a search on 'ethnic conflict' returned as many as 2,610,000 results – nearly 300 times more; and on 'identity' nearly twice as many again. But let us not fool ourselves: the fact that anthropologists have shifted their research and publications to other topics now more in fashion, better fundable and promising greater career opportunities, does not mean that on the ground the favourite topics of yore have become totally non-existent. When in 1968 and 1970 I did fieldwork in the highlands of North-western Tunisia, I encountered a situation where clans (in the sense defined by Murdock 1949) were very much in evidence, and where each clan tended to be closely associated with a saint's shrine and tomb –

total' – an all-encompassing principle of social and religious organisation, *clan totemism* was already beginning to be an obsolescent notion at the time of Durkheim; he missed the distinction between local ritual and more comprehensive, 'tribal' ritual; much as he tried in several preparatory articles, his conception of the social organisation of the Australian was fundamentally incorrect; so was his idea that a particular totem has only validity within one specific group instead of for the entire society, and that one such group can only be associated with one totem at the time, *etc.*¹⁶² Radcliffe-Brown (1951: 165 *f.*), Goldenweiser (1958: 80 *f.*). Bellah and Lévi-Strauss are so kind as to extend their protection to Durkheim, *e.g.*

'the best Australian field workers hailed it [*Les Formes*] as the forerunner of the discoveries they made several years later' (Lévi-Strauss 1945: 536),

but to both of them Bellah's own ambiguous reproach equally applies:

'most anthropologists who have criticized Durkheim for being an armchair ethnologist never set eyes on Australia' (Bellah 1965: 163).

Considering the fundamental theoretical problems which Durkheim broaches it is of only secondary importance whether or not his purely ethnographic data were at all correct and up to date; and the same point applies to my present argument, which seeks to investigate the remaining usefulness of Durkheim's paired concepts *sacred / profane* as analytical concepts for modern social science. But the specialists have contributed to the discussion around *Les Formes* also at a higher level of abstraction than merely adducing ethnographic data. I already mentioned Warner's research, highlighting

1. the distinction between religion and magic, and
2. the relevance of Durkheim's (and Frazer's, and Robertson Smith's) idea of the *ambiguïté du sacré*. Elkin, one of the greatest anthropological specialists on Australia, wrote on Warner's book about the Murngin of Arnhemland:

'His [Warner's] work shows that the latter's [Durkheim's] original interpretation of Aboriginal life was sound' (Elkin 1937: 119).

Here Elkin can only mean these two points (a) and (2), for they constitute Warner's only mention of Durkheim's insights concerning the Australians. And even at so limited a scale Elkin is still exaggerating, for concerning these two points Warner

while every saint was associated with a natural species such as partridge (*Perdrix perdrix*), carob tree (*Ceratonia siliqua*), reed (*Arundo donax*), *etc.*: effectively, this amounts to a skeleton structure of clan totemism (van Binsbergen 1971a, 2013c, forthcoming (b), and below, Chapter 5). By the same token, when I proceeded to do fieldwork among the Zambian Nkoya (1972-present) and in North-eastern Botswana (1988-1998), I found clans and totems to be very much in evidence as manifestations of an *emic* sub-national consensual form of classification, whose distribution would often extend for thousands of kms across national boundaries, regulating joking relations (often with sexual implications) and burial assistance in rural areas and even among townsmen, and informing patterns of social identification, divination, and food taboos (*cf.* van Binsbergen 1992b, 2012d for the Nkoya; author's fieldnotes for Botswana; Schapera 1952).

¹⁶² See *e.g.* Worsley (1956: 51, 61); Stanner (1967: 224 *f.*).

demonstrated that the opposition between magic and religion was not meaningful in the Australian ethnographic context which he had painstakingly investigated.

Warner's Australian field-work was prompted by the British / South African anthropologist Radcliffe-Brown, who was not only an Africanist but also published on the Australians, and wrote a monograph on the Andaman Islanders whose Negrito-like inhabitants in many ways are similar to the earliest Australian Aboriginals.¹⁶³ In 1929 Radcliffe-Brown had proposed a radical change of perspective in relation to Durkheim. Instead of *sacred*, he preferred to speak of a *ritual relation*, defined as follows:

'There exists a ritual relation whenever a society imposes on its members a certain attitude towards an object, which attitude involves some measure of respect expressed in a traditional mode of behaviour with reference to that object' (Radcliffe-Brown 1951: 123)

This still sounds as Durkheim, but the elaboration is totally different:

- a. While Durkheim has 'absolute respect', Radcliffe-Brown settles for respect 'in some measure'.
- b. With Radcliffe-Brown we see respect expressed 'in a *traditional* mode of behaviour'; now in principle all culture could be considered 'traditional' (in the sense of being *transmitted*, more or less intact, from generation to generation), but if we read Radcliffe-Brown formulation to mean something in the way of 'explicit rules', 'immutable', and 'detached from a signification which is entirely anchored in the present', then we approach rather more closely to the reality of ritual than is the case with Durkheim's enigmatic concept of 'effervescence', which is supposed to be experienced by the ritual participants directly and yet again with every new ritual occasion.
- c. Radcliffe-Brown posits that Durkheim had not sufficiently analysed the relation between object and adorant, and sets out to find the causes of this shortcoming. He chides Durkheim's explanation that the *sacred* objects are so very obvious as representations / depictions (Durkheim 1912 / 1960 / 1990: 329 *f.*). Radcliffe-Brown subsequently ignores the fact that for Durkheim it is immaterial *what precisely* is selected as *sacred* object because sacrality is attributed precisely for non-intrinsic reasons. Finally, Radcliffe-Brown claims that the reason for the ritual relation is that the totemic species are economically so very important for the nutrition of

¹⁶³ Radcliffe-Brown 1914, 1922 / 1933 / 1948, 1931. In recent decades, since the deciphering of the human genome, we have found extensive genetic indications that both the Andaman Islanders and the earliest inhabitants of Australia belonged to the initial sally 'Out-of-Africa' of Anatomically Modern Humans, from 80-60 ka BP. Cf. Forster 2004; Oppenheimer 2004. These findings are confirmed by Comparative Mythology, and to some extent by comparative linguistics.

the Australians; an additional and derived argument is that the totemic objects make it possible for groups in society to specialise ritually. For Radcliffe-Brown, the totemic species are not *sacred because* they have been chosen as symbol of society (and thus derive from society the absolute respect that is accorded them) – on the contrary, they have been chosen as symbols because they were already *sacred* on the basis of their economic significance:

‘The primary basis of ritual is the attribution of ritual value to objects and occasions which are either themselves objects of important common interest linking together the persons of a community or are symbolically representative of such objects’ (Radcliffe-Brown 1951: 151).’

What initially appeared to be only a minor departure from Durkheim’s view, in the end turns out to be a diametrically-opposed position. (For a similar interpretation, albeit from the individual rather than the collective perspective, see Malinowski 1954: 44 *f.*). Considered in this way, Evans-Pritchard is right when he claims that Radcliffe-Brown makes total nonsense of Durkheim’s theory (even though the latter is, in turn, totally rejected by Evans-Pritchard (1965: 73 *f.*).

Stanner writes, with unmistakable sarcasm:

‘There is little to suggest that Durkheim thought personal infamiliarity [*sic*] with aboriginal life a disadvantage.’ (1967: 218).

It does not seem exaggerated to attribute Radcliffe-Brown’s more down-to-earth viewpoint to the fact that he was personally acquainted, through prolonged field-work, with societies outside Europe, and therefore could appreciate the importance of prey animals for hunter-gatherers better than the armchair analyst Durkheim, whose only hunting grounds had been secondary and tertiary educational institutions in French urban environments around 1900 CE.

On the basis of his fieldwork on Groote Eylandt (Carpentaria Gulf, Northern Australia), Worsley approvingly cites Radcliffe-Brown on the relation between society on the one hand, and animal and vegetal species featuring as totems, on the other hand:

‘It appears to me that such a view [Durkheim’s – WvB] , contrary to all that is known of the importance of these natural species in the life of the aborigines, must be the product, partly, of “armchair” isolation from the reality of aboriginal life, but also of a pre-conceived notion that the relationship of the totem to the natural world is unimportant, or something about which we can say nothing intelligible’ (Worsley 1956: 54).

As far as this second point is concerned (*i.e.* bias concerning the relation between Nature and humans), one detects a distinct smell of dusty and mouldy books when reading Durkheim’s assertions concerning the allegedly inconspicuous nature of

totemic animals

‘le plus souvent parmi les plus humbles qui soient’ (Durkheim 1912 / 1960 / 1990: 245),

or concerning the distinct boredom of nature:

‘une régularité qui va jusqu’à la monotonie’ (Durkheim 1912 / 1960 / 1990: 119).

This was even Durkheim’s most important argument against Max Müller’s explanation of religion from distress and awe over natural phenomena; it may also have been the basis for Durkheim’s valuable emphasis on the non-intrinsic and the symbolic.

