Religion as a social construct

Religion as a social construct

African, Asian, comparative and theoretical excursions in the social science of religion

by Wim van Binsbergen

to André J.F. Köbben (1925-)
a great teacher and a lasting role model

Part I. Preliminaries

0. Preface

0.1. About this book

0.1.1. Background of this book

Trained in my native city, at Amsterdam University and the Free University Amsterdam, as an anthropologist and a general linguist (1964-1971), I conducted my first field-work in the highlands of North-western Tunisia, 1968. I subsequently focused my field research on South Central and Southern Africa, Guiné Bissau, Cameroon, and on the continuities between sub-Saharan Africa, on the one hand, and South, South-East and East Asia, on the other hand. Over nearly half a century this has yielded a substantial output in the form of monographs, authored books, edited collections, and articles. From 1998 most of this internationally published work was also made available at my website http://shikanda.net, more recently mirrored at, even replaced by, http://quest-journal.net/shikanda . In 2003 a selection of these papers was collected under the title *Intercultural Encounters* (marking my transition from anthropology to intercultural philosophy), which was to be followed by: *Vicarious Reflections* (2015, on North-South knowledge formation, but with a fair helping of religious-anthropological texts), *Our Drums Are Always On My Mind* (in press and to appear in 2017, on the Nkoya people of Zambia – my principal research context since 1972), and *Researching Power and Identity in African State Formation* (with Martin Doornbos, 2017). Sampling all major themes and regions I have worked on over the decades (except the method and epistemology of field-work), the present book bundles mainly texts that have not yet been anthologised in that way: studies specifically in the social science of religion, written between 1975 and 2012.

I have often been unfaithful to my original academic discipline, but this was for a sense of intellectual curiosity and adventure, not for lack of recognition or remuneration. Throughout my career I have held prestigious appointments and received flattering invitations. At a tender age I acted in the Leiden chair of Africanist Anthropology (1975-1977), soon to be followed by the famous Simon Professorship, University of Manchester (1980-81), similar appointments at Berlin, Durban, and Amsterdam, co-directorship of the Leiden African Studies Cen-

tre, and presidency of the Netherlands Association for African Studies. My choice, in the course of the 1990s, yet to largely steer away from religious anthropology, reflected not material or social dissatisfaction nor changing opportunities in the academic market of income and prestige. What was at stake was my growing consciousness of the global politics of knowledge – in ways which I have amply and, I believe, incisively discussed in *Intercultural Encounters* and *Vicarious Reflections*. The objectification and reductionist subordination, in ethnographic texts, of my field-work hosts and associates, and their respective religions, to an alien and violent scientific logic, grew more and more repugnant to me. At the time, postmodern approaches were already creating room for a less distancing, more personal, and more loyal merging of the researcher's life-world with that of her or his research host, and this trend has consolidated over the quarter of a century which has meanwhile passed. In the early 1990s, during field-work in Botswana, I became a fully-fledged diviner-medium-healer in the Southern African *Sangoma* tradition. However, in the process, the epistemological and political problems of North-South knowledge formation (the ones that had made me uncomfortable as a religious anthropologist in the first place) were only driven home to me with acerbated force. Continued reflection and writing on this crucial matter made it possible for me, in the late 1990s, to trade my Amsterdam chair in the anthropology of ethnicity and ideology for a Rotterdam one in intercultural philosophy. Initially I was excited by the enhanced intellectual scope and depth my new professional environment seemed to offer me, and my productivity was immensely stimulated. However, within a few years I found that blood is thicker than water: the empirical social-science tradition in which I had been trained (during the full seven years stipulated by an academic curriculum of such intensity and seriousness as today can no longer be imagined let alone politically negotiated, nor funded), and my own thirty years of reseach work in that tradition, increasingly appeared incompatible with the complacent, utterly non-empirical, introspection-driven, individual-centred, anti-social-science, and implicitly ethnocentric ways in which most of my Rotterdam philosophical colleagues at that time went about officiating about the world, society, the human subject, and the North Atlantic postmodern urban experience (the only touchstone that seemed to count for them). Meanwhile my attempts at Africanist intercultural philosophy were surprisingly warmly welcomed by my African colleagues, and for many years this was sufficient reason to continue to work the philosophical field even though I was soon personally dissatisfied with its fruits. The details of my philosophical adventure I have recently argued at length in the Introduction to *Vicarious Reflections*, so there is no need to go over this highly instructive matter again.

When all is said and done, and due consideration has been given to global responsibility, political correctness and the global politics of knowledge, I am at heart primarily a simple empirical scientist, addicted to data, to their personal, painstaking collection inside and outside 'the field', to their systematic and exhaustive analysis, to method. I do not believe in the redeeming power of

mere text unless backed up by factual evidence and by critical reflection on that text's genesis and power purpose. With such an orientation, the philosophical faculty cannot become or remain one's permanent home. The revival of the field of comparative mythology, as well as explorations in the Bronze Age Mediterranean (after all, the region, though not the historical period, of my first field-work), for almost a decade offered me a refuge beyond intercultural philosophy. Yet, inevitably, I began to look with different, less guilt-driven and more artisanally proud eyes at the anthropological handwork that I had passionately engaged in for decades, and that had won me a name in my original discipline. I began to undertake new field-work, both in Africa and in Asia. And after a decade of passionate philosophical debate, I settled for an extensive, perhaps surprisingly superficial and irrelevant, field-work-inspired exercise in data, library research and interpretation: focussing on Africa's transcontinental continuities in pre- and protohistory.

After my earlier collections with a specific focus on philosophy, the Nkoya, or the African state, it was becoming time to anthologise the remaining textual achievements of my religious-anthropological practice – for no ulterior reason than that they testify to a sustained, passionate research effort. Spanning more than forty years, the present collection is highly variegated both in approach, regionally, paradigmatically, and methodologically. These studies do not revolve on the person of the field-worker in her or his existential struggle to brave boundaries, to clamour for local acceptance, and at the same time to pretend an insidership '*one can always drop*' (*My Fair Lady*) when expelled from the field by the need for comfort, culinary enjoyment, medical care, and security in the institutional, financial and law-enforcement fields. The chapters in this book are, for a change, not about intercultural encounter, but about what might be learned giving that such an encounter has more or less effectively taken place. They are largely an anthropology from Before the Fall (I mean *the fall of becoming aware of classic anthropology's hegemonic thrust*) – yet many of these chapters are admittedly saturated with the objectifying, hegemonic implications – the Original Sin – of more or less classic anthropology, and eclectically spiced with the terminology and theory of that somewhat obsolete paradigm. Perhaps in some ways unpardonable, even these chapters need no pardon – I still love them, as I do my children. And for the same reason I have refrained from the futile attempt to mask the extent to which these texts belong to successive phases in religious anthropology that are now largely behind us. It would have been possible to update the bibliography and the details of arguments in many cases, but that would not alter the fact that the paradigmatic outlook of most of these pieces fixes them as irreparably to a past period as Izanami, in my chapter below on Japanese cosmogonic myth, having died when 'Giving Birth to Fire', is by fate (and by her ingestion of the food of the dead, in other words: an obsolete paradigm) no longer capable of crossing back into the Land of the Living.

I hope that the reader, while justifiably finding fault with these texts for all the above reasons and probably for a few more that myopically escape me, may still summon some appreciation for these texts, which – believe it or not – at the

9

time of their creation inspired me with great joy and a sense of challenge, and of accomplishment.

Bringing together these studies under the programmatic, deliberately sociologistic title *Religion as a Social Construct*, it will appear only a few months before its companion volume, where I revisit the Durkheimian heritage under the anti-deconstructivist title *The Reality of Religion*. Together the two books, and their titles, bring out my ambivalence in both affirming, and denying at the same time, the material role of religion in reality – in ways which I cannot discuss in detail in this Preface but which *The Reality of Religion* will elucidate, in line with my earlier arguments in *Intercultural Encounters* (2003) and *Vicarious Reflections* (2015), and in anticipation of my forthcoming book *Sangoma Science*.

0.1.2. Theory and method

As indicated above, from a book spanning over forty years of research and writing in a field so much in flux as anthropology, one cannot expect unity of method and of theory. The initial chapters echo (in their quantitative and objectifying approach) not only my formative sixteen years as partner of the experimental physicist Henny E. van Rijn, my first wife, but especially my extensive training in the sociological / structural-functionalist tradition *en vogue* in Amsterdam anthropology in the 1960s, among my principal teachers Köbben (to whom this book is dedicated), Wertheim, and Boissevain (who had come to replace the structuralist Oceanist Pouwer in 1966); with Jongmans in charge of field-work training, and Reichling and Dik on the side of General Linguistics. Never monolithic, that tradition was even then already being questioned by several alternatives, which gained ascendance in subsequent decades:

- the movement away from institutionalised group processes as the central focus of anthropology and towards transactionalist approaches, represented not only by Boissevain but more importantly by the Manchester School[1] which was to be the main context and inspiration of my Zambian research over the decades;

- Lévi-Straussian structuralism, of which Leiden anthropology was an anti-Amsterdam stronghold at the time, and which therefore inevitably remained anathema to me until I personally discovered its truth (and its rationalistic limitations) when the study of myth: after initial work from the 1970s on, increasingly captured my attention as, in the early 2000s, I was co-opted into the revival of comparative mythology;

- the renewed interest, in the 1970s-1980s, in Marxist approaches;

- the insistence, beyond classic anthropology's emphasis on rigid structures, upon historical processes which fundamentally required different

---

[1] *Cf.* Werbner 1984; van Binsbergen 2007a, 2006e.

methods than participant observation with its narrow spatial and temporal horizon;

- the revival of neo-diffusionist approaches: the dominant anthropological paradigm around 1900 CE, diffusion had gone obsolete with the rise of classic, field-work-centred anthropology, but was to be revived with the emergence of globalisation studies in the 1980s.

