Part VI. Asia and transconti- nental continuites

Chapter 8. Magic in history

A theoretical perspective, and its application to Ancient Mesopotamia

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One of the stumbling blocks in the study of religion in Ancient Mesopotamia is that of the theoretical approach to *magic* – a major focus in the voluminous scholarly literature. The analyst has a choice of various theoretical positions, each with a venerable ancestry to recommend it. Without trying to be exhaustive, we shall review a number of typical approaches. This will make us aware of the specific epistemological and analytical difficulties associated with the various definitions of magic. We propose another alternative model, which, however, retains the notions of human coercion of the divine, and mechanicism, as habitually associated with magic; and we seek to appreciate these aspects by exploring four interrelated, but mutually apparently irreducible *sui generis* domains in which actors have experiences of *control*. One of these domains is that of the hegemonic process by which the state imposes its dominance, and since the historical outlines of that hegemonic process are more or less known in as far as the Ancient Near East is concerned, we have the means to situate magic in Mesopotamian history – even if this leaves us with three other dimensions of control which as yet elude historical treatment. In the first half of this chapter we shall present a tentative theoretical framework for our approach; in the second half we argue its applicability to Ancient Mesopotamia by reference to selected textual evidence. Fully aware that this is only a tentative first formulation of a new theoretical perspective, in the conclusion we review a few topics for further research.

8.1. A theoretical approach to magic in history[1]

8.1.1. Definition of magic: The descriptive position

The descriptive definitional approach to magic has been by far the most popular in the context of Ancient Mesopotamia.[2] This approach takes 'magic' as a relatively self-evident term, by which we may conveniently label genres of texts, and identify the practices referred to or implied in those texts as '*magical*': curses, incantations and spells; divination; human attempts at interaction with invisible beings of a minor order ('demons'); charms, amulets, talismans; and finally cures involving *materia medica* whose imputed effects are not corroborated by the natural science of the twentieth century CE.

The orientation of such an approach is exploratory rather than interpretative and analytical. Hence some the most interesting questions pertaining to the corpus thus designated 'magical' remain out of scope: that corpus' relation with other forms of symbolic production in the same culture, its place in history, the extent to which, and the reasons why, it is secret or public, *etc*.

One can understand what recommended the descriptive approach in the first, founding phase of Assyriology, when the task of opening up the texts, their vocabulary and imagery, and the creation of such basic tools as the *Chicago Assyrian Dictionary*, had to take precedence over more theoretical, analytical and comparative concerns. This approach reveals Assyriology as essentially a 'positivist' (a cherished term among Assyriologists, reflecting a naïve belief in 'just facts', and hardly rooted in epistemology) or non-theoretical project. Its acknowledged core activities have revolved around texts and their translation. For the wider historical and sociological interpretation of these texts Assyriologists have relied either on common-sense ideas as circulating in nineteenth and twentieth-century North Atlantic cultured society, or (more rarely) on a highly eclectic and unsystematic selection of conceptual and theoretical positions scraped from a variety of academic disciplines ranging from anthropology to comparative religion and linguistics; just like Assyriology, these other disciplines have seen a tremendous growth since the late nineteenth century, but their growth has largely remained without impact on Assyriology itself.[3]

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[1] When this chapter was jointly written, during our fellowship at the Netherlands Insitute for Advanced Studies, Wassenaar 1994-1995, Frans Wiggermann was a member of the Department of Semitic Languages, Free University, Amsterdam. In line with Assyriological conventions, Sumerian text appears in expanded roman, Akkadian text in non-expanded italic. Words and gods' names will be cited as S u m e r i a n / *Akkadian*, with, depending on the text discussed, one or the other language form in parentheses.

[2] For surveys of Mesopotamian magic, *cf*. Bottéro 1988; Contenau 1947; Fossey 1902; Haas 1978; Lenormant 1874 / 1877; Reiner 1966, 1995; Thompson 1900.

[3] A comparable state of affairs obtains in the study of Ancient Egypt, *cf*. Trigger 1995. With regard to the periodisation of socio-cultural analysis Trigger offers an useful generational sequence which helps to elucidate our own position. He sketches a development from historical particularism (as exempli-

This position has dramatically limited the scope for *explanation* in Assyriology. In any empirical science, including Assyriology, if we want to explain an individual case, we do so by generalisation: the case is shown to display certain features, and we argue the applicability to the case of generalisable, systematic relationships between such features as revealed by the study of a number of other cases considered to be similar. In order to be able to do so we need four things:

- a consistent and developed conceptual or definitional apparatus,
- a theory,
- procedures of operationalisation, and
- data.

With the data at long last becoming increasingly available, Assyriology can now begin to contemplate the other three necessary steps towards more incisive understanding of the societies of Ancient Mesopotamia. It is in such a context that the present argument, however tentative and preliminary, situates itself.

8.1.2. The error of reductionism

To seek and understand ancient texts and practices involves both

- the ability to appreciate them in their own language and cultural setting, and

- their rendering, as faithfully and subtlily as possible, into a lingua franca of scholarly discourse, where analytical terms (concepts, ideal types, definitions) are employed which on the one hand are arguably (yet always at the cost of considerable simplification) applicable to the case under study, but which at the same time have a wider range of applicability, involving other cultures, other settings in time and space.

In the process, we seek to avoid a number of errors. The translation towards a *lingua franca* of twentieth-century scholarship should be made in such a way that the culture-specific concepts and practices of our own culture and times are not unduly projected onto the material under study, and the latter should not be evaluated in the light of our own accepted beliefs.

This helps us to appreciate a distinct advantage of the descriptive approach to magic: shunning all theory, it at least keeps us from asking the *wrong* theoretical questions. In the context of the study of magic the *avoidance of ethnocentric projection* turns out to be very difficult to achieve and maintain. Many scholars today would consider not the internal ramifications of the magical world-view, or its connections with the publicly mediated religion, with the state, family life and the economy, but the magical nature of that world-view itself, as the most puzzling aspect, the one most in need of explanation. How is it possible, such

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fied by Boas's insistence on understanding a culture on its own basis, without comparison – a position which for the Ancient Near East corresponds with Landsberger's insistence on *Eigenbegrifflichkeit*), via general comparison as in processual archaeology and in Steward's work, to the present post-processual phase which seeks to combine a revived interest in the historical process with general comparison and theory. *Cf.* Boas 1940 / 1902; Steward 1949.

scholars insist on asking, that otherwise sane and intelligent people could be-
lieve in such obvious figments of imagination, and how could they allow their
lives to be largely governed by such collective fantasies? This line of religious
scholarship has a honourable ancestry, going back to Hellenistic theories on the
nature of the gods, and leading to 19th and 20th century attempts to explain
away religion, and magic: for instance as products of group life creating the
essential conditions for its own emergence and persistence, by arbitrarily en-
dowing certain aspects of reality with sacred qualities (Durkheim); or as prod-
ucts of individual (Freud) or collective (Jung) sub-conscious psychological
conditions which regulate man's functioning by confronting him with images
which are as indispensable as they are unreal, *etc.*[4] Certainly in the anthropol-
ogy of religion, we have reached a stage where the sub-discipline's basic stance
is that of mainly agnostic or a-religious scholars studying the believers' beliefs
and practices with a view of taking them apart, and reductionistically explain-
ing them away.

The point is not at all that we as analysts of ancient religions seek to apply non-
religious categories to the religious phenomena under study, and thus try to
look for relationships of a correlative or even causal nature between religious
and non-religious aspects of a given culture; this is what we can do and must
do. The point is that we overplay our hand as empirical scientists when in the
process we turn the phenomenon of religion itself into our central explican-
dum. Scholarship should study *aspects* of religion in their *context*; if it seeks to
explode that context by reducing religion to some other, supposedly more fun-
damental, category of being human, we are merely borrowing the authority of
empirical science under false pretences – for what we produce in such a case is
no longer empirical science but theology or philosophy.

This means that we cannot define magic simply by reference to a cognitive sub-
system ('modern science') of our own North Atlantic late second millennium
CE culture. Frazer's characterisation[5] of magic as pseudo-science is untenable –
even if other aspects of the Frazerian approach to magic may yet continue to
inspire us, as we shall see below. Taking modern science as our touchstone
would reduce the analytical exercise to a simple act of ethnocentric projection
on our part, taking for granted the structure of the physical world as portrayed
by our own natural sciences, philosophy and theology of today, and evaluating
other cultures' conceptualisation of the world in the light of that criterion.

The descriptive position thus has the redeeming advantage that, taking the ancient
actors' own construction of their world-view more or less as self-evident, it cannot
be accused of seeking to impose upon the magical material the dismissively agnostic
view of twentieth-century global intellectual culture. But let us hope that the ap-

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[4] Durkheim 1912; La Barre 1978; Freud 1953-1974; Jung 1938.

[5] Frazer 1911-1915, first published 1890. *Cf.* the criticism by Malinowski 1954 / 1948 / 1972; Wax & Wax 1963; Versnel 1991.

proach to magic in Ancient Mesopotamia as proposed in the present argument, may be equally capable of avoiding such reductionism, while at the same time aspiring to somewhat greater theoretical sophistication.

8.1.3. Anthropological positions[6]

The understanding of symbolic production in a cross-cultural and / or historical context always involves a negotiation between the alien actors' views (more or less distant from the analyst in time and space) on the one hand, and the conceptual tools of a community of modern scholars on the other. In the anthropological usage introduced in the 1960s, such understanding always involves complementarity between 'emic' and 'etic' perspectives. This pair of concepts plays on a linguistic analogy: the difference between phonetic and phonemic approaches to language. A phonetic study relies on external assessment, often by natural-science means, of features whose recording does not require one to share the perceptual and evaluative patterning by native speakers; while these do constitute the focus of a phonemic approach. The 'emic' approach in other words, tries to arrive at a valid and insightful description on the basis of primarily the local actors' concepts and symbols, while the 'etic' remains external and distant. It is amazing to see the prominent classics scholar Versnel (1991) deny this in an otherwise inspiring attempt to revive the debate on magic. He proclaims the etic position as the only tenable one. Coming from a classicist, it would effectively amount to advocating the study of the classics through English translations rather than in the original Latin and Greek. Fortunately, Versnel does not do what he preaches: he makes a point of stressing that the analytical distinctions ('etic') which he chooses to impose upon classical magic, coincide with those made by the ancient actors themselves ('emic')!

More in general, the task of anthropological understanding is further complicated by the fact that the community of scholars, at least in the social sciences and the humanities, is divided as to the central concepts of its discipline – so further negotiation is required. In this process of negotiation, philologists and historians tend to take a more subtle, more historically informed position than anthropologists. This is one major reason why Oppenheim's (1970 / 1964) plea to bring more anthropology to Assyriology, has never worked; the other major reason lies in the a-theoretical and inward-looking nature of Assyriology as discussed above.

The social sciences have often been tempted to resort to a rather shallow form of epistemological *nominalism*, claiming that any concept can be defined in whatever arbitrary way, provided the definition is technically, logically, well formed. The aim of anthropological analysis would then be:

- not primarily to convey, with the greatest possible precision, the meaning and structure of an aspect of the culture under study as lived and ex-

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[6] *Cf.* Brooker 1971; Evans-Pritchard 1972 / 1937; Horto & Finnegan 1973; Jarvie & Agassi 1967 / 1970; Macho 1981; Yalman 1964.

pressed by the actors themselves, but

- to argue, for that culture, the applicability of some alien, abstractly defined concept.

Within anthropology, a standard way of going about cross-cultural comparison has been to abstractly define, without specific reference to any existing culture, the social phenomenon under study (e.g. 'patrilineal descent group', 'ancestor worship', 'magic'); then translate this abstract definition operationally into criteria which would allow us to identify the phenomenon in a number of actually attested cultures where of course it may occur under totally different names or in forms scarcely recognised or institutionalised by that culture's actors themselves; and finally, to link up the occurrence and non-occurrence of this phenomenon with other phenomena, similarly defined. The advantage is that such an approach involves a number of human cultures at the same time in the context of methodologically falsifiable hypotheses (which for the influential epistemologist Popper (1959) is the hallmark of science). But its weakness of course is that in the operationalisation the specific actual features of each of the cultures involved are only approximated and often distorted, in order to match the abstract definitions. The historical specificity of each culture (let alone, of each actor) is sacrificed for the sake of an aggregate discussion, and after the enthusiasm for this kind of analysis in the middle of the 20th c. CE, structuralism and historical research have sufficiently enriched main-stream anthropology to allow us to admit that the results of culture-unspecific, nominal approaches (like those *en vogue* in the time of comparative structural-functionalism)[7] have been very disappointing. Presumably these disadvantages are particularly great in the field of religious studies, where an appreciation of the subtle interplay of multiple references and of superimposed layers of meaning is essential.