Meanwhile Durkheim did define the *sacred* as constituting a non-intrinsic, non-utilitarian value; this cannot have been wrong as long as we consider the *sacred*, nominally, as an imposed, etic analytical concept to be defined in whatever way we like – but of course, as a rendering of an emic actors’ religious concept in the society under study it could turn out to be either correct or incorrect depending on the intersubjective empirical methods by which ethnographic data are being established. The bullroarers and the totemic representations constructed out of sticks or (in the case of drawings) out of geometric figures certainly fall within this definition; it will not be by accident that in the ethnographic passages of *Les Formes* they receive most attention, on the basis of Durkheim’s rash ethnographic generalisation to the effect that

‘les images de l’être totémique [in other words, the *representations* of specific totemic animals and plants – WvB] sont plus sacrées que l’être totémique [*i.e.* concrete specimens of the species itself – WvB] lui même’ (Durkheim 1912 / 1960 / 1990: 189; my italics),

– an idea¹⁶⁴ which in the later chapters of *Les Formes* is even raised to a general principle (Durkheim 1912 / 1960 / 1990: 329 *f.*). It is doubtful whether the living specimens of the totemic species do at all fit Durkheim’s definition of the sacred. And, considering the available ethnographic reports, those plants and animals are not the only candidates to claim (instead of the clan or the total society) the status of constituting the referents of the religious symbolism. Worsley writes:

‘it may actually be some event of general concern of society, such as the opening of the Airbase (!), or an established institution, such as the custom of cicatrization’ (Worsley 1956: 58).

(text continues after Figure)

¹⁶⁴ Here Durkheim’s indebtedness to Kant is particularly manifest.

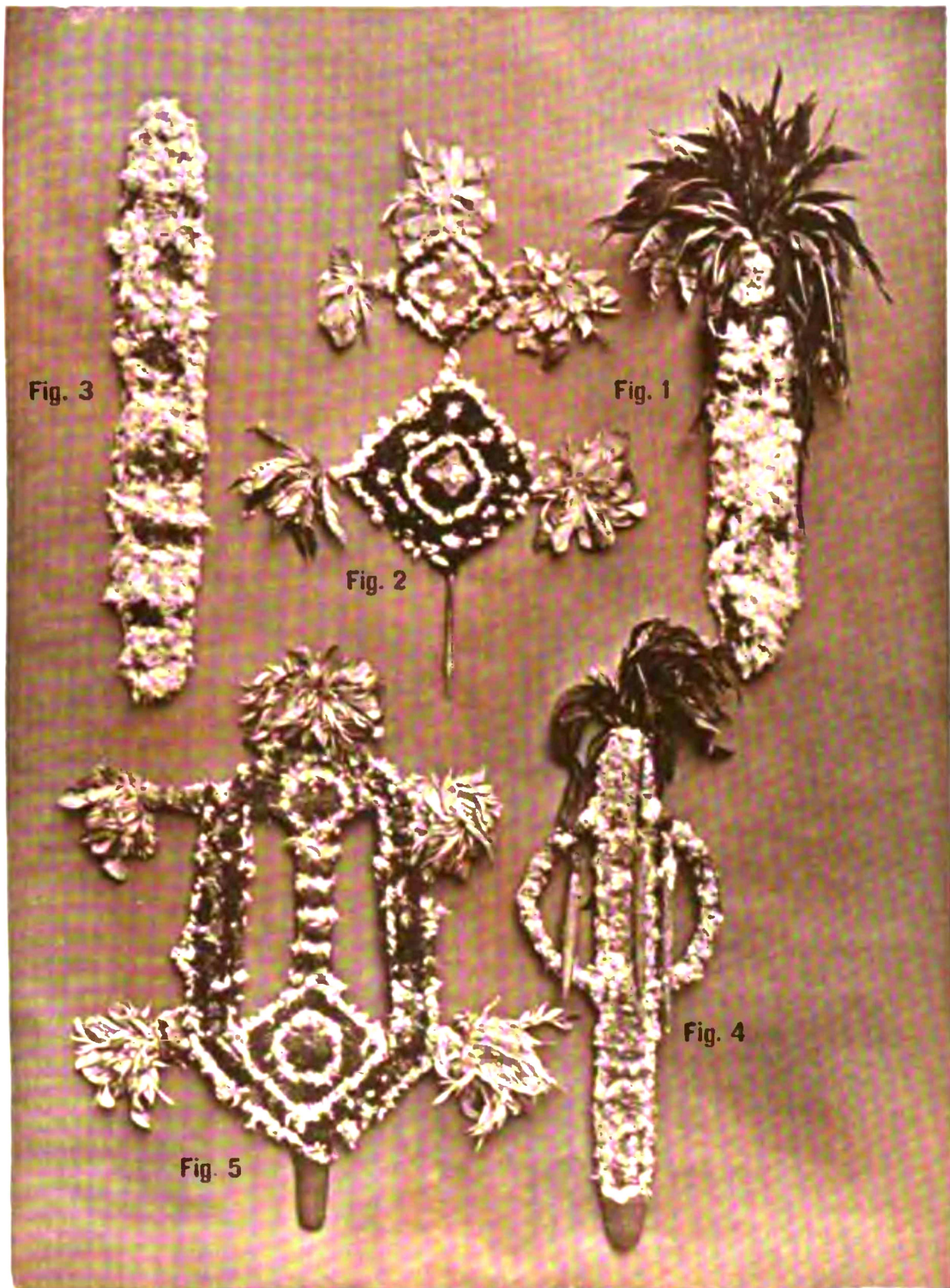


Fig. 3.4. Aranda totemic representations made out of sticks, after Strehlow 1907: 121-122, *Tafel VIII*; his caption appears overleaf

Tafel VIII (Städtisches Völkermuseum Frankfurt a/Main)

Figur 1. Ratapa tnatantja. Gebraucht bei den Aufführungen des Totems der ratapa s. pag. 4, Anm. 3 [of Strehlow's book]; die dort erwähnten zwei Söhne (Sprößlinge = ratapa) sind die Totem Vorfahren. Wie No. 3, jedoch am oberen Ende mit einem großen Büschel langer dunkler (?) Raubvogelfedern von *Aquila amlax?* [a species of predator bird] verziert, da« Holz ganz mit aufgeklebtem Kakaduflaum bedeckt, ohne die Ockerquerstreifen (...)

Figur 2. Urturba wonninga. Gebraucht bei den Aufführungen des Totems des kleinen Habichts [little hawk] . Doppelkreuz, gebildet aus fingerdicken Rundstäbchen, die in der Weise verbunden sind, daß der vertikale Stab durch die beiden gespaltenen Querstäbe hindurchgesteckt ist. An den Enden der beiden letzteren, sowie am oberen Ende des Vertikalstabes, dessen unteres Ende zugespitzt ist, befindet sich je ein Büschel aus zerschlissenen Raubvogel-Federn [feathers of a predator bird] . An den beiden Kreuzungsstellen der Stäbe ist je ein (...) Viereck aus parallel und locker nebeneinanderliegenden, konzentrisch angeordneten Schnüren aus schwarzem Menschenhaar [human hair] und hellen Pflanzenfasern [vegetal fibers] und zwar in der Art, daß letztere die Mitte einnehmen. Bei dem unteren größeren Viereck Überwiegen die Schnüren aus Menschenhaaren, bei dem oberen kleineren diejenigen aus Pflanzenfasern. Die Vorderseite dieser Schnur-Vierecke ist in der auf der Abbildung ersichtlichen Weise mit Kakadudaunen [kakatoo down] verziert. (...)

Figur 3. Tjilpa tnatantja. Gebraucht bei den Aufführungen des Totems der wilden Katze (*Dasyurus spec.*). Breites schwertförmiges, an beiden Enden abgerundetes Holz, welches mit Schnüren umwunden, mit Kakaduflaum beklebt und mit Querstreifen aus rotem Ocker beschmiert ist. (...)

Figur 4. Nkura tnatantja, s. Tafel V, Figur 2 und 3. Längliches, oben und unten abgerundetes Holz mit Schnüren umwunden. An demselben ist ein kreisförmig gebogener ebenfalls umwundener Reif befestigt. Von der oberen, mit einem Büschel zerschlissener dunkler Raubvogel(?) -Federn verzierten Spitze, sowie von beiden Seiten des Reifes hängt an einer Schnur aus Menschenhaaren je ein schmales, lanzettförmiges Schwirrh Holz herab. Das Ganze ist mit Kakaduflaum beklebt, (...)

Figur 5. Kwatja atjua wonninga, s. Tafel VII, Figur 1. Doppelkreuz, ähnlich wie das auf Tafel VI abgebildete Stück, nur bestehen die breiten lose nebeneinanderliegenden Schnurreihen, welche die beiden Querhölzer miteinander verbinden, ganz aus Menschenhaarschnüren. Die beiden über den Kreuzungsstellen liegenden Vierecke aus konzentrisch angeordneten Menschenhaarschnüren berühren sich mit den Spitzen nicht. Mit Ausnahme der seitlichen Menschenhaarschnurbänder ist das Ganze mit Ocker rot gefärbt und in der aus der Abbildung ersichtlichen Weise mit Kakaduflaum beklebt. (...)