Some of the chapters in the present book bring out my struggling with the pros and cons of these various paradigms, until gradually a post-modernist, boundary-effacing identification with my research hosts (also in the field of religion and therapy), coupled with a long-range historical and comparative mythological perspective, brought a flexible approach more or less capable of handling both field-work data and library research, literate traditions and mythology, open to the additional inspiration which such auxiliary disciplines as archaeology, genetics, linguistics and philology may offer, and no longer strictly identifiable as social science of religion. The later chapters of this book offer adequate examples of these more recent accents of my work.

In retrospect, I am struck by two somewhat unexpected features of the studies collected in the present book:

- their tendency to statistical analysis (particularly manifest in my study of popular-Islamic pilgrimage, chapter 1; and of Botswana churches and the state, chapter 5); and

- their reliance – notably in chapters 10 (on transcontinental effects of world religions on Africa), and 12 on students and pilgrimage in West Java, Indonesia – on what my long-standing friend and colleague Richard Werbner (1985) once called 'the argument of images': evoking relationships and their implications not only by the dextrous manipulation of one-dimensionally lineal, monolingual text, but also by images, which in profusion and contrast may convey more of the historical complexities at hand than can be argued in discursive text; after all, 'a picture is worth a thousand words'.

The statistical approach is closest to a *scientistic*[2] conception of the study of religion: apparently steering away from understanding, meaning, symbol and existence, all that seems to remain is the observation and calculation of actual,

---

[2] As distinct from *scientific*. *Scientism* occurs when the results, canons and methods of mainstream science are taken for granted as the only, definitive and objective truth about reality – rather than as statements of a tentative, ephemeral, partial and partisan truth, meant to be soon supplanted by a better one, and always subject to the limitations of the methods, instruments, data, human minds and interest groups that have been conducive to such statements. Interdisciplinary borrowings tend to take the original, lending discipline too seriously and are under severe dangers of scientism. This applies *a fortiori* to lay-man appropriations of apparent scientific results by non-scientists, as is common in the New Age movement, in science journalism, and in certain genres of present-day philosophy; *cf.* van Binsbergen 1999d / 2015: ch. 10.

overt behaviour. Thus formulated, this seems lethal for any kind of religious understanding. Yet careful consideration of the two chapters in question will reveal that much of the power and meaning at stake in the religious complexes involved, yet turns out to be fairly precisely and fairly adequately captured by the statistical approach. Almost as if those clamouring for ulterior meaning beyond structure and power are victims of what in our Marxist days we would call 'false consciousness', wrongly suggesting – *pace* Durkheim – that the social is not inspiring and lofty enough to serve as source of the sacred; it is – yet in *The Reality of Religion* I have sought to go beyond the Durkheimian heritage I have cherished for literally half a century, and to dispense not only with scientism, but particularly with its social-science version, *sociologism*.

The 'argument of images' may well be found, in the end, to be the last resort, not 'of wit' (which is how Nabokov interprets 'parody' in *Pale Fire*, 1962: line 896), but of an over-ambitious scholar seeking in vain to liberate himself from the disciplinary boundaries within which he has been educated, but lacking the essential resources of time, method, language skills, peer commentary, and (despite Internet!) library facilities to go about his transcontinental and transdisciplinary explorations in a truly satisfactory and professional, specialist way. If devastating criticism, and ridicule, are the price to be paid for opening up of the kind of long-range vistas that belong to our age of globalisation, I have been always (from my first, 1981, book, about which shortly) prepared to pay it, knowing that ultimately transcontinental and transdisciplinary perspectives will win the day, regardless of the obvious limitations of my own knowledge, methods, and mind – which to no one could be more manifest than to myself.[3]

0.1.3. A peculiar book

Overlooking the contents of the present book, I cannot escape the thought that it coincides only partially with current main trends in the anthropology of religion. One cannot with impunity repeatedly change horses, *i.e.* disciplines, in mid-career. Yet, ironically, and unfortunately, one of these current trends is certainly manifest here, notably in the Asian chapters: the reliance, however reluctantly, on documentary and secondary sources in combination with *cursory, often multi-sited. field-work* that in terms of length, intimacy, mastery of local language and culture, would never have met the professional standards of classic anthropology of the mid-20th century CE. The broadening, in the later chapters, of my horizon as a researcher beyond present-day Africa so as to in-

---

[3] Not accidentally, the case is very similar to that of my role model and long-standing friend, the late lamented Martin Bernal (1937-2013; *cf.* van Binsbergen 2013b). Inevitably, and admittedly, his enthusiasm and sense of scholarly, social and historical responsibility drove him far beyond the boundaries of his own competence and resources; but where so many critics have merely dwelled, with relish, on his errors and limitations, I have felt compelled to defend him for the sheer relevance, and at least *partial* truth of his overall insights, *pace* his Afrocentrist myopia concerning West Asia (van Binsbergen 1997b, 2011e, 2013b).

clude the Ancient Mediterranean and parts of Asia past and present, and the focus on material objects, cults, and their seemingly unbounded trajectories through space and time (*cf.* Fjelstad & Nguyen Thi Hien 2011) does reflect the neo-diffusionist dimension so marked in recent globalisation studies – to which I have tried to make some general contributions myself.[4] Another present-day trend detectable in the book is the attention for *occult* aspects of the research hosts' social experience – divination, spirit cults and witchcraft; yet with this proviso that these topics had been constants in my work since decades before my friends and colleagues Peter Geschiere, and Jean and John Comaroff, rendered them fashionable once again in the 1990s. Yet this feast of recognition may give way to jaded disinterest once the reader realises that some of the more typical, and topical, aspects of recent religious anthropology are not manifest in this book:

- the approach (usually superficially justified by reference to globalisation including post-modern media culture, culture industry and the Internet) that takes the North Atlantic urban experience, and English as its hieratic *lingua franca,* as self-evident key and touchstone for the religious experience wherever on the globe;

- the attention – in many situations unmistakably to the point; *cf.* Ammerman 2007; Klass & Weisgrau 1999; Schielke & Debevec 2012 – for present-day eroded, boundary-effacing, disintegrated and fragmented, not to say *anomic* (Durkheim) and meaningless, remnants or re-inventions of past religious systems rather than for time-honoured continuity of meaning and ritual form;

- the unmitigated celebration of *the body* as practically the main surviving refuge of (not to say: mimicry of) meaning in globalised postmodern media culture (*cf.* Fedele & Blanes 2011); yet *cf.* ch. 7, below

- and the navel-gazing contemplation *(cf.* Goulet & Miller 2007) of the field-worker's own feelings, experiences, and epistemological misgivings, instead of the more naïve emphasis on data and results which prevails in the present book (but its author largely left religious anthropology for intercultural philosophy as a result of these very self-contemplations, marking his growth – from reductionist hegemonic empiricism to empathic and responsible global politics of knowledge – by a considerable number of personal self-reflective and often autocritical testimonies, including four books).[5]

One deliberate limitation of the book is that, in its largely *descriptive* orientation, it lacks the emphatically *theoretical* angle (*e.g.* Banton 1966; Glazier & Flowerday 2003) which has made religious anthropology one of the most sig-

---

[4] van Binsbergen 1997e / 2015: ch. 1, 1998a, 1998b; Fardon, van Binsbergen & van Dijk 1999; van Binsbergen & Geschiere 2005; van Binsbergen & van Dijk 2004.

[5] van Binsbergen 1988b, 2003b, 2015; van Binsbergen & Doornbos 1987.

nificant and challenging divisions of the beautiful anthropological discipline; however, I can hardly feel guilty in this respect, having paid more than my due to the theory of religion in a number of other books (van Binsbergen 1981b, 1997e, 2003b, 2009b, 2015, and in press (f); van Binsbergen & Schoffeleers 1985).

