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Africa's splendid social technology of reconciliation, and the political sociology of its under-utilisation at the national and international level¹

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ABSTRACT. The argument consists of two parts. In the first part, I address the question as to the nature of reconciliation – reconciliation being a 'social technology' i.e. a set of established and viable strategies of problem-solving, consisting however not in the manipulation of the natural, non-human aspects of the world but in the articulation and transformative management of human individuals and groups. Such social technologies of reconciliation i.e. of social and political conflict resolution, I will examine especially in the African context, and I will conclude that, among the societies of the world, African societies have, since times immemorial, particularly excelled in the social technology of reconciliation as applied at the local and regional level. This leads on to the second part, in which I contrast Africa's excellent record in local and regional reconciliation, with the excessive rate of destructive and genocidal conflict that has characterised the African continent in the past few decades. The argument's central question then becomes: *How can we explain that Africa's social technologies of reconciliation have proven so utterly ineffective, and have so little been applied, at the national and the international level?* After highlighting the crisis of legitimacy of modern and traditional elites as part of the explanation, a fuller explanation is derived from an examination of the political sociology of modern Africa, along such lines as the weak nature of Africa's formal organisations; the pitfall of particularist divisiveness; failing idioms of universalism; and the dislocated and alienated African subject. This leads us to consider Christianity and *ubuntu* ('the art of being human') in South African reconciliation, and to recognise transcendentalism and universalism as harbingers of peace – but at a considerable cultural cost for Africa. Greater attention to the time-honoured African social technology of reconciliation may help to reduce that cost.

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¹ This is the greatly revised version of my paper 'On the dynamics of conflict, reconciliation and peace in African societies – from the local to the national level, and beyond', presented at the International Colloquium on The Problematic of Peace and Development in Africa: Balance Sheet and New Stakes in the 3rd Millennium (convenor Jr. Prof. Célestin Tagou), Faculty of Social Sciences and International Relations, Protestant University of Central Africa, Yaounde, Republic of Cameroon, 6-9 April 2009.

1. Introduction

In the first place I wish to express my gratitude to the Protestant University of Central Africa, and to the convenor Jr. Professor Célestin Tagou, for inviting me to participate in the present International Colloquium, which marks the founding, at Yaounde, Cameroon, of the African Institute for Peace Communication and Development (AIPCD), in close association with the radical peace activist Johan Galtung and his organisation *Transcend International: A Network for Peace and Development*; I have particularly welcomed this opportunity to come into contact with peace researchers and peace activists from Africa and beyond, as a significant enrichment of my own perspective in this matter.

Secondly, let me explain how my contribution to the conference is part of a much wider project, which has kept me occupied for the past two decades. My original training was in sociology, anthropology, Islamic Studies, and linguistics. In the first twenty years of my career I was a fairly standard North Atlantic scientist, frequently scooping down on the African continent in order to transform the raw cultural, historical and especially religious data I could collect there in abundance (largely thanks to the trustful research-mindedness of my African hosts and research associates), into grist for the global academic mill whose main locations were in the North Atlantic region. Also the allegiance and the inspiring concerns of that form of knowledge production were mainly orientated towards the North Atlantic region. However, by the end of the 1980s I turned around. The radical, also action-orientated socio-political analyses to which I had been initiated by such prominent scholars as Wim Wertheim, Jack Simons and Max Gluckman (against the background of the general neo-Marxist revival in the social sciences from the 1960s-1970s, now long subsided again), in combination with the increasingly accommodating forms of sociability, affirmation of shared humanity, and spirituality, which I had come to recognise, appreciate, and adopt as my own on the African continent, made me realise that that the standard forms of knowledge production on Africa tended to be based on an implicit premise of North-South inequality. Predicated on intellectual distancing, and being essentially hegemonic, these forms of knowledge production did not seem to do full justice to the intrinsic value of African societies, their cultures and their knowledge systems. Current forms of global (but essentially North Atlantic) Africanist knowledge production only seemed prepared to admit these African achievements to global scientific discourse, *on condition of their being subjected to a process of transformative and distortive, usually condescending, representation in which North Atlantic concepts, theories and evaluations could falsely pose, and impose, as universal*. Most of my subsequent work has been devoted to the vindication of African positions in the global politics of knowledge. In the process, I became not only the adopted son of a Zambian king, but also a certified and practising African diviner and spiritual healer in the Southern African *sangoma* tradition, as an affirmation of the global value of African knowledge systems. And after holding professorial chairs in my original fields, I finally, in 1998, traded these for the chair of intercultural philosophy at the Erasmus University Rotterdam, to which I was privileged to add, in 2002, the Editorship of *Quest: An African Journal of Philosophy / Revue Africaine de Philosophie*. Needless to say that this somewhat unusual itinerary has not been completed without overstatements, conflicts, and setbacks. Even assuming my good intentions and my common sense, the underlying assumptions of my present position admittedly raise

fundamental epistemological dilemmas that serve to remind me, as a philosopher, of the provisional and one-sided nature of this position.²

Against this background, my paper seeks to do the following. The argument consists of two parts. In the first part, I address the question as to the nature of reconciliation – reconciliation being what I call a ‘social technology’ i.e. a set of established and viable strategies of problem-solving, consisting however not in the manipulation of the natural, non-human aspects of the world – as in standard technologies based on natural-science knowledge, for transporting things over land or water, for growing crops, for building houses, for splitting atoms etc. – but consisting in the articulation and transformative management of human individuals and groups. Such social technologies of reconciliation i.e. of social and political conflict resolution, I will examine especially in the African context, and I will conclude that, among the societies of the world, African societies have, since times immemorial, particularly excelled in the social technology of reconciliation as applied at the local and regional level. This leads on to the second part, in which I contrast Africa’s excellent record in local and regional reconciliation, with the excessive rate of destructive and genocidal conflict that has characterised the African continent in the past few decades. The argument’s central question then becomes: *How can we explain that Africa’s social technologies of reconciliation have proven so utterly ineffective, and have so little been applied, at the national and the international level?* After highlighting the crisis of legitimacy of modern and traditional elites as part of the explanation, a fuller explanation is derived from an examination of the political sociology of modern Africa, along such lines as the weak nature of Africa’s formal organisations; the pitfall of particularist divisiveness; failing idioms of universalism; the dislocated and alienated African subject. This leads us to consider Christianity and *ubuntu* (‘the art of being human’) in South African reconciliation, and to recognise transcendentalism and universalism as harbingers of peace – but at a considerable cultural cost for Africa. Greater attention to the time-honoured African social technology of reconciliation may help to reduce that cost.

My endeavour at vindicating African time-honoured cultural and spiritual achievements does not spring from blind love, or from an ideological position such as often found among authors identifying as Afrocentrist.³ Although I have often thus identified myself, my position is that we need to understand why the unmistakable

² For an extensive epistemological reflection and autocritique on this itinerary, see for instance: van Binsbergen 2003a, 2007, 2008.

³ Afrocentricity is an intellectual and ideological movement with roots in the experiences of exploitation and humiliation, against which African Americans in North American society revolted from the late 19th century on, just like Africans and Caribbeans in European society during the heyday of colonial rule. Among its predecessors are W.E.B. Du Bois (e.g. 1976) and G.G.M. James (1954 / 1973); among its modern spokesmen are Diop (e.g. 1948, 1989), Asante (e.g. 1990), Carruthers (e.g. 1986), Finch (e.g. 1990), Ben-Jochannan (e.g. 1971), Rashidi (e.g. 1992), Obenga (e.g. 1990, 1992), van Sertima (e.g. 1995). Also the Americanised British Sinologist and intellectual historian Martin Bernal, initiator of the *Black Athena* debate, has progressively approached Afrocentrism (Bernal 1987-2006). We may distinguish between a radical and militant Afrocentrism, which claims that all initiatives in the world history of culture were taken by Black people from Africa, and an accommodating Afrocentrism, which merely affirms and celebrates African roots. My own position is somewhere between these extremes (van Binsbergen 2000a, 2000b, 2005, 2008c), whilst reserving my right to criticise the often defective standards of Afrocentrist scholarship.

potential of African forms of reconciliation has been so little applied in concrete African conflict settings of the last few decades, before we can pinpoint what changes are needed in order to make the full potential of these African social technologies of reconciliation available at the level where they are currently most needed: within African states at the national level, and between African states.

2. Reconciliation in general⁴

'Reconciliation (theology) means in general: the lifting of enmity and the restoration of peace. Usually this effect cannot be brought about fully by compensation of the evil perpetrated; in addition is required forgiving of guilt and foregoing retaliation. In Christian ethics the genuine (readiness to) reconciliation with enemies has always been regarded as a sign of love and humaneness (for example Mt. 5: 43f). The opposite applies when the reconciliation, or the readiness to reconciliation, is insincere. That is the case if reconciliation is desired for other reasons than the restoration of right and love, if contradictions are merely covered up and if aggressive feelings are not genuinely resolved and integrated.'⁵

The above quotation offers a fair summary of the Judeo-Christian conception of reconciliation. Van Kessel, the Dutch theologian who wrote this as part of an encyclopaedia entry, shows considerable insight into the dynamics of conflict. In his article he stresses that reconciliation should not come too late or too early: for conflict has not only negative, but also positive, effects on people and groups, and we should guard against less noble motives for reconciliation, such as cowardice. In many religions, and especially in Judaism, the author goes on, reconciliation as a concept addresses relationships not only between people but also between humans and the supernatural: the Day of Atonement, which, among other things, involves dismissing the scapegoat into the desert.⁶ There reconciliation is primarily with God and presupposes an awareness of God's forgiveness, and moreover repentance, conversion, and a change of behaviour. Christianity, van Kessel continues, builds on these basic ideas, defining the decisive reconciliation between God and men as the redemption brought by Christ.

Thus from the Jewish-Christian orientation of North Atlantic culture, a specific, and historically important interpretation has been given to the concept of reconciliation. Yet reconciliation is very far from primarily or exclusively a Christian concept. The society of Israel in the late second and in the first millennium BCE reflected in its social organisation, in many respects, the societies of other Semitic-speaking peoples and of the Ancient Near East in general. The patterns of conflict settlement that have been sanctified in the Jewish-Christian tradition have more or less secular parallels in the Near East and North Africa.⁷ In a remarkable study, one of the professors at our hosts' Protestant University of Central Africa has even demonstrated the very close

⁴ The following few sections are largely based on: van Binsbergen 2003b.

⁵ van Kessel 1975; my translation.

⁶ Lev. 16: 1f.

⁷ Gellner 1963, 1969; van Binsbergen 1980a, 1980b, 1985b, and forthcoming (c).

parallels between the Old Testament model of expiation, and that found traditionally among a Cameroonian people, the Fon.⁸

We could go even further and claim that reconciliation is an essential aspect of all human relationships, both in primary human relations based on face-to-face interaction, and in group relationships of a political, religious and ethnic nature that encompass a large number of people. As in the Christian theological conception of reconciliation, in the religion of many societies the theme of interpersonal reconciliation is complemented by that of the reconciliation between man and god by means of ritual, prayer and sacrifice.