In the anthropological study of magic, a few nominalist approaches have dominated the field. We have already referred to Frazer's approach, highly aggregative in general and almost totally unaware of the implications of cultural specificity and spatio-temporal context, which (on the basis of a now obsolete evolutionist perspective justifying the assumption of comparability within each evolutional phase) projects the same, limited repertoire of mythical and ritual scenario's all over the globe, and insists on the haphazard comparison of isolated, totally de-contextualised shreds of cultural and mythical material in interminable succession. Satisfied that 'magic' is, or represents, a universal concept having to do with man's attempted control over nature through means which nineteenth-century science claimed to be ineffective, Frazer postulated that such attempts essentially take two distinct forms: imitation and contagion. The distinction appeared to hold true for a great many cultures, and any fieldworker could and still can quote convincing examples of contagious and imitative magic from his or her own experience. In retrospect one would say, with Tambiah (Tambiah 1985; *cf.* Carucci 1993), that the distinction Frazer captured,

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[7] A typical example for the study of religion is: Swanson 1960.

admittedly felicitously and with rare intuition, reveals not so much 'traits' of any one specific culture, nor the universality of 'magic' (under whatever local vernacular name) as a cultural category, but, far more fundamentally, two major ways in which the human mind can process sense impressions into language: metaphorically, and metonymically. What yet seems to remain of the Frazerian edifice is his emphasis on actors' notions of *coercion* and *mechanicism* as characteristic of magic:

> 'Thus in so far as religion assumes the world to be directed by conscious agents who may be turned from their purpose by persuasion, it stands in fundamental antagonism to magic as well as to science, both of which take for granted that the course of nature is determined, not by the passions or caprice of personal beings, but by the operation of immutable laws acting mechanically. In magic, indeed, the assumption is only implicit, but in science it is explicit. It is true that magic often deals with spirits, which are personal agents of the kind assumed by religion; but whenever it does so in its proper form, it treats them exactly in the same fashion as it treats inanimate agents, that is, *it constrains or coerces instead of conciliating or propitiating them as religion would do.*[8]

Another, rather less interesting yet immensely influential nominal approach to magic stems from Hubert and Mauss,[9] who were so impressed by anthropologists' and travellers' accounts of the Polynesian concept of *mana* (some sort of free-floating, eminently powerful natural life-force) that they formulated nothing less than a universal theory of magic, according to which we have to do with magic whenever the actors in a culture can be shown to believe in a local equivalent of a concept of *mana* which, needless to say, was de-contextualised and nominally redefined for subsequent anthropological consumption. Whatever the disadvantages of the nominalist approach, strictly speaking we are all party to it from the moment we set out to study, *e.g.* in the context of Ancient Mesopotamia, not so much *āšipūtu*, *bārûtu*, *asûtu etc.*, but rather 'magic', *i.e.* an alien, imposed concept. Our reliance on 'magic', not just apologetically and self-consciously as a loosely descriptive marker, but as an emphatic analytical category, risks to involve the same operational distortion familiar from anthropological cross-cultural studies.

While Durkheim, apparently much influenced by Hubert & Mauss, made the concept of magic a cornerstone in his sociologistic theory of religion as being, ultimately, a celebration of the social itself, Malinowski[10] became the first major theoretician in anthropology to approach the study of magic on the basis of personal prolonged field-work outside his own society. Malinowski affirmed *both* the practical rationality of non-European humans, *and* their awareness of the limitations of their knowledge, inducing recourse to practices of personal encouragement and anxiety reduction. Such practices, considered universal by Malinowski, he did not hesitate to call 'magic'.

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[8] Frazer, 1890-1915 / 1911-1915; the present quotation is after the abridged edition: Frazer 1957: I, 67.

[9] Hubert & Mauss, 1966 / 1906; Mauss 1972 / 1950.

[10] *Cf.* Malinowski 1935, 1954, 1972.

In a way, the best informed, and least theoretically warped, use of the concept of magic in the formative years of the anthropological discipline, in Malinowski's hands, already spelt doom for its future within anthropology. From the centre of the discipline's attention, it gradually moved to the periphery. Already for Malinowski it was part of a more general concern: humans' psychological make-up, viewed in relation to humans' selective productive interest in nature. Structuralism subsequently allowed us to describe and understand much better the subtle play of metaphor and metonym on which magical rites and imagery revolve,[11] but such understanding could be achieved without reserving for magic (as Frazer had done) a truly distinct domain of its own – for the same structuralist methodology was claimed to elucidate myth, ritual, dreams, arts, drama and narrative literature. The 1960s and 1970s saw a number of incisive critical theoretical discussions of the concept of magic in anthropology,[12] and from then on the concept was not only impopular but even slightly suspect in the discipline – although very much the same kinds of topics as were earlier covered by the term 'magic', would continue to be studied under such more accepted labels as witchcraft, sorcery, rationality, consciousness, thought processes, and collective fantasies; the continued study of these topics is often cast in the interpretative framework of the expansion of the money economy, the capitalist mode of production, 'modernity' and North Atlantic civilisation. The well-known anthropological collections published in later decades with the word 'magic' featuring prominently in their titles[13] either mainly reprint much older material, or turn out to hardly discuss magic at all.

An intensive bibliographical search confirms this pattern for the first half of the 1990s.[14] On the one hand, historical studies of the magical tradition from Ancient Mesopotamia to modern Europe, the Arabian world, India and Africa continue to be undertaken often with new insights and theoretical positions.[15] At the same time there is very little on the topic of magic in modern anthropology. One major field of exception consists of highly descriptive ethnography.[16] Another exception consists of the re-publication of classic theoretical state-

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[11] Lévi-Strauss 1963; Tambiah 1990.

[12] *Cf.* Wax & Wax 1963; Rosengren 1976; Hammond 1970.

[13] *E.g.* Middleton 1967; Kiev 1964.

[14] We are indebted to Willem van der Wal at NIAS for carrying out the survey, and to the NIAS management for making available additional funding towards the use of the DIALOG data-base. After the dramatic expansion of scholars' Internet access in the last two decades, present-day readers can hardly imagine the high thresholds of access and fee-paying prevailing before that time.

[15] *E.g.* Barry, 1996; Derby 1994; Flint 1992 / 1991; Godbeer 1992; Kieckhefer 1994; Labouvie 1992 / 1989; McMillan 1994; Scribner 1993; Tomlinson 1993. Meanwhile, the broad categorization suggested here does not preclude that the term 'magic' is still being used by highly respected present-day anthropologists relying on synchronic ethnography, *e.g.* W. van Wetering among the contributors to the Barry 1996 volume cited above, or: Meyer 1995.

[16] Argyrou 1993; Brown 1993 / 1986; Some 1994; Voeks 1993.

ments on the anthropology of magic and reflections on the history of the concept in anthropology.[17]

Most of the time, when the word 'magic' is being used in titles of scholarly publications these days, it is in a loose metaphorical sense, evoking dazzling effects of sleight-of-hands,[18] particularly of the kinds characteristic of globalising electronic technology and media industry in the late twentieth-century CE. It is the conventionalized, colourful, bowdlerized 'magic' (emphatically called thus by its producers) of Walt Disney productions, exuding the proud rationality by which modern technology has captured space and time. Interestingly, this specific form of the North Atlantic actor's concept 'magic' – largely inapplicable when it comes to understanding the magical tradition which started in the Ancient Near East – was already discussed by the anthropologist Hortense Powdermaker in 1951.[19]

8.1.4. The continuity of the Middle Eastern / European magical tradition

Why do we not simply follow the example of anthropology and do away altogether with the analytical concept of magic?

To abandon the concept of magic with regard to Ancient Mesopotamia would mean denying a historical usage which has persisted over the past two millennia.[20] During almost that entire period first-hand textual evidence concerning the symbolic production of Ancient Mesopotamia had to be lacking since scholarship had no longer access to the cuneiform tablets nor to the language and script for which they had served as medium. Even so, distinct echoes from that symbolic production filtered through to Hellenic and Hellenistic (and ultimately Arabian, Indian and Christian) texts and practices, and here they tended to be subsumed under the heading of a complex actors' concept, that of

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[17] Horton 1993; Lanwerd 1993; Tambiah 1990.

[18] *E.g.* Stocking 1992; Dauber 1995.

[19] Powdermaker 1951. Incidentally, her fascination with the anthropology of modern life was also to yield a remarkably lifely early study, not of the stereotypical African village, but of teeming and innovating urban life on the Zambian Copperbelt: Powdermaker 1962. We owe the reference to her work on modern manufactured dream magic to Bonno Thoden van Velzen, who also informs us that the prominent Dutch anthropologist of religion Van Baal repeatedly expressed the opinion – generally shared among his colleagues in the discipline since the middle of the twentieth century – that the concept of magic had better be abolished in anthropological discourse.

[20] To gather access to the history of this extended magical tradition we have benefitted from the following works, among many others: Barb 1963; Betz 1986; Bidez & Cumont 1938; Blau 1898; Cumont 1929; Dieterich 1891; Doutté 1909; Graf 1994; Hopfner 1921, 1924, 1965 / 1928; Hubert 1904; Kropp 1930-193; Lloyd 1984 / 1979; Meyer & Smith, 1994; Naveh & Shaked 1985; Preisendanz 1951; Preisendanz with Henrichs *et al.* 1972-1974 / 1928-1931; Thomas 1978; Thorndike 1923-1958; Ullman 1972; Yamauchi 1967; Yates 1978 / 1964. Of course, Ancient Mesopotamia was not the only original contributor to this extended tradition; Ancient Egypt made its own fairly independent contributions, *cf.* Griffith & Thompson, 1974 / 1904; Pinch 1994; Sauneron 1966; Wilkinson 1994.

μαγεία: a word deriving from an Iranian linguistic and religious context but under which – by implying, at the same time, a vague category of Chaldaeans whose actual cultural, ethnic, linguistic and religious associations with Ancient Mesopotamia may often have been more fictitious than real – also the afterlife of Mesopotamian magic was subsumed. When, in 1900, R.C. Thompson published *The Reports of the Magicians and Astrologers of Nineveh and Babylon*, he used the word 'magician' not so much in a general, universally applicable abstract sense but in one that, for two millennia, had been used for, among others, Ancient Mesopotamian religious specialists *as seen from a European perspective*. In other words, Ancient Mesopotamian magic is not just one particular form of magic – it is one of the few *original* forms of magic as recognised in the European tradition. The history of the concept through Hellenism and Late Antiquity right down to the present day contains much of the European encounter with modes of thought which for two millennia had occupied a central position in esoteric scholarly culture, and which only in the last one or two centuries were relegated to a peripheral position. The continued dominance, in North Atlantic culture, of the Bible with its layers of Ancient Middle Eastern world-views; the survival and even twentieth-century revival of astrology;[21] the tremendous Renaissance success of *Ġāyat al-Ḥakīm / Picatrix* as a medieval Arabic re-formulation of Hellenistic magic with a considerable input from Ancient Mesopotamia;[22] the even greater success of geomancy, which with a similar background spread not only to Europe but also to most of Africa, the Indian Ocean region and parts of the New World:[23] all this shows that the symbolic production of Ancient Mesopotamia has, albeit very selectively, filtered through to our times. Having been the science *par excellence* during the greater part of these two millennia (as it was in Ancient Mesopotamia, in the first place), this ancient magical tradition helped to engender modern science. Thus it can even be said to have contributed to the emergence of the intellectual stance from which we are now critically and agnostically looking at that very same symbolic production.

By now our sources, as unearthed and deciphered since the middle of the nineteenth century CE, have become incomparably more direct, abundant, with far greater time depth, and far more complex, than anything which seeped through in the course of European cultural history. However, to continue to apply the

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[21] The scholarly literature on the history of astrology is extensive, the popular literature enormous but largely of appalling quality. Important works relating to the history of astrology, and partly overlapping with the literature on the general magical tradition of the Ancient Near East and Europe, include: Barton 1994; Berthelot 1938; Bouché-Leclercq 1899; Boll *et al.* 1966 / 1926; Cumont, Boll *et al.* 1898-1953; Cumont 1937; Festugière 1943; Gundel 1968; Gundel 1972; Gundel & Gundel 1966; Gundel 1936 / 1969; Gundel 1936; Nilsson 1943; Pingree 1978, 1979; Rehm 1941; Reiner 1966, 1995; Tester 1989 / 1987; Thomas 1978; Wright 1934.

[22] Ritter & M. Plessner 1962; transl. of: al-Majrītī (Pseudo-), Abū Maslama, 1933; Hartner 1965; Pingree 1980.

[23] van Binsbergen 1995a, 1996b, and extensive references cited there; chs 9 and 10 of the present book.

term magic to this newly emerged, puzzling body of Assyriological material may be more nostalgic than it is revealing, unless we find a way of accounting for the dynamic historical development of this corpus and for its peculiar position *vis-à-vis* other ideological stances within Ancient Mesopotamia. This requires looking afresh at the concept of magic.

8.1.5. The comparative and historical position

An obvious way out from the nominalist dilemma of distortion is to compare only cultures that are arguably comparable: that are close to one another, for instance because they share the same region and historical period, use related languages, the same productive technologies *etc*. Under such conditions of closeness, historical links reduce the operational distortion and make the comparison far more meaningful. In Southern African anthropology this has proved a useful line of comparative studies.[24] In this way it becomes much more likely that justice is done to local perspectives and concepts, and that, in the negotiation process between the culture under study and its academic rendering, the inherent logic of the former is not light-heartedly sacrificed. Within one extended region and one extended period, it is often possible to trace in detail the historical ramification of essentially the same cultural complex (*e.g.* oxen traction, kin endogamy, or magic), and to reveal both its qualified continuity and its response to situationally different social, economic and political conditions within constituent part-regions and part-periods; the result is a greater understanding of the region and its history, and of the cultural complex under study – perhaps even beyond those spatio-temporal confines.

