Chapter 0. Preface

0.1. Background, genesis, and general structure of this book

This book took over half a century in gestation (only a few years less than Goethe's *Faust*, which from *Urfaust* to the publication of Part II spanned the period 1773-1832) However, it admittedly lacks the stature of that life's work. Ever since 1965, the second year of my anthropology studies at Amsterdam University, I have been preoccupied with Durkheim's religion theory; and very soon, from the earliest preparations (1967) towards my first fieldwork (which was assigned by my professors to be on North African popular Islam), that theory was to constitute the backbone of the theoretical framework I brought into the field. The two-volume book I kept writing, rewriting and editing on the basis of this fieldwork, today, after nearly half a century, is finally about to be published (in between came dozens of other books in a handful of disciplines and mainly dealing with other parts of Africa than the Islamic North – in addition to an entire literary oeuvre), but since that fieldwork-based North African book is already overburdened with detailed local and regional ethnography, historiography and statistical analyses, I need another text in which to set out the region-unspecific, theoretical struggle that went into my analysis of social organisation and popular Islam. This prompted the present volume.

A year after I had entered (in 1964) the field of anthropology as a freshman student at Amsterdam University, the Assistant Lecturer in charge of a work group on the societies of the highlands of New Guinea, Mr Arie Pans (a former civil servant of the then newly defunct Dutch New-Guinea administration, and one with an impressive track record as a jungle explorer), introduced me to major theories in the anthropology of religion. [1] This was my first encounter with Émile Durkheim's *Les Formes*

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[1] Pans made all the two dozen students in his 1965-1966 class write a 20-pages paper on a selected ethnic group

Élémentaires de la Vie Religieuse (1912), and, as a somewhat pedestrian application of Durkheim's immensely seminal theory, with Guy Swanson's *Birth of the Gods* (1960) – the latter book being based on the idea that, if Durkheim is right and religion essentially reflects the social, then differences in social organisation would necessarily result in statistically detectable differences in religion. Brought up as a Roman Catholic, attending Roman Catholic primary and secondary schools, and serving as a choirboy, but having lost my fervent, mystical belief in God in a deep adolescence crisis from which I emerged as a budding poet, clearly religion still continued to fascinate me sufficiently to specialise as an anthropologist of religion, and to make Durkheim's theory both the topic of my first major social-science text (my Cand. Soc. Science thesis in sociology, Amsterdam University, December 1967), as well as the cornerstone of my first fieldwork. Substantially updated, expanded and corrected, that thesis still loosely forms the basis of Part II of the present book.[2]

Source: http://www.marxists.org/glossary/people/d/pics/durkheim.jpg, with thanks

Fig. 0.2. Émile Durkheim (1858-1917) by the time his last book *Les Formes Élémentaires de la Vie Religieuse* (1912) was published

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in the New Guinea highlands; mine was on the Mae Enga, on whom Meggitt had by then already produced a fairly extensive literature. *Cf.* Meggitt 1958a, 1958b, 1962, 1965, and years after the completion of my Mae Enga paper: Meggitt 1973, 1977; Lawrence & Meggitt 1965; Wiessner 2001; Wiessner *et al.* 1998.

[2] In 2007 I uploaded the original 1967 argument – but embedded in nearly twice the original length in commentary and auto-criticism – onto my website on *African religion* (now at http://www.quest-journal.net/shikanda/african_religion, but then still at: http://shikandal.net/african_religion.

The sociology lecturer supervising that thesis, J. Berting, initially found my argument too anthropological. His insistence on sociology in its own right has not been in vain. Within a few years I would find myself in charge (as Assistant Lecturer, soon Lecturer, in Sociology, 1971-1973) of the final-year B.A. students' training in theoretical sociology at the University of Zambia, and engaging in a sociological survey (funded by that institution) of urban religiosity – an endeavour for which the *anthropological* part of my Amsterdam training had scarcely prepared me, but that would have made Berting happy; however, he and I never had any contact again after 1967.

Throughout my career I have continued to grapple, intermittently, with the Durkheimian heritage. Not only was my work (from 1967 onward) on North African shrines and saints largely based on Durkheim's religion theory – for which it constituted an unexpected but amazingly precise empirical confirmation – but also my first major book, *Religious Change in Zambia* (1981), however Marxist in orientation and oral-historical and proto-historical in execution (spanning a period of half a millennium in an essentially illiterate socio-cultural context), derived much of its theoretical inspiration from implicit polemics with the Durkheimian position, which is often considered as essentially structural-functionalist *avant la lettre*. When, in the early 2000's, I published (van Binsbergen 2004) a well-received argument on 'African spirituality', suggesting the latter to be not so much a set of shared doctrines[3] or rites but *a social technology of sociability (on the basis of a shared history of exclusion)*, much of this was implicitly referring to Durkheim. As recently as 2015 I was still in debate with Durkheim's *sacred*, stating (van Binsbergen 2015b: 266 and 266n):

> 'Durkheim departs from what he considers the fundamental condition for religion: the distinction between *sacred* and *profane*, which may take all sorts of forms in concrete settings of time and place, but whose fundamental and allegedly universal (!) feature is that it is *absolute*.
>
> > Wrongly, as it turned out – and that is little surprising since he only knew about the Australian Aboriginals from published early ethnographies, and lacked all personal field experience that could have allowed him to critically link the written ethnographic text to actual socio-cultural practice; his critics include Evans-Pritchard 1965b; Stanner 1967; Goldenweiser 1958; Schoffeleers 1978 – also *cf*. van Binsbergen 1967 / 2007, 1968, 1971, and forthcoming; although with his focus on the *sacred* / *profane* distinction, Durkheim finds himself in excellent company: Eliade 1965; Hogarth *et al.* 1899; Kaberry 2004; Lynch 2007; Nougayrol 1947; Sherratt 1991; Uzoho 1974; Wasilewska 1991; and Isambert 1976. Meanwhile I have recently argued on the basis of linguistic indications that *thinking absolute difference* is not a universal but a recent achievement of humankind ('range semantics', van Binsbergen & Woudhuizen 2011; 147 *f*.; van Binsbergen 2012d).'