3. An attempt to define reconciliation

3.1. Exploratory observations

3.1.1. Recognition of conflict

In the first place it should be clear that a necessary condition for reconciliation is the following: *explicit recognition by the parties concerned, that there is an specific, explicitly expressed conflict*. This is less self-evident than it appears. Many conflicts and oppositions in society are partially implicit and partially concealed from the actors' consciousness. Many overt conflicts do not in fact revolve around the stakes that are apparently being mediated, but on underlying stakes that remain partially

⁸ Oyono 2000. Cultural, including religious, parallels between sub-Saharan Africa and West Asia (including the Biblical lands) should not surprise us, and should neither be relegated off-hand to the effects of early Christian proselytisation. In the last decade, molecular geneticists have been able to reconstruct the migration history of Anatomically Modern Humans in much detail, and one of their findings was that, from c. 15,000 Before Present on, a considerable 'Back-into-Africa' migration had taken place from Central and West Asia. This movement brought back into Africa: Asian genes, language forms and cultural traits which had percolated through Asia in an intensive process of innovation and transformation, after, 80,000 to 60,000 years Before Present, they had left the African continent where they had originated in the first place (cf. Hammer et al. 1998; Cruciani et al. 2002; Coia et al. 2005). One of the dominant cosmological themes, emerging as a major innovation in Upper Palaeolithic West to Central Asia, and from there spreading over the entire Old World including Africa, is that of the separation of Heaven and Earth as the central moment of creation. Implied in this cosmogony is the incessant attempt, throughout the ritual and mythological systems of the Old World, to re-connect Heaven and Earth, in a great variety of ways: through natural phenomena such as rain, lightning, the rainbow, mountains and trees; through man-made constructions such as altars, temples, poles, ladders, towers, into heaven; through ritual acts such as sacrifice; through more or less divine beings such as the demiurge, angels etc. that serve to connect Heaven and Earth; and through selected humans privileged to serve the same purpose, such as shamans, kings, priests, prophets, twins (van Binsbergen 2006b, 2009). Thus considered, not only much of the imagery repertoire of the first 12 books of Genesis, but even the central notion of reconciliation between God and man in Judaeo-Christian theology, without denying its unique features, reflects a complex that has a very wide distribution in space and time, and ties in with the central mythological and ritual repertoire of the Old World since proto-Neolithic times.

unexpressed and that are unclear to at least part of the combating actors. Reconciliation is only possible if the conflict is clearly and publicly discussed by those involved, and such discussion creates a clarity that may well have a beneficial influence on future relations, also because previously unexpressed contradictions have found an overt expression that allows them to be taken into account in the social process much more readily.

3.1.2. Reconciliation as a creative social act

Moreover – and this is a point amply stressed in Professor Johan Galtung’s masterly key note address with which the present International Colloquium was opened⁹ – *reconciliation is a creative social act of rearrangement and reinterpretation*. This must be understood in the following sense: if available legal rules would have been self-evidently and simply applicable to the case, the conflict would not have arisen and there would have been no question of reconciliation. Probably reconciliation always resides in the recognition that firm rules are not sufficient. Dropping those rules is an acknowledgement of shared humanity and therefore creates the central condition for community, for society. This means that reconciliation is perpendicular to the normative, the institutionalised: it provides the additional cohesion that makes community and society possible. In this way reconciliation constitutes society. Hence also the fact that a confession of guilt needs certainly not always be a condition for reconciliation, or a necessary part of reconciliation.

3.1.3. Reconciliation as transformation of conflict

Reconciliation therefore is not so much the alternative to conflict, but the transformation of conflict, and one that makes it possible both to define clearly the stakes of the conflict and to adopt a relative view of these stakes in the light of a larger good, pointing towards the future and towards a wider community than just the parties involved in the conflict.

3.1.4. Reconciliation not primarily governed by rules

Reconciliation is emphatically not the application of formal normative rules from a society’s cultural orientation; it is not the result of a fixed procedure or a fixed scenario, but it consists in the creation of a framework within which those rules can acquire an added value of inclusiveness, flexibility, transcendence.

In this process it becomes manifest what people feel to be the most fundamental basis of their social life. This can be many different things, for instance:

- the recognition of a shared humanity; then reconciliation implicitly implies that a particular conception of the human person is being mediated
- the recognition of the need to terminate the conflict in the interest of future generations
- recognition of a shared identity
- recognition of shared responsibility vis-à-vis the supernatural.

⁹ Galtung 2009, cf. 1975, 1996, 2008a, 2008b; Galtung & MacQueen 2008.

These themes do not in the least rule out an element of self-interest in bringing about, and accepting, reconciliation. Probably, on this point, the anthropological discourse on reconciliation takes a distance from the theological discourse, which centres on integrity and authenticity and considers self-interest in reconciliation disqualifying.

The shared humanity that is restored, and expressed, in reconciliation, also makes possible a return to other forms of contact, which in their turn foreshadow future possibilities of reconciliation. If the reproduction of society, to a considerable extent, takes place by means of reconciliation between groups, then it stands to reason that other reproductive elements may serve as an expression of such reconciliation as is being reached. Much reconciliation is accompanied by the consumption of food and drink, which often may be interpreted locally in terms of a sacrifice to supernatural beings overseeing the reconciliation process, but which may also be simply recognised as the conditions for the maintenance and the reproduction of the human body. Collective consumption in this manner is an expression of the same shared humanity that is being implied in reconciliation. On both sides of the Mediterranean massive annual saints' festivals display such commensality to a great extent. In practice they constitute a calendrical event of reconciliation in the midst of a year full of violence or the threat of violence between various villages, clans, etc.; during the annual festival the members of these rival social units have sanctuary to visit each other's respective festivals and saintly shrines as pilgrims, i.e. in an explicitly ritual context. Also here we see an element of biological reproduction as an extension of the shared humanity as emphasised in reconciliation. For such annual festivals are, among other things, informal marriage markets. And in general, in a large number of contexts the world over, reconciliation is symbolised by engaging in marital relations. As the Mae Enga¹⁰ people of New Guinea put it:

'We marry the people we fight'.

Also, a specifically sexual expression of reconciliation is possible, as is borne out, for example, in the numerous accounts and myths featuring marriages between the victors and the vanquished.

Moreover, reconciliation often involves the explicit verbalisation of the termination of a conflict. Such verbalisation is often public, and often depends on the intercession of a third party in the role of mediator. Reconciliation may be a public event, and important forms of social control derive from the public confession of a state of reconciliation.

However frequent though, neither the public nature of reconciliation nor the intercession of mediators is a universal feature of reconciliation.

3.2. Not always mediators

An oath, such as accompanies many contexts of reconciliation in North Africa, may invoke invisible supernatural agents in such a way that formally no specific intercession of mediating humans is required anymore. Here the collective oath is a central mechanism of reconciliation. Taking an oath by reference to a supernatural power (God, or a saint – typically one whose grave is in the vicinity) invokes a super-human

¹⁰ Meggitt 1965, 1977.

sanction in case the sworn statement that is capable of terminating the conflict, turns out to be false or, if it is a promise, not to be honoured. Although the supernatural being and the latter's sanction are at the centre of reconciliatory oath-taking, such oaths are often taken before outsiders invested with religious powers: living marabouts (saints), who are no party to the conflict and who – through their abstention from weapons and violence – have situated themselves outside the dynamics of secular social life. By contrast, ordinary life in that part of the world has tended to consist of a continuous struggle over ecologically scarce goods (land, water, cattle, trading routes), and over persons (women, children, subjects, slaves). Incidentally, the institution of these peaceful marabouts, who through their association with saints' graves that are fixed in the landscape have a special link with the land, is closely related, both systematically and – probably – historically, to the institutions of earth priests and oracular priests of West Africa, to the leopard-skin chiefs of East Africa, to the oracular priests and heralds of Ancient Greece, Italy and the Germanic cultures;¹¹ the themes of the herald's staff and of the Hermes-like mediator are widespread throughout the Old World.¹²

3.3. Not always public

However, different types of borderline situations can be conceived as far as the public and mediating aspects of reconciliation are concerned. The conflict may occur in such an intimate sphere that the admission of outside mediators involves great embarrassment if not shame – this often applies to the conflicts between kinsmen, which one tends to see through within one's own circle as long as this is still possible. In rural Zambia it is considered indecent to summon a close kinsmen to court – and this of course applies in many societies, including the North Atlantic one. Much reconciling and therapeutic ritual is in fact private.

There are several types of reconciliation. There is the reconciliation that although publicly confessed allows the conflict to simmer on, and, as a result, at least one of the parties involved continues to seek a genuine termination of conflict through the effective annihilation of the adversary. Then again there is the reconciliation that does constitute a total transformation of social relations in a way which may closely approach the Christian theological definition of reconciliation. The latter type of reconciliation cannot merely be described in terms of law and power politics. It involves nothing less than man's fundamental capability of creating a society out of symbols, and of dynamically guarding and adapting these symbols. The shared humanity that underlies any successful reconciliation does not only resolve the specific conflict that was at hand, but also inspires the people involved to embrace the social in many or perhaps all other contexts in which they may find themselves. It produces a purification (catharsis). However, the extent and the duration of such catharsis depend largely on the dynamics of social structure obtaining in that time and place.

In reconciliation, not only society in general is formed or reinforced, but particularly the component conflicting groups constitute themselves in the process. We

¹¹ Cf. van Binsbergen, forthcoming (e).

¹² Kristensen 1966; Eitrem 1966; Brown 1947; Boylan 1922; Fauth 1979; Schouten n.d.: 99f; de Waele 1927; Hoffmann 1890; Meyer 1928-1936: II 97f; Boetzkes 1913; Breuil 1938.

should not think of social groups as firm persistent givens that may or may not happen to be engaged in a particular conflict. Many groups have no previous existence before they form themselves in the very context of conflict, through the institutions of mobilisation of group members, through identification with the stakes of the conflict, and through the roles that are defined by these processes both during the conflict and in the reconciliation process. Part of reconciliation is that the conflict is explicitly verbalised; it is then that the conflicting groups need to have a name, a label, an identity. Even in Central African villages the following situation obtains: any individual has a considerable number of possible group memberships at the same time (of a number of villages, a number of clans), and it is only in concrete situations of conflict and reconciliation, when the social process intensifies, that one commits oneself, temporarily, to one specific group membership, allowing this to define who one is, which side one is on, and what one hopes to get out of the conflict; in a future conflict, however, that individual may turn out to belong to a different group.

3.4. The role of the mediating outsider in reconciliation¹³

In order for someone to be able to play the role of mediator, special characteristics may be needed. Usually the mediators are not themselves party to the conflict. If they are party in one respect, it is likely that in another respect they are between both parties – for instance, as political leader of a group comprising both conflicting parties, or as kinsman of one party but affine (kinsman through marriage) of the other party. We shall come back to this point. High status brings to the mediator authority and also protection. And protection he may well need, for as long as the conflict has not terminated intercession may not be without risk, certainly not if the conflict in question involves physical violence. Also, a religious status (as prophet, saint, scriptural specialist, priest), may confer authority and protection: the marabout, the griot (West African bard), the priest, the herald, who implicitly or explicitly are under the protection of supernatural forces and thence in a position to effect reconciliation in the lives of others. In addition, class differences may be expressed in the role of mediator: in many societies a high social position means, in the first place, the responsibility, the duty, and also the right, to bring about reconciliation between others; hence the politician or the boss is often the chairman and initiator of informal palavers, and so is the African village headman especially in East, Central, and South Central Africa.¹⁴ Reversely, however, mediation brings great social status to the mediating outsider.

3.5. The social costs and benefits of reconciliation

The great benefit of reconciliation consists in the fact that society is newly constituted, not only on the concrete basis of the regained unity of parties which before were at daggers drawn, but also on a much more general and abstract level: the reconstitution of the unity of these two parties in a specific conflict, by implication refers to

¹³ The stranger as peace maker is also a major theme in Levinas; cf. Levinas 1993; Duyndam & Poorthuis 2003; Keifert 1991; Ogletree 1985; Raffoul 1998.

¹⁴ Cf. Cunnison 1956; Kuper 1970.

the reconstitution of any social community in terms of shared humanity – it is an affirmation of the principle of shared humanity in general. The confession of shared humanity is the essence of reconciliation. It creates the conditions in which to arrange the concrete practical issues of the conflict, once terminated, on a basis of trust.

But against this social benefit, what is the price of reconciliation? To resign from a conflict that one has once started, may not be totally advantageous. The formal normative structure of the local society may stress peacefulness or prowess, and depending on that context the termination of conflict may be either honourable or shameful, a sign of strength or of weakness. To the extent to which conflict, and the reconciliation that may follow it, have a public nature outside the narrow circle of the parties immediately involved, to that extent any reconciliation will have a social price, positive or negative, or a mixture of both in a plurality of aspects. But reconciliation will also have a price in the case of a conflict that is not public but that is fought out in the inner rooms of a kin group, or other face-to-face relationships. On the one hand, both parties are being glorified by the ritual, abstract, sharing of humanity that is being testified in reconciliation. But, on the other hand, the manifest readiness to accept reconciliation may undermine the credibility of either party in each other's eyes and in the eyes of outsiders; this will particularly be the case in a context where confrontation and conflict are the everyday norm – such as in the segmentary societies to be discussed shortly, or in the world of organised crime, in the context of economic competition in general, or in a bad marriage.