The clumsy title I had initially in mind for the present collection, *Structure, Interaction, the Land, and Myth*, at least had the advantage of bringing out the distancing, objectifying, sociologistic orientation of my first two decades in the discipline of religious anthropology, whose main product was the highly theoretical, Marxist-orientated book that effectively launched me in international academia and in religious anthropology specifically: *Religious Change in Zambia* (1981). Much as the religious anthropologist Matthew Schoffeleers, my 1979 PhD supervisor, was (with Richard Werbner and Terence Ranger) among the early admirers and propagators of my scientific work on religion, this did not prevent Matthew from chiding me, in private, for what he called its superficiality: where I stressed forms of social organisation and power structures, and (a field where we worked closely together, as pioneers) long-term historical processes in African religion, he would have preferred to see work addressing the presumed essential core of religion, which for him as a Roman Catholic clergyman was the individual in awed existential encounter with the personalised and anthropomorphic sacred considered (also by the analyst) to be an epiphany of a living, personal god. Since I was brought up a Roman Catholic, went to schools run by Roman Catholic clergy, and served as an altar boy, I was familiar with the kind of spirituality Schoffeleers meant – not for nothing was he the officiating priest at my second marriage, in 1983. However, since that upbringing had proved not enough to overcome my existential crises in adolescence, I was not prepared to take his official version of established, revealed religion for granted; and I occasionally resented the clergyman's pretensions of condescending superiority in his manner of dealing with non-clergy like myself. While remaining sufficiently fascinated by religion to make its study (albeit reluctantly, and inconsistently,) the cornerstone of my professional life, never in adulthood – except, momentaneously, in situations of the greatest distress – did I return to my childhood belief in a personal god or spirit. And even after I assumed a formal role of religious authority myself, that of *Sangoma* diviner-healer-priest in the dominant Southern African tradition, officiating in that capacity hundreds of times, and for better or worse (and much to my surprise) realising the genuine powers of clairvoyance and healing this unleashed in me, I could yet not bring myself to formally believe in the spiritual beings (ancestors, Mwali, Shumba) invoked in my public prayers and rites. Thus, since I refused to identify as belonging to what Horton (1975, *cf.* 1984; Wyllie 1980) has called the 'devout opposition' (*i.e.* outsider students of non-European, *e.g.* African, religion who themselves are known to be practising Christians), my colleagues in religious anthropology have tended to look at me with suspicion, accusing me of hypocrisy (since while identifying as a non-believer, I nonetheless often and publicly went through the motions of Christianity and *Sangoma-*

hood, not to mention Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism) and (apart from the striking shortcomings of my published work, I suppose – as well as my contentious personality, and my tendency to drift from discipline to discipline in the course of my career) this may have been one of the reasons why I never came to occupy a chair specifically in the anthropology of religion.[6]

0.1.4. Scientist or believer, or both?

There is a fundamental dilemma to be appreciated here, which the conception of the present collection has set out to avoid, but which is confronted head-on in some of my other books *(Intercultural Encounters, 2003*, and *Vicarious Reflections, 2015*, and my writing project in progress, *Sangoma Science*). How can one be a detached student of African religion, as well as an initiated, certified and practising *Sangoma*, yet at the same time an avowed unbeliever – and occasionally preach in African Independent Churches, and worship in Islamic,

---

[6] It was simply not meant to be. In the 1970s already, the ethnomusicologist Merriam asked me to apply for a position at Bloomington IN, USA; but with my newly-arrived application letter in the breast pocket of his jacket he had a heart attack (!), and when returning to normal duties months later, the post was already filled. In Europe, chairs in religious anthropology are few and far between. I came closest to occupying one when my old friend and PhD supervisor Matthew Schoffeleers retired from his own chair at the Free University Amsterdam in the late 1980s; but there was a suitable internal candidate and, given the Protestant Christian original orientation of that institution (one that had already been compromised when, partly on my advice, the Roman Catholic priest Schoffeleers had been appointed in the mid-1970s as successor to the theologian who had nominally been the supervisor of my graduate work on popular Islam), a staunch defendor of the faith had been preferred, and – in the manner of a marauding barbarian army before the walls of an imperial city and religious centre – my candidacy was simply bought off with a personal chair on ethnicity and ideology. Another one of Schoffeleers' PhDs, Gerrie ter Haar, later managed to build her chair at the Institute for Social Studies, The Hague, around her religious specialisation, and became a deservedly important figure in the international organisation of African religious studies. Such dogged concentration on one subject has been beyond me. My long and diverse list of publications shows that, by my own choice, religious anthropology has been an important, but never the only focus of my attention. My limitless curiosity, my apparent capability of learning and absorbing, and my aversity of the power play that constitutes a discipline and holds it together, did not exactly render me faithful to any one field. Moreover, the interdisciplinary nature of my work at the African Studies Centre, Leiden (ever since 1977), however stimulating and well-endowed, meant that for many years I was compelled to pay far more attention to modern political topicalities than came naturally to me, while the continued religious orientation of much of my work there was merely tolerated and could never be turned into institutional policy. More recently, Walter van Beek, after tragically abortive earlier attempts, and after taking his official retirement as Senior Lecturer at Utrecht, was granted a part-time chair in religious anthropology at Tilburg University; in the 1960s-1970s CE, van Beek had been the favourite student and designated crown prince of the then main exponent of religious anthropology in the Netherlands, the former Governor General of Dutch New Guinea, and Protestant politician, Jan van Baal, 1909-1992 (*cf.* van Beek & Scherer 1975); I only did one course with van Baal. In his Tilburg chair van Beek has made substantial contributions to the subject; he also proved himself to be a loyal colleague, not only in the context of my own retirement in 2012 (when he was among the few African Studies Centre colleagues to participate in my valedictory conference, and even prepared a poetical *Liber Amicorum* for me; van Beek 2012), but also in offering an institutional setting in which my last few remaining PhD students from Africa (Pascal Touoyem and Pius Mosima) could yet graduate after my PhD conferment rights with the Erasmus University Rotterdam had expired. I take this opportunity to extend my warmest gratitude to Walter van Beek.

Hindu and Buddhist contexts, to boot?[7] My argument on 'African spirituality' (van Binsbergen 2004b; reprinted in *Vicarious Reflections*, 2015: ch. 8) comes a long way towards answering this question. For me, religion is not in the first place a set of beliefs and practices. More importantly, it is an idiom of sociability, among people who identify as having the same historical experience – which renders the particulars of beliefs and practice immaterial. Publicly going through the motions of African religion (even if that happens to be African *Christian* religion) turns me into the African which I have effectively become in the course of half a century, and it is as African that I have been affirmed by the Nkoya people of Zambia, African philosophers, and the Bakweri people of Cameroon. Further refinements of this view or religion as sociability are now being explored in *Sangoma Science*.

In that argument (and as already foreshadowed in some recent texts *e.g.* in chapters of *Vicarious Reflections* and towards the end of the present *Religion as a Social Construct*) I make a contentious ontological claim in connection with religion, which certainly qualifies my assertion as to being a non-believer:

> by analogy with my various explorations on virtuality (van Binsbergen 1997e, 1998a, 2015: ch. 1)
>
> - *admittedly, the spiritual beings supposed to be addressed in religious action have no objective, real existence on their own and may only exist 'virtually';*
>
> - *yet once religious action is directed at them they m a y t a k e o n r e a l i t y in the sense of occasionally (and fairly unpredictably) having a real, tangible, sensorily demonstrable effect on material reality.*

Such a claim no longer belongs to the realm of the *social science* of religion, and I will not attempt to substantiate it here. Yet my claim is based on the sustained efforts, extending over a lifetime, to engage with religion in the many different forms in which it has presented itself to me – and it is a claim I make non only as a sometime altar boy and still practising *Sangoma (where, believe me or not, I conduct veridical divination and engage in effective healing in the full – albeit surprised – awareness of the tangible reality of spirit)*, but also as an emeritus professor of intercultural philosophy in a university Department of Philosophy.

All this leaves no doubt that it was existential encounter and fusion I was looking for, too, rather than the mere reduction of living religions to facts and figures. Yet, by and large, what the present book offers is incisive studies of the social science, rather than the theology or philosophy, or performing art, or

---

[7] The question has played a certain role in my published exchanges with my dear friend Valentin Mudimbe, and in that connection is extensively addressed in my *Vicarious Reflections*, 2015: 440*f*.

vindication, of religion.[8] From the extreme objectification of my quantitative analysis of pilgrimage behaviour and state-church interactions, to the fusion of my approach as comparative mythologist, or as *Sangoma*, a pendulum-swing movement may be appreciated throughout this book, but ultimately (at least, in *this* book) the pendulum seems to the objective, not to the fusion side.

0.1.5. From Africa to Asia

Where so much of my research over the latest decade has been preoccupied with the question as to Africa's transcontinental continuities in pre- and protohistory, I have decided to also include a fairly recent, long piece (chapter 10) where I explore the somewhat unexpected significance of major Asian religious forms (Taoism, Buddhism, and Hinduism) for historic religion in sub-Saharan Africa, after a somewhat older exercise (chapter 9) in which I use the example of geomantic divination in order to make the same point concerning Islam. Such boldly comparative arguments inevitably are based on extensive (but, in the eyes of the regional and disciplinary specialist, never enough) library research rather than on the field-work experience – limited as the latter is in both temporal and spatial horizons. However, for these Asian explorations the initial concrete factual inspiration derived from many years of field-work in an African setting, where I only very gradually, and (as the typical Africanist, faithful to the disciplinary tenet – repeatedly, but unaffirmingly, referred to in the present book – to explain things African in the first place by reference to Africa) *reluctantly*, became alive to the transcontinental inroads, and to the transcontinental historicity, of so much that so far has tacitly passed as 'African traditional religion'. Only after three decades of research with the Nkoya people of Zambia, during which period I was fortunate to be extensively exposed to the study of the Ancient Near East, Ancient Egypt, and Asian religions and mythologies, did I open up to the many transcontinental strands in Nkoya culture, politics and society, and could I upgrade my initial inklings into specific, referenced claims and arguments.[9] And it is only in recent years, with the versions included in the present book, with their 2016 Postscript, that I have gained some confidence in applying the same transcontinental perspective to my Manjaco research in West Africa in the early 1980s.