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[3] Whitehouse (2000) proposed to distinguish two kinds of religion, one doctrinal, the other 'imagistic'. The book on religious archaeology he edited with Martin (2004, *Theorizing Religions Past: Archaeology, History, and Cognition*) is build around this dichotomy. Below I will approach certain varieties and socio-cultural contexts of religion with the term 'logocentricity'. That will drive home the fact that in order for a religion to be 'doctrinal', the attending society must be saturated with logocentricity to an extent scarcely to be expected among 'elementary forms of religious life' – in non-Western, preliterate contexts.

In the late 1980s, during new fieldwork on religion, urban culture and globalisation in Francistown, Botswana, I had crossed the line from observer to participant, and has become a local diviner-healer-priest; this forced me to reconsider, also in print, my epistemological *habitus* as a social researcher, and grapple with the global politics of knowledge. As a result, in 1998 I had the opportunity of trading my Amsterdam chair in the Anthropology of Ethnicity for the Rotterdam one in Foundations of Intercultural Philosophy. This ushered in for me an entire new phase of writing and research – initially largely at the expense of my work in the social sciences, more recently rather intermittently, in combination with work in both the social sciences and proto-history. All this is reflected in the present book.

In the fifty years of my career, my work on Durkheim and on the North African material as conceived in a Durkheimian framework, has been constantly present at the back of my mind, but largely as a Wittgensteinian ladder,[4] which served me to ascend theoretically, ethnographically, and career-wise, but only to be cast away (not only for lack of time, but particularly because I was continually being captivated by new theoretical, empirical and institutional challenges and imperatives) once a new level had been reached. Apart from a few international articles, and the oblique general inspiration which the Ḫumiri fieldwork has exerted on my recent work on the Mediterranean Bronze Age,[5] this my first research has not yet led to book-size publications, apart from an ethnographical novel I published in 1988 (*Een Buik Openen*). One of the reasons for this lack of output was that the principal field supervisor, Douwe Jongmans, considered the highlands of North-western Tunisia as his privileged personal research site, to which students were admitted for training purposes, as long (and this was stipulated by written and signed agreement before we even set out to the field!) as their research did not leave any traces in the scientific literature – he himself was an excellent fieldworker (*cf.* van Binsbergen 2011c) but a slow and reluctant writer. My nearly-completed two-volume monograph on North Africa has been lying idly on the shelf for decades. Clearly my first major research project, that on North Africa, is surrounded by great ambivalence. When I left the Netherlands to take up my first teaching appointment in Zambia, in 1971, the principal supervisor of my graduate theses Jeremy Boissevain (1926-2014), entirely out of his own initiative invited me to take a PhD under his supervision on the strength on my North African work, which he then considered accomplished and convincing; however, when at the end of my two-years' Zambian appointment I reminded him of this arrangement and pressed for its implementation, the institutional political situation around Boissevain and his chair had changed, and he no longer honoured our agreement which, on second thoughts, he declared not to be in my career interest. In disgust I turned away from his Mediterranean specialty, hardly ever spoke to him again, became

[4] Wittgenstein 1964 / 1921 /1922: §6.54.

[5] van Binsbergen 1997b/ 2011a; van Binsbergen & Woudhuizen 2011.

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a prominent Africanist, and the rest is history. Yet all my later work has been informed, far more than meets the eye, by the struggles and results of that first major research project, which initially already stretched across four years practically full-time, not counting the subsequent decades when translating and revising the original texts. The spectre of a Durkheimian approach to North Africa and to religion in general has hovered over my work for decades, and the desire for closure which this engenders, is the real reason for the present book.

A greatly revised version of my 1967 thesis constitutes only *Part II* of this voluminous book. It would be suspended in the air without a substantial and up-to-date critical review of the very extensive scholarly literature around Durkheim and especially around *Les Formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse*, against the background of an overview of that book's argument. This makes up Part I.

Concentrating on the merits and demerits of Durkheim's central paired concepts sacred / profane, Part II situated Durkheim's *sacred / profane* dichotomy in the international discussion, as well as in the rise and fall of structuralism in Dutch anthropology in the mid-20th century CE. Part II ends in venting my misgivings about the utility of the paired concepts *sacred / profane* as analytical ('*etic*') tools, let alone as faithful renderings of '*emic*'[6] discourse: the dichotomy is alleged by Durkheim to exist in all religions through space and time.

When Durkheim wrote *Les Formes*, anthropology / ethnology had existed as a subject for nearly one and a half centuries especially in Germany (with the pre-

[6] #1. *ON EMIC AND ETIC*. Modern or Modernist anthropology (as distinct from both Early, and Postmodern, anthropology) was predicated on the basis of the assumption that the positions of the members of the host society, and the ethnographer, are fundamentally different, and would need to be distinguished at all costs if we wish to produce valid and reliable scientific ethnography. This reflects the social conditions in the middle of the 20th c. CE, when most classic anthropological texts were written. The ethnographer was supposed to be a free-moving, typically male, relatively affluent North Atlantic intellectual protected by the privileges of gender, class, formal organisations and somatic category, and the typical (though not exclusive) ethnographic actor was usually a colonial subject, tightly framed and largely immobilised within the restrictions of bureaucratic control, poverty, traditional leadership, and peripheral manifestations of the capitalist mode of production. The technical analytical language of academic ethnography was sharply distinguished from 'the partcipants own categories, perceptions and motivations'. By a linguistic analogy (the contrast between phonetics and phonemics) the participants's views were designated – first by the linguist Pike – '*emic*', the etnographer's imposed ethnographic representation as '*etic*' (*cf.* Headland *et al.* 1990; van Binsbergen 2003a: 22 *f.*). The *emic / etic* distinction has proven its practical and heuristic value, and has persisted in anthropological discourse, even when the rigid colonial separation has been obsolete for over half a century, and among the consequences of globalisation have been the mass movement of individuals (especially from Africa and Asia) all across the globe, the global circulation of personal communication and of real and sham knowledge via the Internet, and the saturation of local life worlds with a handful of *linguae francae* often even used for the purpose of anthropological fieldwork. Under such circumstances, too much insistence on the *emic / etic* distinction threatens to obscure the underlying fundamental unity of humankind (van Binsbergen 2015b: 8 *f.*). Another shortcoming of the *emic / etic* distinction is that it tends to exaggerate the monolithic homogeneity of local communities.