(text continues:)

Also the topography plays a major role in the Australian totemic systems; here (by a general principle which time and time again has proved, worldwide, extremely fruitful in the interpretation of oral traditions)¹⁶⁵ the *mythical journey* of the Dream-Time Beings may refer to historic migrations of the ancestors of today's clans to their present-day territories; the association between totem and present-day habitat is then once more an illustration of the close relation between humans and Nature.¹⁶⁶

Such criticism does make us doubt whether, what Durkheim considers as *sacred*, is in all situations truly non-utilitarian; if this criticism could be considered well-taken (but we have not yet reached the point in our argument where we can confidently decide on this important matter) this is to have profound implications for Durkheim's theory concerning the way in which the collective takes shape through individual action. The Australian case appears to demonstrate that in a religious system a major role may be played by objects from the material world which are unmistakably useful and important. If this is the case, then it would certainly constitute an objection against Durkheim's theory; all the more untenable would then become Durkheim's conception of the individual whose utilitarian / egoistic calculations would be in continuous and blatant contradiction with the social, and who would have to be constantly coaxed, by means of collective ritual, into a non-utilitarian *i.e.* social point of view – in other words, the individual who has to be literally 'called to order': the existing social order, or possibly a new social order.

But let us not jump to conclusions. Apparently economically crucial matters such as animal and vegetal food, territory and meteorological phenomena play a major role in the religions of Australian cultures, and it stands to reason that they do so precisely because of their economic importance. But that is only one half of what is at stake: for is the way in which they have been incorporated in religion, identical to the way they function in the economy? No, they have been selected into the religious domain according to certain principles (for instance, economic importance, but considering the great variety of Australian totems – also among one and the same people – other principles are also involved), and once they have been admitted to the religious domain they become the object of attitudes and behaviour that is proper to that domain, – a transformation which probably is well described in terms of 'extreme respect' and 'non-utilitarian'. This means that in a culture, and from the actor's frame of reference, two complementary phases may be discerned:

1. The selection which admits some objects, at the exclusion of other objects, to function within the religious domain

¹⁶⁵ Cf. Vansina 1966; Cunnison 1968; van Binsbergen 1980b, 1985a, 1992b.

¹⁶⁶ For an excellent analysis cf. Warner 1958; and also cf. Stanner's critique, below.

2. The selection which defines some situations as religious, *i.e.* as situations in which the available principles as under (1) are mobilised so as to allow (in that specific situation) objects to function in religious attitudes and behaviour, either directly, or as symbolic referents.

That the same things (*e.g.* totemic animals) may function totally differently in the economy and in the religion is an effect of (religious) symbolism. Further reflection might well lead us to realise that Durkheim's conception of sacrality, (even if unacceptable in its extreme form) yet turns out to be more fertile than Radcliffe-Brown's, Malinowski's and Worsley's apparently so attractive appeal to means-end rationality. Stanner (1966: 234 *f.*) dedicates the interesting third section of his article to this merit of Durkheim; yet for Stanner a qualified recognition of Durkheim's merits in the field of symbolism is all but hidden under a great deal of (well-taken) criticism. We shall return to this fundamental problematic of Durkheim's religion theory in Chapter 6, where we shall try to offer a solution on the basis of Ĥumiri / Tunisian ethnography, reconciling the symbolic and the utilitarian perspective through the nexus of social organisation.

Time for us to turn to the leading French anthropologist of a previous generation, Claude Lévi-Strauss.

3.3. The war on the sacred in 20th c. CE France

Although many commentators have accepted and applied Durkheim's paired concepts *sacred / profane* as the centre of his, and their, approach to religion, in fact precisely in his country of birth, France a heated debate was waged on this issue throughout the century following the publication of *Les Formes*. The debate is excellently summarised by Tarot (2009):

'...Durkheim, who emphasized the social origin of religion and its integrating function, tied this idea closely together with the *sacred / profane* distinction: it is through this distinction that society reflects itself in individuals and imposes its norms and values on them. On the other hand, he explains *the alleged universality of the distinction precisely by its social origin*. In spite of Durkheim's emphasis on the central place of the sacred in the analysis of religion, *the French religious sociology has ever since contested this claim*. However, the article claims that these criticisms can be divided into two categories depending on the reasons given for the attack against the Durkheimian conception. These critical approaches, in turn, constitute two ultimately antagonistic sets of theories of the religious itself. *The defenders of the 'subjective sacred' (Eliade) find the Durkheimian thesis about the social origin of the sacred reductionist,*¹⁶⁷ *whereas the proponents of the 'non-existentialist' theory (Lévi-Strauss) contest not only the universality but the very existence of the sacred*. As a last 'act' of the French war over the sacred, the article discusses René Girard's attempt to bring back the problem of sacred by linking it to the intrinsically mimetic and hence violent nature of hu-

¹⁶⁷ Nonetheless, above I could list Eliade as one of the authors who have continued to endorse the *sacred / profane* distinction.

man desire.’ (Tarot 2009; my italics – WvB).

Tarot makes us realise how far Lévi-Strauss, although Durkheim’s intellectual grandson through Mauss, distanced himself for the conception of society and the *sacred* as expounded in *Les Formes*:

From 1947 on, in an article that has not been republished (...), Lévi-Strauss (1947) declared the Durkheimian religiology obsolescent: Durkheim was not a field ethnologist.¹⁶⁸ No doubt, he had spotted some distinctive oppositions, which could guide ethnologists, but the opposition of the profane and the pure / limpure sacred had not been confirmed among them. His theory of the sacred was therefore obsolete, Lévi-Strauss claimed. Instead of being the first institution, religion is but a small and completely secondary sector. It is sufficient here to reread Lévi-Strauss’ definition of culture which he gave in 1950 in his *Introduction à l’oeuvre de Marcel Mauss* in order to find the anti-Durkheimian point or the 180 degrees revolution that structuralism operates in relation to the Durkheimian thinking.

“Every culture can be considered a set of symbolic systems, the first row being occupied by language, matrimonial rules, economic relations, art, science and religion” ([Lévi-Strauss] 1950: xix).

This order of factors is by no means accidental. It conveys the very logic of structuralism. The religion is put *in fine* [at the end – WvB], as a fifth wheel or a superstructure to the cultural phenomenon. This position is diametrically inverse to that of Durkheim, which Lévi-Strauss knew very well, as he by no means ignored the two declarations where Durkheim stated that religion was the most primitive of all social facts’ (Tarot, 2008: 273).’ Tarot 2009.

Upon her (shaky) argument (for consecutive order does not equal subordination!), Tarot bases two conclusions each of which seem to require far more discussion than in fact she offers:

1) the equilibrium between the symbolic and the sacred has to be conserved in any viable theory of religion; 2) the *sacred* is not to be conceived as an ideology, but rather as a category connected to the ritual side of religion.’ (Tarot 2009).

But while these two reminders may remain as further growth points for theory and reflection, with the superior insight of the cultural, linguistic and institutional insider Tarot has managed to update our debate on the paired concepts *sacred / profane* by more than half a century.

¹⁶⁸ This argument is somewhat hilarious, a *chutzpah* (to remain in the discourse of Judaism), when considered from the distance in space and time that separates me from pronouncements made by Lévi-Strauss in France, in the year of my birth in Holland. Admittedly, Lévi-Strauss was to become well-known with his *Tristes Tropiques* (1955), based on personal experiences in South America, and of little substantial anthropological significance. His lasting claim to fame, however, was with abstruse, theoretical studies in kinship and mythology, none of which leaned heavily on his fieldwork if any: *Les Structures Élémentaires de la Parenté* (note the pun on *Les Formes*), *Anthropologie Structurale I-II*, and *Mythologiques I-IV*.

3.4. Lévi-Strauss yet salvaging Durkheim's analysis of totemism?

Despite Lévi-Strauss's wholesale rejection of Durkheim's religion project at least as explained by Tarot (2009), he would yet make a surprisingly positive contribution to the debate on intrinsic sacrality by resolutely rejecting Worsley's Marxist-inspired criticism on this point. The famous French structuralist departs from Radcliffe-Brown's later elaboration of the second aspect which the latter attributed to the totemic species in a totemic system: they enable ritual specialisation between groups, each identifying with their own specific totem in other words, articulating themselves through the juxtaposition of totems. With an overkill of polemical sarcasm Lévi-Strauss deals with Malinowski:

'les coups de baguette – assez légers, dans les deux sens du terme – de la fée Malinowski', Lévi-Strauss 1965: 84);¹⁶⁹

'the rather light (in the two senses of the term) touch of the magic wand as wielded by the fairy Malinowski'

Lévi-Strauss denies totemism both its utilitarian and its affective / emotive aspect, and concludes, with an expression that has meanwhile become famous:

'les espèces naturelles ne sont pas choisies parce que "bonnes à manger", mais parce que "bonnes à penser" (Lévi-Strauss 1965: 128).