Although I had done a fair amount of Asian Studies as part of my undergraduate and graduate training at Amsterdam university in the 1960s, and although my work (e.g. as an administrator of the African Studies Centre, Leiden, and of the WOTRO Programme on Globalization and the Construction of Communal Identities) already

---

[8] Yet, something of this movement away from objectifying distancing is also at the heart of chapter 15 of the present book, on 'Rupture and fusion in the approach to myth'.

[9] This process of re-considering in principle familiar evidence from a transcontinental perspective is still in full flux. The 2012 conference paper which I have included in the present book, was later rewritten and expanded several times, once specifically to be geared to the Nkoya situation and to be included in my imminent monograph *Our Drums Are Always On My Mind* (in press (a)); and once again to accommodate a request from the *Chinese Yearbook of African Studies*.

brought me to the People's Republic of China and to India, for this side-tracking into Asia (fairly exceptional for an Africanist, and frowned upon by my colleagues), I am particularly indebted to the leading Sanskritist and comparative mythologist Michael Witzel, whose Harvard Round Tables and annual meetings of the International Association for Comparative Mythology, from the mid-2000s on brought me to major Asian academic centres and in close contact with Asian colleagues, on an annual basis. It is in this connection, also, that my piece emerged on the tragic Japanese cosmogonic goddess Izanami – in some respects a counterpart of Ancient Greek Eurydice and Ancient Mesopotamian Inanna, lingering at the border between life and death): 'Giving Birth to Fire', chapter 11 of the present book. My argument initially angered my Japanese hosts because they found that I impolitely – and deliberately, contrary to East Asian cultural pressures to interactional nicety – stressed early Japanese cultural dependence on China; departing from texts like 古事記 / 伊邪那岐 *Kojiki* and 日本紀 *Nihongi*, written in classical Chinese with no more than a substantial admixture of ancient Japanese language elements, this unwelcome truth, however, was difficult to avoid. In the version included in the present book I have left out most of the global comparison on cyclical element transformation; its most famous example happens to be the Chinese, Taoist cycle presented below as Figs 11.1 and 11.2, but it has a much wider distribution in space and time, including the Empedoclean four-element system. A few years later, this vital section of the original argument was extensively reworked to become my, equally poorly received, speculative book *Before the Presocratics*.

The Africanist dabbling in other continents and regional specialties must accept to take a beating. Used to prolonged conditions of participant observation she or he usually is even prepared for beatings[10] that would kill the specialist philologist for shame: ancient texts do not talk back so fellow-philologists – well-informed, strict, unrelenting, professionally deprived of a sense of humour and socio-political relevance, yet rival – are such texts' main, extremely demanding, protectors and champions. By contrast, the professionally rather more callous and insensitive field-worker, usually a loner as far as her or his colleagues are concerned, is used to undergo severe humiliation, ridicule and ostracism in the field when, as a more or less uninvited guest, she or he is trying to learn a language and a culture – the whole point about field-work as participant observation is that in the learning process one can afford, is compelled even, to make mistakes, for those are (often instantly) commented upon, sanctioned, and corrected, by the host community, and thus constitute a royal road (Freud 1961-1973) to the ethnographic truth. Much to the confusion and irritation of my readers, students, and transdisciplinary colleagues, I have implemented this field-work habitus into my very style of writing and speaking. My utterances are not intended to unequivocally render reality as it is, or as I think it is, in other words are

---

[10] As numerous autobiographical passages in the ethnographic literature have brought out, *e.g.* Evans-Pritchard's famous preface to *The Nuer* (1940 / 1967); Laura Bohannan's (ps. Bowen Smith's) *Return to Laughter* (1954); Berreman 1972; van der Geest / Bleek 1978; van Binsbergen & Doornbos' collection *Afrika in Spiegelbeeld* ('Africa in the Mirror'), 1987; my field-work novel *Een Buik Openen* ('*Opening a Belly*'; van Binsbergen 1988b), *etc. etc.*

not meant as truth claims, but they are intended in the first place to make a provisional statement on reality solliciting correction, in the full awareness that I may be wrong, and hoping through my very statement to invite others to correct me and find the truth.

Little or none of that predictable interdisciplinary rejection, meanwhile, has attended my inspiring work with my former PhD student, the Ancient Historian Dr Fred Woudhuizen on the Bronze Age Mediterranean; or with the Assyriologist Frans Wiggermann on Mesopotamian magic (chapter 8, below) – our major product (in addition to putting my global geomantic research on a sound bibliographical, comparative and conceptual footing) of a year I was fortunate to spend at the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities and Social Sciences (NIAS), Wassenaar, the Netherlands, 1994-1995.

A similar pleasure of excited exploration has also characterised my repeated experiences with the devotional site of Nagara Padang in Sunda-speaking West Java, where the extensive and excellent field-work of my former PhD student Dr Stephanus Djunatan, and his generous sense of sharing and boundary-crossing, allowed me to try and explain, to his colleagues and students at the Parahyangan Universitas (Bandung, Java, Indonesia) some of the social and spiritual mechanisms which pilgrimage involves and which had left them baffled – the basis of chapter 12 of the present book.

0.1.6. General lessons from this book

Overlooking the book as a whole, I am confident it will make attractive and exciting reading, even though some of its chapters were written thirty years ago, and even though the theoretical and methodological perspective is shifting from chapter to chapter like in an experimental novel. As a collection bringing out the richly-textured variety of religion as a social construct in the two largest continents of the Old World, the book may not be without interest and utility. Since the days of Max Weber (*e.g.* 1922, *I-III*), it has not been common to have one author extensively deal with religious situations in more than one continent; and the sceptical specialist reader may see her or his misgivings at such *hybris* confirmed on every page of this book. The contents are as kaleidoscopic and limited as their author is versatile, protean and lacking in restraint; yet a few lessons clearly emerge:

- One principal lesson is that of *knowability and translatability*: religion may tie a local, relatively small, subset of humanity together in a shared, particularist and idiosyncratic understanding of the world and of themselves, but that makes the practitioners (while retaining, beyond this empiricist credo, *the mystery of the other* which is the inevitable boundary condition of any Weberian *Verstehende* orientation in the social sciences) not impervious to the analytical and understanding gaze of such an outsider as the religious anthropologist is per definition – at least initially.

- Other lessons are about *interdisciplinarity*, in other words, about what the Manchester School – my ultimate role model of anthropology – called *'the limits of naïvety'* (Gluckman 1964) – so if we have to deal with Graeco-Roman, Israelite, Islamic, Sumerian, Babylonian, Hindu, Buddhist, Shinto or Taoist discourse let us by all means try to invest in philology and in the specialist conventions of the

scholarly disciplines focusing on those cultural and linguistic contexts. The reader will see how much I have tried to live up to this admonition, and also how I utterly failed to rise above amateurish dabbling.

- *Historical awareness* is certainly implied among such limits of naïvety, which means that relevant anthropological knowledge can never solely derive from within the restricted spatial and temporal horizons of personal field-work but always needs to be complemented by a historical (implicitly *comparative*) perspective – which also throws the analyst's own position in relief and may go some way towards checking its implicitly hegemonic tendencies.

- Trained (brainwashed?) in a British-orientated anthropological tradition that was mainly interested in the micropolitics of social life at the expense of nearly everything material from ecology to production to art (but with a remarkable interest in religious movements; Köbben 1964), I had to discover by myself the central position *objects* occupy in any social system and any religion: shrines, divination tablets, books, statuettes, ritual leader's paraphernalia, bureaucracy's filing cabinets etc. The excessive use of pictures in the present book is directly related to this. Religion may revolve on imaginary worlds, but (whatever the protean shimmerings of the mind) it can only manifest itself in human life and gather some firmness through its condensation and anchorage in material form.

- Some of the chapters of this book will also illustrate the irreplaceable contribution a *quantitative, statistical / mathematical perspective* brings to the study of religion.

- But while a quantitative approach may enhance our insight and bring out hidden implications that would scarcely meet the eye of the conventional qualitative field-worker, much of the book is about what simple, old-fashioned personal, prolonged qualitative *field-work* can yield in the discipline of religious anthropology – the familiar but regrettably obsolescent handiwork that starts out with a map and a census of the local rural or urban community, and – on the basis of ever increasing linguistic and cultural competence, acquired and calibrated in constant intimate and critical contact with the host population – proceeds to share and reflectively know the (often kinship-based) ins and outs of that community in everyday routine and ritual paroxysms over an extended period of time. It is only by sharing and learning the life of a community for many months on a daily basis (cf. van Binsbergen 2003b, 2007d), that one can begin to free oneself from the logocentric heritage of North Atlantic intellectual and denominational life, and realise that *religion is not in the first place about doctrine or deliberate acts of belief, but about interaction, thus primarily constituting an idiom of sociability – and ultimately one of t h e r a p y .*

- And a final lesson, gradually unfolding as the chapters succeed each other, is that of *underlying transcontinental continuity*. In this respect it reiterates the argument opening my 2015 philosophical collection of papers *Vicarious Reflections*, where finally I dare write on what I have increasingly come to consider the foundation on which all intercultural philosophy is predicated: *the idea of the underlying fundamental unity of humankind*.[11] Despite the fragmentation, boundaries and differences on the surface (produced in part

---

[11] *Cf.* van Binsbergen 2015, specifically: http://www.quest-journal.net/shikanda/topicalities/vicarious/vicar_block_A.pdf

by the political management of identity, material interest, organisational dynamics and doctrinal entrenchment among the practitioners themselves and among administrators, politicians, development workers and scholars), the shrines, ecstatic and healing cults, divination systems, the handling of evil and malice, forms of interaction with the state and the economy, the religious articulation of social organisation, and the mythological themes, in both Africa and Asia all turn out to have a surprising similarity about them.