3.6. The symbolic technology of reconciliation

We have seen that it is not enough, in order to reach reconciliation, to bring to the fore the overtly available cultural contents of the situation, such as are manifest and self-evident to all actors involved. The very existence of the conflict pinpoints a contradiction in the social process: positions exist side by side that are each admissible in terms of the prevailing culture and of the system of social control, yet these positions are mutually irreconcilable. For the party occupying a particular position, that position is eminently valid; but to the other party, the opposite position is just as valid. Clearly social systems do not work in the same way as the axiomatic systems of symbolic logic and mathematics: it is common for social systems (as it is for biological systems) to arrive at more or less the same point from different starting points, along different routes, and to invest that point with the conflicting tendencies specific to the various points of departure. Contradiction is an inevitable and necessary condition of social life; and utopias in which such contradictions have been reduced to a minimum, or have been annihilated altogether, will be unliveable states of terror.¹⁵ Given such contradictions, it is not enough to summon to the fore what is already understood to be self-evident in the local society; instead, one has to appeal, relatively and selectively, to implicit possibilities that lie hidden in the culture and society. If one does not immediately succeed in making an effective (i.e. conflict terminating, actually reconciling) selection from this shared pool of cultural material, *then the mediator in the course of his attempts at reconciliation, has to selectively reformulate and transform publicly both the conflict and the underlying social and cultural material in such*

¹⁵ Cf. Popper 1966.

a way that it yet becomes possible, in the end, to come closer to one another and to confess publicly to this rapprochement.

Here we hit on one of the paradoxes of reconciliation. Although reconciliation (at any rate, in the African societies that have inspired my argument) is perpendicular to institutionalised frameworks and procedures in society, yet reconciliation is unthinkable without all parties concerned recognising a shared basis of communality, something on which they agree. This basis need not be a totally explicit given from the very beginning of conflict and reconciliation onwards. It is ritual that enables us to produce, in preparation of reconciliation, points of view and bases for communality which so far had not been perceived consciously by the parties involved in the conflict. It is the task of the typical outsider who monitors and presides over the process of reconciliation to identify, visualise, and exploit for the ultimate good, such hitherto unsuspected, hidden potential bases for communality. Especially African healers/diviners, whose task it is to bring out interpersonal conflicts and guide them towards reconciliation, tend to be masters in what we could call *praxeological bricolage*. By means of ‘do-it-yourself’ (i.e. French: *bricolage*) they construct a temporary, improvised, action-created (i.e. ‘praxeological’) language of communality, that was not felt to exist before the session started but that is the result of the verbal and non-verbal exchanges during the session, under the guidance of the therapist. And the latter is capable of bringing this about by means of the free use and the reinterpretation of selected symbolic material that, strictly speaking, is available within the local cultural orientation but not exactly in that specific form and combination in which it is summoned up in the divinatory and therapeutic session.

3.7. Reconciliation and time

The time dimension of reconciliation appears to be of great importance.

Reconciliation has the character of a process but also of a moment. The ritual of reconciliation is of a condensed nature, both in space and in time. If the conflict involves large sets of people (for example ethnic groups, nations, creeds), typically only a selection of the members of the groups involved participate directly in the reconciliation process. Reconciliation makes it possible to arrive at a specific transformation of the conflictive matter, which may subsequently lead, in a much more diffuse way, to the reorientation of the everyday life of all group members concerned. Reconciliation, therefore, does not only mean the transformation of conflictive matter, but also means indicating the possibilities for the transfer of conflict-terminating factors from reconciliatory ritual to everyday life. It means, in fact, a transformation of the ongoing social process.

But not only need we make a distinction between reconciliation as a process (the terminal phase of a conflict that has already run a considerable course through time), and reconciliation as the concrete moment when the viewpoints informing the conflict are particularly clearly expressed, when the parties in conflict concretely constitute themselves, and when these parties do, in fact, arrive at reconciliation by reference to a creatively transformed representation of the conflict matter. It is more important to realise that reconciliation is in itself a thinking about time: the normal time, when conflict is taken for granted, is interrupted, and it makes way for an ideal time, one of reconstruction, purity, clarity, sociability, in which the conflict is no longer capable of occurring; and that moment looks forward to the future, in which the transformation implied by reconciliation, will – ideally – have caused the then normal time to have

permanently shifted a bit towards ideal time. Even when reconciliation does not last and new conflict will continue to present itself in future, yet this reordering of time is the central idea of such transformation as is implied in reconciliation.¹⁶ In reconciliation eternity and cosmogony simmers through in a way which – even without Christian inspiration – occurs in African, Asian, Latin American and Oceanic societies just as well as it does in North Atlantic ones.

Another temporal dimension of reconciliation has to do with its possibly cyclic nature. In many African societies reconciliatory events are not so much unique, once for all, but repetitive and circular. This is what Calmettes¹⁷ points out in the context of the cyclical nature of witchcraft eradication movements in the villages of Northern Zambia in the twentieth century: these invariably occurred in a cycle of crises, a new crisis occurring once every ten to fifteen years. In my view, this cycle was produced by a combination of ecological and demographic factors periodically causing unbearable strain on the local community's natural and leadership resources. Reconciliation, then, is one of the predictable phases in the social process of the small-scale local community, in a continuous pendulum-swing movement back and forth between the following positions:

- integration after, and through, reconciliation
- erosion of the communality thus produced;
- initial skirmishes;
- conflict

after which the cycle is repeated unless reconciliation proves impossible and the community (village, kin group, congregation, political party) falls apart.

In segmentary, acephalous (chief-less) societies (see below), this repetitive nature of conflict and its resolution is not even distributed over an extension of time, but

¹⁶ Here we may pinpoint an essential difference between the time perception of the two closely related Mosaic religions, notably Christianity and Islam. Reconciliation between God and man is at the very heart of Christianity, and it stipulates a specific, extremely dramatic history of salvation: after a paradisaical state of perfect harmony, the Fall of Man through disobedience of God's command creates a state of total and absolute rupture between God and man, which plunges the whole of humankind in a state of incomparable collective distress and loss, only to be remedied by the most drastic means imaginable: God sending his own Son to bring about reconciliation by expiation through his own bloody sacrifice on the cross; against this background, each individual will still have to fight the individual struggle against sin and for salvation, but the possibility (for some Christian denominations even: the near-certainty) of salvation is given by Christ's self-sacrifice. By contrast, the Islamic perspective on human history is far more simple and straightforward, and lacks the stark dramatic contrasts of the Christian view of salvation history. Islam rejects the notion of the Original Sin as a total separation between God and man. Human history is articulated as the succession of dozens of prophets with the prophet Muḥammad as the culminating ultimate prophet and ʿAīssa / Jesus as Muḥammad's precursor. The Islamic view of history is continuous and lacks both the total rupture, and the total, collective reconciliation through the self-sacrifice of a prophet. Like in Christianity, every individual in Islam has to struggle against sin and for salvation, but he or she can do so confidently, unburdened by any notion of an Original Sin, and strengthened by the certainty – conveyed and reinforced by the single most frequent expression in Islam, repeated dozens of times a day by each believer: *bismi-llāhi ar-raḥmāni ar-raḥīmi* – that Allah is compassionate and merciful.

¹⁷ Calmettes 1972.

occurs at one and the same moment of time. There, reconciliation and conflict coincide incessantly, in line with the constantly shifting, kaleidoscopic, segmentary perspective within which an actor in such a society has situated himself vis-à-vis other actors.

In those African societies that have an elaborate political system organised around a chief or king, the cyclic nature of reconciliation goes through a developmental process along with the person of the king himself. As long as the king is alive and well, a condition prevails according to which the political system, the human society in general, the land, the crops, game, the rain, the cosmos in its totality, know the greatest regularity and fertility. However, at the king's death – even when it is only imminent – an interregnum begins during which both the political, the social and the cosmic order is supposed to be fundamentally disturbed, so that illness and drought, infertility, conflict, violence, incest and sorcery may reign supreme. This state can only be terminated by the accession of a successor, who brings about the reconciliation, both politically, socially and cosmically, through which chaos is turned once more into order.

Conflict, revenge, feud, sorcery are the opposites of reconciliation, and it is to these alternatives that I shall return in section 6 below.

4. Reconciliation and socio-political organisation: Segmentarity and feud

4.1. Segmentarity and the Nuer

One of the principal contexts in which the topic of reconciliation has come to the fore in anthropology is that of the feud and of the structure of acephalous societies – those of which feud is a characteristic per excellence. Evans-Pritchard – in his description of the East African Nuer, an acephalous society – defines the feud as follows:

'lengthy mutual hostility between local communities within a tribe'.¹⁸

In Evans-Pritchard's analysis, the entire (or rather, the entire male) social structure presents itself as a tree diagram (dendrogram), whose humblest, smallest twigs are formed by the individual members, united at the nodes into groups of brothers, the latter in their turn united at higher-order nodes into groups of cousins, groups of cousins in their turn into even larger groups, into still larger groups, into yet larger groups ..., until finally, at least in theory, the dendrogram encompasses the entire society. The branches of the dendrogram make for integration (for all twins under the same node constitute a united group), and for opposition at the same time: for the nodes at the same level, although united in their turn by a higher-order node at the

¹⁸ Evans-Pritchard 1967: 150. Few Africanist anthropologists today would still speak of 'tribe' in this connection, but that is immaterial for our present argument. For related studies of the societies in this region and their internal processes of reconciliation, cf. Greenberg 1971; Owen 1920; Titherington 1924; Simonse 1992.

next level, are still in opposition vis-à-vis one another. And, in fact, this also applies to all groups and individuals tied to each other by the node immediately above them. For this type of structure anthropology has coined the term of ‘segmentary system’. According to Evans-Pritchard,¹⁹ Nuer society (which was alleged to be representative of many other societies both in Africa and outside) hangs together by the subtle play between segmentary opposition and segmentary integration, both of which invariably present themselves in complementarity. Whether in a particular situation a particular actor will stress opposition or integration, depends on the continually shifting perspective the actor may adopt; in the last analysis, from an *etic* perspective, both positions apply equally. In theory we can tell exactly where this structure meets its boundary: at the point where segmentary integration at the highest level is still possible because of the potentiality of reconciliation after violence.

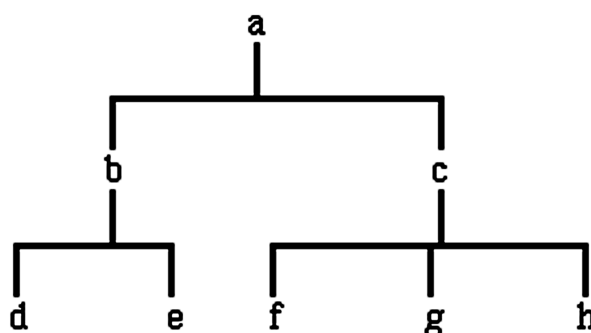


Figure 1. A simple system of segmentation

d and e are in segmentary opposition vis-à-vis one another, but they are in segmentary integration as parts of b when in opposition to f, g, or h; in the latter event, f, g, or h will effectively identify as c vis-à-vis b and any of b's constituent elements, i.e. d or e.

If it turns out that such reconciliation is not possible and that only violence can answer previous violence, then by definition the segmentary distance between the adversaries is too large. One has no option left but to admit that one's adversary is not implied in one's own social order and cannot be approached using that social order's technology of reconciliation.²⁰

In Nuer society²¹ conflicts were the order of the day, and they were usually accompanied by physical violence. In the case of violent conflict within the village, precautions were taken to prevent a mortal outcome (choice of weapons), but between different villages manslaughter did occur.