'the natural species are selected, not because they are "good to eat", but because they are "good to think"'

Here *penser*, 'thinking', is meant in the most abstract, logical sense. By *pairwise* selection of animals, plants and other object from Nature, in such a way that the selected paired objects resemble each other in some respects but are diametrically opposed in other respects

(e.g. kangaroos and emus are both terrestrial animals, but kangaroos are quadrupeds, have a woolly skin, and produce live offspring to mature in their pouch, whereas emus have two legs, feathers, and lay eggs in a nest)

the totemic system would offer the participants a handy model of (segmented) social organisation consisting (according to an analogous logic as unites and differentiates the totemic species at the same time) of groups which in same respects are similar and in other respects diametrically opposed:

'pour reconcilier opposition et intégration' (Lévi-Strauss 1965: 141).

Lévi-Strauss' references to symbolic logic and to suitable philosophical predecessors such as the French philosophers Bergson and Rousseau may be meant to take away the reader's last resistance to such ideas, yet could hardly succeed in doing so from the standpoint of Amsterdam social science, which at the time when this was first drafted (1960s) was emphatically, even notoriously anti-structuralist.

¹⁶⁹ Here the importance of the text, and the risks of misunderstanding, make me deviate from my rule of not translating quotations in major modern languages.

We touch here on one of the major bones of contention in modernist (as distinct from post-modern!) cultural anthropology; a further discussion would be outside our present scope, and I will limit myself to two remarks. In the first place, stressing the central economic importance of the totemic species, Worsley (1967: 141 f.) managed to cast serious doubt upon these eminently Cartesian, rationalistic, structuralist insights of Lévi-Strauss, using the same ethnographic data and sometimes even the same formulations which in Worsley's 1956 article the latter had brought against *Les Formes*. In the second place, grafted upon de Saussure's linguistic structuralism of half a century earlier, the lasting value of Lévi-Strauss' reading of totemism as a tool for segmented social organisation is *that he made it very clear that a totemic symbol cannot stand on its own: it is only the juxtaposition with at least one other such symbol, similar yet different, which yields a viable societal logic*. Although initially steeped in the Amsterdam prejudice against structuralism during my studies,¹⁷⁰ later (working from Leiden continuously since 1975!) my own fieldwork-based analyses on social organisation especially on clans, shrines and myths in Tunisia, on clans in South Central Africa, and in Comparative Mythology, benefited greatly and explicitly from the Lévi-Straussian inspiration – also as a result of my approchement to the Louvain School of anthropology, where not Manchester (with its conception of social structure as inchoate, and its emphasis on the social process above structure), but structuralism and Lacanian psychoanalysis are the main sources of inspiration.

3.5. Intermediate stock-taking

Having heard these voices pro and contra Durkheim, is it still possible to maintain his paired concepts *sacred / profane* as analytical tools? Despite the ethnographic objections, I am still not decided.

We may continue to define the *sacred* in terms of extreme respect,

– but provided we qualify Durkheim's approach in such a way as to make unambiguously clear that the extent to which the utilitarian aspect of a given cultural item (i.e. an act, representation, relation, norm etc. as defined within a specific culture) may be of greater or lesser relevance, depends greatly on the culturally defined situation in which the actor in question finds herself or himself.(a)

If we accept this as a meaningful step, then the task of the researcher is not limited to

defining operationally what for a specific culture might count as an expression of such extreme respect, (b)

¹⁷⁰ A prejudice, incidentally, which also in itself could be explained away as, not so much a compelling matter of scientific contents but rather as an inevitable structural opposition within Dutch academia, where institutions are competing for status, funds, students etc.!

but is also to include specifying the cultural data and culturally defined situations as under (a)(c)

It is an obvious requirement that the situation and cultural items in question are explicitly recognised not just in the researcher's analytical, *etic* frame of reference, but also in the *emic*, actor's frame of reference: for we seek to understand how the latter informs the actor's motivation, assess what the latter's effect is on the actor's worldview. The qualifications proposed here bring the paired concept back under the scope and specificities of space and time; I believe this is necessary to cleanse the paired concepts *sacred* / *profane* from the last remainder of intrinsic sacrality which may still be detected in Durkheim's emphasis on the bullroarers and the totemic representations – objects, in other words, which by no stretch of the imagination could every serve a utilitarian purpose, even if we wished them to.¹⁷¹

3.6. Back to Stanner

I propose to end this overview of the main existing criticism of Durkheim's paired concepts *sacred* / *profane* with the more extensive discussion of some of the points of view of Stanner, as a specialist on Australian cultures, and especially as the author of a brilliant analysis of Australian religion in a series of articles in the leading journal *Oceania* (Stanner 1959-1963).

The qualifications ((a) – (c)) I proposed above seem to take away Stanner's principal objection against the paired concepts *sacred* / *profane*:

'the static and timeless character' (Stanner 1967: 229)

but that does not exhaust his criticism. In his opinion, the weak spot in Durkheim's argument is not so much *sacred* but *profane*. And it is true that *profane* is hardly being defined in *Les Formes* unless in total dependence upon, and as denial of, *sacred*.¹⁷² According to Stanner, Durkheim's use of *profane* is utterly imprecise, it may allegedly mean anything from 'common', 'minor *sacred*', to 'non-*sacred*', and 'anti-*sacred*'. However, I believe Stanner is mistaken on this point. For instance, it is not true that Durkheim subsumes ordinary, everyday human action as well as black magic under the same denominator of *profane*. Black magic belong to the domain of the *sacred*, it is precisely the reason why Durkheim, in his famous definition of religion cited above (which already con-

¹⁷¹ Could not they? Some of these objects are sufficiently heavy and pointed so as to be used as a formidable weapon in anger, *e.g.* in a brawl over proper ritual procedure and personal precedence, as is a common occurrence in small-scale societies. The Northern Australian ethnographic work of my friend and colleague Eric Venbrux (1995) offers examples of such conflicts. But use as a weapon would probably rule out an attitude of 'extreme respect'.

¹⁷² The point is similar to that articulated by Riley above in regard of Durkheim's students Hertz, Mauss and Hubert: setting the balance straight and acknowledging the 'negative sacred'.

tained the oppositions between *croyances* and *pratiques*, and between *sacré* and *profane*) introduced a third dimension of collective ('church') versus individual, relegating black magic to the individual pole; this is in line with his and his contemporaries's view, meanwhile sufficiently chided in the literature, of the absolute opposition between magic and religion.¹⁷³

Neither have I been able to find substantiation for Stanner's claim, according to which also in the domain of the *profane* Durkheim presents a mirror image of the distinction he makes between *sacré-bienfaisant* and *sacré-impur* (Durkheim 1912 / 1960 / 1990: 584 f.). Probably the confusion springs from the word *profanation*, 'sacrilege', which Stanner counts as belonging to the *profane* domain, whereas Durkheim sees it as the prototype of magic, hence clearly an aspect of the *sacred*.

One other point of Stanner's criticism is more difficult to refute: his claim that a mere pair of concepts, a mere bifurcation or opposition, is not enough to do justice to the complexities of the religious domain. He points to an entire class of observable material things which, even though they are employed in rituals and thus brought within the *sacred* domain as defined in Australian cultures, yet are not supposed to react to the *sacred* (either by becoming – by means of a dramatic metamorphosis – *sacred* in their turn, or by being harmed by the *sacred*). Stanner gives quite a list on this point: water, fire, earth,¹⁷⁴ food, cos-

¹⁷³ Durkheim 1912 / 1960 / 1990: 56 f. Frazer's classic distinction between religion and magic (the former as existentially humble, receptive and relational, the latter as an idiom of mechanically and impersonally applied manipulative power) was much discussed in the anthropology of the early decades of the 20th c. CE, and while obsolescent in anthropological discourse, has continued to inspire theology- and classics-orientated religious studies of the 'history of religion' type. My personal view inspired by the Tunisian fieldwork (1971a and forthcoming (b)) is that the two – under whatever arbitrary names – are really complementary and oscillating modalities of thought and of action which, depending on culture, situation and person, each may serially take greater or lesser weight as compared to the other.

¹⁷⁴ #30. *TRACES OF TRANSFORMATIVE ELEMENT COSMOLOGY AMONG THE AUSTRALIANS? Water, fire, earth...* these are three items which feature in many cosmologies of cyclical element transformation in many parts of the world (including the well-known Empedoclean system in Western Eurasia c. 500 BCE, and the *pa kua* 'Five Phases' Taoist cosmology of East Asia. Given the evidence for extensive links between the Australian Aboriginal population in historical times, and South Asia, Indonesia and New Guinea (Roberts-Thomson *et al.* 1996; Cavalli-Sforza *et al.* 1994; Forster 2004) it cannot be ruled out that stray fragments of this widespread cosmological model have also been enshrined in Aboriginal cultures, despite the tendency to essentialise them as primordial, timeless and *sui generis*. Remarkably, the classes of items listed by Stanner also make up the bulk of the heterogeneous array of tokens contained in the basket oracle of South Central Africa (Rodrigues de Areia 1985; Turner 1961). In a comprehensive statistical analysis now being rewritten for final publication (van Binsbergen 2002a / in press (f)), I have sought to demonstrate the unexpected continuity between the South Central African and the East Asian systems – a line or argument more elaborately developed in my book *Before the Presocratics* (2012). However, a totally different explanation also comes to mind: the four Empedoclean elements, with their enormous impact on two and a half millennia of iconography, *belles lettres*, astrology, alchemy, the other occult sciences, natural sciences up to Early Modern times, *etc.*, belong to the intellectual baggage of nearly all Westerners (including Stanner) whose education has proceeded beyond secondary school;

metics, weapons, tools, and musical instruments. This prompts Stanner to propose a third category next to *sacred* and *profane*: the category of the *mundane*, i.e. things which in a ritual context continue to be experienced in the same manner as in everyday life, in other words, things which are indifferent *vis-à-vis* the *sacred*. One is reminded¹⁷⁵ of the Azande shrines as described by Evans-Pritchard, however, the big difference there is that one object could be at the same time *sacred* and *profane*, whereas in Stanner's context certain objects apparently can never be *sacred*.