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Critical[7] Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) as a major early exponent). However, the discipline was still searching for a central paradigm and a method by 1900, when Durkheim was preparing for *Les Formes*. Today anthropologists are inclined to consider as Durkheim's greatest handicap the fact that he extensively wrote on the religion of the Australian Aboriginals *by proxy*,[8] on the basis of published ethnographic accounts, without ever setting foot in Australia or without otherwise acquainting himself with the systematic collection of qualitative, *emic* data among religious practitioners. Does this lack of personal empirical acquaintance through fieldwork totally disqualify Durkheim's religion theory? Does his theory have heuristic value in the field? Would it stand up to empirical application in concrete socio-cultural settings?

The spate of religious-anthropological fieldwork which I have conducted, in many different settings,[9] since I wrote the 1967 thesis, has allowed me to look

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[7] #2. *ON KANT'S CRITICAL WORKS.* After Kant had been writing and teaching on a great variety of philosophical and scientific subjects for decades, the watershed in his work occurred when he came to concentrate on the limits of knowability, a project that was to give rise to the three great Critical works: *Kritik der Reinen Vernunft* (1781 / 1787), *Kritik der Praktischen Vernunft* (1788), and *Kritik der Urtheilskraft* (1790). Kant's central conclusion is that (*pace* the perennial intuitions of poets, mystics, illiterates and police detectives – and many philosophers – by and large excellent company, I have found) we cannot know the world / the things as they are in themselves, but can only know the (necessarily limited and distorted) representations of the world / the things as formed in our minds; this became the principle of Modern Western philosophy. This watershed is commonly designated 'Kant's Copernican Revolution' – by analogy with the revolution which Copernicus (1539; Kuhn 1957) brought about when re-establishing the heliocentric astronomical system already known to the Ancient Greeks. Kant's *Anthropologie in pragmatischer Hinsicht* was only published in 1798 but essentially belongs to his pre-Critical period. Its French translation, with an introduction (1961), was the minor component of the doctoral thesis of a (post-)modern author who has had an enormous influence upon the social sciences from the 1970s CE onward, Michel Foucault.

[8] *I.e.* an armchair ethnography based not on an author's own fieldwork but on published ethnographic studies as a secondary source.

[9] Extensive fieldwork in religious anthropology was conducted by me, intermittently, in: the highlands of North-western Tunisia, 1968, 1970, 1979, 2002; urban and rural Zambia, 1972- present; Calequisse, region Canchungo, Guinea Bissau, 1981, 1982, 1983; urban and rural North East Botswana, 1988-1998. Shorter to ultrashort (hence barely significant) spells of fieldwork, sometimes in the context of supervision of my PhD students and junior colleagues, were undertaken by me in Assiut, Egypt, 1976; Navaho Nation, South-western USA, 1979; Casamance, Senegal, 1982; Durban, South Africa, 1992; Bulawayo and the Matopos Hills, Zimbabwe, 1989; Thailand, 2010; Sri Lanka, 2011; Tamil Nadu and the Andaman Islands, 2012; *desa* Rawabogo, region Bandung, Java, Indonesia, 2006, 2010; Bali, Indonesia, 2011 and 2014; Malaysia, especially Saba and Sarawak, Borneo, 2010; New Zealand, 2013; Yaounde, Buea, Baffoussam, Mbouda, Cameroon, 2006, 2009, 2015; Wu Tai Shan, Shanxi Province, China, 2006; the variety of religious expressions, Kyoto, Japan, 2005; the variety of religious expressions, Tokyo, Japan, 2009; British Columbia, Canada, 2008. I am very greatly indebted to my research hosts, interlocutors, guides, friends, relatives and teachers in all these settings; being admitted to their religious activities and discussing their beliefs has ranked among the most valuable experiences of my life. On the institutional level I am particularly indebted to the African Studies Centre, Leiden; the Department of Sanskrit and Indian Studies, Harvard, Cambridge, USA; the Musée des Arts et Traditions Populaires, Tunis, Tunisia; the University of Zambia; the Applied Research Unit of the Ministry of Local Govern-

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with a critical, eye at the pivotal elements of Durkheim religion theory – notably, his insistence on the close association even identity, between the social group and its religious symbols, his paired concepts *sacred* / *profane*, and his rejection of intrinsic sacrality as a possible background of religious symbols.

In my first, North African, fieldwork I was confronted with a rural society consisting of numerous localised (pseudo-)kin groups at various levels constituting a segmentary system (like a tree diagram, see Fig. 5.1 below), and numerous saintly shrines which were neatly distributed over these segments and formed their characteristic attributes. The details of this socio-religious system I set out in Chapter 5 (*cf.* van Binsbergen 1970b, 1971a and forthcoming (b)). To find thus the *sacred* to constitute a neat parallel system to the effective social groups on the grounds, is an unexpected corroboration of Durkheim's religion theory, and a first step towards the vindication which the present book entails.

The next leg in that process is the examination of Durkheim's theory of the symbol. The essence of Durkheim's conception of religious *symbol* is that it is completely arbitrary, because what determines the sacrality of the symbol it not its inherent specific characteristics, but merely that fact that it mirrors society as the ultimate object of all religious veneration. The selection of a religious symbol out of the myriad things that constitute our life world, is therefore claimed by Durkheim to be entirely arbitrary, and to have nothing to do with whatever specific characteristics and qualities of the referent (thing, person, concept, deity, etc.) to which that symbol refers. This is a counter-intuitive puzzle I could not attempt to solve before I had actually conducted religious fieldwork myself. But already the Tunisian popular religion which I studied in 1968 yielded illuminating data on this point, and it allowed me to propose substantial corrections of Durkheim's position, *i.e.* to strike an argued compromise between his position and that of his critics such as Malinowski and Worsley (Chapter 6, below).