In potential, such a position is historical rather than anthropological, since it concentrates on the differential, largely unpredictable and far from systematic, unfolding of historical concepts and institutions, against the background of other historical processes in the same geographical context. The conceptual perspective adopted tends to lean heavily on that of the historical actors involved, since it is largely in terms of their own perceptions and motivations, and changes therein, that their changing life-world can be made sense of.

Ideally, if both our time and the necessary data would be plentiful, this is the kind of study of magic in Ancient Mesopotamia which we would like to undertake. But let us first try and construct a tentative theoretical perspective without which, as argued above, no meaningful explanation could be attempted.

8.1.6. Four domains for the experience of control

We return for a moment to what would appear to be of lasting value in Frazer's approach, the notion of magic as being coercive and mechanistic. Many students of magic tend to agree, with Frazer, that the concept of magic seeks to

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[24] Schapera 1963 / 1956; Kuper 1982; van Binsbergen 1981b.

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describe actors' ways of conceptualising and effecting *control*. Such conceptualising can be relegated to a limited number of contexts in which human individuals have primary experiences of control. Let us try to list the most obvious of these contexts here, with implicit reference to the town-dwelling agriculturalists of Ancient Mesopotamia:[25]

- instrumental control, or man's interaction with nature
- volitional bodily control by the emerging self
- interactive control, or man's effect upon his immediate social environment
- hegemonic control of, and through, large-scale formal political institutions

8.1.6.1. Instrumental control, or man's interaction with nature

Through technology humans seek to control nature outside themselves, in such activities as hunting, collecting, agriculture, animal husbandry, house construction, pottery, weaving, basketry, metallurgy, and other crafts. At the same time man has an overwhelming experience, certainly in the period indicated, of the limitations of his control: in hunting accidents; crop failure; domestic animals breaking away, attacking their masters, or dying; materials being spoiled, tools breaking, technological problems remaining unsolved, *etc*. Besides, there is the experience that only a small segment of the non-human world is at all open to human control: celestial and meteorological phenomena, the rhythm of night and day and of the seasons, occur with such rigid periodicity that only with a considerable effort of imagination can man boast to have any influence on these natural phenomena. However, the existence of seasonal and meteorological magic shows that man has been capable of such imagination, and therefore it is perhaps a more valid point to say that, while humans created a domesticated habitat through clearing, agriculture, irrigation, house construction *etc*., by the end of the fourth millenniumthey were nowhere far away from an un-transformed landscape that was virtually unaffected by hithemm.

Although the non-human elements (materials, tools, animals) involved in post-Neolithic technology may conceivably be personalised and addressed in an anthropomorphic fashion, by and large the everyday technical experience in the sphere of production is more likely to represent a factual, mechanistic conceptual domain of its own. It is here, probably, that the notions of instrumentality and coercion originate that many of us would prefer to retain in any approach to magic. If we may adhere to the old definition of man as tool-maker, such instru-

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[25] For general works on the history of Mesopotamia the non-specialist may be referred, in addition to the *CAH [Cambridge Ancient History]*, to: Knapp 1988; Postgate 1992; Nissen 1988; a general introductory work with chapters on history, social institutions and religion is the four-volume: Sasson with Baines *et al.* 1995.

mentality could have a very long history indeed, going into many hundreds of thousands of years; but with reference to times before the last few millennia, we can only guess at the specific phases which notions of instrumentality have gone through.

8.1.6.2. Volitional bodily control by the emerging self

The second domain comprises humans' effect on their own bodies, *e.g.* motor patterns which may involve wielding tools including weapons, the bodily experience of breathing, feeding, eliminating, sexuality, childbirth, nursing, *etc*. Also here sensations of control are offset by overwhelming experiences to the contrary: of lack of control, through infancy, old age, through lack of experience and of physical strength, or in sleep, drunkenness, fatigue, mental disturbance, sexual arousal, illness, – with death as the ultimate ceasing of all self-control. To modern humans, this domain of bodily experience implies a personal awareness of self and at least a partial dissociation between self and one's own body; yet (as studies in historical psychology have argued)[26] the emergence of self and personhood as a distinct, conscious category may well be a relatively recent cultural product, and it would be rash to attribute a universal, basically identical experience of self-control to human beings regardless of time and place, cultural history and human evolution. Meanwhile the hallmark of bodily control is volition, the (however qualified) subjugation of bodily processes to the human will, and this is in principle an experience of control rather similar to the instrumental control exerted over extra-human nature: it resembles the wielding of voiceless and unmotivated tools more than the mobilisation, management or subjugation of fellow humans.

8.1.6.3. Interactive control, or man's effect upon his immediate social environment

Our third domain involves controlling other people, and being controlled by them, in the face-to-face context of the kin group and the localised community (let us call it the domestic domain),[27] by such social mechanisms as language use, kinship rules and etiquette, the division of labour in productive arrangements inside and outside the kin group, patronage, contracts, formal and informal judicial negotiations, physical violence, *etc*. Physical violence incidentally is a border-line case in that it applies the forms of instrumentality within the social domain of social interaction – which is precisely why most face-to-face groups based on kinship or co-residence make a point of declaring intra-group violence out of bounds. Somewhat in the same way the even more widespread regulation of

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[26] *Cf.*: Dodds 1951; Onians 1951; Snell 1955. In social-science circles, Jaynes's (1976) somewhat popular book has made considerable impact; *cf.* Vroon 1981, 1992.

[27] Implied in the following sections is the theory of the articulation of modes of production, *cf.* van Binsbergen & Geschiere 1985a; van Binsbergen 1981b, 1992b, 1993 c / 2003e, 2012a, and references cited there. For a related perspective specifically adapted to Ancient Mesopotamia, *cf.* Service 1975: ch. 12, p. 203 *f.*

sexuality through incest prohibitions within face-to-face kin-groups might be considered an attempt to create a boundary between the social domain of interactive control and that of bodily experience inimical to control. If we may not assume a timeless, constant quality for such actors' notions as the self and the person, it would be dangerous to characterise the experience of control in this domain as *personalistic*. But what we certainly can say is that here we meet control as a result of the *interaction* between humans, which also implies the differential distribution of power and status springing from such interaction. It is here that practices of gift giving, address, negotiation, propitiation, supplication, are found – as ubiquitous forms of more or less oblique interactive control between group members, and as obvious models for the interaction between man and god. The latter in its turn may provide models for the interaction between juniors and seniors, patrons and clients, and between the genders. But while the gods may be models of, and for,[28] a group's most senior members, interactive control is not the prerogative of dominant elders, as is clear from the effective demands babies make upon their environment. Babies' survival depends on interactive control (through crying, grabbing, sucking and other forms of behaviour triggering adult responses). At the other end of the human life-span, it is interactive control which ensures access to food and shelter, and thus survival, in the case of elders whom old age has rendered unfit for productive work. In general, interaction in the domestic domain entails a rather reticent and uncertain control, a give-and-take based on direct or deferred social reciprocity; it is persuasive, never absolute, and often lacks effective physical sanctions. Again, along with other anthropomorphic features, such reciprocity may be projected onto man's instrumental action upon nature, without, however, assuming the same indispensability which interactive exchanges have in the small human group. The sphere of interactive control, the closely-knit human group, makes for internal production, circulation of products and consumption within the group, defining various roles and statuses. Access to the latter largely depends not only on gender but also on age, so that group members may occupy them successively in the course of their lives. To the extent to which status differences depend on age, they are rotating with the individual's climbing years. At the same time, the domestic sphere is the locus of biological reproduction.

8.1.6.4. Hegemonic control of, and through, large-scale formal political institutions

Superimposed upon the interactive, domestic domain we can discern a fourth domain of control, typically associated with a form of organisation centring on *formal* institutions, such as the temple and the palace. For its own biological and material reproduction this domain is not self-supporting: it feeds upon the

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[28] The complementary duality of religion as a model both of, and for, social life, has been inspiringly argued in a famous article by Geertz 1966, to which reference is made more often in the present book, see General Index.

product and the personnel of the interactive, domestic domain. For it is from the latter that the human material comes which peoples the formal institutions, even if these do invest in their own reproduction (*e.g.* through formalised instruction in writing, ritual, etiquette, martial skills) once the personnel has been acquired. The ideological orientation in this fourth domain departs from that of the domestic domain in that hierarchy tends to be absolute and enduring rather than rotative and generational. By the same token, bureaucratic and legal rules rather than kinship obligations govern social relations within the hegemonic sphere. While the hegemonic apparatus consolidates itself it seeks to impose its control ever more effectively over an ever larger number of people involved in the interactive domestic domain. The control it seeks is formal and absolute, and its sanctions often include physical violence leading to loss of life. In short this is the process of state formation, state consolidation, the supplanting of one state by another, and the emergence of imperialism in the history of Ancient Mesopotamia. The hegemonic domain unavoidably imposes severe constraints on the nature and the extent of interactive control in the domestic domain: for whatever product is realised in the latter (basically through instrumental control over nature), risks to be appropriated or destroyed as an effect of hegemonic control; likewise, although biological human reproduction exclusively takes place in the domestic domain, the hegemonic domain appropriates human personnel as captives, soldiers and clerks, as well as destroying humans in military campaigns.

A number of observations may be made at this point.

First, the human experience of control has been always heterogeneous – there is *not one original form of control* from which all others, including that which we may choose to call magic, are derived. Always we have various idioms of power, which depending of the situation shade over into each other or emphatically contrast with each other.

Secondly, these various experiences of control are intimately linked; within the span of one life, even of one day, people typically operate within most if not all of these spheres. Instrumental control may invoke well-known older academic notions of magic; interactional control may appeal to us as a likely context for the emergence of ancestor worship; the hegemonic sphere may seem to breed fully-fledged gods, distanced from humans and with claims to impersonal, absolute respect. Yet these modes of control, and the ways in which they have been conceptualised by actors at the time, do not represent successive stages in an evolutionary scheme, but complementary modes within one and the same time frame, one and the same historic culture. Even so, there is a temporal sequence here, not for reasons of blind evolutionary necessity, but in reflection of the historical fact that technology, personhood, group processes in the domestic domain, and state formation (to sum up our four domains) each have gone through a history (which includes complex interrelations), and each have had an origin. For technology and personhood this origin may go back hun-

dreds of thousands, not to say several million years – to man's very origins as a species; face-to-face social organisation is likely to have an even more remote origin in Primate socio-biology. But state formation is a relatively recent phenomenon, and its origin coincides with the historical baseline we have chosen, that of the fourth millennium BCE. In this respect it eminently makes sense (archaeologically, for instance) to speak of 'pre-hegemonic', without implying an evolutionist's frame of analysis. The distinctive feature of evolutionism in the social sciences and humanities, of course, does not lie in admitting the well-established facts of man's biological evolution as a mammal species, but in (wrongly) assuming that the history of human societies, and their comparison, can be understood by reference to the same classificatory and dynamic models that elucidate biological evolution.

Thirdly, for an appreciation of the emergence of magic from the interplay of these domains, it is relevant to look not just at experiences of control, but also at their counterparts: experiences of failure to control, and of the anxiety this creates; here Malinowski continues to be inspiring.

Fourthly, and that is our main point, despite the entanglement of these four spheres, yet it is possible to proceed, in this perspective, from the timeless and universal, to the historical and the specific.

8.1.7. Magic in history

Archaeology informs us on the increasing achievements regarding instrumental control in the various domains of technology. Coming to the second domain, however, it is extremely difficult to gauge historical developments in the field of bodily experience, volitional self-control and self-awareness. With regard to the formation and evolution of the third, domestic domain we are on slightly more solid historical grounds. Finally, with the hegemonic domain history properly begins, since writing, and the bureaucratic power it engenders, is one of the hallmarks of the hegemonic process, certainly in Ancient Mesopotamia; the texts record the ins and outs of the hegemonic process, and the archaeological record fills in the material details.

If magic is an idiom of control, it could in principle refer to any of the four domains identified here, and possibly others which we have overlooked. Given the defectiveness of our historical data on some of these domains, we could not hope of ever writing anything near a full account of magic in history. However, as an idiom of control magic must of necessity be caught up, in one way or another, in the relatively well-attested hegemonic process, which is merely the sustained attempt of one particular form of organised extraction to impose itself upon the domestic communities of a region.

If there is to be a product in the first place, so that the hegemonic domain can appropriate it, the latter's control over the domestic domain can never be so tight as to destroy the typical forms of interactive control on which domestic productive relationships largely depend. Therefore implied in the very hege-

monic process *is the continuing existence of an embedded or encapsulated, yet partly uncaptured, interactive logic of control fundamentally irreducible to the hegemonic idiom of control.*

The situation becomes even more complicated, and more promising from a point of view of situating magic in history, when we realise that the productive success of the interactive, domestic domain also depends on the extent to which that domain continues to be the social context for activities entailing instrumental control over nature (in the form of production in agriculture, hunting, crafts *etc.*), while its members pursue volitional bodily self-control (as essential for both material production and biological reproduction).