¹⁹ Evans-Pritchard 1967; cf. Middleton & Tait 1958; Sigrist 1967; Kelly 1983; Sahlin 1961.

²⁰ The model of complementary opposition, which is the backbone of segmentation as a model of social organisation, has a striking parallel in Derrida's concept *différance*, which comprises both the opposition and its resolution. It is unnecessary to remind the reader that Derrida hails from Algeria, whose social structure, like that of many Islamic countries, has retained strong elements of segmentation despite the rise of the centralised nation-state. In the Introduction to van Binsbergen 2003a, I have stressed that reconciliation, as a African hermeneutical social technology, offers a viable model for the puzzles of intercultural knowledge production. Also see my recent study on wisdom (van Binsbergen 2008c).

²¹ In the 1930s (when Evans-Pritchard did his fieldwork).

The system of segmentation in Nuer society revolved around the contradiction between two norms:

- (a) There is a moral obligation to settle conflicts through mediation, thus effecting reconciliation instead of retaliation. On the other hand, one of the pillars of the lineage organisation is
- (b) the obligation to revenge the murder of an agnate (a patrilineal kinsmen).

This is a typical social contradiction that cannot be resolved by normative or judicial means, but only through a process of reconciliation that transcends such institutional means. The function of the leopard-skin headman and his mediation makes it possible to alleviate these contradictory tendencies and to bring about reconciliation in the place of feud. These headmen (Nuer society is alleged to know no other types of headmen) have no effective material or military power, no great authority, but they do have a special link with the Earth, by virtue of which they may curse people. After killing a person the perpetrator flees to the headman and as long he is in the latter's sanctuary, he cannot be killed. The victim's kinsmen lie in ambush in case the murderer ventures outside his sanctuary. Meanwhile the headman ritually cleanses the killer (one is reminded of the *Oresteia* and dozens of other similar passages in Ancient Greek tragedy). At the same time he sets in motion a process of reconciliation: exhortations to forgiveness, and negotiations about the number of heads of cattle that the murderer's kinsmen are to pay. If this is settled after a few weeks, the murderer can return home and although a general unease lingers on, no counter-murder will be committed.

Evans-Pritchard stresses that the larger the social distance (i.e. the segmentary distance, as measured in terms of the number of distinct elements of the dendrogram connecting them) between the social groups involved, the smaller the chance that the conflict may be settled in this way. Feud characterises the relationships between distant groups, whereas between closely neighbouring villages that by virtue of their proximity share all sorts of ecological interests, the conflict cannot be allowed to persist in its original violent form, and reconciliation is imperative.

4.2. Alternative interpretations of the reconciliation process among the Nuer

On this point the Manchester School, as founded by Gluckman in the late 1940s, has explicitly engaged in polemics with Evans-Pritchard's analysis of the political system of the Nuer. Gluckman claimed that we have only learned to understand the dynamics of the reconciliatory process from Elizabeth Colson's study on 'Social control of revenge in the society of the Zambian Plateau Tonga'.²² According to Gluckman and Colson the key to an understanding of feud and its reconciliation would lie in conflicting loyalty on the part of third parties, who would have equally strong ties with both warring parties especially through affinal (i.e. in-law) relationships. As a result of clan exogamy (the obligation and the practice of marrying outside one's own clan) the entire local community, both among the Nuer and among the Zambian Tonga, is a

²² Colson 1960; Gluckman 1955, 1965.

network, throughout, of affinal relationships. An outburst of conflict, especially in the case of manslaughter, brings a number of individuals to a point where their affines and their consanguineal relatives seek to mobilise these individuals to two camps at the same time. Torn between conflicting loyalties, it is clearly in the interest of these people to solve their personal role conflict by seeking to terminate the conflict as a whole; they can do so by setting in motion the institutionalised mechanism towards reconciliation (through compensatory payments), and by exerting their influence on both parties, persuading them to cease hostilities.

An important step in the understanding of reconciliation in the context of segmentary societies in South Sudan was set more recently by Simon Simonse in his book *Kings of Disaster*.²³ For Simonse, mediators of the type of the Nuer leopard-skin headman are not merely catalysts, whose contribution to the social process is only indirect and inactive. With the support of a wealth of case material derived from Nilotic societies other than the Nuer, Simonse shows how the dynamics of the relationship between ‘mediator’ and ‘followers’ can take all sorts of forms. In many contexts the mediator himself becomes a key figure, charged with the task of giving symbolic form to the social process in his capacity of rainmaker; but, on the other hand, if he fails in that task, he will become the literal victim, the literal scapegoat, of that same society that is tied to him by a love–hate relationship. The schemes proposed by Frazer and Girard²⁴ would thus appear to have, albeit in greatly revised and updated form, an applicability that makes us see beyond the mere neutral role of the mediator in reconciliation processes.

5. Reconciliation and the law

In more centralised African political systems the social order results not only from an insecure balance between opposition and integration, nor only from the conflicting loyalties of kinsmen in the course of an informal social process, but also from that eminently African institution, litigation, that is often under the direct patronage of the chief or king.

In purely local litigation, at the village level, it may happen that for the sake of the shared interests of male kinsmen and affines, more profound personal and group conflicts are being dissimulated, and that the socially weaker party in the conflict (women, children, ex-slaves, and, in general, people of low social status) are forced to yield to these interests.²⁵ This constitutes a situation of incomplete reconciliation that calls for a continuation of the conflict with other extra judicial means: sorcery, poisoning, slander, suicide. This kind of local litigation does not stand on its own, but is embedded in the total social process of the local community; it may lead to a situation where, just as in the Gluckman/Colson reinterpretation of Evans-Pritchard, litigation may also work towards reconciliation in the context of a small-scale society whose

²³ Simonse 1992.

²⁴ Frazer 1911-1915; Girard 1977, 1978.

²⁵ For a case in point, cf. van Binsbergen 1977.

members are tied to each other by multiplex²⁶ relationships (and therefore cannot afford to push a conflict to its extremes merely in the interest of just one group member. In other words, a totally independent court of law is not a probable phenomenon in such a context.

However, if the judges have a greater distance vis-à-vis the local community, if they are linked to a royal court or to a central modern state to which the local village society is subjected, and if the judges identify more with the political order and the legal ideas and ideals of the court and the state than with the ongoing social and political process at the village level, then the insistence on reconciliation at all costs and at the expense of individual interests may be rather more limited.²⁷

In itself the termination of conflict through adjudication may imply reconciliation. A context for such reconciliation is already provided by the fact that the parties have agreed to put their case before the court (which thus constitutes the shared point of departure whence reconciliation may be obtained), and that a verdict is being pronounced. Lest the parties be held in contempt of court (an offence that is normally heavily sanctioned), such a verdict implies that the conflict must henceforth be considered to be terminated. In such a case the underlying, shared judicial system furnishes implicitly the framework within which reconciliation may be reached.

Such a formal reconciliation, that amounts to the decision not to continue the conflict now that it has been formally adjudicated, may however often be too formal and too distant to convince as a form of genuine reconciliation. In the context of South Central Africa, it is a common phenomenon that after such a formal legal verdict, when the conflict is no longer actionable in court, the conflict is yet carried on, notably with extra-judicial means. If this happens, the judicial termination of conflict manifestly did not produce reconciliation in the meaningful sense of the word. This forces us to look further for such a definition of the concept of reconciliation that would enable us to express why in these cases we are not dealing with genuine reconciliation, contrary to some other cases that also involve the intercession of the courts. It appears that, both at the purely local level and as part of an elaborate national judicial structure, effective reconciliation and the judicial process are far from coterminous. This we could already expect on the basis of our earlier insight that real reconciliation typically begins where the rule of law has been exhausted and does not offer a solution.

6. Reconciliation, ritual and therapy

It is important to realise that African village societies – not only those of pastoral semi-nomads, but also those of sedentary cultivators – tend to be fairly unstable social units, with a limited time-span. The nostalgic image of the African village as a haven

²⁶ A and B stand in a multiplex relationship to one another, if more than one complementary role is involved, e.g. if they are not just each other's father-in-law / son-in-law, but also neighbour, member of the same ritual congregation, member of the same hunting party, of the same political faction etc.

²⁷ On the legal dynamics of reconciliation, cf. also van Rouveroy van Nieuwaal & Baerends 1981, 1984.

of harmony, sharing and love is just – nostalgic, in other words: an ideological stereotype.

For instance, among the Zambian Nkoya²⁸ a village is nothing but a core of kinsmen which, merely because of the members' temporary and somewhat accidental co-residence, happens to stand out among the wider kin group; the latter overlaps with other such groups anyway. Also, because of their limited number of members, their low fertility, their high child mortality, and the prolonged stay of some of their members in urban areas, these localised kinship cores are involved in an incessant, often sinister, competition over members. Someone's position in Nkoya society is primarily determined by the village where he or she dwells at a particular moment in time – but this is only a temporary choice privileging one village and kin core from among several villages and several kin cores to which that person may reckon himself to belong. There are nearly always alternative choices, and often these are effected in the course of time. The village is a spatial given, but in the first place a kinship-political given.²⁹ One is a 'member' of the village, rather than just an 'inhabitant' of the village. Very frequently this membership is discontinued, trading it for an alternative, by moving house to a different village. On the spur of personal conflicts, illness and death, fear of sorcery, and the ambition to gain a headman's title for oneself, virtually any person in this society continually proceeds, in the first half of his or her life, through a kind of musical chairs, from village to village, in the course of which process ever different villages, kin cores, and senior kinsmen come to figure as protectors and sponsors. (The pattern is not very different for women and men, albeit that women may also attach themselves to non-kin patrons by marrying them (an option scarcely open to men, although some men have been known to rely heavily on kin support from their in-laws), while over the past hundred years or so women have no longer been eligible to compete for royal and headmanship titles among the Nkoya, contrary to the situation in the more remote past.) In this process, the villages themselves, as concrete localised sets of dwellings, are also far from stable: most villages, as physical conglomerates of dwellings in a specific place, have only a lifespan of ten to twenty years. *In practice, therefore, Nkoya villages are temporary sets of relative strangers, who usually have not grown up together, and who are unlikely to die as co-resident neighbours of one another.* In their mutual relationships the people concerned are constantly conscious of the optional aspect of their state of co-residence, and they are constantly looking around for opportunities to improve their personal security, mainly through intra-rural moving. Here security is defined both in terms of supernatural protection – against illness, death and misfortune – as mediated by the elders (provided these are not exposed to be witches themselves), freedom from sorcery-generating, interminable conflict, and such freedom from hunger and exposure as is provided by ecological plenty. All these qualities of life are subsumed under the Nkoya expression *ku-ikāla shiwāhè*, 'to stay, to live, all right'.

In order to counteract the chaos that constantly threatens the close relationships between members of this – fairly common – type of African village societies, artifices are needed that deny or dissimulate the opportunist nature of the village as merely a temporary meeting place of relative strangers – artifices that turn these villages into a social context of a much more permanent and inescapable nature, so that their mem-

²⁸ Cf. van Binsbergen 1991a, 1992b.

²⁹ For the anthropological concept of the politics of kinship, cf. van Velsen 1971.

bers will be domesticated into consensus and unity. How can this be achieved? Mainly through collective rituals, in which the localised kin core, augmented with members who stay in town but have come over for the occasion, construct their unity and celebrate it through music, dance, sacrifice and prayer. Many African village societies boast an extremely rich repertoire of ritual, and attending forms of music, dance and verbal expression. These forms range from the solitary prayer at the village shrine of the hunter setting forth in the evening or the early morning, via reconciliatory rituals in the restricted circle of close kinsmen around the village shrine after a conflict, to massive life crisis rituals marking a girl's attainment of maturity, a person's culmination of life in the form of funerary celebrations, and finally the crucial ritual of name inheritance a year or so after the demise of a senior kinsman or kinswoman.