This vindicatory exercise further entails a detailed discussion of the manifestations of transcendence in a society (that of the Nkoya people of Zambia, South

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ment, Lands and Housing, Republic of Botswana; the Erasmus Trust Fund, Erasmus University Rotterdam; and 西亚非洲研究所 the Institute of West Asian and African Studies, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (IWAAS), Beijing, People's Republic of China; the Kyoto Graduate School of African Studies, and the Kokugakuin Shinto University, Tokyo, Japan. At the personal level, my greatest debt is to my successive spouses, Henny E. van Rijn and Patricia Saegerman, and our children; to my various research assistants, especially Mssrs Hasnawi bin Tahar, Dennis Shiyowe, Davison Kawanga, M. Malapa, Francisco Ampa and Mrs Jacqueline Touoyem; to Robert Papstein; to my hosts and relatives in Zambia including among others Dr Stanford Mayowe, Rev. Mary Nalishuwa, Mwenekahare Kabambi, Mwene Shumbanya Shimbwende and Mrs Mayatiro Shiyowe; to my hosts and relatives in Ḫumiriyya including Mssrs Al-Hadi and ᶜAbd Allah bin ᶜAissa, M. Dhiab bin Hassouna, Mme Nejma bint Hassouna, and Al 'Omda Hellal bin Hassouna; to my hosts in China especially Dr Haifang Lui, and Professors Lui, Wei Cuiping, and Li Anshan; and to all my PhD students, but especially the late lamented Gerti Hesseling, Stephanus Djunatan, Pius Mosima and Pascal Touoyem, for substantial intellectual, social, and logistic contributions to these projects.

Central Africa) which, although admittedly not located in Australia and not really at a hunter-gatherer level of subsistence (but a lot of hunting and gathering still went on among the Nkoya in the early 1970s CE), still is sufficiently remote from the literate, *logocentric*,[10] urban, world-religion-informed society that was the only one Durkheim was personally familiar with: the middle-class and elite society of Western Europe around 1900 CE, dominated not by people's engagement in primary production processes but by formal organisations under the general impact of high capitalism and the state. Durkheim uses the concept of transcendence only sparingly,[11] but implicitly it is indispensable for

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[10] #3. *ON LOGOCENTRICITY*. Throughout this book I shall repeatedly refer to the concept of logocentricity (Derrida 1967; Rorty 1989; van Binsbergen 2015b: 35 n. 56). The operative part here is the Ancient Greek λόγος logos, whose extensive semantic field includes: 'word, ratio, rationality, rule, order, divine creative word' (*cf.* Liddle *et al.* 1897, s.v. λόγος). Logocentricity in my specific approach refers to a culture's or a subculture's excessive reliance on language and especially on text in the approach to reality. Although any use of articulate language implies a degree of logocentricity, its centrality in the social production of reality was greatly enhanced with the installation – throughout a narrow geographic belt comprising a number of ancient societies (most probably historically loosely connected) from Carthage and Egypt and West Asia to China and Meso America in the Bronze Age – of a newly emerging package including writing, the state, organised religion and proto-science. So much so, that if below I use the term logocentric, this implies this entire package.

[11] At the explicit surface level Durkheim mentions 'transcendence' only in passing and essentially in a non-technical and non-problematised sense: exclusively on pages 53, 117, 263, 317, 331 of the 1990 Quadrige / Presses Universitaires de France (PUF) reprint of 1912. Occasionally Durkheim appears to mean 'transcendental' in the sense Kant has given to this term: that which cannot be thought consciously and deliberately, but which provides the very framework for our thinking, such as notions of space, time, number, causality etc. The most unambiguous and central expression of Durkheim using 'transcendence' is the following

> 'Il faut donc se garder de voir dans ces symboles de simples artifices, des sortes d'étiquettes qui viendraient se surajouter à des représentations toutes faites pour les rendre plus maniables : ils en sont partie intégrante. Même le fait que des sentiments collectifs se trouvent ainsi rattachés à des choses qui leur sont étrangères n'est pas purement conventionnel : il ne fait que figurer sous une forme sensible un caractère réel des faits sociaux, à savoir leur *transcendance* par rapport aux consciences individuelles. On sait, en effet, que les phénomènes sociaux prennent naissance, non dans l'individu, mais dans le groupe. Quelque part que nous prenions à leur genèse, chacun de nous les reçoit du dehors. Quand donc nous nous les représentons comme émanant d'un objet matériel, nous ne nous méprenons pas complètement sur leur nature. Sans doute, ils ne viennent pas de la chose déterminée à laquelle nous les rapportons; mais il reste vrai qu'ils ont leur origine hors de nous. Si la force morale qui soutient le fidèle ne provient pas de l'idole qu'il adore, de l'emblème qu'il vénère, elle ne laisse pas cependant de lui être extérieure et il en a le sentiment.' (Durkheim 1990 / 1960/ 1912: 331).

I keep French quotations deliberately untranslated. When the present book was initiated, over half a century ago, a wing-clipped version of American English had not yet come to dominate international academia; intellectuals were supposed to have both active and passive command of the main West European languages (German, French and English), and to read the discipline's classic texts in the original languages. Far more than one would expect from a French intellectual at the time, Durkheim (1912) is mainly based on English-language ethnographies and theoretical treatises. Today publishing houses, even when publishing for the international market, tend to insist on weeding out all non-English expressions from the main texts of their books, and only tolerate quotations in English translation. I have not followed this hegemonic

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his theory: religious symbols, in their transcendence from the individual consciousnesses of the members of society, make it possible for the social to keep divergent individual inclinations in check.

Of course, at the highest level of abstraction Durkheim's identification of *society* as the ultimate object of religion, is a metaphysical claim that cannot be substantiated by empirical research. Yet at an intermediate level of lesser scope and abstraction, Durkheim's insight is so rich and casts light on so many details of religion and social organisation, that one can very well understand how his theory has survived as the main stock-in-trade of religious social studies for over a century.