In other words, the control as pursued in the hegemonic process is necessarily accompanied by various, rival experiences of control which stand on a totally different footing, which express a totally different coherence and imagery (see below), and which refer to contexts and situations of production and reproduction outside the hegemonic domain and (as the very condition for the latter's success) only *partially* subjected to it. *We submit that these experiences of control in the instrumental, bodily and interactive domain, as alternative domains of action and experience rival to the political domain of hegemonic control, are enshrined in the magic which we have sought to identify and define.*

If this theoretical reasoning is correct, we should be able to pinpoint the vestiges and indications of rival forms of control within the very expressions of hegemonic political control which the textual material can offer. And to the extent to which we are capable of writing a history of that hegemonic process, we may also become capable of identifying, decoding, and analysing, magic in history.

Let us stress that these rival vestiges of pre- and para-hegemonic control are embedded within hegemonic ideological expressions. Only a theoretical perspective coupled to a process of textual decoding, of close reading, can throw them in relief. They are therefore merely implicit, not explicit, challenges of the ideological component of the hegemonic process. Of course the hegemonic process may often call for counter-action in the form of passive resistance, rejection, rebellion, civil strife, and groups moving away outside the state's effective territory. But that is rather a different matter. What we are emphatically not saying is that magic is a consciously rebellious counter-ideology as carried by identifiable subjugated groups; rather, it is a dislocated sediment of pre-hegemonic popular notions of control, which have ended up in the hegemonic corpus.

8.1.8. From structure to contents: Magical imagery versus theistic imagery

Thus we have theoretically defined a structural and historical context for magic. Before we now turn to the case of Ancient Mesopotamia in order to apply this theoretical framework, let us finally try to make a few pronouncements about the specific contents, the mythical imagery, that might in principle be charac-

teristic of the four domains of control distinguished here. Here, a note of caution is in order: religious imagery almost by definition lacks a solid anchorage in empirical reality (even though it is ultimately inspired by the latter). Among human symbolic production religion is particularly open to free variation and creativity. Therefore structural aspects never more than suggest, and never determine, symbolic contents in this field.

The domestic (preponderantly feminine) domain of the production and processing of raw materials (grain, oil, wool *etc.*) for the immediate family, is also the domain of biological and (as far as socialisation in early childhood is concerned) cultural reproduction. As a mode of production and reproduction, the domestic domain is highly resilient in itself, as well as highly resistant to effective hegemony from the political and economic centre. Even when processes of material domestic production are assaulted and virtually destroyed, – as has been effectively the case in the North Atlantic region in the last few centuries under the impact of urbanisation, industrialisation, commoditification, proletarianisation and state control over education – the domestic domain remains the virtually autonomous locus of biological reproduction, which even the wilder Orwellian or Huxleyan[29] nightmares of human reproduction in a state context have never been able to appropriate. No system of slavery or imprisonment has ever been able to effectively and lastingly replace the human family as a locus of biological reproduction. The domestic domain is also the most obvious context of interpersonal care in times of illness and death. Thus, implicitly, the domestic domain represents a power-house independent from the political and economic centre of the society, and a challenge of the latter's premises of control. Quite likely, the domestic domain has been one of the main contexts in which the old holistic world-view and a variety of non-hegemonic cults have been preserved. In general the domestic domain has been a major locus of magic, folklore and uncaptured 'paganism' throughout human history.[30] A similar argument could be made for the relatively outlying, rural sections of Ancient Mesopotamian society, which in effect amounted to domestic communities. These features would perhaps favour a symbolic repertoire highlighting images of fecundity, femininity, continuity, and wholeness.

While rejecting the assumptions of intra-group reciprocity and insisting on a one-way process of extraction based on assumptions of absolute bureaucratic control, the hegemonic domain tends to constitute itself ideologically and mythologically after the model of the domestic domain. It is in the latter that the hegemonic domain finds, and exploits for its own interests, the imagery of legitimate authority, and of justified exchange of material products for immaterial services such as management, knowledge, ownership of means of

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[29] Orwell 1949; Huxley 1945 / 1932.

[30] This theme is less developed in Foucault's monumental history of sexuality: Foucault 1976-1984; however, *cf.* Rattray Taylor 1953; Ginzburg 1966, 1992 / 1991 / 1989. On the domestic domain and witchcraft, *cf.* van Binsbergen 2001c, reprinted as ch. 14, below.

production, protection, purification and intercession. While in the domestic domain supernatural beings (tutelary gods, ancestors) tend to provide models of, and for (Geertz 1966), the authority of living senior kinsmen, the function if not the nature of the gods undergoes profound changes when appropriated by the hegemonic domain: for there the gods come to represent the logic of extraction, its inescapability, absolute nature, violence and unaccountability – and from the domestic sphere notions of relative hierarchy and supplication are hegemonically transformed into an absolute distinction between god and man, into submission and total, impotent dependence.

But the domestic domain is not only subservient to the hegemonic domain; it also forms a context for productive and reproductive activities in which instrumental and volitional modes of control are pursued. Thus the domestic domain essentially mediates between two main models of control, on the one hand a theistic model with personalistic overtones which is pressed into service in the hegemonic process, and on the other a mechanistic, volitional (from the point of view of the actor) and thus coercive model governing the relation between man and nature, and between self and body. Here, personalism and instrumentalism, supplication and coercion may alternate in what is a composite mode of conceptualising control. While the hegemonic idiom would emphasise distance, absolute difference and total submission between god and man, the domestic domain, which also enshrines instrumental and volitional modes of control, would tend towards far greater horizontality, complementarity if not interchangeability between man and nature, between body and consciousness, between person and object; such complementarity would stress the community not only between humans, but also between humans and the non-human aspects of nature involved in human production, while at the same time situating humans also in the context of the bodily processes associated both with production and reproduction. As an expression of the successful negotiation of these contradictions, the term 'holism' would seem to sum up the non-hegemonic, domestic idiom.

We have speculated enough. Let us see if the theory presented above gets us anywhere closer to an appreciation of magic in the history of Ancient Mesopotamia.

8.2. Application to Mesopotamia

8.2.1. Magic in Mesopotamia: Modes of holism and uncapturedness

Throughout the corpus of Ancient Mesopotamian symbolic production,[31] the

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[31] General references on Ancient Mesopotamian religion and its history, for the benefit of non-Assyriological readers: Bottéro 1951, 1974; Frankfort 1948; Frankfort *et al.* 1957 / 1946; Jacobsen 1976; Sasson c.s. 1995: III part 8, 'Religion and science', pp. 1685-2094.

evidence of the hegemonic, theistic half of our fundamental contradiction is overwhelmingly present, with references to the king, his works for the gods, and particularly the pious, self-effacing references to these gods themselves, without whose exalted presence and condescending intervention no order or power can exist on earth. Yet inside this collection of ideologically and politically 'correct' statements, elements can be detected that fit in only superficially, and implicitly challenge the hegemonic process which lends structure and direction to the royal and priestly extracting process governing Mesopotamian society. Viewed in isolation these embedded elements add up to a holistic world-view in which the boundaries between man and nature are far less strictly drawn than in the orthodox theistic repertoire, and where on the basis of methods manipulating metaphor and metonym, much as described (but wrongly interpreted) by Frazer, man identifies, utilises and redirects the forces around him without divine interference.

It will be argued that these holistic passages, with their alternative view on the sources of cosmic power, are the truncated and re-ordered remnants of a pre- and para-hegemonic world-view, picked up, developed and guarded by specialists applying themselves nominally to the hegemonic order, while in fact channelling an anti-hegemonic sentiment that is actualised in crisis situations in which the theoretically infinite power of the gods fails, and man has to take care of himself. Since this holistic alternative to hegemonic power is very close to what would commonly be called magic, we see no objection to applying this term also to the Mesopotamian material, provided that our theoretical stance is not obscured by the use of such a conventional term. It is the interaction between this type of alternative material, and divine rule, that will guide our analysis of the Ancient Mesopotamian ideological system.

8.2.2. Aspects of the hegemonic history of Ancient Mesopotamia

Before we can set out to interpret whatever textual evidence we have in the light of a hegemonic history of magic, let us first sketch the bare outlines of such hegemonic processes as are discernible in the political and economic history of Ancient Mesopotamia since the late fourth millennium.

In the southern part of the alluvial plains we see the emergence, from that early date, of city states. The organisation of these early urban communities is in the hands of an elite associated with the temple as well as (somewhat later in the third millennium) with the palace and a system of law enforcement. The unifying efforts of these agencies may be detected from the fact that despite evidence of cultural and linguistic heterogeneity in the region at the time, yet the religious and political idioms are unified and more or less constant. One has the impression of an explosively expanding society trying to create a new social order out of the scattered debris of pre-existing organisations (in the fields of kinship and politics) that no longer served its needs. Although the city's public institutions (temple and palace) demonstrably established themselves as struc-

tures of production, extraction and domination, it is the imposition of this complex as a whole upon other, earlier domains of human organisation and activity which marks the hegemonic nature of the process involved. These earlier domains would include: agricultural production; the processing of food in the family which is also the main locus of biological reproduction; petty commodity production; exchange of products between settled and pastoralist elements; *etc*. Within the social, political and economic life of the society a number of domains become discernible whose interrelationship consists in the fact that one domain (that of temple and palace) reproduces itself mainly on the basis of surplus extraction from the other domains. It is perhaps useful (but no more than that) to designate these domains as 'modes of production', and their asymmetrical exploitative relationship as 'articulation'. We note that as a mode of production the temple and palace domain, far from being internally undifferentiated and egalitarian, has its own internal hierarchical structure, from the ruler to lower officials and priests; but all share in the extraction from other, pre-existing domains. At the same time this extraction process, which an outside observer might be inclined to call exploitative, conceals its exploitative nature (and perhaps even the violence facilitating that exploitation) under an effective ideology: that of the city god, for the fulfilment of whose needs man was created in the first place. Even regardless of the conscious legitimation of this structure in religious terms, it is clear that the temple and palace domain delivers an essential service probably well worth the input in terms of surplus extraction: it creates a viable social order ensuring production and security, as well as an urban and ethnic identity that people are proud of.

In the first half of the third millennium the political ideology was centred on the axis: city-god / city-ruler; there is not yet a national state, but the notion of a national religious unity is maintained by the centrality of Eridu and its god E n k i / *Ea*. The second half of the third millennium sees the development of a national kingship centred on Nippur and E n l i l . When during the second millennium Babylon becomes the uncontested capital of the nation, its god *Marduk* rises with it; at the end of the millennium the political situation is formalised in a newly created myth, *Enūma Eliš*, in which *Marduk*'s rulership is made independent of E n l i l .

From the second half of the third millennium BCE onwards there is an ever increasing quantity of evidence relating to the ins and outs of the hegemonic process. The outline of the development of the ideological system stems from (more or less) datable mythological texts linked to archaeological and historical fact, but cannot be discussed here in detail. Our opinions on magic are based less on specific texts, which are often fragmented, hybrid, and undatable, than on a contrastive grouping of the types and themes that dominate the corpus as a whole. Since it is not so much the inner development of magic, but rather its place in the ideological system that interests us here, the loss of historical detail implied by the distant view does not detract from the argument.

The present argument aims at a deep-structural reading and seeks to recon-

struct a subconscious level of structuration which as such is not open to conscious reflection by the subjects themselves. A rather similar case is presented by iconography, which also revolves on our external reading of meaning and implications which are seldom explicitly indicated by the actors. Thus, something as abstract as an alternative notion of control should not be expected to have left a precise and detailed textual formulation, the absence of which therefore cannot be construed as an argument against our reconstruction.

8.2.3. From political hegemony to religious concepts

What emerges from the evidence as the religious counterpart of political centralisation, is a centralistic idiom focusing on the god E n l i l . E n l i l , and less prominently the other gods, govern by n a m t a r / *šīmtu*,[32] that is by 'allocating tasks', 'determining the fates / destinies' of gods, man and the universe. An earlier layer of centralisation in the South focuses on E n k i and his city Eridu. It would seem, however, that Eridu was a religious centre, the touchstone of tradition (m e), rather than a political centre. That the *Sumerian King List* lists Eridu as the seat of the earliest *kingship* is undoubtedly an anachronism related to the nature of that text.

In ways which are eminently important for an understanding of Mesopotamian magic as part of a historical process, the concept of n a m t a r / *šīmtu* contrasts with another normative principle, that of m e / *parṣu*. While n a m t a r / *šīmtu* connotes the governmental decisions made by E n l i l , m e / *parṣu*[33] evokes an impersonal and timeless order, the non-volitional state of equilibrium which the universe and its constituent parts are subjected to. They are at home in the old religious centre Eridu, and guarded by its god E n k i / *Ea*. The m e / *parṣu* are not created, but they are simply there as part of the universe; they are the rules of tradition, the unchanging ways in which the world of man and things is supposed to be organised; they can be disused or forgotten, but never destroyed. Together they constitute natural law, a guideline for behaviour untainted by human or divine interference. As an impersonal cosmological principle m e / *parṣu* (and the similar Egyptian concept of *ma'at* ('right order', 'truth'; see Assmann 1990) would appear to stem from a religious repertoire predating the third millennium and rather of a Late Neolithic signature; early in the second millennium the concept looses its cosmological significance. The idea of a traditional timeless world is less capable of being manipulated for hegemonic purposes than anthropomorphic myth; it fits the loose association of small-scale village societies largely organised by kinship, while the obviously more hegemonic divine government exemplified by n a m t a r / *šīmtu* fits their reorganisation into cities and later a nation.