Yet by and large I am inclined to reject Stanner's proposal, not in the last place because it appears to reflect Stanner's partial misunderstanding of Durkheim's concepts. In my opinion we do not need a third category next to *sacred* and *profane*. If we may return for a moment to the qualification (a) I proposed above, then it might appear that Stanner's category of the *mundane* simply comprises those cases in which the culture under study defines, for every situation, the relevance of an object to lie exclusively on the utilitarian side. Meanwhile I question whether the objects listed by Stanner will always remain so completely indifferent *vis-à-vis* the *sacred*. The existing ethnographic and mythological literature contains strong indications that some of them do have considerable symbolic value in the Australian cultures. The Earth is a case in point: if it is being sacralised by the peregrinations of the totemic beings in the primordial Dream Time as recounted in myth, it is hardly imaginable that nothing of this sacrality is communicated to the current Earth where rituals are

perhaps the mention of three components of this foursome, is an unwarranted projection from Stanner's own Western culture, rather than a faithful and well-documented rendering of Aboriginal cultures. However, Stanner's fame as an ethnographer of the latter seems incompatible with this explanation in terms of unconscious ethnocentrism.

¹⁷⁵ #31. CATALYTIC ELEMENT TRANSFORMATION AND TRANSCONTINENTAL CONTINUITIES. Cosmologically, Stanner's introduction of a third category 'mundane', reminds us rather (van Binsbergen 2012d) of the once widespread *cosmology of the cyclical transformation of elements*, which after humble beginnings in the Upper Palaeolithic, became enriched, only a few millennia BP (in the Neolithic or Bronze Ages in East Asia) with a complicating factor, the catalyst which could affect that transformation back and forth between elements, without in itself being transformed. It is in this catalytic form that the cyclical cosmology has been embedded in the clan nomenclature of the Nkoya people of South Central Africa – which fact is an important indication of massive East Asian influence (directly, or mediated indirectly via South Asia) upon South East Asia; such influence no longer comes as a surprise, considering the extensive corroborating evidence concerning East and South Asian impact upon prehistoric East, South and West Africa, as documented and referenced in my recent writings, notably van Binsbergen 2007b; 2012d; 2017a: ch. 10, pp. 361-412; in press (a); in press (b). I am not suggesting any direct maritime exchange between the Australians and South Central Africa in proto-historic times (although there is ample evidence of Sunda impact upon South Central Africa – probably the Indo-Pacific could be implicated in this connection). Yet both regions have been indebted to South Asia in recent millennia, and both have also received, in far remoter times (the Middle and Upper Palaeolithic) a fair share of the contents of Pandora's Box. In other words, Stanner's 'mundane' suggestion appeals to me but mainly because it may be considered as another instance of embeddedness, now in Australia and not in South Central Africa, of a localised, reformulated catalytic cyclical transformative element cosmology.

being staged, from which clay, ochre etc. are taken and used for bodily markings, etc. Water and Earth feature at the core of mythemes that are so widespread and so ancient among Anatomically Modern Humans, that almost inevitably these two elements will also have mythical qualities among the Australian Aboriginals. In Stanner's formulations, also the concept of *mundane* retains the suggestion of an intrinsic quality (notably: intrinsically useful, intrinsically utilitarian, intrinsically referring to everyday life), which has little heuristic value for the study of religious phenomena, as Durkheim, of all people, saw very clearly.

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Chapter 4. Exploding the paired concepts *sacred* / *profane* as analytical tools

4.1. Defectiveness of the paired concepts *sacred* / *profane* as analytical tools

In this Chapter 4 we continue our criticism of the paired concepts *sacred* / *profane* which Durkheim placed at the centre of his religion theory, in a bid to assess their potential for continued use within the social science of religion.

When I wrote the bulk of the preceding Part II, in 1967, I had only known one religious context (that of Dutch Roman Catholicism) from prolonged and intensive personal participation, while acquiring a nodding acquaintance with other Christian denominations, and a great deal more than that (as a major socio-cultural – rather than spiritual – influence especially upon my mother) with the remnants of Judaism as surviving in the Netherlands shortly after World War II; today, by contrast, I have become a recognised specialist in the field of religious anthropology; have known Islamic, historic African, Christian, South Asian, South East Asian, East Asian, Ancient Egyptian, Ancient Greek and Ancient Mesopotamian religious forms from personal observation, participant observation, and historical enquiry; and, via a phase as renegade Roman Catholic adolescent and neo-Marxist deconstruction of all religion, have become a diviner-healer-priest in a major Southern African tradition. It would have been tragic if my first attempt in the social science of religion could still be taken seriously, half a century after the fact. Nonetheless, I have continued to consider Durkheim's theory to belong to the best which the social sciences have to offer in the field of religion, and I have repeatedly testified to this opinion in

later work. Yet, for reasons which I will briefly set out below, I no longer accept the redeeming analytical power of the distinction between *sacred* and *profane*, nor the universality of that distinction.

Our above explorations have led to the following insights:

- Although today, in some respects *Les Formes* may raise doubts as a theory and method in the social science of religion, it appears possible to cleanse and qualify that book's central paired concepts *sacred* / *profane* in such a way as to meet the severe criticism which from various sides has been directed at it. Thus in the course of our present argument the paired concepts have obtained a revised character, after we have dropped a number of the implicit presuppositions and explanations attached to it by Durkheim himself; instead of being intrinsically implied in the paired concepts *sacred* / *profane*, such presuppositions and explanations can now in themselves become targets of systematic further empirical investigation.
- It is premature to already make sweeping, general pronouncements as to
 - a) the nature of the distinction *sacred* / *profane* (is it absolute, or rather relative / gradual / situational?),
 - b) the possible transitions between sacred and profane (are they necessary, strategic, situational, *etc.*)
 - c) the relation between sacred objects and the referents (and which are they) to which they may refer symbolically
 - d) the intrinsic characteristics of the objects to which the paired concepts are being applied, and their status as sacred or profane
 - e) contagiousness of the sacred, and
 - f) ambiguity of the sacred

– as long as these relationships have not been investigated empirically, on the basis of carefully formulated working hypotheses, within the concrete empirical, ethnographic material of one or a number of lived religions intimately known from field-work and / or texts and iconography. And if such pronouncements are already premature, the last thing we should do is appeal to these mere hypotheses as convincing explanations for such phenomena as sacrifice, initiation, death rites.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷⁶ This explicitly empirical and methodological viewpoint renders invalid even the argument with which Evans-Pritchard (1965: 85) sought to demonstrate the uselessness of the paired concepts *sacred* / *profane*. He points out that the Azande of Central Africa, one of whose principal ethnographers he has been, have sacred shrines where offerings are being made *but* which,

‘when not in ritual use’,

are used as spear stands, and then pragmatically, without extreme respect. Contrary to what Evans-

I will limit myself here to mentioning a number of possible applications:

- the study of the class of phenomena we are used to call ‘religious’
- study of situations in which expressions of ‘extreme respect’ / ‘non-utilitarian viewpoint’ may be observed: everything between a Christmas afternoon concert in the famous Concertgebouw music hall, Amsterdam, a soldier’s attitude vis-à-vis the commands he has received, and the inspiration emanating from a specific ideology
- the study of normative patterns of behaviour in general: their validity or lack thereof (‘anomie’, another one of Durkheim’s concepts which sociology has cherished), the way in which they are imprinted on individual members of society, and in which they make society possible.¹⁷⁷

In order to explore these suggestions, explicit operationalisation is a firm requirement in addition to further theoretical elaboration. In the next part of this book, we shall see how Durkheim’s theory has splendidly survived a practical application in anthropological fieldwork, which amounts to an operationalisation in its own right. But before we can turn to Part III, let us first consider in some detail the intellectual climate in which my first, beginner’s assessment of Durkheim’s religion theory was set.

4.2. The rise and fall of structuralism in Amsterdam anthropology

My naïve dismissal of structuralist approaches, in 1967, simply (and, for me, with uncharacteristic docility) mirrored the positivist climate of Amsterdam anthropology in the 1960s. These were the years when the brilliant New-Guinea specialist Jan Pouwer, after a conflict over method and theory with his professorial colleague André Köbben,

Pritchard suggests, there would not be the slightest problem here as regards the usefulness of the paired concepts *sacred* / *profane*, as long as, in terms of my qualification (a), we allow the relevance of the sacred aspect to vary with space and time in a way defined by the local culture. Also cf. Geertz’s masterly insight:

‘The movement back and forth between the religious perspective and the common sense perspective is actually one of the more obvious empirical occurrences on the social scene.’ (1966: 36).