Ritual creates the possibility of reconciliation even if, or precisely if, the law cannot be involved because subjecting a kinsman to external adjudication is seen as a breach, from the public social space, into the intimacy of the secluded social space of solidarity and of face-to-face relationships, such as exist in the family, the village, the small group of loyal neighbours in an urban ward, a circle of friends or co-religionists. In the African context, therapy and ritual can scarcely be told apart: to every ritual a therapeutic effect is attributed, and although there are pragmatic therapies whose religious component is merely implied and does not become overt, yet outside the sphere of cosmopolitan medicine there are few African therapeutic situations that do not have a predominantly religious component.

Reconciliation with the supernatural is a central datum in African ritual and therapy:

- with the ancestor through prayer, libation and other offerings at an ancestral shrine;
- with a spirit – ancestral or otherwise – which manifests itself through possession and is subsequently propitiated by the possessed person joining the specific cult of that spirit;
- with the High God in a historic local religious idiom;
- with the Holy Spirit, Christ, God, peace with whom is made through conversion to African Independent Christian churches; and, alternatively, with Allah through the intercession of Islamic specialists and saints.

Usually reconciliation with the supernatural implies an idiom in whose context also, and particularly, the reconciliation between living participants in the ritual can be achieved. We note a triangular relationship: conceptually, if not in reality, the supernatural agent C mediates between human A in conflict with human B, and this opens up the following specific possibilities in the context of ritual, religious reconciliation: by contrast with judicial and socio-political reconciliation, the indirect mediation between two humans via the supernatural third party makes it possible for the reconciliation process to be cast in purely religious and symbolic terms. As a consequence, the precise contradictions and conflicts having caused the conflict in the first place, may be left unarticulated, implied, even dissimulated. In ritual settings the cosmology derived from the religious world view tends to be the source of common redressive understanding. However, the dramatic re-recognition of each other's shared humanity may remain at the ritualised, pious, even bigoted level, without effective transference from the ritual setting to situations of everyday life, and if that is the case, ritual

reconciliation would not be the most effective and lasting form of reconciliation in the long run.

Under certain conditions, including the strict demarcation of space and time as specifically ritual and therefore no longer general or ordinary, ritual produces the possibility of proceeding to reconciliation as a temporal but repetitive phase in a context that is otherwise marked by conflict and violence. Examples of such altered, no-longer-general, space and time are: annual fairs, saints' festivals, pilgrimages in the world of Islam and Christianity as well as elsewhere – as we have already discussed above.

It is the symbolic technology of ritual³⁰ which offers the conceptual possibility of resolving, against all odds, otherwise unsolvable contradictions, opening up a repertoire of cultural elements that are available for bricolage and that allow the skilful mediator to bring out, often by sleight of hand, such unexpected communality and shared humanity as may strike the conflicting parties as revelatory, and exhort them to terminate their hostilities. The symbolic technology achieves this by forcing a breach into the spatio-temporal rationality in which rules and facts are supposed to be sacrosanct, immutable, well-defined, inflexible, bounded, and where, for that reason, conflicting positions, once logically and conceptually based, cannot be shifted. The social technology of reconciliation, therefore, is capable of negotiating hard binary oppositions; it is a shield or a sanctuary from the sheer violence of conceptual rationality.³¹ Such technology yet allows, against all odds, the termination of conflicts that otherwise would be deemed irresolvable, in view of their solid anchorage in accepted, but mutually exclusive, social values of the two groups of participants involved. The advantage of appealing to a supernatural being for conflict resolution is that such beings – contrary to ordinary objects and persons – are infinitely flexible and plastic as regards the empirical manifestations allegedly marking their presence in the world of the senses; the human reconciling agent (a religious specialist) makes use of this plasticity in order, creatively, to bring the manifestations to be attributed to the invoked supernatural being in line with the case at hand. By doing so he makes reconciliation a possibility precisely when such reconciliation would have been ruled out on purely human grounds, at the strictly concrete and rational level. In many parts of Africa, ritual, especially under the experienced guidance of a diviner-priest-therapist, offers the possibility of externalising and sublimating the conflict between humans, transforming it into a conflict between humans and the supernatural. And most human cultures know how to handle the latter kind of conflict – through sacrifices and other rites. Such a way of dealing with conflict between two human parties by invoking the supernatural as a third party would still amount to reconciliation, but, as it were, over the top of their heads. Therapy and ritual are the means *par excellence* for the production of reconciliation in an extra-social, extra-human framework: reconciliation, not with humans (who may be dead, unapproachable, inconsolable, hurt beyond repair – the twentieth century has regrettably offered striking examples: the Holocaust, the Palestinian case, the apartheid state, the Rwanda genocide of 1994) but via symbols, in which the supernatural presents itself so that a judicial or politicised solution,

³⁰ This passage on the symbolic technology of ritual is largely based on my own practice as an *sangoma*, i.e. ritual conflict mediator in the Southern African tradition, since 1990.

³¹ On the violence of rationality, cf. Schroeder 1996; Schott 1988; McKenna 1992; Derrida 1967b: chapter 4 (on violence and metaphysics with reference to Levinas); Wyschogrod 1989.

which would no longer work, is rendered unnecessary. In this respect, such reconciliation as is achieved in the ritual-therapeutic context is of a fundamentally different nature to that achieved in the judicial and socio-political domain.

7. Sorcery and social conflict at a macro scale: Two limits to the African symbolic technology of reconciliation

Now, let us not lull ourselves to sleep, as if everything in historic African societies in the fields of law, therapy and ritual were only geared to bringing about and maintaining beautiful, pure and perfect social relationships as a result of reconciliation. This is a romantic, nostalgic image, which emerged in response, both to the atrocities of the contemporary African experience and to the realisation that North Atlantic, increasingly global, society, has also, despite its economic, political, military and symbolic hegemony, totally failed to provide us with a meaningful and humanly profound future. So why not follow the lead of the Afrocentrists and cherish historic African alternatives for North Atlantic culture? I have repeatedly advocated such a strategy,³² and I will end the present argument by an exhortation to do the same for African social technologies of reconciliation; but we should do so only on the basis of grounded knowledge about African socio-cultural realities, not on the basis of mere wishful projections of our own, African or North Atlantic or global, personal predicaments. The only convincing form of Afrocentrism is the one based, not on semi-intellectual myth, but on the methodologically underpinned representation of present-day African practices and modes of thought, and of a painstaking empirical reconstruction of Africa's past.

African societies did develop extraordinarily effective means in the judicial, therapeutic and ritual domains, through which to prepare reconciliation and to bring it about. But, on the other hand, these societies did need these very means precisely because the social chaos, the distress and the annihilation that were constantly present as a threatening undercurrent.³³

³² Cf. Van Binsbergen 2000; 2003a: chapters 7, 8 and 14; 2005.

³³ Were these tendencies to chaos, distress and annihilation in African societies more marked than in societies outside Africa? That is a question outside the scope of my present argument. Let me however venture a few suggestions on this point, which may have heuristic value towards further research. That the difference between African and non-African societies is only gradual, if any, is suggested by the close affinity between the societies, cultures, languages and genes in sub-Saharan Africa, West Asia and Europe, as implied in the geneticist's recent thesis of the 'Back-into-Africa' movement, and as corroborated by numerous specific instances in the fields of comparative ethnography, mythology and linguistics (van Binsbergen 2008d). The nonsensical racist thesis, from Hegel via de Gobineau to Verwoerd, claiming that Africans have an innate incapability of viable self-government, lacks all theoretical and empirical basis. On the other hand, due to the specific geomorphology of the African continent, societies in sub-Saharan Africa tend to find themselves situated upon the oldest, most exhausted soils of the world (often dating from the Pre-Cambrian geological period i.e. more than 500,000,000 years old), and that may be a plausible argument for claiming that, whilst eminently comparable at the level of social, cultural, political and religious organisation, African societies are yet more vulnerable and unstable than those outside the African continent, because the former have by and

The sinister side of the short-lived euphoria of harmony in African villages during or immediately after reconciliation is the constant suspicion of possible witchcraft, especially on the part of close kinsmen and neighbours.³⁴ Without conflict there is no reconciliation; and the alternative to reconciliation is conflict that does not lead to reconciliation but that instead mobilises to the full extent man's destructive capabilities and fantasies. Parallel to the group process (with its tendency to a cycle of reconciliation, conflict, fission) there is a cosmology, a system of thought defining the world of and around man in such terms as:

- order, sociability, mutual reciprocity, peace, or alternatively
- disorder, anti-sociability, conflict and violence, both overt physical violence and violence in the form of sorcery and poisoning.

In addition to the image – so welcome in a superficially nostalgic view – of Africa (of course, an 'invented'³⁵ Africa aggregated into an artificial, undifferentiated whole beyond recognition) as a specialist domain for the technology of reconciliation at the micro level, there is the equally widely broadcast image of Africa as the homeland of witchcraft, of humankind's sinister daydreams aimed at the desire for extravagant powers, riches and knowledge, and of the cynical manipulation of humans and their so very vulnerable bodies in order to reach these goals. The African leader who on the outside is supposed to be the master of palaver and reconciliation, according to a complementary but equally vocal local social discourse, may also be considered to be the greatest witch around. The reconciliation that to outsiders makes the African village appear one-sidedly as a site of innocent peacefulness, is in fact a reconciliation in conflicts that are in the most literal sense mortal.

Sorcery, at least in large parts of Africa, constitutes an instructive limiting concept for the study of reconciliation. Sorcery refers, in a nutshell, to those forms of anti-social transgression that are not self-evidently eligible for reconciliation; in other words,³⁶ sorcery constitutes the boundary conditions of the kinship-based social order. Hence people's resorting to private execution, violence, lynching of alleged witches, as alternatives to reconciliation – and when such distressful and tragic means of conflict resolution are chosen, the actors legitimate their choice by reference to their adversary's real or alleged acts of sorcery, by which they have allegedly placed themselves outside the collectivity of a shared humanity. The fundamental thought behind African sorcery might be described as the collective recognition of the fact that humans may occasionally act in an absolutely egoistic, absolutely anti-social manner. The witch (who does not have to be a real person but may mainly exist is the

large a more precarious ecological basis. Below we will briefly consider the comparatively limited scope of universalism and transcendentalism in African societies today, and the tendency to rely on personalism and immanentism instead. Since the main social institutions upholding universalism and transcendentalism (writing, the state, organised religion and science) reside in persisting, strong formal organisations, and these need a viable, local material base, the ecological vulnerability of Africa may well be at the root of much that is undesirable in the African condition past and present.

³⁴ Cf. van Binsbergen 2001b.

³⁵ Cf. Mudimbe 1988.

³⁶ Cf. van Binsbergen 2001b.

form of his suspected victims' anxieties and rumours) is supposed to have opted out of the social and symbolic world of humans, and therefore cannot readily be reconciled as participant in that world through reconciliation. However, the African judicial, therapeutic and ritual practice is, most fortunately and instructively, not one of iron consistency. Even in the sphere of sorcery, mechanisms of reconciliation and reintegration may be found: the ordeal (often through the administration of near-lethal poison), redressive purification, submission to punishment, or neutralising of the accusation. Procedures exist through which the person suspected of sorcery may seek to prove beyond reasonable doubt that he or she is not a witch, and hence that he or she, on second thoughts, does deserve – albeit only after reconciliation – admission once more to the world of humans.³⁷ If this should fail, what awaits the sorcerers is their diabolisation: the confirmation of their inhumanity by the most inhuman mutilation and killing.

While thus sorcery, as the opposite to reconciliation, is built into the very model of the African village society, there is, as I said, another limiting concept to the African technology of reconciliation. This is the fact that such reconciliation can seldom be seen to be effectively applied at the meso and macro level, i.e. at more comprehensive levels than the small-scale communities of village and urban wards. In the study of reconciliation we must distinguish between various levels of scope and relevance. *The African technology of reconciliation at the micro level has so far not shown itself to be capable of containing the most destructive conflicts at the meso and macro level, such as tend to occur in the modern, post-colonial state.* Ethnic violence, genocide, civil war, banditism, the total falling apart of the state in at least a dozen contemporary African national territories from the 1980s onward, are sufficient indications of the truth of this depressing statement. Less dramatic instances of the failure of African reconciliation at the meso level may be recognised in the continuing fission of African Christian churches (so that, usually after conflicts over leadership and finance, new break-away churches originate all the time from more established churches), and in general in the relatively limited success of African formal organisation in the economic, bureaucratic, medical and educational domain. Let me conclude this argument by examining the dilemma highlighted in the italicised sentence above.