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[32] For the Akkadian notion of fate see Lawson 1994 / 1992.

[33] For a review of the meanings of this word see, with previous literature, see Farber 1928-; *cf.* also Oberhuber 1991: 11 *f.*

The opposition of me / *parṣu* and namtar / *šīmtu* is not just conceptually implied, but turns out to be made explicit in third millennium cosmogony (see Wiggermann 1992, esp. 287 *f*.). Herein a cosmic ocean, Namma, produces a proto-universe, Heaven and Earth undivided. In a series of stages, all represented by gods, Heaven and Earth produce the Holy Mound (dukug), which in its turn produces Enlil, 'Lord Ether', who by his very existence separates Heaven and Earth – much like Egyptian Šu. Enlil, representing the space between Heaven and Earth, the sphere of human and animal life, organises what he finds by his decisions (namtar / *šīmtu*), and thus puts everything into place: the universe becomes a cosmos. Before being permanently subjected, however, the primordial universe (Heaven and Earth) rebels; its representative, a member of the older generation of gods, Enmešarra, 'Lord All Me', tries to usurp Enlil's prerogative to namtar / *šīmtu* (*i.e.* prerogative to make decisions). He is defeated by Enlil and incarcerated in the netherworld for good. The myth can be read as a theistically-slanted argument on two modes of defining order: an immutable cosmological order (me / *parṣu*) whose unmistakable champion is Enmešarra, against a protean, individual-centred, volitional, anthropomorphic order, whose champion is Enlil. The latter reflects, on the religious and mythical plane, the hegemonic process revolving on the imposition and expansion of the centralised mode of production upon an earlier concept of the organisation of social life, production and reproduction.

The tension between divine rule and the universe to be subjugated is the theme of yet another third millennium myth, Lugale.[34] In this myth an alliance of stones is led by A z a g , 'Disorder', a version (individualised for the occasion) of a common demon of untimely disease and disorder in general. The stones rebel against having their tasks allocated (n a m t a r / *šīmtu*) by Ninurta, E n l i l 's strong arm. Needless to say their resistance proves futile, and the myth ends with a long list of stones, all given their proper functions by Ninurta. The difference between this myth and the one about E n m e š a r r a lies in the specific moment of mythical time in which the confrontation takes place. Whereas E n m e š a r r a belonged to the primordial universe that was subjugated when E n l i l organised the cosmos, the stones belong to a periphery of the universe: to rebellious mountain lands that continue to exist. Apparently the universe prior to divine rule and that outside divine rule share a tendency to rise against the prerogatives of the gods of order; and although in each case the rebellion is quenched, the very fact of its occurrence shows that divine rule is not beyond question, and that order is not completely secured. In other words, the way in which the uncaptured elements appear in the symbolic system reveals their continuing existence as a feared anti-social force and a threat to the hegemonic order.

A further development of the relation between universe and divine rule can be

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[34] van Dijk 1928- , with earlier literature; for the opposition a z a g : n a m t a r in this myth see provisionally Wiggermann 1928- / 1994: 224.

observed in *Enūma Eliš*, and will be briefly discussed below, under the heading 'the nature of Mesopotamian holism'.

8.2.4. M e / parṣu *and the holistic world-view*

If n a m t a r / *šīmtu* is the historical agency characterising the hegemonic process of which holism is the prehistoric counterpart, and if the untamed primordial universe of the m e / *parṣu* is subjugated by the same agency, then we are tempted to equate the universe of the m e / *parṣu* with that of holism and magic. In fact there is evidence supporting this point of view.

A first indication lies in the fact that the specialist concerned with magic refers, for the foundation of his art, mainly to E n k i / *Ea* (and members of his circle: his son A s a l u ḫ i , the half-god Oannes, and the sage Adapa, whom we shall discuss below). E n k i is the very same god that guards the m e / *parṣu*; in this connection it is also significant that an old form of the word for this specialist, i š i b , is written with the same sign used to spell m e / *parṣu*.

More important is the A n z û myth[35] in which the monster bird A n z û , who stole the Tablet of Destinies from E n l i l , is confronted by N i n u r t a , E n l i l 's son and warrior. When asked for his credentials Ninurta identifies himself as the emissary of the gods that rightfully determine the fates. *Anzû*, however, is not impressed since he is in actual possession of the Tablet of Fates, which makes his word as powerful as that of E n l i l and enables him to rule the m e / *parṣu*. By the power of his word (n a m t a r / *šīmtu*) he now performs a trick against his adversary: he decomposes the latter's arrows into their natural constituent parts which are then sent back to their place of origin:

> 'reed that approaches me, return to your thicket
> frame of the bow to your forest
> string, to the back of the sheep, feathers return to the birds' (Tablet II 62-65).

N a m t a r / *šīmtu* here is the power to operate the universe of inanimate things and make them change their normal ways, their m e / *parṣu,* or, in other words, to perform magic. The loss of the tablet of destinies did not affect the gods' ability to act, only their mastery over nature, and another text explains that the possession of the Tablet of Fates involved the 'secret of Heaven and Earth' (George 1986), the knowledge of which in fact entails this mastery, as we will see below. Normally this power over nature, symbolised by the possession of the Tablet of Fates, is a divine prerogative, but it can fall into the hands of malicious outsiders like *Anzû*, who use it for their own purposes. Especially in the *Anzû* myth Enlil is surnamed 'the God, Bond-of-Heaven-and-Earth' (*ilum Duranki).* This is certainly no coincidence, but relates to the theme of the myth: the epithet denotes metaphorically how Enlil keeps the universe from disintegrating, rather than a cosmic element that prevents Heaven and Earth from drifting apart. In the same vein *Marduk* warns that if he

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[35] For a recent translation, with references to text editions, see Hecker 1994.

leaves his seat of government 'the rule of Heaven and Earth will be torn asunder'.[36] The demons, adversaries of divine rule, are said to tear out the 'exalted cord, bond of Heaven and Earth' (*Udug-ḫul* 13-15:36).

Again, and as concluded above, the hegemonic rule of the gods appears to be not completely secured against the forces of reaction.

The ability to perform magical tricks can also be acquired without possession of the Tablet of Fates. This is the case in the legend of Adapa,[37] one of the models of the incantation specialist. Adapa, (E n k i /)*Ea*'s favourite servant and endowed by him with great wisdom, goes out to the sea one day in order to catch fish for the table of his divine lord, and runs into the fury of the South Wind who nearly drowns him. Adapa reacts with a curse: 'may your wing be broken', and indeed, contrary to normal experience, 'as soon as he had said it, the wing of the South Wind was broken'. By the wisdom given to him by (E n k i /)*Ea* Adapa has unexpectedly stumbled upon a way to operate nature without divine help, or in the words of *Anu* considering his decision in the matter:

> 'Why did Ea reveal to an imperfect human being
> that of Heaven and Earth,
> and did he endow him with an arrogant (kabru) heart'

Anu's speech shows that what we have called 'the way to operate nature' is the '*secret of Heaven and Earth*' ('secret' is implied by 'reveal' in the previous line), the secret of the universe regulated by the m e / *parṣu* and turned into an insecure cosmos by the hegemonic rule of the gods. Now, since death is among the fates decreed by the gods for mankind and since Adapa is able to dodge those fates, we are entitled to expect that in the end he obtained eternal life. That this is yet not the case is due to his instructor (E n k i /)*Ea* who exactly at this point closed the book of wisdom by feeding Adapa misleading information. Even E n k i / *Ea*'s humanism has its limitations, and so has the magic of the incantation specialist: he cannot revive the dead (*cf.* Michalowski 1980).

8.2.5. Theism in the arcane arts of Mesopotamia

The Akkadian 'secret of Heaven and Earth' (*pirišti šamē u erṣetim*) which we encountered above in relation to *Anzû*'s and Adapa's magic, is exactly parallel to the Latin *arcana mundi* used to denote magic and divination (*cf.* Luck 1985). This secret recurs in the aetiology of the arts of the diviner, the art of interpreting 'the signs of Heaven and Earth'.[38] In this text Enmeduranki, an ancient king of Sippar, is called before *Šamaš* and *Adad* who seated him on a throne of gold, and

> 'showed him how to observe oil on water, the privileged property (*niṣirtu*) of *Anu*

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[36] *Erra* I 170; *cf.* Cagni 1969.

[37] Edition and translation of the text, with, discussion of Adapa's place as a sage: Picchioni 1981; when this chapter was first written, in 1995, a new edition was being prepared by S. Izre'el.

[38] Bauer Asb. 2 77 r. 8, *cf.* Oppenheim, 1974.

> [E n l i l , and *Ea*], and gave him the tablet of the gods, the liver, a secret (*pirištu*) of Heaven and [Earth].'[39]

Later on in the text astrology is mentioned as well. Apparently knowledge of the 'secret of Heaven and Earth' enables not only a sage like Adapa to perform his magic tricks, but also the diviner to interpret the signs. In both cases this knowledge stems from the gods, and becomes, as is evidenced by a variety of other texts, the privileged property (*niṣirtu*) of the guild of scribes, among whom magical and divination experts: *āšipu* and *bārû* respectively. In this way potentially dangerous and anti-social knowledge is encapsulated and made subservient to the public cause represented by the rule of the gods, just as the primordial universe itself. In line with the precarious nature of divine rule over the universe, however, this optimistic presentation has not banned out the fear of an unauthorised use of this knowledge.

Earlier on we saw that the operation of nature, or briefly magic, was thought to be a prerogative of the gods and related to the way they govern Heaven and Earth by 'deciding the fates' (n a m t a r / *šīmtu*). The canonical interpretation of divination links up with this view by presenting the signs (that is whatever departs from the normal order of things) as divine operations on the inanimate world; these operations encode messages concerning the governmental decisions of the gods (n a m t a r / *šīmtu*). Like magic based on the 'secret of Heaven and Earth', the skills of understanding fate and decoding the divine message are revealed by the gods and guarded by the scholars. This is clear for instance from the *Catalogue of Texts and Authors* which starts off with works ascribed to dictation by (E n k i /)*Ea*: magic, (works about) divination, and the myth Lugale (with its companion Angim), which, as we saw above, is concerned with Fate and its adversary, the individualised demonic power A z a g .[40] For one of the divination series mentioned in this text, the physiognomic omens (*alamdimmû*), we have a very explicit statement in a Middle Babylonian colophon:

> '*alamdimmû* (concerns) external form and appearance (and how they imply) the fate of man which *Ea* and A s a l u ḫ i / *Marduk* (?) ordained in Heaven'.[41]

8.2.6. Holism in the arcane arts of Mesopotamia

Although the canonical view understands omens as messages of the gods concerning their decisions, the

> 'great mass of Mesopotamian omen material was basically non-theistic'.[42]

Omens take the normal, eternal order of things as their point of departure, and

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[39] Lambert 1967, espec. 132: 7 *f.*

[40] See pp. 64: 1 *f.* in Lambert 1962.

[41] Finkel 1988; our reference is to p. 148: 29 *f.*

[42] Cited from Saggs, 1978: 137, where this problem is discussed.

seek to derive information from whatever deviates from the normal state and course of things. A cracking beam in the house's roof (*CT* 40 3:63), intertwined lizards falling down from that beam (*KAR* 382:7), monstrous births, discolorations of the sky, it all upsets the natural order of the universe and is therefore held to be meaningful to all those dependent on this order. This idea of a mutual dependency of man and his surroundings, which above we have called holism, is not limited to Ancient Mesopotamia, and similar omens are found in India, China, and the Arabian world; they constitute an old and widespread substratum in Old World cosmology.[43]

Besides a general lack of reference to the gods, a further clue to the non-theistic dimension of divination lies in the measures prescribed to avert a predicted evil. For whereas the theistic response would necessarily be in terms of supplication and propitiation, this is regularly not what is prescribed. Instead one finds magical action which seems to dissimulate the power and even existence of personalistic gods whimsically shaping man's destiny: the ominous sign (or a model representation of it) is destroyed, the predicted evil is redirected to a substitute or countered by material objects to which amuletic properties are ascribed.

The methods used by the diviner to interpret the signs are based mainly on verbal or material association. For instance, in extispicy a sign in the form of a wedge is called *kakku* (Akkadian loan-word from Sumerian g a g , 'wedge') and generally leads to forecasts involving weapons (*kakku*) or war. Examples for material association can be found in an Old Babylonian liver model in the British Museum (*CT* 6 1 *f.*). It treats the sign 'hole' on a number of different locations, and derives its divinatory value from various metaphoric plays on the notions hole, tunnel, breach: a priestess will have illicit sexual intercourse, a secret will come out, a stronghold will be taken by the enemy, a prisoner will escape. Such associative methods try to specify a sympathetic relation between man and matter, a typical feature of the holistic world-view.