¹⁷⁷ I submit that the flexibility of the paired concepts *sacred* / *profane* as qualified by me, also allows a synthesis between on the one hand the sociological approach to religion (and to ultimate values, and norms in general), and deep psychology, on the other hand. In sociology the emphasis in the approach to social structure is on adults (and, until recently, even *male* adults); and this brings out a different pattern of relevance of the sacred then is the case for young children: for the latter the parents, food, the bogey man and Santa Claus may be relevant in many more situations than would be the case for adults, and in the infantile case these situations of great relevance would meet with little competition from other more or less sacred objects. Yet it is quite possible that the adult sense of the sacred develops from the infantile one, which would mean an intimate relation between socialisation and the sacred, as has been cogently argued, in the first place by Freud, and subsequently by pioneers of the ‘Culture and Personality’ school such as Kardiner, Erikson, and Fromm.

decided to leave the Amsterdam scene and, via a professorship in New Zealand, finally ended up as a mere Senior Lecturer in the Dutch university city of Nijmegen.¹⁷⁸ In the early years of my reading anthropology I had much affinity with Pouwer's Oceania-centred work: I wrote a long anthropology paper on a New Guinea people, and I produced a sociology undergraduate thesis on Durkheim's analysis of Australian Aboriginal religion. In subsequent years, and working continuously from Leiden ever since 1975, I took considerable distance from the Amsterdam prejudices, both as an intercultural philosopher, as an anthropologist of North African myths, as a proto-historian of South Central Africa and of the Bronze Age Eastern Mediterranean, and in my long-range intercultural comparisons especially in the field of Comparative Mythology. Pouwer was succeeded by the Mediterraneanist and transactionalist anthropologist Jeremy Boissevain, who was just as dismissive of structuralism as of the structural-functionalism then prevailing in Amsterdam. As my supervisor, Boissevain was to have considerable impact on the two Drs of Soc Sc. theses (one of kinship and social organisation, the other on religion) which I produced on the basis of my Tunisian field-work; out of his own initiative he had invited me to take a PhD on their basis after my return from Zambia but subsequently dodged his self-chosen responsibilities, in other words *maakte zich er met een Jantje van Leiden vanaf*... For meanwhile the institutional political situation had changed substantially. The institute's long-standing Mediterraneanist, Douwe Jongmans (*cf.* van Binsbergen 2011c), who was to closely supervise my Humiri field-work on the spot, had been bypassed again when a new incumbent for Pouwer's chair was to be found – and Jongmans had already been painfully bypassed (and on the futile grounds that his Oceania-based PhD had not been on personal field-work) eleven years earlier when Köbben had succeeded to the chair of his own and Jongmans's teacher Fahrenfort. Jongmans had meanwhile developed into the main Dutch field-worker on North Africa, had published (with Gutkind) a major methodological collection on field-work, and had set up an intensive field-work training facility for Amsterdam anthropology students in Tunisia. However, when this facility came (predictably, given the preceding politics) under fire from Jongmans's institutional colleagues (I was among the very few to defend Jongmans wholeheartedly), Jongmans left the department for the African Studies Centre at Leiden, the Royal Tropical Institute, and a personal chair in the anthropology of human fertility. Under those circumstances, Boissevain could dispense with me as a client, follower, or fellow-Mediterraneanist. He sent me a short note to the effect that taking a PhD on the basis of my Tunisian material 'would not be in my career interest'. So at very short notice I had to make the best of my dwindling Zambian opportunities and leave the country, after a year's extension paid for from our personal family budget, with enough material to base a new, hitherto unplanned PhD thesis on. Of

¹⁷⁸ In Amsterdam anthropological circles he was nicknamed 'Jantje van Leiden' – especially under the influence of J.P.B. de Josselin de Jong (1886 – 1964; see end bibliography) Leiden had developed into a fortress of structuralist anthropology, an orientation subsequently continued when his nephew P.E. de Josselin de Jong succeeded to one of his uncle's professorial chairs in 1957. This epithet was doubly hurtful because the Dutch expression *zich ergens met een Jantje van Leiden vanaf maken* means: 'dodging one's responsibilities by producing sloppy work' – which could hardly apply to hard-working, widely publishing Pouwer. *Cf.* Vermeulen 2002.

course, Boissevain turned out to be right: instead of his client-*cum*-epigone, I became a leading Africanist in my own right, not in the last place because I had in the meantime been co-opted (although not for long) as one of Köbben's favourite and most promising advanced students.¹⁷⁹ Although as a student I had never entertained much of an Africanist inclination, it was Köbben who (though his friendship with the Manchester anthropologist Jaap van Velsen) found me a teaching position at the University of Zambia, designed a special curriculum geared to South Central Africa for me so that I would not enter the South Central African (Manchester-School-dominated) field unprepared, and in 1974 once more helped me out by becoming my temporary PhD supervisor (later to be replaced by van Velsen and finally Schoffeleers) and by arranging, with record speed, a WOTRO (Netherlands Foundation for Tropic Research) scholarship for me when, after three years, I returned from Zambia.

My present position is very far removed from my scientific ideal of 1967. Today, as a result of my struggling with possibility and impossibility of interculturality (van Binsbergen 2003a, 2015b), I am convinced that, per definition, truly valid and grounded knowledge can only exist within one specific, homogeneous cultural framework, which makes the attempts of anthropologists and intercultural philosophers at the production of transcultural knowledge (an attempt which goes hand in hand with the disintegration of homogeneity in the today's globalising and hybridising world) a risky balancing act between partial truth and untruths. In the last analysis, valid knowledge appears to be nearly impossible in a culturally fragmented and heterogeneous world. In connection with the specific topic of the present, originally 1967, argument, I would now lay far less stress on the definitional problem, and (against the background of my several long-range historical reconstructions of the cultural history of Africa and of the Old World as a whole, right back to 1500 CE, to the Bronze Age, to the Neolithic, even to the Middle Palaeolithic) I would after all yet be less interested in quasi-universal forms of religion as explored by Durkheim, and far more interested in the *oldest* forms of religion – which today I consider far more knowable and reconstructible than in 1967 – over the last decade my research has largely concentrated on such reconstructions.

¹⁷⁹ However, human relations often have capricious dynamics – as every anthropological fieldworker knows from extensive personal experience in host societies. In 2017 I compiled into a book many of my article-length studies in the anthropology of religion, and since Köbben had been a major role model in my conception of anthropology and fieldwork, and had himself extensively engaged in the study of religion, it was a natural gesture to dedicate that book (van Binsbergen 2017a) to him. His picture embellishes p. 4 of the prelims. However, when I made arrangements to present him, meanwhile aged 92, with a copy, it turned out that I could spare myself the trouble: apparently still articulate, still functioning, still in control of an e-mail account, he no longer had the slightest idea who I was, and he thought we had fallen out after a misunderstanding, decades earlier. Our last contact has been in 1995, on the occasion of the valedictory conference for my retiring colleague Ineke van Wetering, another one of his former students; this was only a few years after he had sent me a congratulatory note in connection with my inaugural lecture when acceding to my chair in anthropology at the Free University in 1992. Apparently, and pardonably, a quarter of a century is a long time, especially for an aging mind. My own powers of memory are phenomenal, and I have never accepted this not to be a universal condition.

4.3. Taking my distance from the paired concepts *sacred / profane*

Durkheim based his religion theory in the first place on the perennial, universal validity he attributed to the dichotomy between *sacred* and *profane*. Admittedly, the dichotomy is elegant, – it has the format and hence the compelling power of modern philosophical argument. This is what we like our scientific concepts to be: clear-cut, firmly bounded *vis-à-vis* one another, impermeable *vis-à-vis* one another, defining two neatly separate realms of reality, and thus together constructing a coherent and transparent world. Yet closer scrutiny will reveal that Durkheim's religion theory was not so tightly structured that the *sacred / profane* distinction was irretrievably at its very centre – and that the whole would collapse if that dichotomy would be taken away. On the contrary, Durkheim's theory of the essentially arbitrary nature of religious symbolism owes relatively little to the *sacred / profane* dichotomy, and exists largely at a different plane.

The *sacred / profane* dichotomy does well in lecture rooms and textbooks, but does not stand up to most empirical ethnographic confrontations. Folk categories are often blurred and their application tends to be contradictory. What in the experience of many anthropologists of religion, with extensive participatory field experience, is at the heart of religion in non-formal ethnographic situations outside the (implicitly bureaucratised) North Atlantic region,

- is not an absolute distinction, valid once for all,
- but (as Geertz has very rightly observed) the movement to and from between spatio-temporal situations that have a heightened sacrality content, and other situations where that content is much lower.