8. The dilemma: If African societies have evolved such excellent social technologies of reconciliation, why are these used so little at the national and international level?

As far as peace and conflict are concerned, there is a remarkable contradiction to be noted in African societies ever since the establishment of modern state bureaucracies (mainly in the 19th century AD).

On the one hand, extensive studies of the social and judicial processes at the local level (village, urban ward) have highlighted the exceptionally effective practices and institutions African societies have developed in the field of conflict regulation and reconcilia-

³⁷ Oyono 2000 describes such expiatory rituals of redress in detail for the Fon people of Southern Cameroon.

tion. The occurrence of socio-political conflict is probably at the very heart of human group formation, whenever and wherever, but local-level African communities have usually been remarkably effective at the containment of conflict through communal rituals, therapeutic rituals, the judicial process, the intermeshing of social groups through kinship and marital arrangements, shared environmental interests, etc. *If one had only experience of local-level African life, one would be tempted to claim that, by comparative world-wide standards, Africans are specialists par excellence in non-violent peace-keeping.*

Some of the skills needed and socially facilitated in this connection are displayed, in modern times, by African leaders who have made an impression on the global scene: Julius Nyerere, Nelson Mandela, Kofi Anan, to mention only the most obvious and least controversial cases. Throughout Africa, many thousands of community leaders have displayed similar skills, both in modern settings (as trade unionists, managers, local-level politicians) and in more traditional roles as male and female elders in kin groups, village headmen, chiefs, traditional healers, court assessors etc.

On the other hand, however, especially in recent, post-colonial decades African states have displayed conflicts at the national and international level, with such devastating violence, and with such failure of arriving at reconciliation and peace, as to make the African continent one of the main trouble spots in the world today, at a par with the Middle East, the Balkan, and South East Asia.

Why is it that the peace mechanisms that work so admirably well at the African local level, cannot exert their wholesome effects at the national and international level? Why is it that Africans cannot use their unmistakable resources of conflict resolution so as to solve their national and international problems today? The question presses all the more, since, in recent decades, and for reasons whose investigation is largely beyond our present scope, African conflicts have turned out to be explosive and uncontrollable, to such an extent that a dozen African states have been relegated to only a chimerical existence, incapable of controlling their territories and of protecting their citizens.

If the answer to these questions were simple and straightforward, the present International Colloquium would never have taken place. However, if yet the beginning of an answer could be found, we would be one major step closer to effectively mobilising the time-honoured, and comparatively rich, human, institutional and spiritual resources of Africa for the continent's own benefit – for the peace it needs more than ever to develop, and to regain its rightful place among the world's regions.³⁸

9. Modern and traditional power elites, and the crisis of legitimacy

Let us begin to consider one obvious reason why traditional African modes of conflict regulation are little utilised at the national and international level. The colonial destruction of historic ethnic / national divisions and of their traditional leadership (if any – many of these divisions were acephalous and segmentary, and their later chiefs were colonial creations) has meant that these traditional leaders, in the form of chiefs

³⁸ Meanwhile, my emphasis on *African* resources of conflict resolution does not mean:

1. to disqualify non-African resources: religious, legal, cultural, political
2. to deny that the forms to be enumerated under (1) may also appear in an African shape.

and kings, have now been largely relegated to fragmented clients of the modern state elite.³⁹ However, much like the colonial state elite (who often furthered and even invented local traditional leaders in a bid to consolidate colonial power), also the post-colonial state elite finds that in the eyes of the population, the modern central state with its bureaucratic institutions largely lacks such a cosmological basis as traditional leadership usually had. For that reason the modern state elite selectively seeks to co-opt the traditional elite's legitimating potential, often resulting in considerably greater actual powers for the traditional elite than are accorded to them under the modern constitution. Some traditional leaders have been known to play a considerable role at the regional and national level, such as the Bemba Paramount Chief Chitimukulu in Zambia, the Akan Paramount Chief Asantahene in Ghana, and the Buthelezi Zulu Chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi in South Africa, where – among other, more prominent forms of political action – also aspects of their historic reconciliatory role may be detected. The forms which the interaction between chiefs and state take in modern Africa are highly complex and variable, and can hardly be subsumed under one overall formula.⁴⁰ By and large however it can be maintained that the mutual accommodation between state and traditional authority has eroded both the constitutional form of the modern state, and the cosmological image of the traditional leaders, and thus has rendered the higher-level traditional authorities less eligible for a role as mediators in modern conflicts at the national and international level in Africa.

However, this is scarcely the full and convincing answer to the central question posed in the previous section. Before we find more satisfactory answers, we must take a closer look at the political sociology of Africa today, and seek to pinpoint the considerable structural differences between modern African society on the one hand, and the historic African societies in which the time-honoured mechanisms of conflict resolution discussed above were at home.

10. Aspects of the political sociology of modern Africa

10.1. The recently-imported, and generally weak, nature of the formal organisation in Africa

The formal, bureaucratic organisation was largely unknown in sub-Saharan Africa before the imposition of colonial rule, yet it has grown, within a century, to constitute the obvious and dominant matrix for the entire organisation of social and political life, from state bureaucracies and the military to churches, education, medical care, eco-

³⁹ Cf. Nana Arhin Brempong et al. 1995; Perrot et al. 2003; van Binsbergen c.s. 2003; van Rouveroy van Nieuwaal et al. 1987; van Rouveroy van Nieuwaal & van Dijk 1999; van Rouveroy van Nieuwaal & Ray 1996; van Rouveroy van Nieuwaal & Zips 1998.

⁴⁰ For a theoretical and comparative approach to this problem, cf. van Binsbergen 2003f, especially pp. 20-39.

conomic life, recreation, and even traditional healing cults.⁴¹ The formal organisation is a patent instrument for the creation of social order and control (and hence constitutes a modern royal road to peace), provided that both its officers and its clients (i.e. the population at large) strictly subscribe to the same principles of impersonality, all-overriding rationality, firm boundaries between social units and between fields of competence, clear lines of command, objective equality in the face of laws and regulation, the binding nature of such regulations, etc.; and provided that the benefits of upholding these principles outweigh the disadvantages connected with challenging or ignoring these principles. In many African situations today (characterised by highly unfavourable conditions which the prominent Cameroonian social philosopher Achille Mbembe has summarised under the term word *Postcolony*),⁴² formal organisations constitute a major context for the creation, circulation and contestation of socio-political power and privilege (usually in the hands of a minority). Yet in the African Postcolony, such formal organisations are fragmented and eroded for a number of reasons: their underlying principles are not internalised by large sections of the population; these formal organisation by and large fail to deliver what they are supposed to deliver, and therefore the (often informal and personalised) alternatives parallel to the state and its institutions are more effective and attractive.

10.2. The pitfall of particularist divisiveness

Since the universalising, formal-organisational conditions of the modern state institutions have not been widely and profoundly internalised, the national state mainly serves as an arena in which increasingly irreconcilable oppositions between sub-national groups are being acted out (not so much classes, but rather ethnicities, language groups, regional groups, denominational or religious groups, etc.), with the threat or the reality of violence always around the corner.⁴³ Historic enemies may have been replaced by new groups that may be recent colonial or postcolonial creations (notably, creations of modern formal organisations in their tendency to create and reify clear-cut administrative divisions).⁴⁴ If ethnic conflict was not a major organising principle in pre-colonial African societies, it certainly became one in the course of the twentieth century – and it was internalised as such by African actors. In itself, ethnicity as a mode of structuring the sub-national space is neutral and not necessarily a destructive evil: for *all* political systems, of all places and all periods,

⁴¹ The basic theory of the formal organisation is to be found in: Weber 1969 (1921). Inspiring applications to modern societal changes outside the North Atlantic region, and especially in Africa, are offered by Goody 1985; Glinga 1989; and Hannerz 1992. Specific case studies exploring these changes and drawing theoretical lessons, include von Oppen & Rottenburg 1995; van Binsbergen 1993a, 1993b, 1998, 2004a; Bibeau 1979; Last & Chavunduka 1986; Kapferer 1972; Konings 1998. However, there are indications that formal organisations were not totally absent in pre-colonial Africa, cf. Ngubane 1981; Morton-Williams 1964; Epstein 1975.

⁴² Cf. Mbembe 1988, 1992a, 1992b, 1995, 2000a, 2000b; Bayart 1990, Adeleke 2002; Osha 2000.

⁴³ Cf. Berman 1998; Azam 2001; Davidson 1992; Konings et al. 2000; Lemarchand 1983; van Binsbergen 1994, 2008b; Abbink 1995; Schilder 1994.

⁴⁴ Cf. Amselle & Mbokolo 1985; Amselle 1990; Chrétien & Prunier 1989.

are constituted by the interaction and accommodation between nominally opposed groups constituting the overall system. However, entrenchment into particularism, the refusal to perceive a more general common identity uniting the various actors on the national (let alone international) scene, and the tendency for one particular ethnic group or power block to appropriate the state and make it serve their particularist interests, have meant that in post-colonial contexts, national-level political interaction has more often tended towards armed conflict rather than towards peace, whilst the accommodating and reconciliatory mechanisms provided by modern state regulations often remained ineffective, or were simply abolished.

10.3. Failing idioms of universalism

In socio-political terms, peace is not so much the *absence* of conflict, but the condition in which the parties that (as competing occupants of the same territorial, economic, ethno-political, cultural, ideological and demographic space) are inevitably in conflict with one another, *perceive enough of a common ground of shared activities, interest and especially of shared humanity, not to allow their conflict to destroy the texture of their joint society.*⁴⁵ Here lies the crucial point as far as national and international peace in contemporary Africa is concerned: idioms of mutual identification are insufficiently developed. Admittedly, in many African situations today such idioms do exist to a limited or even a considerable extent, e.g. in terms of such world religions as Islam and Christianity; or linguistic and cultural continuity; or a basic formal education; or explicit political ideologies such as Socialism, Humanism, *ubuntu* (see below); or fundamental notions of citizenship and human rights such as could be instilled and maintained by adequate formal education, responsible free media, citizen's open political participation, and the absence of the kind of poverty that forces citizens to resort to particularist clientism, and that makes formal organisations collapse. However, even where these idioms do exist, often their hold on the population, and its leaders, is incomplete and situational, so that they do not constitute a reliable protection against devastating national and sub-national conflict.

10.4. Intercontinental patterns of hegemonic geopolitics in the field of mineral extraction, trade, control of strategic regions etc.

Having thus indicated, in a nutshell, some of the salient internal structural aspects of modern African societies, it is important that we realise the dynamics of war and peace in the African continent today is far from completely determined by endogenous factors –by factors that spring from the makeup of Africa itself alone. Admittedly, what is represented in the intercontinental media as signs of African poor performance in the field of peace and governance, is often to be accounted for by reference to internal conflicts and deficiencies in African states, but equally often simply a sign of intercontinental encroachment, from the North Atlantic region and, especially the last few years, also from China, as well as from non-statal more or less criminal entrepreneurs active in the arms trade, the trade of minerals and precious

⁴⁵ This reiterates Galtung's (1996) well-known distinction between negative and positive peace.

stones, etc.⁴⁶ The absence of peace in Africa has many roots inside the African continent, but is also caused by intercontinental complicities which only a dedicated, morally inspired African self-affirmation can begin to remedy or to counter.