Massive though the Durkheimian influence has been on my early work as an anthropologist of religion, it did not remain the only influence, and was soon to be supplanted by a Marxist-orientated modes-of-production approach – still looking, in the best Durkheimian tradition, for parallelism between the social and the religious, but materialistically focussing on the way in which symbolic / religious institutions provide an ideological underpinning for such processes of production, reproduction, appropriation and exploitation as make up the political economy of a 'social formation' – a society, an ethnic group, a formal organisation, etc. After having internalised the theoretical, and especially the political and activist lessons of Marxist senior academics with whom I came into contact in Southern Africa (Jack Simons, Jaap van Velsen, and Max Gluckman), these approaches were canalised, in my case, in the Amsterdam Working Group for Marxist Anthropology. The latter was founded in the late 1970s and it was only for a few years that it figured as an active body of intellectual production. It was here that Marx's original work on modes of production, and the more recent elaborations of the concept by such prominent French anthropologists as Terray, Meillassoux, Rey, and Godelier, and their followers, were forged into viable tools for the analysis of the extensive, state-of-the-art fieldwork which the Working Group's members[12] had recently conducted in various parts of sub-Saharan Africa (van Binsbergen & Geschiere 1981, 1985). The modes-of-production perspective was to form the theoretical inspiration of my first major book, *Religious Change in Zambia* (1979 / 1981). It has continued to be used as an important analytical tool by me[13] until quite recently (van Bins-

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and unscholarly practice in the present book, but instead have included long French and German quotations, often in *italicised* form. Only when the minute details of a text passage are crucial, or for relatively minor languages (*i.e.* those with less than 30 million living speakers today including my native Dutch / Flemish / Afrikaans), have I taken the trouble to add, to the quotation in the original language, an English translation.

[12] Klaas de Jonge, Peter Geschiere, the late lamented Reini Raatgever †, Simon Simonse, Jos van der Klei, Johan van de Walle (in English alphabetical order), and occasionally the late lamented Henk Meilink †. I thank these colleagues and friends for their inspiring company over the decades.

[13] During a conference on 'theory in African Studies', which was convened at the Leiden African Studies Centre in the late 1990s, my inspiring senior colleague (also co-author and co-editor) of many

bergen 2012a), has informed my analyses of Nkoya history in Zambia (van Binsbergen 1981, 1992, and in press (a)) and of the dynamics of global mythology ever since the Middle Palaeolithic (van Binsbergen 2006a, 2006b); yet gradually it ceased to be an all-encompassing concept of nearly Durkheimian scope,[14] for me, and became just an illuminating heuristic perspective and nothing more.

As indicated above, in the meantime, during new religious-anthropological fieldwork in Guinea-Bissau (West Africa) and Botswana (Southern Africa), my stance as an ethnographer changed from the extreme objectifying distancing (whilst participating and observing) that I had learned as a student at Amsterdam University, to an existentially participating and sharing attitude. I ended up, not only as a regular patient of West African diviner-healers (1983), but what is even more, as a fully trained, initiated, locally recognised, certified, and practicing Southern African diviner-healer (*sangoma*) in my own right (from 1990 on). These experiences, and my extensive writing about them, launched me on the trajectory from religious anthropologist to intercultural philosopher. In 1998 I acceded to the chair of the Foundations of Intercultural Philosophy, Philosophical Faculty, Erasmus University Rotterdam, a chair created for its first incumbent, my immediate predecessor, the late lamented Hegel specialist Heinz Kimmerle. This career shift left hardly any room for the sweeping sociologistic pronouncements of Durkheim, and instead brought me to concentrate on identity, encounter, existential dimensions of human life, reconciliation, therapy, divination, myth. Being at a loss to define a viable new orientation of my academic research work once I realised the depths of the credibility gap that had opened as I tried to be both a practicing African 'witchdoctor' and a senior empirical social scientist at the same time, I increasingly began to explore the dazzling connections across vast expanses of space and time that unexpectedly lay behind the knowledge I had acquired as a *sangoma*. I became aware of the profound and unmistakable continuities that exists between the illiterate divination systems practiced by local specialists in Southern Africa, and those of West Africa, Madagascar, Islamic West Asia around the year 1000 CE, and the famous trigram-based cosmology of Chinese Taoism. Similar long-range connections became manifest when, in the final phase of my training as a *sangoma*, the High God oracle of the pan-Southern Africa Mwali cult at Nata, Central Botswana, told me, as some kind of

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years's standing, the late lamented Robert Buijtenhuijs, bitterly complained that for theoretically ambitious and prolific colleagues like Peter Geschiere and myself, the modes-of-production approach seemed mere fashionable window-dressing, to be lightly, and without explicit theoretical *post mortem* nor autocritique, cast aside when other fashionable themes such as globalisation came around the corner. The reproach was far from justified, in the sense that despite autocritique (van Binsbergen 1988a) I have continued to use this paradigm till this very day (2012a, in press (a)) – albeit increasingly sparingly. In the light of the inspiring guidance received over the years from Buijtenhuijs as my senior colleague, and the good work we did together, this disagreement (reflecting the unwarranted lack of self-esteem that haunted Buijtenhuijs towards the end of his career) did not prevent me from playing a major role in the production of his *Festschrift* a few years later (Konings *et al.* 2000).

[14] The appropriate Maussian term would be *'un fait social total'* (Mauss 1924).

koan,[15] that my final confirmation would have to be postponed until I came back to the shrine 'with the traditional attire of [your] people, a leopard skin'. Who were my people, in the eye of the High God and the latter's spokesperson? And what was 'my people' 's connection with the leopard skin? I embarked on a most comprehensive research project, in the course of which I familiarised myself with enough state-of-the-arts linguistics (in which I had already received extensive BA and MA training at Amsterdam), archaeology, Indian Studies, and especially Comparative Mythology, to be able to solve the oracle's *koan*. The enormous scope of global, and massively diachronic, insight that dawned in the course of such projects has informed much of my research and writing during the past two decades, gained me a prominent place among the circles around Michael Witzel that have recently revived Comparative Mythology into a rapidly growing and exciting field; this new, global research has also allowed me, much to the relief of my African colleagues and friends (but to the disgust of my North Atlantic colleagues who still believe in the global patchwork-quilt model of thousands of separate ethnic groups – as proferred by classic anthropology), to redefine the place of the African continent as a fully-fledged, even major, scene of human cultural history and initiative from the Palaeolithic on.