Movement, blurring, process, negotiation, confusion, fundamental inability to sustain sharp and consistent distinctions, nor to sustain an initial promise of transcendence – that is folk religion for you, in a nutshell. Neither Aristotelian nor modern symbolic logic, nothing that is based on the principle of the excluded third, is capable of adequately handling the contradictions and dynamics of such knowledge – but Derridean difference is, as an emulation, in discursive philosophical discourse, of how most people think most of the time, when there are no philosophers, logicians, language teachers, art critics or anthropologists around to hold them accountable for the format and contents of their thoughts.

As I realised already in 1967, the distinction *sacred / profane* has a bookish ring about it. After

- having lived through many years of participation in practically illiterate environments in North and sub-Saharan Africa as an anthropological and oral-historical field-worker;

- after having struggled with the emergence, spread, ramification and transformation, of formal systems in the course of cultural history (writing systems, board games, geomantic divination systems, astronomical nomenclature, the cosmology of cyclical element transformation, *etc.*) since 1990;
- and after further reflection on the nature of transcendence,¹⁸⁰

I think I can now pinpoint whence the absolute nature of Durkheim's *sacred / profane* distinction came from. It did not spring from the elementary forms of religious life, either in remotest human history, nor is it implied in all forms of religion past and present. It sprang from a very specific, and limited, more or less accidental position in the History of Ideas: from the routinisation of transcendence, and the inevitable, highly productive, and historically absolutely decisive, effect of the emergence, in the Ancient Near East c. 5,000 years ago, of the peculiar *logocentric* package comprising writing, the state, organised religion, and proto-science. Both

- as a male (capable of producing through words but not through flesh);¹⁸¹

¹⁸⁰ 'Transcendent' being taken here in the usual sense of 'beyond the here and now'— clearly distinct from the very specific Kantian (Kant 1983 / 1781 / 1787) concept of 'the transcendental' as 'that which makes up the format but not the contents of our knowledge, and therefore is the prerequisite to all human thought'. For extensive specialist discussions of the transcendental in the history of Western philosophy, see: Duintjer 1966; Aertsen 2001; Cesa 2001; Hinske 2001; Honnfelder & Moehle 2001; Koenig 2001; Leinsle 2001; Lembeck 2001; Niquet 2001; Ollig 2001; Poggi 2001; Red[aktion] 2001; Trappe 2001. For an application of the concept of 'transcendence' in the sociology of religion, *cf.* Garrett 1974.

¹⁸¹ #32. *MALE GENDER AND LOGOCENTRICITY: ANCIENT MESOPOTAMIAN MARDUK AS MALE CREATOR*. What has male gender got to do with Durkheim's reliance on *logocentricity*? I take the liberty of quoting here a long but immensely illuminating passage from the work of the social psychiatrist Erich Fromm (1976 / 1951: 231 *f.*, from Heidel 1942) – one of my pet quotations anyway:

'The Babylonian myth of Creation (*Enuma Elish*) tells us of a victorious rebellion of male gods against Ti[ā]mat, the great mother who ruled the universe. They form an alliance against her and choose Marduk to be their leader in this fight. After a bitter war Tiāmat is slain, from her body heaven and earth are formed, and Marduk [is established as] supreme God. However, before he is chosen to be the leader, Marduk has to pass a test, which seems insignificant and puzzling in the context of the whole story and yet which, as I shall try to show, is the key to the understanding of the myth. This is the description of the test:

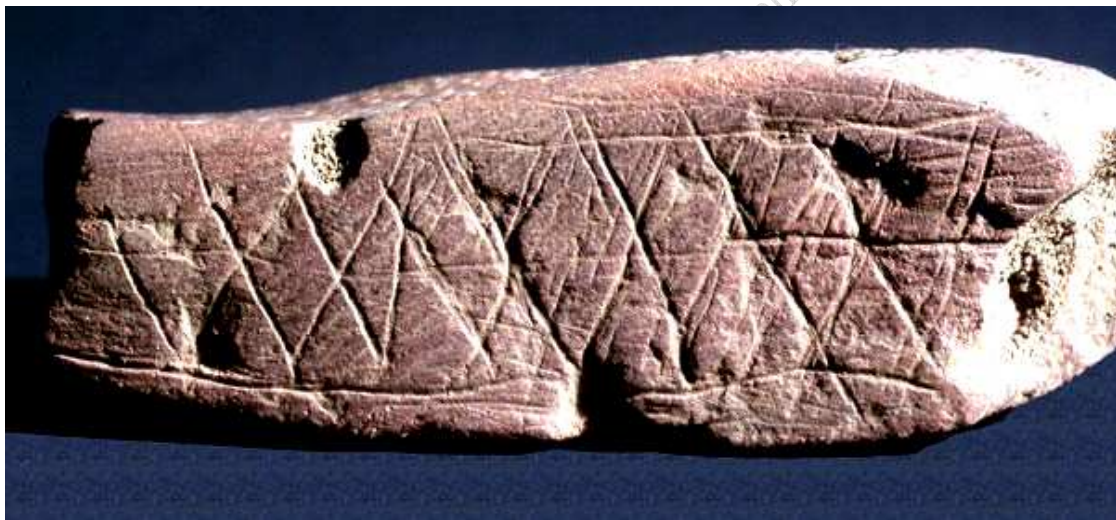
Then they placed a garment in their midst;
 To Marduk, their first-born, they said:
 "Verily, O lord, thy destiny is supreme among the gods,
 Command 'to destroy and to create,' (and) it shall be!
 By the word of thy mouth let the garment be destroyed;
 Command again, and let the garment be whole!"
 He commanded with his mouth, and the garment was destroyed.
 Again he commanded, and the garment was restored.
 When the gods, his fathers, beheld the efficiency of his word,
 They rejoiced (and) did homage, (saying) "Marduk is king!"

- and as Jew (son of a Rabbi and having started on rabbinical studies himself – heir to Judaism as one of the most transcendence-orientated, most abstruse intellectual and religious traditions of West Asia),
- and as a leading modern French intellectual,
- and as a reasonably affluent university professor,
- and as someone deeply concerned about the society and the state to which he belonged – idealistically endowing the latter with moral and religious qualities somewhat at variance with the actual performance of French society and state in the late 19th and early 20th century

– by virtue of all these qualities, Durkheim was (despite the paucity and lack of emphasis with which Durkheim uses the term ‘transcendence’, already noted above) *a specialist in transcendence*, in thinking beyond the here and the now, and in ignoring (through the comfortable affluence he enjoyed most of his life) the base necessities of physical and economic life. Some measure of transcendence has always been implied in even the most primitive language of early Anatomically Modern Man – for the essence of language is to be able to refer to what is beyond the here and the now, to have more or less stable words and syntactic forms that are valid not just for the one situation in which they are used for the first time, but that are applicable, beyond that here and now, to myriad other situations involving the same, and other, speakers and listeners. However, it is only with the emergence (very late in few million years of human cultural history, and only in a handful of – probably distantly interdependent – places: Elam, Sumer, Egypt, China) that it became possible to, transcendently, define and control, through *written* decrees, laws and records, situations separated from the here and the now by hundreds of years and by hundreds of kilometres. It is particularly (perhaps even, in the

What is the significance of this test? Does it not sound like a trivial bit of magic rather than the crucial test that is to determine whether Marduk will be able to defeat Tiamat? In order to understand the meaning of the test, we must remember what has been said of the problem of patriarchy in the discussion of the Oedipus myth. Quite clearly the Babylonian myth reports the conflict between patriarchal and matriarchal principles of social organization and of religious orientation. The rule of The great Mother is challenged by the male sons. But how can they win when they are inferior to women in one essential aspect? Women have the gift of natural creation, they can bear children. Men are sterile in this respect. (...) Quite in contrast to Freud’s assumption that the “penis envy” is a natural phenomenon in the constitution of the woman’s psyche, there are good reasons for assuming that before male supremacy was established there was a “pregnancy envy” in the man, which even today can be found in numerous cases. In order to defeat the mother, the male must prove that he is not inferior, that he has the gift to produce. Since he cannot produce with a womb, he must produce in another fashion; he produces with his mouth, his word, his thought. This, then, is the meaning of the test: Marduk can defeat Tiamat only if he can prove that he can also create even though in a different fashion. The test shows us the deep male-female antagonism, which is the basis of the fight between Tiamat and Marduk and the essential point of contention in this fight between the two sexes. With Marduk’s victory male supremacy is established, the natural productiveness of the women is devaluated, and the male begins his domination based on his ability to produce by the power of thought, a form of production which underlies the development of human civilization.’

last analysis, *exclusively*) in literate contexts that full transcendence can be sustained, which then generates such socio-political power that the *state* becomes possible, with organised religion and proto-science as its two, closely intertwined, manifestations. The bookishness of the *sacred / profane* distinction is not a mere accident or affectation – it reveals the essentially literate, specialist, hieratic and state-related nature of modernist scholarship as the hallmark of West Asian / North-east African / European cultural history since the Neolithic. It is an indispensable asset to scholarship and science – but its formal features are highly specific in space and time, and must not be considered universal. That Durkheim could consider the dichotomy *sacred / profane* as both absolute, and universal, faithfully reflects his specific cultural background and environment – which he shared with most scholars, but not, through all space and time, with humankind at large. In other words, the paired concepts *sacred / profane* are implicitly but fundamentally ethnocentric. They reveal much about the elementary forms of literate and state-associated religion, not about the religious forms of what, in space and time, has been the vast majority of humanity.



source: Henshilwood *et al.* 2001; alternatively: <http://cogweb.ucla.edu/ep/Art/BlombosOchre.jpg> , with thanks

Fig. 4.1. The engraved ochre block from Blombos Cave, South Africa, dated at 70 ka BP

Such a dichotomy reflects the historical tradition in which it was formulated, and can only apply within that tradition. It appeals to anthropological scholars who themselves are steeped in that historical tradition, but it can hardly apply, unless as an externally imposed, *etic* category, to the non-literate, non-bureaucratized, informal, in short *non-logocentric*, socio-cultural situations that, before the late 20th century, used to form the main subject matter of anthropological enquiry.