Could the latter message of convergence within a shared global field, so passionately delivered by some of the chapters of this book, be more than simply an artefact of an over-ambitious and over-adventurous anthropologist way past his prime (meaning myself)? Is the deliberate and insistent boundary-effacing which this book implies not just another ecstatic cult, another myth, this time initiated by a scholar reproachably unheedful of such conceptual and methodological protection as faithfulness to one's original academic discipline and limitations may afford? *By a scholar who simply cannot keep his distance?* Arriving at the end of one's career and struck by the apparent futility and absurdity of what one has achieved at considerable personal sacrifice, the desire for redemptive meaning, purpose, coherence and synthesis often plays tricks on a researcher – and this desire has been responsible for such flawed, all-encompassing books as Kroeber's (1944), Hrozny's (1951), or Martin Bernal's (2006); according to some my own 2012 book *Before the Presocratics* is another candidate for this list. For the present volume, I have tried to anticipate all such misgivings and prove them wrong, but no doubt in vain: the tribe of splitters may never see eye to eye with the tribe of joiners (see below, p. 555, 555n). Many specialists may concede to me at least the point of *recent* convergence on the ground, even at a transcontinental scale, and recognise *modern globalisation* as a major factor behind it. But we need to go much further than that. Painstaking typological and historical research will reveal that what continuity we may encounter underlying the world's religious diversity is not just modern globalising coalescence but also ancient *proto-globalisation*, and even *ancient shared origins* in combination with incessant, multi-directional and multi-centred interactions.

If the careful reworking of such of my older texts as have remained dear to me, can help to bring across something of these messages, my not inconsiderable efforts towards this religious-anthropological testament will have been worth their while.

0.1.7. Practical details

Finally a few practical details. Each chapter is preceded by a brief introductory statement summarising more or less its argument and succinctly indicating its theoretical and topical background. Many items in the end bibliography in this book have been reprinted at least once, and with the adoption of the Shortened Harvard system of bibliographical reference this may lead to the type of apparent anachronisms like Heraclitus 1978 for a 6th-c. BCE author, or Durkheim 2017 for an author who died 100 years ago; in order to reduce the unintended comical effect, I have often given two years of publication, the year of first publication and the date

of publication of the version actually consulted, separated by a slash. In order to remind the reader of the immense, potentially hegemonic and subordinative, acts of interpretation, distortion and alienation involved in the rendering of non-European texts and ideas in European scholarly language and discourse, I have often included non-European scripts; but I have not implemented this lofty policy systematically, nor impeccably, lest I suggest far greater philological competence than I in fact possess as, originally, a simple anthropologist by training. Following classics practice, Ancient Graeco-Roman texts are cited under their customary Latin names, even if in Greek. Also for Greek proper names the Latin version is often preferred. In the rendering of Arabic names I have attempted to represent each Arabic letter by a specific sign; I have deviated from the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* usage, where Arabic letters tend to be represented by two adjacent and underlined Latin letters, so I use *j* instead of *dj*.

All texts in this book have previously circulated in a slightly different form. I will now list these earlier contexts, in combination with the relevant acknowledgments.

0.2. Acknowledgments and provenances

I am deeply grateful to my numerous research hosts and my dozen of assistants in the several research locations treated in the studies in this book. I feel the same gratitude towards my teachers who passionately, responsibly and painstakingly introduced me to what also to them was clearly the great joy of their lives. Without the loyal, loving support of my family in various stages of its genesis and re-composition I would never have been able to do so much field-work alternated with so much writing over the years. To these three groups of essential facilitators of my work, I have to add a fourth and a fifth:

- the various institutions where I have held appointments and research fellowships, foremost the African Studies Centre Leiden (1977-); but also the Centre des Arts et Traditions Populaires (Tunis); the University of Zambia and its Institute for African Studies; the Applied Research Unit (Ministry of Lands, Local Government and Housing, Republic of Botswana); the University of Botswana; the Netherlands Foundation for the Advancement of Tropical Research (WOTRO); Leiden University; The Erasmus University Rotterdam, Department of Philosophy; the Department of Philosophy of the University Yaounde I (Cameroon); the Université Protestante de l'Afrique Centrale; the Cameroonian cultural development organisation CERDOTOLA; and numerous other institutions with which I have been associated in the context of my research over the decades
- colleagues / friends, who have critically, stimulatingly discussed my work, testing existing ideas and coming up with new ones, – constituting a readership eminently worth writing for.

That now, 53 years after I entered the field of religious anthropology, my work again appears to me as meaningful and worthwhile, is not in the least a sign of its quality, nor entirely a product of my vanity or approaching senility. It is probably in the first place an indication that, reluctantly learning from my (mainly African) research hosts and assistants, from my teachers, from my loved ones, and from my friends and colleagues, I have perhaps finally learned how to try and do credit to the infinite love that has been invested in me from all these sides. The social sci-

ence of religion is a human endeavour like any other – capable of losing its humanity by a lapse into textual, conceptual, cognitive, hegemonic violence, but for that very reason inviting us to make this little province of human activity an unexpected context of illumination and redemption. This will do for a religious-anthropological testament.

Chapter 1. The cult of saints in Northwestern Tunisia

Field-work was conducted in north-western Tunisia in 1968, 1970, 1979, and 2002. The 1979 field-trip convinced me that the religious patterns described in this paper have by and large persisted through the 1970s, but by the early new millennium the situation had almost irrecognisably changed, as described in the long footnote 24, chapter 16. I am indebted to the Municipal University of Amsterdam, and to the Free University, Amsterdam, for grants towards my 1968 and 1979 field-trips respectively, and to the Centre des Arts et Traditions Populaires, Tunis, for local support. I am moreover indebted to: the people of Ḥumiriyya, Ḥasnawi b. Ṭahar, the late lamented Douwe Jongmans †, Jeremy Boissevain †, Klaas van der Veen, and Henny van Rijn, for substantial contributions to my analysis of Ḥumiri popular religion. An earlier version of this chapter was written and presented in 1980, when I was a Simon Professor at Manchester University; I am indebted to the participants in the anthropology seminar, and particularly to Emrys Peters †, Richard Werbner and Kenneth Brown, for helpful criticism made on that occasion. Finally I wish to thank Daan Meijers and Jojada Verrips for organizing the conference in whose context this chapter was first presented and published; Ernest Gellner † and Katie Platt for going out on their way in order to accommodate this chapter in that volume; Ria van Hal and Mieke Zwart for typing successive drafts; and the Arabist F. de Jong for advice on transliteration. This chapter was originally published as: van Binsbergen, Wim M.J., 1985, 'The cult of saints in north-western Tunisia: An analysis of contemporary pilgrimage structures', in: Gellner, E. ed., *Islamic dilemmas: Reformers, nationalists and industrialization: The southern shore of the Mediterranean*, Berlin / New York / Amsterdam: Mouton, pp. 199-239.

Chapter 2. Shrines, cults and society in North and Central Africa

This chapter was originally read at the Conference on Regional Cults and Oracles (Annual Conference, Association of Social Anthropologists) Manchester, March-April 1976. The argument is based on field-work carried out in Tunisia, 1968 and 1970, and in Zambia, 1972-1974. In addition to my informants and the Tunisian, and Zambian, authorities, I am indebted to the following persons and institutions: to Hasnawi ben Tahar and Dennis Shiyowe for excellent research assistance; to Henny van Rijn, my first wife, for sharing much of the field-work and the analysis; to the University of Amsterdam, the Centre des Arts et Traditions Populaires (Tunis), the University of Zambia, the latter's Institute for African Studies, the Netherlands Foundation for the Advancement of Tropical Research (WOTRO), and Leiden University, for financial support and research facilities; to Douwe Jongmans †, Marielou Creyghton, Jeremy Boissevain †, Jaap Van Velsen †, Klaas van der Veen, André Köbben, Matthew Schoffeleers †, Terence Ranger, Maud Muntemba, Bob Papstein and Dick Werbner, who over the years have been my partners in stimulating discussions on parts of the present argument; to John Beattie for comments on an earlier draft. In the forty years passed since this chapter was written, many of these friends, colleagues and teachers have passed away, leaving precious memories.