10.5. The dislocated and alienated African subject

Such African self-affirmation in the face of the world at large has been relatively rare. Under the eroded social, political, religious and cultural conditions of the Postcolony, the African subject tends to utterly *dislocated and alienated*, i.e. tends to define herself or himself not in the first place by the affirmation of a local or regional religio-cultural identity that is celebrated as her or his birthright and that is in continuity with historic socio-cultural forms dating back to pre-colonial times. Even when emphasis is laid on a particular sub-national ethnic identity, this mainly defines the subject's positioning within the ethnic space; the specific sub-national ethnic identity seldom provides the subject with a total culture within which to live his or her entire life, from morning to evening and from cradle to grave, but rather with a selective set of cultural traits that, rather than giving existential contents to life, function as mere ethnic boundary markers of distinction. For many modern Africans, the construction of the subjective self amounts to the celebration of vicarious identities imported since the end of the 19th century CE. This is understandable when we consider the colonial state's, and the Christian missionary churches', alienating strategies of globalised middle-class formation, at the expense of the denial of African cultural, organisational and spiritual resources. Of this strategy, elite life-styles in postcolonial Africa are largely a continuation. In such a context, one is tempted to look for European, or global mechanisms of conflict regulation, for instance those inspired by human rights discourse and by Christianity, much rather than for time-honoured African social technologies of conflict regulation.

10.6. Christianity and *ubuntu* ('the art of being human') in South African reconciliation

This is not to say that Christian-inspired models of conflict regulation are doomed to fail in modern Africa. One striking example may serve to bring out the dynamics involved. This argument was first conceived with a very specific macro-level contemporary African situation of reconciliation in mind:⁴⁷ the redress of social relations within South Africa, after the advent of democracy (1994) has terminated not so much the socio-economic inequalities of the apartheid state (for these have in part persisted – with new elites and middle classes taken the places formerly exclusively occupied by Whites), but at least the apartheid state's constitutional inequalities, and its atrocities. In this connection the shared humanity, to which my argument on reconciliation has appealed repeatedly, has a clear-cut local vernacular equivalent in the concept of

⁴⁶ Cf. Schroeder & Lamb 2006; Barry 2006; Reyntjens 2005; Bayart 1999; Orru et al. 2007; Gruhn 1983.

⁴⁷ The earliest, much more modest version of part of this argument was read at the 'Seminar on culture and globalisation', Human Sciences Research Council, Pretoria, South Africa, 21st April, 1999.

ubuntu, i.e. ‘being human’, ‘humanity’, ‘the art of being human’. Over the past two decades, Southern Africa has seen the emergence of an African philosophy of *ubuntu*, in which the historic cultures of that region are selectively scanned for ideas and principles that may inspire social and managerial problem-solving in the transition from a racist to a democratic conception of the urban mass society of South Africa.

Here, and in many other African contexts, we can see the dynamics of a local *emic*⁴⁸ conceptualisation of the concept of ‘humanity’ in concrete situations of reconciliation.⁴⁹ Mainly since the attainment of majority rule in 1994, South African man-

⁴⁸ For the paired concepts of *emic* and *etic*, cf. Headland et al. 1990; van Binsbergen 2003a, section 15.3.1 (pp. 465f).

⁴⁹ Cf. Prinsloo 1998; Mbigi & Maree 1995; Ramose 1999; Louw n.d.; Boele van Hensbroek 2001; van Binsbergen 2003d; Bewaji & Ramose 2003. Also note the emphasis on the central ontological concept of *muntu*, ‘human being’, in contributions to African philosophy from other regions and of an earlier vintage: Kagame 1956; Bimwenyi 1968; Eboussi Boulaga 1977; and, as a sympathetic outsider view, Jahn 1958.

Remarkably, the root *-ntu*, ‘human, person’, although only one of many of hundreds of reconstructed proto-Bantu roots (cf. Guthrie 1948, 1967-1971: **-nto*, Guthrie no. 1789; Meeussen 1980: **-ntu*, in historical linguistics, the asterisk denotes a reconstructed form which often is unattested) found in many or all languages of the large Bantu family (a division of the Niger-Congo or Niger-Kordofan phylum), was so conspicuous in the eyes of the first European linguist (Bleek 1951) to subject these languages to thorough comparative study, that he named them ‘Bantu languages’ after that root (*ba-* being a common form of the plural personal nominal prefix). However, this root does not seem to be exclusive to the Bantu family. This is already clear from proto-Austronesian **tauw*, ‘human, raw’ (Adelaar 1994). Looking for an etymology of the puzzling Greek word ἄνθρωπος *anthrōpos*, ‘human’, the Dutch linguist Ode (1927) had the felicitous inspiration to see this word as a reflex of what he claims to be proto-Indo-European **-nt*, ‘under’ (cf. the more consensually established proto-Indo-European: **ndho* ‘under’ cf. Pokorny 1959-69: I 323) – thus proposing an underlying semantics of humans as ‘ground or underworld dwellers’; this, incidentally, also offered him an interesting etymology of the long contested Ancient Greek theonym Athena as underworld goddess. Along this line, many more possible (pseudo-?)cognates from many language phyla come into view. The background assumption in this kind of historical linguistic reconstruction is that standard methods of historical and comparative linguistics allow us, with intersubjective plausibility, to reconstruct progressively older levels of parent forms, right up to the oldest possible reconstruction, which is presently at the level of so-called Borean, a reconstructed language form presumed to have been spoken somewhere in Central Asia c. 20,000 years ago; nearly all language phyla spoken today contain, among an admixture of forms of unidentified provenance, also reflexes from Borean – thus, of the 1153 reconstructed Borean roots, over 80% occur in Eurasiatic (the phylum to which Indo-European belongs, along with Uralic, Altaic, Dravidian, etc.), while according to my personal reconstructions just over 25% of these Borean roots occur in Bantu, as a branch of the Niger-Congo or Niger-Kordofan phylum; incidentally, this confirms the considerable linguistic and cultural continuity between Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, much of which is Niger-Congo speaking (and the same argument could be made for the other three African language phyla). Against this background, quite convincing (pseudo-?)cognates of Bantu *-ntu* seem to be proto-Afroasiatic **tV?* ‘a kind of soil’ (cf. Old Egyptian *t* / *t3*, ‘earth’, with cognates in Central and East Chadic and in Low East Cushitic), from Borean **TVHV*, ‘earth’; a reflex of this root is also found in Sino-Caucasian notably as 土 *tǔ* (modern Beijing Chinese), *thā* (Classic Old Chinese), ‘land, soil’, Karlgren code: 0062 a-c, probably of Austric origin: proto-Austronesian **buRtaq* ‘earth, soil’, proto-Austroasiatic **tɛj* ‘earth’, proto-Miao-Yao **Ctau* (cf. Bengtson & Ruhlen 1994: 60, *tak*, however these authors – according to Starostin & Starostin 1998-2008 ‘Long-range etymologies’ s.v.

agers, constitutional lawyers, philosophers and other intellectuals have engaged in a largely nostalgic rekindling of the concept of *ubuntu* as a means of massaging current transformation processes away from open conflict and open confrontation, no matter what the inequalities and injustices that may be involved. Contemporary South Africa is a society that has more to forget than it can possibly, humanly forgive.⁵⁰

Somewhat half-heartedly,⁵¹ but spurred on by Archbishop Tutu's incessant drive, South Africa has gone, in the second half of the 1990s, through the exercise of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) entirely on the basis of a Christian model of forgiveness without punishment solely on the basis of confession, for which some rare African parallels may be cited,⁵² but which by and large deviate from the (South Central, and Southern) African conception of reconciliation as I have tried to describe, understand, and apply it. The Christian conception implies that, in the light

**TVHV*, 'earth' – seem to confuse the reflexes of Borean **TVHV* with those of **TVKV*. Considering the remarkable similarities between Southern and Eastern African Khoisan and North Caucasian (for which the geneticist Cavalli-Sforza et al. – 1994 – has given an adequate explanation: today's Khoisan speakers are a hybrid African-Asian population which had still ancestors in West Asia 10,000 years ago – they are another example of the Back-into-Africa movement) one should not be surprised that also some Khoisan language families seem to attach to the very old and very widespread earth/human complex which we have identified here: South Khoisan (Taa): **taʔ*, **tuʔ*, 'person'; North Khoisan (proto-Zhu) **ʒu*, 'person' – Central Khoisan has **khoe* etc. 'person', which might well be a transformation of **ʒu*. Further possibilities are contained in the reflexes of another Borean root **TVHV*, 'bottom', which however is both semantically and phonologically so close to **TVHV* 'earth' that we may well have to do with one and the same word (although interference cannot be ruled out): proto-Sino-Tibetan **diʔiH* 'bottom' (e.g. Chinese 底 **təjʔ* 'bottom' Karlgren code 0590 c; 抵 **təjʔ*, 'root, base', Karlgren code 0590 d) from proto-Sino-Caucasian **dVHV*, 'bottom'; from the same Borean root **TVHV*, 'bottom' also Afroasiatic **duh-*, 'low' (e.g. Egyptian: dḥ (21) 'low', East Chadic: **dwaHdaH-* 'down') as well as proto-Austroasiatic **dʔuj* (also **tuoj* 'tail, vagina'), proto-Miao-Yao **tʃoʃi.B* 'tail', Proto-Austronesian: **hudi* 'buttocks' (not in B) (also **udehi* 'last, behind') (cf. Peiros 1998, 157, 165; Starostin & Starostin 1998-2008).

It is not my intention (*pace* Bewaji & Ramose 2003) to diminish, by pointing out these long-range linguistic connections, the significance of the semantic and ontological elaboration of the Bantu root *-ntu* and the ensuing worldview. After all, with Austric, and perhaps the isolated Greek case as a somewhat puzzling branch of Indo-European < Eurasiatic / Nostratic, Bantu is one of the very few members of this worldwide and very ancient complex to have transformed the meaning 'down, earth' into 'human' – and still in many Bantu languages / cultures humans are 'down' – on earth (where they prostrate before the king as representative of the sun and of heaven, and before their parents, and elders in general), or (as human ancestors) in the grave or the stream. Considering the central place occupied by the sense of a shared humanity in African social technologies of reconciliation, it is quite possible that these outstanding African technologies owe much to the semantic elaboration of the root *-ntu*. But granted all that, yet the above long-range linguistic exploration goes to show that most likely the Bantu application of this root is only one specific case, in space and time, of one of the oldest and most widespread words in global human culture.

⁵⁰ Cf. van Binsbergen 2004.

⁵¹ In his own contribution to the present International Colloquium, Professor Okumu-Aiya (2009) reminds us that the final recommendations of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission have even never been implemented.

⁵² Oyono 2000.

of humankind's redemption by Christ, no sinner could have sunken so low as to have forfeited the right to be included in the collectivity of shared humanity (and thus to be forgiven); in other words, it is an idiom of inclusive universalism. By contrast, the Central and Southern African conception of sorcery would tend to exclude sorcerers from the scope of humanity, so that these must be eliminated from the community, or killed, but cannot just be forgiven on the basis of a mere confession of guilt (as was the standard formula in the TRC).

I am not in the least suggesting that those found guilty in the South African situation, at the national level, should have been subjected to the time-honoured sanctions of the village. However, the TRC alternative could only serve as genuine reconciliation to the extent to which the majority of the South African population could genuinely recognise their own notions of justice in the TRC procedure, and considering the standard custom of the lynching of sorcerers (which in several parts of South Africa has persisted well into modern times, even to this very day) one may have serious doubts on this point. Probably, instead of genuine reconciliation, mere acquiescence in the public domain has been imposed by the TRC and its administration, underneath of which unexpressed and uncontrolled resentment is likely to linger on – perhaps waiting to surface in a way that may well tear South Africa apart in the near future. It is almost a miracle that – for the time being – this exercise seems to have been relatively successful. The explanation lies in the comparatively early, and comparatively high levels of proletarianisation, citizen formation, infrastructural development, and Christianising, in South Africa even under while minority rule – largely as a simple effect of high levels of urbanisation and industrial development. But even so, we see post-apartheid thinkers, and social activists, rally around the concept of *ubuntu* that was remarkably underplayed in the TRC context. It forms the time-honoured cultural orientation (although partly an invented tradition)⁵³ that allows people to perceive the fellow human being even in their most bitter enemies.