These developments, while making me less of a blinkered and specialised anthropologist of religion, did not remain without implications for my appreciation of Durkheim. Having found (or so I believe) important methodological and theoretical keys for disclosing long-range continuities in space and time, what would be the implications for the universality claims that are at the foundations of the Durkheimian theoretical edifice? Is it possible to explore, define, and limit the scope of applicability, of the paired concepts *sacred / profane*, which Durkheim claimed to be universal? What is the actual distributional extent, in space and time, of the other 'elementary forms of religious life' for which *Les Formes* claimed universality – such as ritual, sacrifice, the sacralisation of space? Now that we have incomparably more data as to religious forms of the past, and incomparably better (especially digital) tools to compare and analyse them, than were at the disposal of Durkheim over a century ago, is it possible to come up with new and better answers concerning the nature and distribution of 'the elementary forms of the religious life'? Can we trace them, with any degree of empirical reliability, in the remote past of the Upper Palaeolithic, and even the Middle Palaeolithic, and before? If, as Durkheim claims, religion is truly and deeply constitutive of all society, can we find state-of-the-art data that confirm the ubiquity of religion throughout all human history, or do we, going back in time, somewhere reach a point where no religion is discernable any more, even though we are undoubtedly dealing with humans, and with humans that are socially organised? Can we pose the same questions for theistic beliefs, which are such a major aspect of the face religion presents to us today? Is it possible to date the belief in God / gods backward in time and identify its beginning? What methodologies and what data are at our disposal for such an eminently appealing endeavour?

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[15] A Zen Buddhist master's pedagogic riddle.

When the pioneer English antiquarian Sir Thomas Browne wrote his book on *Urn Burial*[16] in the middle of the 17th c. CE, he made a bold statement:[17]

> 'what song the Sirens sang, or what name Achilles assumed when he hid himself among women, though puzzling questions are not beyond all conjecture' (Browne 1658)[18]

The outstanding long-range questions I just formulated in relation to Durkheim's religion theory, have a comparable level of boldness, and yet they, too, are not beyond all conjecture, as we shall see in *Part IV* of the present book.

In trying to answer them I will rely, in addition to archaeology, population genetics and comparative ethnography, on two principal bodies of scholarship, whose barest outlines I shall present as we move into Part IV: historical / comparative linguistics, and Comparative Mythology. The latter two fields will be amply introduced in the methodological and theoretical Chapter 8. But before I can tap these resources, I shall have to answer the following question. *Within archaeology, the subdiscipline of religious archaeology has been prominent from the very beginning; why then approach prehistoric religion by the relative detour of linguistics and mythology, intead of seeking to answer our questions on prehistoric religion straightaway from religious archaeology?* A considerable part of Chapter 8 will be taken up with precisely this question. I fear my ansers will be unpleasing to archaeologists.

Next we turn to long-range comparative / historical linguistics. This exciting, rapidly growing, and healthily contested field has been, in the last few decades, the scene of a number of inspiring syntheses, the most productive of which I consider the *Borean hypothesis. This is the idea that, in the (systematically, intersubjectively reconstructed) proto-lexicon of most linguistic macrophyla spoken today, detectable (though approximate) traces still exist of an Upper Palaeolithic language form that may be given the name of *Borean, and of which over a thousand words (at least their consonantal skeleton), with semantics, have been reconstructed on the basis of what we presume to be descendant languages as recorded in historical times. Such an extensive vocabulary, and such a profound time depth, promise to go a considerable way towards answering our outstanding Durkheimian questions. A joint venture of some of

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[16] Then long obsolete as a practice, but a major practice in Bronze-Age Europe; *cf.* van Binsbergen & Woudhuizen 2011: 259, 294, and references cited there.

[17] Later quoted by the English poet and mythographer Robert Graves as the motto for his controversial historical approach to poetic myth, *The White Goddess* (1961 / 1980), whose delightful conjectural excursions are even bolder – to the embarrassment of most modern comparative mythologists.

[18] On the Sirens and their song: *cf.* Smith 1880; Atsma, 'Sirens'; Zwicker 1927; von Geisau 1977, for an overview of the principal Graeco-Roman classical sources. Similarly on Achilles, whom his divine mother Thetis had hidden (from the imminent Trojan war) in a women's harem at the isle of Scyrus, but ultimately breaking his cover when enticed by the splendid weaponry Odysseus came to show: Smith 1880; Atma 2018b; Escher-Bürkli 1894; Volkmann 1977.

the world's most prominent universities and research institutes,[19] the *Borean reconstructions make up an important (though relatively minute) part of the *Tower of Babel* database (Starostin & Starostin 1998-2008).[20]

The second body of scholarship on which Part IV leans heavily is Comparative Mythology, where the reconstructed *Borean semantics may be considered in a fuller and more revealing light than merely in the hands of the modern specialist lexicographers who have filled the *Tower of Babel* database. Comparative Mythology will be a considerable help when we probe into the historical distribution, and time depth, of such concepts as God, devil, evil, *sacred*, etc. With the complementary perspective of long-range linguistics, Comparative Mythology will assist us in our search for 'elementary forms of religious life' in prehistory – first along the lines and using the concepts and religious institutions which Durkheim himself has already indicated in *Les Formes*, but finally (section 9.17) also taking into account such concepts and institutions as were overlooked by Durkheim but whose importance has been suggested in the wider comparative religious literature.