Chapter 3. The Christian church and social control

An earlier version of this chapter was read at the WUOO (Netherlands Association of Urban Studies in Developing Countries) Conference on African Towns, Leiden, February 26-28, 1985. In conjunction with my competent and resourceful assistants Pat A. Mutesi and Dennis K. Shiyowe, I collected the data on which this chapter is based, in the course of field-work in Lusaka, Zambia, in the period February 1972 to July 1973. The project (initially entitled A sociological study of religion in Lusaka) was started off by a K625 grant from the Research and Higher Degrees Committee of the University of

Zambia, which covered transport expenses and payment of one research assistant from February through April, 1972. A further subsidy of US$500 from CROMIA (The Churches' Research on Marriage in Africa) made it possible to extend the project, from March through May 1973, by means of a survey of urban marital structures, social control, and the role of churches therein. Quantitative analysis was undertaken by me at the Technical Centre of the Faculty of Social Sciences of the municipal University of Amsterdam, by means of computer time voted by the department of Cultural Anthropology of that University – where I was a WOTRO (Netherlands Foundation for Tropical Research) research fellow in the years 1974-75. With today's access to statistical packages on microcomputers, permanently and at no extra cost for the researcher, it is difficult to realise that at the time special permission and funds had to be voted for such simple quantitative analysis. Further work on this material was made possible in the course of my appointment at the African Studies Centre, which also enabled me to repeatedly revisit Lusaka in subsequent decades. For the data collection and analysis phase, I wish to register my indebtedness to: R. Hatendi, H. Hinfelaar, A. Shorter, L. Steen, H. van Schalkwijk, J. Veitch, J. van Velsen, and C. Woodhall; the Registrar of Societies (Lusaka); the UNIP (United National Independent Party) Regional Office (Lusaka); The District Secretary's Office (Lusaka); Mindolo Ecumenical Foundation (Kitwe); numerous members and leaders of Lusaka churches and church organizations; and an even greater number of Lusaka residents approached as respondents during our surveys and depth interviews. Further I am grateful to R. Bergh, W. Heinemeyer, D. Jaeger and L. van de Berg for helpful comments on an earlier draft. The chapter was originally published in: P. Konings, W. van Binsbergen, & G. Hesseling, eds, *Trajectoires de liberation en Afrique noire: Hommage à Robert Buijtenhuijs*, Paris: Karthala, 2000, pp. 223-250. Buijtenhuijs was the fellow-editor of my first book on the social science of African religion (van Binsbergen & Buijtenhuijs 1976).

Chapter 4. Church, cult, and lodge

After a preparatory visit in Spring 1988, a first extensive spell of field-work was conducted from November 1988 to October 1989, in Francistown and rural communities in Botswana's North-East District, with a short excursion into southwestern Zimbabwe. In subsequent years this was augmented by regular visits of shorter duration, on almost an annual basis. I am greatly indebted to the Applied Research Unit, Ministry of Local Government and Lands, Republic of Botswana, for their hospitality extended to me as a visiting researcher; to the African Studies Centre, Leiden, the Netherlands, for leave of absence and research funds; to my wife and children for wholeheartedly sharing in the field-work; to Chuke Amos, Ennie Maphakwane, Edward Mpoloka, Joshua Ndhlovu, Dikeledi Moyo and Rebecca Siska for research assistance; to the ritual leaders, adepts and church leaders described in this chapter; to neighbours, friends, respondents and officials throughout Francistown; to Terence Ranger, Isaac Mazonde, and particularly Richard Werbner for the generosity and trust with which they have welcomed and facilitated my intrusion into their cultic region; and to Robert Buijtenhuijs for stimulating comments. In addition to participant observation and depth interviews, the data on Francistown cults and churches were collected in the form of video recordings. In this connexion I wish to acknowledge the generosity of the Board of the African Studies Centre which enabled me to have the necessary equipment at my disposal; and the contribution by Patricia van Binsbergen-Saegerman, who was largely responsible for the video recording. This chapter originally circulated as: van Binsbergen, Wim M.J., 1990, 'Church, cult, and lodge: In quest of therapeutic meaning in Francistown, Botswana', paper presented at the 6th Satterthwaite Colloquium on African Religion and Ritual, Cumbria (UK), 21-24 april 1990, and subsequently as seminar paper, University of Cape Town, August 1990, and University of Louvain, January 1991. Selections from this chapter were published as: van Binsbergen, Wim M.J., 2005, ' "We are in this for the money": Commodification and the *sangoma* cult of Southern Africa' in: van Binsbergen, Wim M.J., & Peter Geschiere, 2005, eds., *Commodification: Things, Agency and Identities: The social life of Things revisited*, Berlin / Muenster: LIT, pp. 319-348 + bibliography pp. 351-378.

24

Chapter 5. The state and African Independent Churches in Botswana

Field-work was conducted in November 1988 to October 1989, August-September 1990, June-July 1991, May 1992, October 1992 and February, 1994, in Francistown and rural communities in Botswana's North-East District, with a short excursion into southwestern Zimbabwe, and consultation of government files in Gaborone. I am greatly indebted to the Applied Research Unit, Ministry of Local Government and Lands, Republic of Botswana, for their hospitality extended to me as a visiting researcher; to the African Studies Centre, Leiden, the Netherlands, for leave of absence and research funds; to my wife and children for whole-heartedly sharing in the field-work; to Chuke Amos, Ennie Maphakwane, Edward Mpoloka, Joshua Ndhlovu, Dikeledi Moyo and Rebecca Siska for research assistance; to church leaders, adherents, ritual leaders, adepts, neighbours, friends, and respondents in the Francistown region; to officials both in Francistown and Gaborone. Under the *Botswana Societies Act* (Republic of Botswana 1977: section 30), the records of the Registrar of Societies are open for consultation by the public, and I am greatly indebted to the Registrar of Societies and individual officers for facilitating my perusal of the files in every conceivable way. After this argument had been drafted, I presented it as a seminar before the Botswana Society, Gaborone 1991, and it was groomed for publication as one of that society's working papers; however, the intended editor, Don Rempel Boschman (*cf.* Boschman 1994) insisted on comprehensive revision which, however understandable in the light of the local Christian community that was the editor's constituency, yet proved prohibitive to me as an author and researcher; therefore that publication never materialised; also, at the time I was so preoccupied with the first stages of my 'becoming a *Sangoma*', that I could not muster the detachment and the localising strategies required to make this critical political analysis palatable at the national level of an independent African state. Meanwhile I thank Mr Boschman for his well-taken comments. Finally I wish to express gratitude to Matthew Schoffeleers, Robert Buijtenhuijs, Bonno Thoden van Velsen and Emile van Rouveroy van Nieuwaal for valuable comments made on an earlier draft, which was presented at the conference on 'Power and Prayer', Institute for the Study of Politics and Religion, Free University, Amsterdam, 10-14 December 1990. A much shortened version of the present argument, without any of the statistical analyses on which it is largely based, appeared as van Binsbergen 1993a in a collective volume entitled *Power and prayer: Essays on religion and politics*, VU [Free University] University Press, eds Mart Bax & Adrianus Koster, pp. 24-56. Shortened versions of this chapter have meanwile appeared, one even as recently as 2017 (Doornbos & van Binsbergen), but the present book contains the only version where the statistical analysis on which the whole argument depends, could be presented in full.

Chapter 6. Socio-ritual structures and modern migration among the Manjacos of Guiné Bissau

After preparatory trips in November 1981 and November 1982, field-work was carried out (mainly through the medium of the Creole language, the national *lingua franca i.e.* a Manjaco interpreter was used only in the first few weeks – in the Cacheu region, Guiné Bissau, from April to August 1983, at the request and with the unfailing and generous support of that country's Ministry of Health and Social Affairs, and within the wider framework of that Ministry's mental health planning policy (*cf.* de Jong 1983). In addition to his extensive administrative and logistic support, and the contribution of relevant clinical case material not used in the present argument, the psychiatrist J. de Jong for about two weeks shared in the field-work so as to augment the data with depth interviews of rural psychiatric patients. He also took care of the bureaucratic and logistic framing of the project, and of other practical aspects (including saving my life when I was only hours away from dying of cerebral malaria!). Further, I wish to register my indebtedness to local authorities in the Cacheu region; to the people of Cale-

quisse, especially: the high-priest of the land, Antonio Ampa, who welcomed me to his house and his work; his grandson Faustino Ampo, who served as research assistant for a few weeks until Arguetta da Silva had taught me enough Creole for me to dispense with an interpreter; Antonio Ampa's toddler grandchildren Sanda and Sandu, whose accepting closeness was an everyday avuncular joy; and Arghetta da Silva, my amazingly effective teacher of the Creole language. I also owe thanks to the African Studies Centre, Leiden, which funded the project and graciously granted me leave of absence in order to carry it out; and to my wife Patricia Saegerman and my elder sister Else Broers, for being perceptive companions in the field. The frequent seminars (1976-1981) of the Amsterdam Working Group for Marxist Anthropology (*cf.* van Binsbergen & Geschiere 1982, 1985), and in that connection especially the work of my long-standing friend and colleague Jos van der Klei, were helpful in formulating an analytical and theoretical perspective on Manjaco labour migration. For preliminary accounts of the Manjaco research, *cf.* van Binsbergen 1983a, 1983b; the former paper contains a very extensive bibliography of possible use to other researchers. Given the limited period of field-work the present analysis must be considered as provisional. The chapter was originally published as: van Binsbergen, Wim M.J., 1984, 'Socio-ritual structures and modern migration among the Manjaco of Guinea Bissau: Ideological reproduction in a context of peripheral capitalism', *Antropologische Verkenningen*, 3, 2: 11-43.