A similar case as for the diviner can be made for the incantation specialist *(āšipu)*, who nominally attributes his art to the gods, but in fact uses methods that stem from the holistic rather than from the theistic repertoire. This is clear especially in

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[43] Literature on omens in the Old World is fairly extensive but largely obscure. On omens in South Asia, see: Bijalwan 1977; Devkar 1954; Govindasami 1941; Gray 1910; Pandit 1951; Pillai 1951; Raghunathji 1885; Ray 1924; Vyas 1952-1953; Weber 1859. A discussion of omens in the Arabian world may be found in: Wellhausen 1927: 200 *f.* Representative references to omens in Africa are *e.g.* to be found in: Simmons 1956; Berglund 1989 / 1976 (see that book's index s.v. omens); Doke 1970 / 1931 (see that book's index s.v. omen). Not specifically on omens but a standard publication on African divination in general is: Peek 1991; further for Africa, cf. van Beek & Peek 2013; Devisch 1985d; Abimbola 1976; Adler & Zempléni 1972; Bascom 1969, 1980; Brenner 2000; de Boeck & Devisch 1994; Hammond-Tooke 2002; Monteil 1931; Pemberton 2000; Rodrigues de Areia 1985, Trautmann 1939-1940; Werbner 1989; and in the present book chapters 9 and 10. On omens in Greek and Roman Antiquity, *cf.* Bouché-Leclerc 1879-1882: I, 177 *f*; Flacelière 1961 / 1965 / 1976; Luck 1985: 229 *f*; Plinius Maior, *Naturalis Historia*, XVII, 38, 243. Finally, on omens in China, see: Doré 1914-1929 : Pt 1, vol 3: *Méthodes de divination* (pp. 217-322); Smith 1991 (see that book's index *s.vv.* 'omens', 'portents').

incantations of the *Marduk-Ea* type and in the *Kultmittelbeschwörungen*. In the latter type of incantations plants, minerals and animal substances are addressed and given their effectiveness as *materia magica* by a series of mythical statements relating them to the pristine purity of Heaven and Earth.

Often the k u r , 'mountain lands', appear in this context as well. The grouping of Heaven, Earth and mountain lands as the place of origin both of the demons and of the *materia magica* reveals that what we have called 'pristine purity' and the demonic share the same pre-hegemonic holistic qualities. The subject of purity, and its relation to the knowledge of the 'secret of Heaven and Earth', one of the themes of the Adapa legend, cannot be discussed here.

In the *Marduk-Ea* type of incantations the specialist justifies his choice of actions and materials by a brief, standardised mythical introduction deriving his knowledge from the humanitarian gods A s a l u ḫ i (/ *Marduk*) and E n k i (/ *Ea*). A similar case can be made for the formula *šiptu ul iatun šipat* [*DN*] ('the incantation is not mine, it is the incantation of [Deity's Name]' that occurs in many Akkadian incantations. There is an essential non-sequitur here between the theistic idiom of the mythical introduction, and the denouement in terms of a manipulation of inanimate matter constituting an application of the 'secret of Heaven and Earth', the ancient science that the theistic idiom had been unable to eradicate. Here we witness the same shift of perspective as in man's evasion of fate through destruction of the sign or through amulets.

By choosing E n k i / *Ea* as its main patron, magic reveals its foundation in the universe of the m e / *parṣu* and the antiquity of Eridu, E n k i / *Ea*'s city. Thus, although E n k i / *Ea* is a full member of the pantheon and as such fulfils his role as embedding agent, a certain tension is expected between him, the ancient guardian of the m e / *parṣu*-ordered universe, and the representatives of theistic hegemony. In fact, as we will see below, this tension, which from a different perspective S. N. Kramer (1970) has called ' E n k i / *Ea*'s inferiority complex', is attested in the demonisation of E n l i l 's rule.

The evil u d u g and a z a g demons which the incantation specialist confronts in the older magical texts, belong to the same holistic world as his counter-measures: they are the non-anthropomorphic breed of Heaven and Earth, a-moral outsiders sharing neither the burdens nor the profits of civilisation. They attack man indiscriminately, not because of his sins (a hegemonic concept), but in order to take by force what they do not get by right: food and drink. The essential characteristic of these demons is that they do not have a cult, so that they cannot profit from the co-operation with man on a regular basis as the gods do. They are not members of the civilised centre, and in many incantations the specialist adjures them by the non-theistic entities they belong to: Heaven and Earth, the untamed universe.

Surprisingly there is a second class of demons in the early incantation material, the enforcers of Enlil's rule: the personified n a m t a r / *šīmtu,* 'Destiny', himself, the g a l l a / *gallû* policemen, and the m a š k i m / *rābiṣu* inspectors. These essentially

legitimate spirits do not have a cult either, but are expected 'to eat at the table of their father Enlil'. They have a demonic quality because their commander Enlil shares an important characteristic with real demons: beyond insisting to be served in an orderly fashion, he takes no interest in man. Enlil's lack of interest in the fate of mankind is exemplified by the creation myths, in which man is created as a work force to replace the demurring lower gods whose task it is to serve under Enlil. When later the noise of man disturbs Enlil's sleep he is immediately ready to destroy his human servants, for whether by man or by the lower gods, Enlil will be served anyhow. Thus, although framed in a theistic idiom, *āšipūtu* encodes a tension between the humanitarian gods of white magic and Enlil's legal but oppressive rule, a clear anti-hegemonic tendency. It is undoubtedly to redress this evil that some very early incantations replace E n k i / *Ea* by E n l i l (Krebernik 1984: 211.).

Like the diviner, the incantation specialist uses methods based on verbal or material 'sympathies'. An example of verbal sympathy is the use of the anameru plant in a ritual 'to see', ana amari, ghosts. Material sympathies lie at the basis of substitution of the threatened person by images of various materials, especially clay.

8.2.7. The nature of Mesopotamian holism

Taken together these non-theistic modes of action (the interpretation of signs, the reaction to adversity) suggest a more or less coherent alternative to theistic power, one in which man is an integral part of a 'pure' universe (Heaven and Earth) without abnormalities (signs) and adversities (disease, demons). The presence of such disorders signals an impure or even demonic deviation from the norm, which can be interpreted and readjusted by the correct application of a secret knowledge concerning the 'design' (g i š ḫ u r / *uṣurtu*) of Heaven and Earth.[44] From what actually perspires of this secret knowledge it must be concluded that it was based on the verbal or material association of man and matter. There are many examples of this mode of thought, especially in the commentaries.

Heaven and Earth, the universe of the m e / *parṣu*, represent an empirical a-moral world that precedes and underlies the cosmos structured in theistic terms, with its personal, moral, and transcendent leadership. It is through immanent concatenation of agency that man pertains to that world of the senses, and may interpret or re-direct it by using the powers that permeate it. Such a use of power, however, becomes an usurpation of divine prerogatives from the moment the concept of a personal god gains prominence; no theistic system can afford to accept such usurpation. The subjugation (n a m t a r / *šīmtu*) of that amoral realm escaping divine control is as imperative as the incorporation of uncaptured modes of production at the peripheries and in the hidden folds of the centralised system, and in fact is its ideological double. The specialists at

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[44] For this notion and its relation to me see Farber-Flügge 1973: 181 *f.* (to 1.23 add *KAR* 4:4); *Ee* I 61 *f.* (where E a establishes the 'designs of everything' for his incantation); and *Udug-ḫul* 3:125 (where the incantation specialist states that 'the designs of E n k i ' are in his hands).

incantation and divination are the typical embedding agents, who, by vesting holistic power with a theistic idiom, effect its survival and development. By themselves the survival of holistic notions and the growing importance of the embedding agents *āšipūtu* and *bārûtu* reveal the weakness of the theistic project, and the continuing existence of uncaptured elements in the centre of civilisation. As we have seen above, the texts recognise this by implying a tension between E n k i / *Ea* and E n l i l and between m e / *parṣu* and n a m t a r / *šīmtu*, as well as by repeatedly commenting on the precarious nature of divine rule over the universe. The embedded and therefore acceptable survival of holistic magical power, and the concomitant recognition of the uncertainty of divine, moral rule, imply the peripheral existence of a non-embedded, immoral magic. This immoral and inexcusably non-theistic magic, the black counterpart of *āšipūtu*, defines witchcraft, at least from the point of view of the centre (Abusch 1989). In this definition witchcraft is an imaginary anti-institution just as permanent as *āšipūtu*, and coincides with the other counter-forces of hegemonic rule: foreign enemies, primordial gods, demons, and wild animals, the whole undomesticated universe. As we will see below, however, there is reason to believe that the centralistic view on witchcraft was not universally held, and that among the population there still existed forms of magic that were not embedded and yet not witchcraft. Of course this non-embedded magic too has a black and anti-social application, which can be called witchcraft as well; in this definition, however, witchcraft is rather something incidental, something depending on judgement, and lacks the permanence and cosmic moral dimension of witchcraft as defined in opposition to *āšipūtu*.

After *Marduk*'s rise to cosmic rulership, the place of magic in the ideological system changed. In the myth upon which *Marduk*'s universal rule is founded, *Enūma Eliš*, both E n l i l and the m e / *parṣu* as a cosmological principle have completely disappeared. The Fates (n a m t a r / *šīmtu*), once E n l i l 's instrument of rule, have now taken the place of the m e / *parṣu* as the cosmic organising principle, and pertain to the primordial universe. It is only by his superior wisdom and by his incantations (*tû*) that *Marduk* could defeat the gods of chaos, whose power stems from their possession of the Tablet of Fates: a thoroughly revised version of the E n m e š a r r a myth. Thus, although it is still the power of the word that rules the world, this word is from now on 'incantation', the same thing that is used by the magical specialist. The earlier (Old Babylonian) identification of *Marduk* with A s a l u ḫ i , E n k i / *Ea*'s son and one of the patrons of white magic, together with the decisive role of his incantations in *Enūma Eliš*, imply a solution of the tension between, on the one hand, the magic of E n k i (/ *Ea)* and A s a l u ḫ i (/ *Marduk)* and, on the other hand, E n l i l 's hegemonic rule as attested in the earlier material: E n l i l has lost his mythological significance, and one of the patrons of magic has taken over cosmic rule. In other words, magic is elevated to a hegemonic principle. This shift in the position of white magic must have corresponded with a shift in the position of its black counterpart, witchcraft, and have elevated the witch from being one among many, to constituting the

cosmic enemy par excellence of hegemonic rule.[45]

The elevation of magic, however, did not rob it from its non-theistic foundations. Implicitly it remains a counter-force of theistic rule, and its presence now at the heart of the ideological system signals a major defeat of the gods' hegemonic aspirations that in the end would result in their total subordination to the eternal forces of nature (Fate, replacing the earlier m e / *parṣu*) in astrological cosmology.[46] These changes are rooted in the shift from national state to empire, and in the concomitant universalisation of hegemonic claims implying a relative loss of control by the central powers. A detailed discussion of this very basic shift in the ideological system, however, falls outside the scope of the present chapter.

8.2.8. Non-embedded forms of Mesopotamian magic

So far we have been concerned with forms of magic embedded in a theistic framework, which for obvious reasons is textually the more common type. There are other forms of Mesopotamian magic, however, less well adapted to the hegemonic enterprise, and therefore less well attested, but especially worthy of attention in the present context. All of them seem to stem from a rural or popular background. It must be remembered here that the king, his family, and his courtiers are not only officials but also ordinary people, and that they also had problems and projects that did not derive from their official functions. This perhaps explains the interest of the scribal community in the more popular types of magic, like the potency incantations and even 'Entering the Palace', which the Assyrian king (or rather court) wants for his library (*CT* 22 1:23).

Embedded magic, orthodox *āšipūtu* so to speak, contrasts with another, complementary genre, 'the Art of the Healer', *asûtu (cf.* Ritter 1965).This art shows a number of peculiar features that distinguish it from *āšipūtu* and refer it to a more popular *Sitz im Leben*.[47] In the first place, while basically using the spoken language of the nation, Akkadian, it contains a fair amount of corrupt, misspelled and puzzling Sumerian phrases and incantations, quite in contrast to the Sumerian of the *āšipūtu* corpus, which through the ages retains a high degree of correctness and intelligibility. The difference is due, we would suggest, to a difference in transmission: whereas the *āšipūtu* corpus was written down

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[45] *Cf.* ii 7 of the late astral mythological commentary discussed in: Landsberger 1923; there, the constellation *enzu*, 'goat', is associated with Tiamat and the Witch (reference courtesy T. Abusch).

[46] For a summary of Seleucid astrological 'philosophy' through the eyes of Diodorus Siculus and Philo of Alexandria, see Cumont 1960 / 1912.

[47] Assyriology developed into a highly secluded and entrenched specialist domain already in the beginning of the 20th c. CE. Despite some Assyriologists' dabbling in psychoanalytical, postmodern, globalisation and otherwise fashionable and fundable approaches in recent decades, the tightly organised and frequently interacting Assyriological discipline has by and large failed to absorb the mainstream sociocultural and political vocabulary developed in the course of the 20th century. The originally German expression *Sitz im Leben* ´seat / situation in life´, still a frequently-used shibboleth among present-day Assyriologists, harks back to that early period and might be translated as 'emic discourse'.

early and transmitted in a more or less fixed form through the schools, the *asûtu* corpus was transmitted orally by its practitioners and thus only contained spoken Sumerian, which for a variety of reasons is something quite different from written Sumerian and easily corruptible. Generally speaking, and in contrast to *āšipūtu* with its recognisable themes and series, the whole corpus of *asûtu* is one big mess, which confirms its lateness as a scholarly interest. In the second place, it contains a large amount of near duplication both of incantations and prescriptions, which again suggest a background in actual practice, with different healers using variant forms of the same theme, all indiscriminately petrified in writing; we find here an illustration of the general principle pointed out by the famous anthropologist Evans-Pritchard, who concludes that multifarious variation of incantations points to a less guarded and more variegated context of transmission (*cf.* Evans-Pritchard 1967 / 1929). Thirdly, the corpus contains a number of (especially cosmological) incantations that represent heterodox mythologies; and finally, up to the end the *āšipu* with his theological affiliations has a much higher status than the *asû*.