The title I have chosen for this book, *Confronting the Sacred*,[21] is both a compromise and a misnomer. I have been dreaming, for years, of a book in which I would truly confront the *sacred*, in the sense that I would extensively address the truth, if any (Durkheim claims there is!), behind religion, and behind my own beliefs (puzzlingly – or, as some critics felt, hypocritically – ranging from being an affirmed agnostic, even atheist, North Atlantic social scientist, a published poet, and an expert and practicing Southern African diviner-healer-priest). Although time is somewhat pressing at my age 71 especially considering the health problems that have marked the last few years, and although by now I do have drafted a rough book-length text that in the literal sense confronts the *sacred* (*Sangoma Science*), it is still too early in my intellectual and spiritual development to broach such a formidable topic head-on.[22] I first need the stepping-stone of the present book. What is being confronted now, is not so much *the sacred* as such, but mainly Durkheim's claims concerning the *sacred* and its counterpart, the *profane* – as well as his assertions concerning

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[19] Current participants include: the Russian State University of the Humanities (Center of Comparative Linguistics), the Moscow Jewish University, the Russian Academy of Sciences (Dept. of History and Philology), the Santa Fe Institute (New Mexico, USA), the City University of Hong Kong, and Leiden University.

[20] In the *Tower of Babel* database, the expression '*Borean' is invariably accompanied by the qualification '(approx.)', stressing the uncertain nature of the linguistic reconstruction. Below, I will extensively use the *Tower of Babel* reconstructions, and I will discuss the limitions of my approach notably its reifying what are in fact very conjectual, often dubious, results. However, I will refrain from the perfunctory repetition of the '(approx.)' qualification.

[21] I was surprised to find the title not yet taken. What comes closest is Elizabeth Sepper's thoughtful 2008 article on international legislation concerning women's discrimination, 'Confronting the Sacred and Unchangeable: The Obligation to Modify Cultural Patterns under the Women's Discrimination Treaty'.

[22] However, for a sneak preview, see the concluding pages of van Binsbergen 2018; they are also included at the end of the present book, in slightly edited form.

other ‘elementary forms of religious life’. Longer books have been written on less worthy topics. And, as has happened before in my tortuous process of intellectual growth (*e.g.* in regard of Martin Gardiner Bernal’s *Black Athena* thesis, or Stephen Oppenheimer’s Sunda Hypothesis), whereas my initial intention was to write a totally dismissive argument, I find that in the end this book is largely a vindication of Durkheim, despite the untenability of his universality claim concerning the paired concepts *sacred / profane*.

When I saw this book through its final editing, I repeated a practice which I found useful for my recent book *Vicarious Reflections* (1915): inevitably (given my inclination towards theory, philosophy and the History of Ideas) my argument contains, mainly in the footnotes, and besides passing remarks and substantiations, a considerable number of concentrated theoretical and bibliographical specific discussions. I have left these in the footnotes, but have preceded each of them with a short descriptive *TITLE IN ITALIC CAPITALS*, and consecutive numering #1, #2,....while listing these items separately in the *Table of Contents*.

0.2. Acknowledgments

What has kept me more or less in the Durkheimian camp (despite many years when I mainly identified as a Marxist, and my more recent inclinations towards Derridaism) is not merely the glorious fit between territorial segmentation and the distribution of shrines and saints as characteristic attributes of local social units at all levels of segmentation, in the highlands of North-western Tunisia (van Binsbergen 1971, 1985). Nor is it merely my desire to go against the grain of the naïve common wisdom, among narrowly-read and philosophically untutored anthropologists today, that Durkheim is now *passé* and can at best serve as prop to add the appearance of a familiarity with intellectual history to otherwise pedestrian anthropological arguments. Even if we take away Durkheim’s more robustly idealist and bookish themes such as *effervescence*, *contagiousness of the sacred* (in fact, rather a theme from Frazer and ultimately from Robertson Smith), and the fundamental and irreducible *opposition between sacred and profane*, his symbol theory of imposed *sacred*ness as society’s method of coercing the individual, remains a stroke of genius. Yet it is not with impunity that one remains more or less faithful to a juvenile theoretical fascination for over half a century. I do not wish to burden the reader with too much autobiographical anecdotal material. Full acknowledgments would reflect every step in my career, and the sum of my indebtedness to hundreds of people and dozens of institutions.

The most important of these are already mentioned in the above footnote on my various field experiences in religious anthropology. Here the immense contribution is highlighted which, in addition to the host community’s trustful generosity, my spouses and children (against the background of the loving support from my brother and sisters over the decades) have made towards my

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personal and intellectual maturation, not in the last place by loyally living through the phases of ill-tempered disorientation that tend to attend my maturation especially before an end product moderately worth all this human investment was ready to materialise. In the process also the constant and loyal support from the African Studies Centre Leiden should be mentioned: my institutional home for over forty years, where (except in the years 2007-2010) I found the trust and financial resources (although seldom the collegial companionship) to engage in my peregrinations from discipine to discipline and from region to region, all the while continuing to identify as an Africanist.

I am indebted to Arie Pans for introducing me to Durkheim in the first place. In the context of my 1967 Cand.Soc.Sc. sociology thesis on which Part II is loosely based, I am indebted to my then supervisor, the Lecturer of Sociology J. Berting, who constructively approved the thesis outline and initial draft; and especially to the New Guinea specialist, the late lamented Jan van Nieuwenhuizen of the Antropologisch Sociologisch Centrum, who, at my request, successfully argued the acceptability of my theoretical argument on one of the foundational theories of the social sciences, when Berting was inclined to dismiss my text as essentially anthropological and therefore disqualifying as a sociology thesis. Despite the complementarity and nearly equal weight of anthropology and sociology crafted in the social-anthropology / development-sociology curriculum at the Antropologisch Sociologisch Centrum in the 1960s, Berting (later professor of sociology at Amsterdam University, and today my colleague as emeritus professor at Rotterdam) had more of a point than I was prepared to admit at the time – fascinated as I was by the possibility of grappling, in Durkheim's tracks, with the essence of religion, and already having planned my then imminent North African field-work along Durkheimian lines.