Chapter 7. The land as body

The background of this chapter is the same as that sketched above for chapter 6. To the acknowledgments there I wish to add my friend and colleague Renaat Devisch, whose penetrating discussions in the stimulating environment of the Louvain 'Unit on Symbol and Symptom' seminar (1984 and 1985) greatly contributed to my analysis of Manjaco symbolism. The first version of this article was read at the Second Satterthwaite Colloquium on African Religion and Ritual, Satterthwaite (Cumbria), UK, April 1986. I am indebted to Kirsten Alnaes, Michael Bourdillon, Richard Fardon, Ladislav Holy, Richard Werbner, and James Woodburn for stimulating comments on that occasion. A revised version was read at the Institut für Ethnologic Freie Universität, Berlin (West), May 1986, where I benefited from comments by Georg Elwert, Till Forster, Georg Pfeffer, and Helmut Zinser. The chapter was originally published as: van Binsbergen, Wim M.J., 1988, 'The land as body: An essay on the interpretation of ritual among the Manjacos of Guinea Bissau', in: Frankenberg, R., ed, *Gramsci, Marxism, and phenomenology: Essays for the development of critical medical anthropology*, special issue of *Medical Anthropological Quarterly*, new series, 2, 4, december 1988, p. 386-401.

Chapter 8. Magic in history

This chapter was jointly conceived and written by Wim van Binsbergen and the Assyriologist Frans Wiggermann. Our division of labour was that textual and specialist Assyriological knowledge, as well as some of the innovating leading ideas of the argument, were largely contributed by Wiggermann, whereas the comparative and theoretical framework, the actual writing, and the editing, were largely my own share. Inclusion of this paper in the present collection does not imply that I now pretend to be an Assyriologist, or that Wiggermann's share in this well-received and much-cited text was less than equitable. We wish to register our gratitude to the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities and Social Sciences (NIAS), Wassenaar, The Netherlands, for initiating and accommodating the theme group on 'Magic and religion of the Ancient Near East' during the academic year 1994-95; without the congenial and supportive NIAS environment the present study would never have been undertaken. We also appreciate the year's leave of absence granted by our respective departments. The earliest version of this chapter was presented at the weekly seminar of the NIAS theme group, 17 May, 1995; we are greatly indebted to the other members of this group (Tzvi Abusch, Marc Geller, Shaul Shaked and Karel van der Toorn) for their constructive criticism. A revised version was presented at the conference on 'Mesopotamian Magic', NIAS, 6-9 June 1995; among the participants' remarks we have especially benefited from those made by Irving Finkel and Karel van der Toorn. This chapter was originally published as: van Binsbergen, Wim M.J., & Wiggermann, F.A.M., 1999, 'Magic in history: A theoretical

perspective, and its application to Ancient Mesopotamia', in: Abusch, T., & van der Toorn, K., eds, *Mesopotamian magic*, Groningen: Styx, pp. 3-34.

Chapter 9. Islam as a constitutive factor in African 'traditional' religion

This chapter is a revised version of the paper 'Islam as a constitutive factor in so-called African traditional religion and culture: The evidence from geomantic divination, mankala boardgames, ecstatic religion, and musical instruments', which I read at the conference on 'Transformation processes and Islam in Africa', African Studies Centre and Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World, Leiden, 15 October, 1999, convenors Wim van Binsbergen, Anneke Breedveld, & José van Santen. It was provisionally printed in the pre-conference collection of papers (van Binsbergen, Breedveld & van Santen 1999). The conveners soon worked the conference proceedings into an edited collection, furnished by an Introduction by Breedveld & van Santen (at their initiative), and submitted to academic publishers. However, dramatic developments were taking place around Islam at the global scene, and were reflected in the study of African Islam in the Netherlands. To most of the contributors to the 1999 conference their glorified dabbling in Islam had been a by-product of more general, non-Islamological research, but now the topic came increasingly in the hands of Islamological specialists seeking to build a local academic name for themselves. They brought such a new vocabulary, and such a level of linguistic skills, textual editorial accomplishment and encyclopaedic knowledge, to that field of study as were largely beyond the reach, and, frankly, the ambitions and intentions, of most of the contributors of the 1999 conference. This rendered its proceedings obsolete, a ready target for dismissive editorial comment, and ultimately unpublishable. So as a book project the undertaking was shipwrecked, and this chapter belatedly publishes a paper left over at the shelf.

Chapter 10. The relevance of Taoism, Buddhism, and Hinduism, for the study of African-Asian transcontinental continuities

The text of this chapter was originally read. at the international conference *'Rethinking Africa's transcontinental continuities in pre- and protohistory'*, African Studies Centre, Leiden University, the Netherlands. 12-13 April 2012. The empirical basis for this argument lies, in addition to extensive library research, in my historical and ethnographic research among the Nkoya people of Zambia since 1972; my research into the *Sangoma* cult in Southern Africa since 1988; shorter explorations throughout Southern Africa, in Cameroon, Benin and Guiné Bissau over the years; and extensive travelling and exploratory field-work all over East, South East and South Asia from 2002 onward. While some of this research has been self-sponsored, I am greatly indebted to the following institutions and persons for funding or facilitating these trips and stimulating my research in and on these various locations: the African Studies Centre Leiden, and its succession of directors over the years; the Department of Sanskrit and Asian Studies, Harvard University, Cambridge, USA, and its chair Michael Witzel; the Philosophical Faculty, Erasmus University Rotterdam and its Dean Wiep van Bunge; the Philosophical Faculty, Parahyangan Catholic University, Bandung, Indonesia; the Faculty of Philosophy and Humanities, Université Yaounde I, Yaounde, Cameroon. My wife Patricia was a perceptive companion on most of the recent Asian trips, and moreover contributed to them financially. Specifically for the 2012 Leiden conference, I wish to express my gratitude to the African Studies Centre, the Leiden University Foundation (LUF) and the Rotterdam Philosophical Faculty, for funding the conference; to Marieke van Winden for sharing its organisation and realisation with me; Gitty Petit for advice on funding; and Ton Dietz for general advice and encouragement.

Chapter 11. Giving birth to Fire

This is a greatly revised and shortened version of my paper presented at the Third Annual Meeting of the International Association for Comparative Mythology, Kokugakuin Shinto University, Tokyo, Japan, 23-24 May 2009 (van Binsbergen 2009). I have reduced to a few paragraphs the extensive discussion of the elemental transformative cycle, which originally ran into

dozens of pages; this transcontinental comparative argument has meanwhile been published elsewhere (van Binsbergen 2010, 2012). I am indebted to Michael Witzel and to the Harvard Department of Sanskrit and Indian Studies, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA, for inviting me to participate in the conference and for making available most of the necessary funds; to my Japanese hosts Professors Inoue Nobutaka, Hirafuji Kikuko and Kazuo Matsumura, for the charm with which they have accommodated the original, highly deficient and unmistakably non-specialist version of my argument. I regret that considerable offence was taken, both during and after the conference, when I stressed early Japan's indebtedness to classical China – merely stating the philological facts, but, as an Africanist, deliberately un-heedful of the tacit knowledge-political conventions of East Asian studies, which are predicated on Japan-China exchanges during only the last 150 years,. I am greatly indebted to these Japanese colleagues, and moreover to Steve Farmer, Klaus Antoni, Nick Allen, Václav Blažek, Patricia Saegerman, Peter van der Mede, Ineke Suijkerbuijk, Hannah van Binsbergen, and Arthur Eaton for illuminating discussions on the topic of this paper; and to the Nkoya people of Zambia, for introducing me, over the decades, to a clan system that in many ways was an enigma also to themselves, but which I gradually came to recognise as a localising transformation of an originally East Asian version of the cyclical element-transformation cosmology. With this chapter's argument I am, as usual, venturing into fields for which I have neither specialist training nor authority. Despite the deceptive but merely cosmetic and snobbish display of Chinese and Japanese characters in this chapter, I am an outsider to Japanese studies, have scarcely any access to modern scholarship as written in the Japanese and Chinese languages,[12] and therefore my answer to the questions posed by the cosmogonic myth of Izanami can only be tentative and partial, not to say blundering and irrelevant. Whatever East Asian philological details I adduce to my argument, are those which any non-specialist outsider may come up