It would seem that this non-consensual, crude, fragmented *asûtu* corpus comes closer to the world-view and the medical practices, not of specialists, but of the general lay population. Typical for *asûtu,* and in accordance with the above, is the avoidance of the theistic model. Afflictions are generally not attributed to gods, demons, or sin, but simply to sometimes personified entities coterminous with the names of the affliction itself. When it is stated, their aetiology resembles that of the demons, but whereas the demons are the personified breed of Heaven and Earth, the diseases are simply pieces of nature that have gone astray: fire that drips down from the stars, wind that has entered a man's body, weeds that have burst the surface of the earth. Treatment in the *asûtu* complex makes use of the very same *materia magica* as are being used in *āšipūtu*: plants, minerals, and animal substances. But whereas in *āšipūtu* the incidence of sin and sanction, propitiation and supplication is growing through time, such moral and ultimately theistic references are virtually absent from *asûtu*. Nonetheless, *asûtu* has its patron gods (Ninazu, Ninisina / Gula, and Damu), and so did not completely escape theistic interference; its gods, however, did not belong to the ruling class of the pantheon.

More folk magic can be found in a wide variety of incantations to work on someone, for potency, love, and various favours. One example from a series of such texts that entered the canonical corpus will suffice:

'Incantation: Wild ass who had an erection for mating, who has damped your ardour ?
Violent stallion, whose sexual excitement is a devastating flood, who has bound your limbs ?
Who has slackened your muscles ? Mankind has ... your ...
Your goddess has turned to you. May A s a l u ḫ i , god of magic
Unbind you by means of the plants of the mountain and the plants of the deep, and
May he give your limbs (back their) abundance through the charms of Ištar.
Incantation for Potency. Its ritual: you crush magnetic iron ore, put it into oil;
He should rub his penis, chest, and waist, and then he will recover.'[48]

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[48] From Biggs, 1967: 12 *f.*

Unavoidably there are references to gods here, but the magic lies in the image of the sexually excited equids with their impressive members, and the use of iron to strengthen the man's potency. The incidence of love incantations and related material is rather low, and most types are either isolated or known only by title from a late text that matches magical activities with stars and constellations in order to fix the best time for performance.[49] The scarcity of actual texts may be explained by the fact that such activities enter the twilight of socially acceptable and unacceptable applications of magic, or in other words, carry the suspicion of witchcraft.

The persistence of a 'magical', holistic perspective can be gleaned from the series Egalkura, 'Entering the Palace', which in actual fact constitutes a special case of the former group of magical activities.[50] The antiquity of this type of activity is hard to ascertain, but the Sumerian name and the occurrence of the land Emutbal in one of the incantations[51] point to its existence in the earlier part of the second millennium. A prescription of nine amuletic stones for a 'courtier entering the palace' has been preserved,[52] in between a number of like prescriptions for amulets for a variety of occasions, such as anger of a god, bad dreams, and demonic threats.[53] The use of magical stones and plants in a context where we expect prayers and confessions, that is, in texts dealing with (the consequences of) divine anger, is not uncommon.[54] This series of prescriptions caters for the needs of the ordinary citizen when entering the palace, the world of civil servants upon whom he is dependent for administrative and legal action. In view of our present argument this context is all the more interesting because here we deal with the very embodiment of the hegemonic process: the organisational forms and their personnel through which the complex of temple and palace imposes its hegemony. Strikingly, the prescriptions in this series read as if, in this confrontation between subject and hegemonic apparatus, the subject implicitly rejects the ideological idiom of the latter including its theistic overtones. These magical instructions make practically no reference to divine authorisation, but instead take recourse to magical objects made effective by a spell (a kind a *Kultmittelbeschwörung* sometimes even addressing Heaven and Earth): a thread thrice twined to bind the mouth of your opponent in court, a salve of powdered metals and stones to enhance your strength, or an amulet of *ashar*-stone that, on the basis of verbal association, is expected to 'turn away' (saḫaru) your adversary and appease his anger. Normally the consequences of such activities are dealt with in the context of anti-witchcraft rituals. 'Binding of the mouth' (kadibeda), 'appeasing of anger' (šurḫunga), and 'entering the palace' (egalkura) occur together in an anti-witchcraft incantation edited by W.G. Lam-

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bert.[55] Generally speaking it is clear from the anti-witchcraft texts that the witch was supposed to use the same methods as the *āšipu*: substitute images, plants, minerals, and animal substances. Like the *āšipu* she could work on ghosts and demons, but she used her ability not to chase them away and cure the patient, but to do harm to her victims.

A final application of magic that remained mostly free of theistic framing is the confrontation of snakes, scorpions, dogs, and field pests, typically rural activities. It is telling that this type of incantations which is well attested in the older material, virtually disappears from the canonical corpus.

8.3. Conclusion

The data presented in the second section of this chapter would seem to indicate the potential of the general theoretical position advocated here: that which sees magic not as a universal of human action, but as a flexible reaction of uncaptured domains to a process of political and economic domination, – a challenge to a theistic ideology of hegemony by reference to another, non-anthropomorphic, non-personalised, source of knowledge and power. In Ancient Mesopotamia the latter source was designated 'the secret of Heaven and Earth'.

Limitations of space do not permit to work out these ideas more fully, and more reflection will be required before we can hope to convince the reader that the fairly limited amount of data presented and interpreted here, is best explained by application of the theoretical model presented in the first part of our argument. On the other hand, we do not feel that we have exhausted the explanatory potential of our approach, and suggest that its application to the history of theistic cults and to witchcraft in Mesopotamia may open up new historical perspectives.

Meanwhile a number of additional general points may be made. One concerns the flexibility of the ideological component of the hegemonic process, which contrasts so strikingly with the dogged intransigence of the holistic pre-theistic world-view of in the local society. In the earlier history of Mesopotamia, mythology (one of the main instruments of hegemonic ideology formation), shows a perplexing malleability and lack of definition. Rather than constituting a corpus of *ex cathedra* truths it offers a productive grammar of possible interrelations between divine characters and thus between the societal sections that have associated with certain gods and are appropriated them for their own hegemonic purposes; *e.g.* the genealogical relations claimed to exist between the gods keep shifting, and this allows to redefine the relationships between the localized communities and polities associatied with them. This feature of the theistic idiom in itself already reveals it as an instrument of ideological control: its very flexibility is part of the ideological technology, and enables it to

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[55] Lambert 1957-1958: espec. 289: 12 *f.*

cope with ever changing situations of alignment and opposition within the evolving power structure of the regional society.

We should also consider the potential of the magical, holistic world-view for shedding its prehistoric reference, and developing into a systematic body of thought and imagery, an ideological genre in its own right. This tendency is already detectable in the various textual examples we have considered above, where whenever we encounter evidence of the holistic world-view, it turns out to be embedded in theistic terminology. Such embeddedness indicates that the ideological contents of the system have in effect been severed from the modes of production and reproduction they once served; without their former constraints they can freely develop in any viable direction. One example of this capability for systematisation can be detected in the relations between stars and other elements of the natural world that are formulated towards the end of Mesopotamian ideological history. This systematisation amounts to the rise of astrology as an increasingly integrated and sophisticated system, which imposes itself upon a whole range of pre-existing sciences, from hepatoscopy to herbalism, mineralogy and dream interpretation.[56] Despite a spate of studies, since the late nineteenth century, on the early history of astrology, few attempts have been made to explain this amazing success of 'the queen of sciences'.

In terms of the perspective offered in the present argument, two opposite interpretations would be possible.

On the one hand astrology with its emphasis on cosmological holism (the famous Hermetic adage 'as above, so below') could be viewed as the revival of an archaic world-view hidden underneath the ideological sediment of hegemony. A Babylonian attempt at the integration of celestial and terrestrial omens is preserved in a canonical text from Nineveh called by its editor 'a Babylonian diviners manual'. Here we read:

> 'The signs on Earth just as those in the Sky give us signals. Sky and Earth both produce portents, (and) though appearing separately, they are not, (because) Sky and Earth are interrelated (*ithuzu*)'.[57]

The final phrase seems to imply a form of the same cosmic holism as attested in the Hermetic tradition.

Or, on the other hand, astrology could be seen as the decaying aftermath of hegemonic theism, giving on to hegemonic aspirations of such universalist, *i.e.* (in political terms) imperialist, dimensions that no longer individual gods, but

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[56] Major publications on astrology in Ancient Mesopotamia up to Seleucid times include the following: al-Rawi & George 1991-1992; Baigent 1994; Bezold & Boll 1911; Bezold 1911, 1918-1919; Hunger 1992; Lambert 1987; Miller 1988; Oppenheim 1969; Reiner 1985. 1995; Rochberg-Halton 1984, 1987a, 1987b, 1988a, 1988b, 1989; Rochberg-Halton *et al.* 1975 / 1981; Sachs 1952; Schott 1938: 194 *f.*; Ungnad 1941-1944; van Soldt 1995; Walker 1989; Weidner 1941-1944, 1954-1956, 1968-1969, 1959-1960.

[57] Oppenheim, 1974: 204, 207. The Hermetic adage, dates from the beginning of the Common Era: 'as above so below', also paraphrased in the *Tabula Smaragdina* (Ruska 1926), *cf.* Saul 1989-1993.

the impersonal mechanism of the heavens as a whole, would offer the appropriate imagery. In the latter case the rise of astrology would be intimately related to claims of universal hegemony, *cf.* its central role in the state religion (when it was still mundane astrology, catering for the state and not yet for individuals) and its suitability for political imagery in the Persian, Seleucid and Roman empires. Perhaps we need not even choose between these alternatives: the success of astrology may have consisted in the fact that it combined, in a unique fashion, both hegemonic and pre- or para-hegemonic references. Certainly, more is involved here than merely a mutation in the hegemonic process: the expansion of astrology involved a shift from mundane to personal astrology, and may be in part attributable to this very shift.[58] Baigent's claim that this change came about as a result of Persian influence cannot be supported, since there is no evidence of personal astrology in the Zoroastrian corpus.[59]

Finally a word on the authors of the corpus we have tried to elucidate: the magicians, diviners and healers of Ancient Mesopotamia. On the one hand they were the champions of the theistic system, composing and adapting texts, and educating the public while making house calls; on the other hand they kept lapsing into holistic modes of thought and presentation. A likely explanation for this remarkable ambivalence lies in their position betwixt centre and population. They catered not only to the needs of the state, but also to those of the public, where at least part of their pay and unavoidably some of their ideas came from.

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[58] *Cf.* Baigent 1974.

[59] *Cf.* Mackenzie 1964; Gordon 1975.

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

The evidence from geomantic divination

Transformation processes in Africa did not in the least start with European colonial rule nor with the advent of Islam on the African continent in the 1st century AH / the seventh century CE. Africa has since long been recognised as humankind's cradle, and in the last two decades as the cradle of Anatomically Modern Humans, so some of the most significant, earliest transformation processes of human history must have taken place there. Moreover, the Sahara region and the Ethiopian highlands played a major and independent role in the domestication of food crops and animals during the Neolithic, so that these regions deserve pride of place in an extended Fertile Crescent extending from West Africa to China. However, when we seek to address African transformation processes in the context of Islam – as was the theme of the conference at which the present argument was first presented – one fairly common approach is still what we might call 'the Trimingham model', although its employ was by no means initiated by that seminal Christian writer[1] – for the same model informs part of the Islamic writing on Islam in Africa. The model consists in juxtaposing

1) on the one hand African 'traditional' (I prefer 'historic') religion, which is assumed to date from before the advent of Islam and to be historically entirely independent from Islam; and on the other

(2) Islam, as a more or less coherent body of beliefs and practices which is as-

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[1] *Cf.* Trimingham 1962, 1964, 1965, 1968, 1976.

sumed to be initially alien to the African continent and to have progressively invaded it, striking all sorts of locally specific compromises with pre-Islamic traditions.

However, in the light of work claiming a North East African provenance for the Semitic language family and for the Afroasiatic linguistic macrophylum as a whole,[2] African historic religion and Islam may be surmised to share a common origin on African soil. The Afrocentrist movement (as inspired by the writings of the Senegalese natural scientist and cultural philosopher Cheikh Anta Diop,[3] and those of his African American predecessors) could profitably have explored these communalities. But it was kept from doing so because, from the 1950s onwards, a different specific role was assigned to Islam in the identity construction of Blacks in the North Atlantic (and of those who, on a global scale, use the latter as role models). In that context, what counted about Islam was not so much where it came from, but the fact that it could increasingly serve as a religious, moral, political, and even economic alternative to dominant, North Atlantic symbolic imports.