The most formative experience in my training as an anthropologist of religion was the fieldwork training I underwent in Tunisia (1968), under the intensive, immensely stimulating and resourceful supervision of Douwe Jongmans and Klaas van der Veen, with the assistance of Marie-Lou Creygton and Pieter van Dijk. Fifty years later, the present book still shows me as in the first place a fieldworker, who sees the criterion of valid and reliable socio-cultural knowledge primarily in the prolonged and humble intimacy of a researcher's personal social relations in the field, struggling to learn the language and the culture, and with the daily feedback from, and often relentless testing by, the research hosts. Among my other teachers in the course of my formal training I should mention André Köbben (who introduced me to Africa and to fieldwork-based religious anthropology), Wim Wertheim (who introduced me to sociological classics including Marx, and to East, South and South East Asia), Anton Reichling and Simon Dik (who laid the foundation for my linguistic work), Bonno Thoden van Velzen (who introduced me to Meso and South American anthropology and proved a significant patron throughout my career). Margaretha de Koster (who gave me a taste for Oceania), and Jeremy Boissevain (who first kindled, then extinguished, my orientation on Mediterranean studies, thus forcing onto me a career as an Africanist –

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without which I would have missed many of the most significant personal and theoretical benefits and challenges in my life, including my decisive encounter with my present wife, in Senegal 1982). The late lamented Matthew Schoffeleers was a friend and a colleague, and together we passionately explored – at the immensely stimulating instigation of Terence Ranger – Africa's religious history, even before he splendidly served as my PhD supervisor in 1979, and in his capacity of Roman Catholic priest officiated at my second wedding (1984). My contacts with Schoffeleers, Ranger and the Manchester School started in Zambia when I was teaching at the splendid University of Zambia; in the course of the 1970s Manchester became a major influence on my work largely because of the most inspiring collaboration with Richard Werbner.

While religious-anthropological fieldwork constitutes the principal inspiration of the present book, over the decades my perspective on religion has been greatly widened by increasing access to other historic socio-cultural realities, which are no longer available for participant observation. A decisive step in this respect was my being co-opted to the Theme Group on Religion and Magic in Ancient Mesopotamia, at the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities and Social Sciences (NIAS), Wassenaar, 1994-1995. The unimaginable library facilities and opportunities of daily profound scholarly debate which were extended to me in that connection, enabled me to put my comparable research into African divination systems on a more solid Classics and Assyriological footing, and to develop my interest in the *Black Athena* debate (as initiated by the late lamented Martin Gardiner Bernal) to the point were I could make a significant personal contribution to it (van Binsbergen 1997b / 2011a). These lines were further developed when the Ancient Historian Fred Woudhuizen, already solidly established with several book publications, and thus as much a teacher as a student to me, became my PhD student at Rotterdam, and together we explored ethnicity and the enigmatic Sea Peoples at the end of the Bronze Age in the Eastern and Central Mediterranean (van Binsbergen & Woudhuizen 2011).

When in 1998 I acceded to the Chair of Foundations of Intercultural Philosophy at the Erasmus University Rotterdam, this was in many ways another turning point in my intellectual career. Here my social-science expertise was increasingly considered, by my new colleagues, an irrelevant and irritating feature to be swept under the carpet. As a result I was all the more rapidly drawn into the philosophical discourse, of which two books bear testimony (van Binsbergen 2003a, 2015). As president of the Dutch / Flemish Association for Intercultural Philosophy I could, however, accommodate my continued religious fascination within the national Workgroup on Spirituality jointly organised by my inspiring new colleague Henk Oosterling and myself. Although at the end of my philosophical adventure I hastened to return to the social sciences, fieldwork and religious research, yet (in addition to long-standing colleagues such as René Devisch, Martin Doornbos (with whom I recently published the monumental *Researching Power and Identity in African State Formation*, 2017), and the late lamented Matthew Schoffeleers and Terry Ranger) it is some of my philosophical colleagues and more recent PhD students who have exerted a decisive positive influence upon the present book: my enthusiastic critic the Nigerian philosopher Sanya Osha; the Congolese / American

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philosopher Valentin Mudimbe, the Dutch philosopher Pieter Boele van Hensbroek – founder (with Roni M. Khul Bwalya) of the journal *Quest: An African Journal of Philosophy / Revue Africaine de Philosophie* which he entrusted to me as editor in 2002; and Fred Woudhuizen, Julie Ndaya Tshiteku, Stephanus Djunatan, Pius Mosima, and Pascal Touoyem.

In connection with my study of the La Ferrassie-6 cupuled sepuchral block summarised in Chapter 8, I wish to express my gratitude to the staff of the Les Eyzies Museum, Dordogne, France, for granting me unrestricted access to the Mousterian and Aurignacian limestone blocks in their holding; and to the African Studies Centre Leiden, the Netherlands, for financing my two research trips to Les Eyzies, September 1999 and April 2000. My colleagues within the Theme Group on Globalisation warmly supported the project and enabled me to make modest use of institutional finance towards its realisation. My analysis could not have been made without the intensive assistance from my Belgian associate, the mathematician and amateur astronomer Jean-Pierre Lacroix, to whom I extend my sincere thanks. Various archaeologists, such as Emmanuel Anati (*cf.* Anati 2007), Michael Rappenglück, D. Delluc and G. Delluc, Francesco d'Errico, and Jim Harrod, have looked at drafts of my 2000 report on an astronomical interpretation of the La Ferrassie-6 burial block, and their comments have greatly encouraged me and contributed to the succinct final report as below, Section 8.2.2. Needless to say that all errors of fact and interpretation remain entirely my own responsibility.

Finally I wish to register my great indebtedness to the Starostins father and son, and to the many other officers of the *Tower of Babel* project especially G. Bronnikov and Phil Krylov, without whose sustained painstaking efforts over the years the long-range analyses on which the present book is partly based, could not have been carried out. To the large extent to which Chapters 8 and 9 are predicated on *Tower of Babel* data, this is also their book; although I fear that, when they see what I have done with their data, they may decline the honour. I am also indebted to the leading Czech linguist my friend Vaclac Blažek, who directed me to this database and endorsed it as authoritative. However, Blažek has been increasingly critical of my use of this type of linguistic data, and, once more, all errors in my use and interpretation of these data are of course entirely my own responsibility.

Last year the world commemorated – although perhaps not at as large a scale as deserved – the hundredth anniversary of Émile Durkheim's death. Let me end these acknowledgments by dedicating this book to his memory.

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