Over the past decades, greatly inspired by the work of my colleagues, and partly spurred on by the impact of my early work on Durkheim, I have tried to peer

through the mists of time and make some empirically grounded generalisations about the specific modes of thought we encounter in ancient mythologies, cosmologies and iconographies from the Lower Palaeolithic onwards – which is as far as state-of-the-art reconstructions of humankind’s oldest mythological repertoire, in conjunction with molecular genetics, allow us to go back – or of the Upper Palaeolithic (which is as far as our oldest linguistic reconstruction, *Borean, allows us to reliably look back). In Chapter 8 below I shall summarise the provisional findings of such bold explorations into the history of human thought;¹⁸² A few relevant results may however be indicated here.

- In the first place, there are indications for considerable continuity in the mechanisms of the human mind, the format of thinking, across tens of millennia. We can reconstruct the few dozen basic mythemes that together make up humankind’s oldest reconstructible mythologies, and we can still recognise the stories, understand their plots, and see them surface in myths and fairy-tales as recorded in historical times. Apparently, some of the transcendental apparatus of thought (number, causation, time, force *etc.*) was already firmly in place 50 ka BP. The oldest excavated work of art now known to science – the engraved ochre block from the Blombos Cave, South Africa, dated at 70 ka BP – exemplifies iconographic and mathematical principles still familiar to us today.
- Yet we also have to admit the *historicity* of modes of thought, in other words the fact that they must have had an origin, and that over time they must have undergone substantial changes, not so much in their contents and imagery (*e.g.* such widely distributed mythemes as virgin birth, or speaking animals, or devastating floods) for despite the difference in contents these can all be handled with the same logical toolkit informing out academic writings – just like an awl can be used to pierce bone, wood, shell and leather) but in their mechanics and format. Once again, Western academic thought is predicated on the Aristotelian principle of the Excluded Third:¹⁸³

‘where P there not (not-P)’.

As supervisors invariably tell students in commentary on the latter’s essays: ‘you cannot have your cake and eat it’ -- you must make up your mind and stick to your choices throughout your argument. But throughout human history, this logical rule has been tampered with (as it is today in most household conversations and political or religious rhetoric), and it is not by accident that

¹⁸² Witzel 2001, 2012; Harrod 1987, 1992, 2003, 2006, 2010, and n.d.; van Binsbergen 2006a, 2006b, 2011e, 2012; van Binsbergen & Woudhuizen 2011; and references cited there.

¹⁸³ Aristotle, *Metaphysica* IV.4, 1006b and following; IV 7, 1011b; see Aristoteles 1831.

it was only explicitly formulated a few millennia ago in the thoroughly logocentric environment of Aristotle's treatises on logic. The rule of the excluded third is predicated on the ability to make absolute distinctions between P and not-P; however, Derrida – although a vocal writer on this subject – was not the first to realise that every given condition carries within itself the principle of its own denial, so that white is really also black, male also female, yes also no. Long-range comparative linguistics has now reconstructed 1151 *Borean roots of a hypothetical language that might have been spoken in Central to East Asia in the Upper Palaeolithic, and reflexes of which have been claimed to be traced in the lexicons of all linguistic macrophyla spoken today by humans (which is the very basic for the reconstruction), and in the semantics of these *Borean roots we see what I have called 'range semantics': the root means anything within a range between black and white, light and dark, etc. It is as if absolute difference could not yet be clearly thought¹⁸⁴ with the linguistic material available in the Upper Palaeolithic, and that only gradually the capability for thinking absolute difference was developed, in conjunction with the growth of language. We have also captured glimpses of the intermediate steps towards thinking absolute difference, notably, in the *cosmology of cyclical element transformation*, where there are only a handful of elements, more or less, and absolute difference is implicitly denied because each element can turn into every other one according to specific rules; this once transcontinentally distributed system (van Binsbergen 2012d) was in the end (6th c. BCE) locally frozen and turned into Empedocles' four parallel, immutable (*i.e.* fundamentally

¹⁸⁴ #33. *THINKING ABSOLUTE DIFFERENCE WITH NATURAL PROPS?* Yet a note of caution is needed on this point. Even if (on the basis of *Borean lexical patterns to be considered in Chapter 8) we cannot credit Anatomically Modern Humans of the Upper Palaeolithic with the full capacity and especially with the *full* linguistic equipment for thinking absolute difference, we should not make the mistake of denying all such ability. The use of articulate language is based on the *emic* recognition, by the speakers, of *distinctive features* of language constructs, especially phonemes. Although phonetically there may be a wide range of variation for English individual speakers's actual pronunciation of the vowels (ē, i, ī, ō) in ŠVp (where V stands for any vowel), still any competent native speaker would be able to distinguish effortlessly between *shape*, *ship*, *sheep*, and *shop*. This is an indication that *etic* variational range does not preclude *emic* absolute difference. Probably the increasing ability to think absolute difference, and the development of articulate language from the Middle Palaeolithic on, have gone hand in hand. The installation of the cosmogonies of the Separation of Land and Water, and of the Separation of Heaven and Earth, as absolutely pivotal mythemes from the Upper Palaeolithic onward, is also a sign of such progress in thinking absolute difference. So is the time-honoured mythology of granulation which divides the world into two states of being, smooth ('lion'; with connotations of superiority, light, transparency, good, male) and granulated ('leopard, with connotations of inferiority, dark, ambivalence, bad, female), *cf.* Appendix III. Nor is all absolute difference only realised at the *emic* level, in the human mind. The zoologist / ethologist Konrad Lorenz gained world fame by his studies (*e.g.* 1963) on patterns of aggression in the animal kingdom; one of his findings has been that the visible distinctive characteristics of species and of genders play a decisive role in courtship and mating since they determine eligibility or non-eligibility as sexual partners – in other words, we have here functioning absolute difference totally independent from the emically structuring human mind. Below, in Part IV, we shall come back to natural absolute differences, and consider the *dead / alive* distinction in this light.

different) elements only in the times of the Presocratics, in a West Asian periphery where the true nature and purpose of the cyclical element transformation had fallen into oblivion. Another early and widespread way of conceptualising difference (albeit not absolute difference) has been in terms of distinguishing between two surface textures: smooth vs rugged / variegated / granulated; of the latter, the speckled leopard skin (as against the evenly coloured skin of the lion) has offered a type that has inspired symbolism nearly world-wide and with amazing lexical convergence (see Appendix III at the end of this book).

Against this background we have reason to assume that thinking the kind of absolute difference which Durkheim insisted on for the paired concepts *sacred* / *profane* was only a local and late development, and could by no means account for all forms of human religion found through space and time. Which begs the question as to how to identify human collective expressions as religion.

This line of argument will be continued throughout Part IV, when on the basis of the reconstructed *Borean lexicon we shall search for empirical evidence in prehistoric language use for the concepts and categories which Durkheim considered to be 'elementary forms of religious life'. Regrettably, the paired concepts *sacred* / *profane* will turn out not to belong to the Upper Palaeolithic vocabulary – much as I argued in the last few paragraphs. But many other points in Durkheim's theoretical picture will be confirmed, so that by and large Part IV will vindicate Durkheim in unexpected and comprehensive ways.

But first it is time for a different kind of vindication of Durkheim's religion theory: through ethnographic fieldwork. In the next Chapter (5) we shall consider an empirical application (to the Humiri highlands of North-western Tunisia) of the main thrust of Durkheim's religion theory: the idea that there is a very close association between *sacred* objects of veneration, and the constituent groups out of which society is composed. This will prepare us to reconsider, in the following Chapter (6) and still with reference to Humiriyya, the problem of intrinsic sacrality, and suggest a solution which is a compromise between Durkheim (and Lévi-Strauss) on the one hand, and Durkheim's Australian critics on the other. Our last empirical application (Chapter 7) will be to consider how in another concrete social setting, that of the rural society of the Nkoya, Zambia, South Central Africa, *transcendence* manifests itself – a condition which we found to be implicitly at the heart of Durkheim's religion theory but which we would rather reserve for modern urban societies with high levels of logocentricity. Only after concluding this threefold vindicatory exercise with considerable and unexpected success, will we turn to more comprehensive vindication of Part IV, based on long-range linguistics and Comparative Mythology.