---

[12] This might have been different. In 1964, faced with the task of choosing a field of study after graduating from grammar school, I acted on an advertisement by the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which was offering well-endowed scholarships for the study of 'exotic' languages at Leiden, for several centuries recognised as a world centre of oriental studies. I was invited to the Humanities faculty for personal interviews with the professors Hulsewé and Drewes, then in charge of Chinese and Arabic respectively. Immensely impressed with their solemn yet intimate display of library resources and scholarship (I already had extensive experience of academic libraries: at age 14-15 I had spent a year on and off in major libraries compiling a French-language bibliography of the reception of Teilhard de Chardin's work in the Netherlands), I was seriously tempted; but meanwhile I was only seventeen years old, I was under the illusion that I could not leave my parents to their own conflictuous devices without my habitual placating presence, and instead of settling as a humanities student in Leiden, I resigned myself to becoming an anthropology student in my home town, Amsterdam. There, within years, I learned basic literary Arabic in a university course offered by the Palestinian refugee M. Suudi. The Asianist Wim Wertheim was one of my three or four anthropology professors (Köbben rightly dominating the curriculum, and Boissevain replacing Pouwer after two years, in 1966), and throughout the seven years of my studies detailed attention was paid to the history and sociology of Asia. But it was only after 1990, in the context of my global comparative study of geomantic divination including *Yi Jing*, that I began to dabble in the Chinese language, reading Chinese philosophical and poetic classics in bilingual editions. I have known philologists to respond violently and unforgivingly to such transdisciplinary amateurism. Perhaps the paucity of profound theoretical and analytical content in their own subjects hence their dependence on other disciplines for scientific meaning persuades them to adopt a fetishistic, ritualistic attitude to the rules and conventions of philology. Anyway, given the high and strong walls of cultivated social and institutional distance between various disciplines and departments even in an academic environment that, in terms of resources of specialist knowledge and libraries, has been so richly endowed as Leiden University (where I have worked for forty years now), I cannot see what alternatives I have had. I needed to travel to Cambridge MA, USA; Kyoto and Tokyo, Japan; and Beijing, People's Republic of China, to find colleagues prepared to share specialist knowledge with me that, in Leiden, had been available for decades, and at a stone's throw from my own office...

with in this age of the Internet, they are admittedly amateurish and must be taken with a large pinch of salt. Despite my access as a colleague, over the years, to a fair number of specialists on the Japanese language and ancient Japan, I suppose my deliberately naïve insistence (at the 2009 Tokyo conference where this chapter was first presented) on Chinese influence upon early Japan during the formative period of Japanese civilisation, made it socially impossible for these colleagues to extend their assistance on the details of my argument, however much I sollicited such assistance. As an Africanist and an intercultural philosopher I am fully equipped to expect such politics of knowledge, and to accept their consequences. Yet, as a prominent scholar of half a century's standing, I refuse to let my publication policy be reduced to a popularity test; and again, as an Africanist and a philosopher I can well afford to be the target of my East Asian colleagues' ostracism (however painful I have found it at the personal level), so if, after all, my Japanese excursion appears in the present volume, it is not so much because I hate to waste anything I have painstakingly written, but out of a sense of scholarly integrity. Meanwhile, I am solely responsible for such errors as my argument in chapter 11 will no doubt continue to contain, and I can only hope that the exciting long-range vistas it opens up somewhat compensate for these shortcomings. In the years following the Tokyo conference, I worked this chapter's globally comparative material into a book, *Before the Presocratics* (2012), which was equally ill received, leaving the original core argument around the Japanese cosmogonic myth to be salvaged in the form of the present chapter.

Chapter 12. The devotional shrine of Nagara Padang, village of Rawabogo, Ciwidey, Bandung, Java, Indonesia, in comparative and analytical perspective

Thanks to the generosity of the Erasmus University Rotterdam and the African Studies Centre Leiden, I twice (2007, 2010) had the opportunity to pay a supervisory visit my PhD student Stephanus Djunatan in Bandung, Java, Indonesia, and to accompany him on his field-work in the *desa* (village) Rawabogo, site of the devotional mountain shrine of Nagara Padang; the latter features prominently in the thesis (Djunatan 2011). I am greatly indebted to Dr Djunatan for sharing with me the insights and the extensive personal resources which he painstakingly built up over the years, having no original background in West Java's Sunda culture and Sunda language. In 2007 my wife shared this short field-work, which added greatly to local *rapport*. In 2010 the occasion consisted of the study weeks which dozens of philosophy students at the Parahyangan University, Bandung, spend at Rawabogo under the supervision of Mr (now Dr) Djunatan and his colleagues. When I found that a comparative and analytical perspective on shrine cults and syncretistic Javanese Islam might considerably help the students to make sense of their in many respects bewildering experience in the village and at the shrine, I wrote this chapter's argument, which circulated among the local philosophy staff and was subsequently published (in English) in an Indonesian Sunda-language periodical, as: van Binsbergen, Wim M.J., 2011, 'The Devotional Shrine of Nagara Padang, Village of Rawabogo, Ciwidey, West Bandung, Java, Indonesia, in Comparative and Analytical Perspective: Reflections on the UNPAR (Parahyangan Catholic University) Department of Philosophy's study days 2010', in: Setiawan, Hawe, ed., *Perspéktif Kebudayaan Sunda dalam Kesatuan Bangsa Indonésia: Dan Esai-esai lainnya mengenai kebudayaan sunda*, Bandung (Indonesia): Pusat Studi Sunda, Seri Sundalana, 10, pp. 25-68.

Chapter 13. Challenges for the sociology of religion in the African context: Prospects for the next fifty years

This paper was read at the Social Compass 50th Anniversary Session, XXVIIth Conference of the International Society for the Sociology of Religion ISSR (theme 'Religion and generations'), Turin, Italy, 21-25 July, 2003. I am indebted to Françoise Gendebien and Michael Singleton, for their invitation; and to Ella Verkaik and her colleagues in the Library and Documentation Department, African Studies Centre, Leiden, for invaluable bibliographical contributions. The impossible project indicated by the subtitle was imposed upon me by *Social Compass* and reflects no ambition of my own. A much shorter version has been published in the 50th anniversary special issue of *Social Compass: International Review of Sociology of Religion*, 51, 1 (2004, March): 85-98.

Chapter 14. Witchcraft in modern Africa

This chapter's argument was originally part of my little book on virtuality, drafts of which were presented at the Free University, Amsterdam, April 1996, and Louvain University, November of the same year; leading to publications in 1997 and 1998, which recently was largely rewritten and expanded as chapter 1 of *Vicarious Reflections* (2015). From this material an argument was extracted specifically on witchcraft, and read at the panel on 'Epistemological and ideological approaches to witchcraft analysis within African Studies: A critical assessment', African Studies Association Annual Meeting, Chicago, 27th October – 1st November 1998. I am indebted to George Bond and Diane Ciekawy for inviting me to take part in this inspiring session, to all participants for illuminating ideas and criticisms, and to the African Studies Centre, Leiden, for financing my participation. This chapter was originally published as: van Binsbergen, Wim M.J., 2001, 'Witchcraft in modern Africa as virtualised boundary conditions of the kinship order', in: Bond, G.C., & Ciekawy, D.M., eds., *Witchcraft dialogues: Anthropological and philosophical exchanges*, Athens OH: Ohio University Press, pp. 212-263. That this paper is reprinted in the present book so shortly after the *virtuality* version appears in *Vicarious Reflections*, has an obvious reason: here it is witchcraft, as a long-standing topic in religious anthropology and in my own work, which constitutes the central focus, and not a more general, fashionable topic such as virtuality.

Chapter 15. Rupture and fusion in the approach to myth

This is the greatly revised and expanded version of a paper read at the International Conference 'Myth: Theory and the Disciplines', 12 December 2003, University of Leiden: Research School CNWS (School of Asian, African, and Amerindian Studies), IIAS (The International Institute for Asian Studies), and NWO (Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research). I am indebted to Mineke Schipper and Daniela Merolla for inviting me to take part in this Conference; and to Marc Geller, Liz Gunner, Robert Segal, Michael Witzel and Cosimo Zene for stimulating critical points. A much shortened version of this chapter was originally published as: van Binsbergen, Wim M.J., 2009, 'Rupture and Fusion in the Approach to Myth: Situating Myth Analysis Between Philosophy, Poetics and Long-Range Historical Reconstruction', *Religion Compass*, 3 (2009): 1-34; this chapter offers the full original paper as rewritten in 2005.

Chapter 16. Religion and development

A first version of this chapter was read at a seminar informally marking my accession to the chair of the anthropology of ideology and ethnicity in the Department of Anthropology and Development Studies, Free University Amsterdam, 1990. On reworking that piece for publication in the present book, I cannot fail to notice that, by 1990 CE Dutch standards of polite academic conversation among colleagues, my argument is fair, and sound, yet uncommonly critical, especially when taking into account that one of the editors was my PhD supervisor a decade earlier, and that all contributors to the book under review were tenured members of the Free University anthropology department I had just joined. Perhaps my tone of voice owed something to the fact that my newly occupied chair in ethnicity and ideology was a mere consolation price for the chair in religious anthropology that had been denied to me. Yet in retrospect I should compliment my Free University colleagues for tolerating me in their midst for eight years, and giving me a splendid valedictory conference when in 1998 I left the department to take up the chair in Intercultural Philosophy at the Erasmus University Rotterdam. A much shortened version was originally published as: van Binsbergen, Wim M.J., 1991, 'Religion and development: Contributions to a new discourse', *Antropologische Verkenningen*, 10, 3, 1991, pp. 1-17.

Table of contents

PART II. TUNISIA 47

PART III. ZAMBIA 117

37

List of figures

List of tables

44