The TRC experience does not stand on its own in modern Africa, where in many contexts (some highlighted at the present International Colloquium) churches have been active, and moderately successful, in negotiating for peace and in mediating major conflicts. Occasionally such Christian efforts have been combined with techniques and strategies derived from the time-honoured African tradition of conflict regulation.⁵⁴

In the light of our above discussion of reconciliation as a creative process in which typically outsiders seek to find a solution for a situation in which two or more conflicting parties all believe to have the right and the truth on their side, it seems too facile to attribute the relative success of Christian-inspired modes of conflict regulation in modern Africa to the people involved having deeply internalised the Christian model of reconciliation. If Christianity had that kind of total impact on people's attitudes and behaviour we would be at a loss to explain why the conflicts to be resolved could ever become so vicious in the first place. Rather, I would see Christianity as a persuasive idiom of both *transcendentalism and universalism*, in the light of which each conflicting party may be more readily persuaded to take a relative view of its concerns and grievances, and can be shown a honourable way out of the conflict.

⁵³ On the concept of invented tradition, cf. Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983. On *ubuntu* philosophy as invented tradition, cf. van Binsbergen 2003e, 2004b; Bewaji & Ramose 2003.

⁵⁴ Cf. Abekyamwale 2007, 2008, 2009.

In other words, Christianity reminds the humans involved in the conflict, of their fundamental equality in the face of their Creator, and of the universal and eternal claims attending its truth, compared to which the conflictive issues at hand may be relativised as merely parochial and ephemeral. The promise that worldly, temporal issues can be overcome lies particularly in the belief that, by comparison, the divine nature presence and truth transcend all human measure of space and time, dwarfing the conflictive issues at hand to their true, merely human, proportions. Similar exhortations to universalism and transcendentalism are to be found, by definition, in all world religion, not least in Islam, whose very name contains the notion of peace and acquiescence,⁵⁵ and whose Supreme Being, Allah, being *merciful* and *compassionate*, is particularly endowed with the characteristics needed for reconciliation. Other, more secular appeals to universalism and hence to identification between the conflicting parties beyond the specific conflictive may be found in the idea of the modern state, in that of the rule of law, of human rights, of truth and justice, in formal organisations, in formal education. In peace, these are among the central factors to make modern societies tick. But if all these elements (many of which have a relatively recent origin outside Africa) have failed to bring peace to a large number of African situations today, it may be time to reconsider the rallying, universalising potential of African social technologies of conflict regulation.

10.7. Transcendentalism and universalism as facilitating conditions for peace – but at a considerable cultural cost for Africa

The last paragraph leads us to a perspective of long duration, which as first glance may not seem flattering from an African point of view and (in its identification of crucial distinguishing features of the African situation today) runs counter to the canons of political correctness, but which nonetheless seems to have considerable explanatory power. If the nation-state as

- a universalising concept,
- as a mythical reality produced by people yet somehow independent from them,⁵⁶ and
- as an ulterior framework to keep or restore peace,

has immense historical significance in North Atlantic traditions⁵⁷, it is as part of a package, whose origin in time and space can be pinpointed with some precision. A

⁵⁵ In Arabic, the root *s-l-m* is the basis of nominal and verbal forms associated with peace and acquiescence; the prefix *i-* and the insertion of the long vowel *ā* create the abstract noun *Islām*, ‘peaceful surrender to God’, cf. *salām*, ‘peace’.

⁵⁶ Despite the efforts of politicians, ideologists, and political scientist to reify the state and make us see it as a reality, it is only the state *organisations* such as administrative and consultative bodies, their buildings, equipment, personnel, leaders, etc. that constitute a reality – the state itself, as the web of roles and rules holding these material forms together and greatly influencing people’s behaviour as if it were another, immensely powerful person, is merely a numinous myth. Cf. Cassirer 1961; Taussig 1997; Kapferer 1988.

package including the state, writing, organised religion and early science, first appeared, as the result of what I would like to call the *First Knowledge Revolution*, in the Ancient Near East, some 5,000 years ago.⁵⁸ From there the package slowly spread all over the world.

Implied in all these four components of the package are the notions of *transcendence* and *universalism*. For the idea of the state, the written word, organised religion and systematic knowledge managed by specialists, all conjure up a presence which, however compelling, is essentially remote, away from the here and the now – which is, in other words, transcendent, and which is suppose to apply not just here and know, but universally. The king, the (sacred or contractual) scripture, the law, the divine presence and the specialist truth of the proto-scientist are not typically present here and now, yet in the subjective contemporary conscience they are, or rather were, considered to rule the here and now.

We have seen the importance, in negotiation for peace, of a transcendent and universalist frame of reference, against whose background the conflictive issue at hand may be relativised. As far as Africa today is concerned, part of the widespread failure to attain and restore peace, and to engage in effective reconciliation in the light of an ulterior interest shared by the conflicting parties, seems to lie in the relatively superficial and imperfect installation, in African societies, of the notions of transcendence and universalism.

Imported legal and statal systems, formal education, world religions such as Islam and Christianity, did bring these notions, but these have been, by and large, insufficiently embedded in the underlying worldview, cosmology, all-overriding notions of personhood, agency and legitimacy, of many Africans also today.

The underlying worldview informing much of African life also today has been immanentist and personalist – as the opposites of transcendent and universalist. In the African consciousness as informed by dominant trends in modern African political culture, the idea of the state tends to be personalised into the person of the head of state in the light of which impersonal and universal rules becomes flexible. By the same token, the formal organisation tends to come to life not through its abstract, universal and transcendent rules but through the selective and creative personal use that may be made of the formal organisation by the persons who constitute the formal organisation's personnel. It is only in the last few centuries that the First Knowledge Revolution has more than touched African life, and has begun to transform notions of

⁵⁷ Space does not permit me to touch here on the Hebrew, Chinese etc. conceptions of peace alluded to in the background document to the present Colloquium, but these were not elaborated either in the actual papers presented.

⁵⁸ This is when we first have written evidence of all four items in the package, and of their co-occurrence, in the Ancient Near East especially Mesopotamia, quite soon to be followed by Egypt. It is a moot point whether the emergence of writing may not have occurred much earlier. Specialists like Gimbutas (1989, 1991: ch. 8 'The sacred script') and Haarmann (1989, 1990a, 1990b, 1999) have argued that the signs appearing fairly consistently in the Neolithic of Central, Eastern and Southern Europe, and in West Asia, amount to a proto-script, for which even phonetic values begin to be suggested. Also the other three items in our package may have had a, hitherto unattested or unrecognised, existence of centuries or even longer, before surfacing in history. The point is immaterial to our present argument.

personhood and power in the direction of transcendence and universalism.⁵⁹ Enhanced formal education, more effective formal organisations including a more effective state but especially including persistent forms of self-organisation (as in trade unions, churches, media, sports, credit organisations etc.) that can hold their own in the face of an encroaching but eroded state, are likely to have a lasting effect on this point; however, in many African contexts today, this is merely a dream for the future. Also world religions such as Islam and Christianity – in whose context transcendence and universalism are taken for granted, and the power of the written word is central – can be expected to make a crucial contribution in effecting such a shift. *For Africa to survive in the modern world, as a viable bundle of communities and identities, economies and nation-states, there seems to be no alternative but a much more radical shift towards universalism and transcendence.*

Yet such a shift risks to go at the expense of the informality, flexibility, self-evident symbolic and musical competence, person-centeredness, and humanist orientation of African life. Although such a shift will no doubt boost the performance of African bureaucracies and economies, it is likely to negatively affect essential intangible qualities of African life, and may therefore mean that we are throwing away the child with the bathing water – resulting in an Africa (cf. Botswana since Independence, or South Africa since the late 1990s) that works, has enough to eat, and where formal organisations work so well as to enhance peace at the regional, national and international level, but that is no longer its own historic self.

Perhaps we must simply accept this cultural shift away from historic cultural identity as a fact of life, more precisely as an inevitable and in many ways desirable result of the globalisation process that has dominated the entire world, and not just Africa, in recent decades. Due to the technological reduction of the costs of space and time (through digital information and communication technologies (ICT), but also through the massive availability of long-distance travel and transport), and its effects on world politics, world economics, the world of the media, music and video, eroding notions of home, identity, and boundary, everyone over forty years old today faces the dilemma of having to live in a very different world from where she or he was born and received early childhood socialisation. Beyond the facile stereotypes of McDonaldisation, Coca-Colaisation etc., it is an unmistakable fact that we are witnessing the

⁵⁹ Afrocentrists would tend to take exception with this statement, for they stress the great achievements of Ancient Egypt, which was a literate society orientated to transcendence and universalism from the late 4th millennium BCE onward. To begin with, Egypt's literary can hardly be attributed to whatever sub-Saharan African roots could be claimed (Hoffman 1979; Williams 1986; Celenko 1996) for other aspects of early dynastic Egypt – Egyptian writing was probably a result of stimulus invention (Kroeber 1940) from Mesopotamia or Elam. It is true that for millennia Egypt had a great influence on the surrounding societies, within a radius of several thousands of kilometres, also reaching deep into Africa: Egyptian parallels in West and East Africa have been identified in considerable numbers (cf. Wainwright 1940, 1949, 1954; Schmidl 1928; Petrie 1914a, 1914b; Seligman 1934; O'Connor 1971, 1994; Celenko 1996; Shinnie 1971; Fairman 1965; Meyerowitz 1960), and even in the Congo basin an Ancient Egyptian statuette was found (Breuil 1951). However, this Egyptian influence was not such that it managed, more than incidentally and for very short periods, to demonstrably sustain literacy, universalism and transcendence in these remote peripheries. With notable exceptions, such as Meroe into the first millennium CE, Ethiopia, Islamic royal courts and centres of learning in West Africa from c. 1000 CE and Southern and East Asian royal courts and centres (likewise under Islamic influence) from the early second millennium on, most of sub-Saharan Africa went largely without writing until the 19th century CE.

birth of a viable world culture, which is also increasingly the cultural space to which African youths and middle class aspire and in which they increasingly at home.⁶⁰

However, when we look at the worldwide selection of items that are admitted into this emerging world culture, what is striking is that most cultural themes have come from the North Atlantic region and especially the USA, just like most material products come from East Asia. In this respect globalisation is a further move away from Africa and its historic achievements and cultural riches. It is my contention that globalised world culture would greatly benefit if more of these African cultural achievements could be mediated towards it and be incorporated in it. I have recently made this claim for African approaches to such important topics as: human corporality; the perennial philosophical problem of the strict impermeability of the individual human mind; and conflict regulation – the topic of the present argument.⁶¹ Having indicated, above, what the African social technology of conflict regulation consists of, and having sketched the framework in which this technology could only remain underutilised so far even though Africa is more conflict-ridden than ever before, I can only repeat my recommendation that this technology be taken serious and be applied, also at the national and international level. There are a few indications that this is already being done in practical settings of peace negotiation in Africa today.⁶²

11. Conclusion

To conclude, we are facing a situation where peace is further away than ever in recent African history, and where the global mechanisms that have shaped modern Africa, have also eclipsed any traditional focus on conflict resolution. Is this situation entire irreversible?

We have identified one obvious way out in strengthening those elements in modern African societies, in the organisational and religious field, that enhance universalism and transcendence as conditions for effective statal performance, for the maintenance of peace, and for the re-negotiation of peace once disturbed.

However, such strengthening inevitably implies a loss of historic cultural identity. Moreover, the depressing state of Africa today as far as peace is concerned, suggests that in addition, other, more originally African mechanisms must be mobilised at the same time.

It is my contention that in-depth investigation and application of the *socio-cultural technologies of meaning, reconciliation and peace* (technologies that have been at the heart of local-level African societies since times immemorial) can help us to find new solutions and to limit the costs and risks attached to the imported solutions such as effective formal organisations, and excessive text-based universalism and transcendence.

⁶⁰ Cf. Aucante 2008; Konings 2007; Straker 2007; van Binsbergen & van Dijk 2004; Fardonet al. 1999.

⁶¹ van Binsbergen 2008c. For a similar claim concerning the potential globalisation of aspects of African therapy systems, cf. van Binsbergen 2003a: ch. 7.

⁶² Cf. Okumu-Aiya 2009; Lenhart 2009; Abekyamwale 2007, 2008, 2009.

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