Without pursuing this tempting line of analysis, the present chapter proposes a partial deconstruction of the time-honoured distinction between African historic religion and Islam. It seeks to demonstrate that at least one major aspect of African historic religion, notably geomantic divination, has been far from historically independent from Islam but in fact constitutes a *transformative localisation*[4] of dominant aspects of the Islamic occult sciences (*'Geheimwissenschaften'*). The astrologically-based branch of Islamic divination called علم ألرمل *ᶜilm al-raml* ('sand science', *i.e.* geomancy),[5] in Africa has engendered such dominant divinatory complexes as Ifa, Sixteen Cowries (both West Africa), Sikidy (Madagascar) and Hakata (Southern Africa), as well as many less formal and less famous lesser geomancies.

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[2] Ehret 1996; however, also see Militarev 1996, 2002; Militarev & Shnirelman 1988, advocating a Levantine / Palestinian homeland associated with the Natufian archaeological culture, which I consider more plausible, although I have certainly no specialist authority on this point.

[3] Diop 1955, 1959, 1974. On the Afrocentrism debate: Appiah 1993a; Asante, 1990; Berlinerblau 1999; Bernal 1996; Fauvelle 1996; Kershaw 1992; Lefkowitz 1997; Van Sertima & Williams 1989; Verharen 1995; Winters 1994; Mudimbe 1997; van Binsbergen 1997a, 2005a, 2011e.

[4] On this concept, *cf.* the indexes of van Binsbergen 2003b, 2015, and the present book.

[5] On the basis of an vague concept of 'geomanti[c]a' circulating in medieval occult sciences, Hugo Sanctgallensis, a major translator of Arabic manuscripts in the early second millennium CE, chose this term as the translation of the Arabic terms *ḫaṭṭ al-raml* and *ᶜilm al-raml*: 'calligraphy, or science, of sand'. *Psammomancy, i.e.* 'divination with the use of sand' would have been much better, considering the established nomenclature of the numerous other forms of divination (*cf.* le Scouézec *et al.* 1965). The Latin neologism *geomanti[c]a,* for divination (Greek: *mantikē*) by the element 'earth' (Greek: *gē*) rather than air, fire or water, as a distinct element, is first attested in fragments from the Roman encyclopaedic writer Varro (second century CE) (Bouché-Leclerq 1975: I, 1: 119). Ancient divination being full of chthonic elements, it cannot be determined if Varro referred to any specific technique. From the late Middle Ages onwards the Latin term 'geomantia' was exclusively applied by European translators and practitioners to Arabian *ḫaṭṭ* divination, which in their hands became a cornerstone of European esoterism.

The larger part of this chapter will be occupied by the elaboration of this point. In the conclusion I will suggest that Africa's historical dependence on Islam is not limited to divination but extends to board games, spirit possession and musical instruments. Nor should Islam be considered as the ultimate origin of these complexes, but rather as a particularly effective vehicle of reformulation and onward spread, of symbolic repertoires whose ancient history encompasses much of the Old World. In the next chapter, 10, we shall see that other world religions, foremost Buddhism, have played a similar role in absorbing and transmitting earlier local religions forms.

The purpose of such arguments is not to deprive African societies of their historical heritage, but to demonstrate that they are much more intricately a part of the wider world, and have always been, than would be suggested by the entrenched reified, and utterly othering, images of African religion and culture which are still circulating, both in professional African Studies, among Africans, and among the general public globally.

9.1. The Francistown four-tablet oracular system and its implications

Many herbalists and spirit mediums of Southern Africa use, as the dominant material apparatus by means of which the local variety of *geomantic divination* is carried out (*cf.* Figs 9.1, 9.2), *four rectangular or triangular tablets* (largest dimension about 10 cm) which are fashioned out of wood, bone, ivory or (among the San populations) leather. All four tablets are different from each other (in terms of shape, notches at the basis, and markings distinguishing between the front and the back of each tablet); each tablet has a distinct name and is identified as male or female, and as senior or junior. Thus when the tablets, in the course of a divinatory session, are cast from the cupped hands of the diviner or the client, sixteen different configurations can form.[6] Each configuration is named and interpreted according to a memorised yet highly conventionalised interpretative catalogue of meanings.

Against the background of my training in cultural anthropology, I would have been inclined to consider these tablets as items of a strictly local African culture. However, by 1990, *en route* from being an ethnographer to becoming an intercultural philosopher. I was forced to reconsider cultural specificity.

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[6] The general formula is $C = n^k$, where

C = the number of possible different configurations

n = the number of different values each tablet can assume (in this case 'front up' or 'front down', which means that n= 2), and

k = number of tablets (here: k = 4)

In this case, $C = 2^4 = 16$.

After twenty years of studying African religion, physically at close quarters as a partici-pant observer but from a reserved epistemological distance, in the course of field-work in a Botswana town I had become a traditional diviner-priest (*sangoma*), an achieve-ment which in itself implied the potential overlap and permeability of African and North Atlantic symbolic domains (van Binsbergen 1991a). Now my newly acquired pro-fessional status would seem to be incompatible with further religious ethnography, with all the distancing and subordinating objectification this entailed at the time. Nei-ther could I bring myself to write about the details of the social and psychiatric case material which automatically came my way as the therapist of my Botswana patients. What to do? Could I find a perspective from which my transcultural stance could yet be combined with a recognisable professional form of scientific knowledge production?
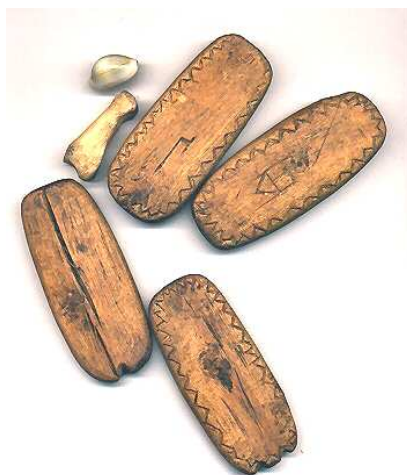

Fig. 9.1. My divining tablets (*Hakata, Ditlaola*) as received from the Francistown cult leader Mrs Rosie Mabutu a few days before her death in September 1989.

I had now in my possession these mysterious rough wooden tablets of the *sangoma* oracle, consecrated in the blood of sacrificial animals and periodically revived by im-mersion in rain water and application of the fat of sacrificial animals. They seemed to represent the epitome of strictly local cultural particularism. They seemed to have risen from the village society of Southern Africa at some indefinite Primordial Age, and the same seemed to apply to the interpretation scheme which names the sixteen specific combinations which may be formed by the tablets when these are ritually cast. The lo-cal oracle of four tablets had been described by missionaries as long ago as four hun-dred years (*Cf.* dos Santos 1901 / 1609). 'The old woman like a stone', 'the old male witch like an axe', 'itching pubic hair like a young woman's', 'the uvula like a youthful penis' – this is how the four tablets are named, and their various combinations have connotations of witchcraft, ancestors, taboos, sacrificial dances, and all varieties of lo-cal animal totems. Could it possibly be more authentic and more African? For good reason had I, at the time, described my initiation (which confirmed me as an accom-plished specialist in this divination and therapy system) as

> 'the end point of a quest to the heart of Africa's symbolic culture'. (van Binsbergen 1991a: 314)

> But soon I had to admit that this romantic suggestion of extreme locality was a mere il-
> lusion, under which lurked a reality which had enormous consequences for my theo-
> retical and existential stance as an ethnographer and a world citizen. The
> interpretational scheme, right up to the nomenclature of the sixteen combinations,
> turned out to be an adaptation of fourth-century (AH) / tenth-century (CE) Islamic
> magic, with a Chinese iconography (consisting, just like *I Ching / Yi Jing*, of configura-
> tions of whole and broken lines), and at the same time astrological implications such as
> had been elaborated another fifteen or twenty centuries before, in Babylonia. The local
> cultural orientation in which the inhabitants of Francistown had entrenched them-
> selves, and from which I initially felt painfully excluded to such an extent that becom-
> ing a *sangoma* seemed the only way out left to me, turned out not to be at all the
> incarnation of the absolute other, but – just like my own cultural orientation as a North
> Atlantic scholar – a distant offshoot of the civilisations of the Ancient Near East, and
> like my own branch of science it turned out to have been effectively fertilised by an ear-
> lier offshoot from the same stem: the Islamic civilisation.[7]

This amounted to a head-on collision with the central theory of classic cultural anthropology since the 1930s: the temporal and spatial specificity of distinct, for instance African, societies, the assumption of their being closed onto them-selves and bounded, of their having a unique internal integration and systema-tics, and in general the idea that something like 'a culture' exists.

This insight was for me the trigger to start a comprehensive research project, which has kept me occupied since the early 1990s, and of which the present chapter is another instalment.[8] But before we discuss some of the results of this project, let us first familiarise ourselves with the four-tablet oracle in action:

> 'As one of the many daughters of Mr R. Sinombe, the high priest of the Nata shrine deep
> in rural Northern Botswana, of the ancient and widespread Mwali territorial cult, Jane (21
> years of age), an unattached typist living in Botswana's booming Francistown, has grown
> up in a milieu where divination, mediumistic cults and herbalism are taken for granted. A
> prominent place among her adolescence memories is occupied by the annual meetings of
> the Kwame / Legwame Traditional Association – one of the several Botswana guilds of
> traditional healers, and the one through which her father pursued the local continuity of
> the Mwali cult in a formal organisational shape well within Botswana's Societies Act (*cf.*
> ch. 5, above) –, with over a dozen of traditional healers discussing, celebrating and offici-
> ating at her father's spacious Nata homestead at 200 km north-west from Francistown.
> Only the previous year she was instrumental in escorting one[9] of the novices of
> MmaShakayile, a particularly prominent cult leader, to Nata for official registration with
> her father's guild. By that time Jane was still enrolled in a typing course. Meanwhile she
> has finished the course and had managed to find work as a secretary at a contractor's of-

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[7] van Binsbergen 1994a, 1995a, 1996a, 1996b, 1996c, 2003b, 2012d, 2015.

[8] The project has meanwhile resulted, among other publications, in an edited collection on the work of Martin Bernal (van Binsbergen 1997a, reprinted and augmented 2011e), and an abortive book manu-script rendered obsolete by my subsequent research and writings, and originally entitled *Global Bee Flight: Sub-Saharan Africa, Ancient Egypt and the World: Beyond the Black Athena thesis*.

[9] I myself.

fice. Her euphoria over this hard-to-find job has not lasted long: within a few months she finds herself the centre of a frightening whirlpool of backbiting and slander, in the course of which her financial integrity is questioned and several candidates have presented themselves to take over her newly-gained job. Her father occupies a towering position in the cult but he himself does not engage in divination, he is not staying in Francistown, and ever since her parents' divorce Jane's attitude towards him has been very ambivalent. So it is to MmaShakayile that she now turns for divinatory clarification and advice. This cult leader's urban yard in Monarch, an upgraded former mine compound, in its various rambling structures houses a large number of junior relatives and lodgers who have no dealings with the cult (*cf.* above, ch. 4); yet the yard is foremost, in popular perception, a cultic lodge, where junior adepts (Ndebele: *amathwaza*, singular *thwaza*) are being puri-fied and trained in order to assume, ultimately, the office of *sangoma* spirit medium, which includes trance divination, officiating at laymen's sacrifices to the latter's ances-tors, herbal therapy, and operating the region's characteristic four-tablet oracle (*Hakata / Ditlaola*) – the local variant of geomancy. Rarely does the old lady throw the tablets her-self these days, but her senior adepts are fully capable of conducting a divinatory session without her intervention.

Upon her arrival at the yard, one evening, Jane presents herself to Molly, senior adept and MmaShakayile's granddaughter, whom she finds chatting in front of the main house. She briefly explains the purpose of her visit, and is taken inside where she is seated on a mat, the legs stretched in front of her. Jane produces her five-Pula note,[10] and MmaShakayile's sacred *Hakata* (four small flat wooden tablets each with distinct markings) are produced. Molly is to preside over the session, with MmaNleya and Johannes[11] – both *amathwaza* about to graduate – in attendance in order to complement Molly's interpretations and to gain further experience and confidence. After Jane has imparted her own life essence to the tablets by handling them and blowing over them, Molly throws them down on a gaudy cloth featuring pictures of lions in the sacred colours red, white and black. She names the tablets' first fall as *Chilume*[12] (one of the sixteen configurations that result when each of four tablets can end up face up or face down), and interprets this fall in terms of an inquiry about sorcery. Then she throws again, naming and interpreting this fall in its turn, and so on, occasionally handing the tablets to Jane to let her throw, and persuading her, through interjections, questions, hesitations, to formulate specific questions and to respond to the ever more detailed and dramatic tale that gradually shapes up out of the oracular pro-nouncements of Molly and her two junior colleagues: a tale of competition between col-leagues at Jane's place of work, and of the sinister, occult weapons which her adversaries are deploying. In the final part of the session, which all together comprised twenty-eight throws, Jane is exhorted to rely on her ancestors, and on MmaShakayile's counter-medicine (for which an additional P10 is to be charged), in order to fight back her colleagues' attacks. The *sangoma*s reassure her that she will keep her job and will even gain a supervisory rank in the near future. (This soon came true, incidentally.) Momentarily relieved, Jane leaves the yard, and stops a taxi to take her all the way back to her room in the Block VII residen-

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[10] Pula, the Botswana currency. At the time, P1 equalled about US$0.50, and the legal minimum wage was just below P1 per hour; Jane earned about 50% more than that.

[11] I myself.

[12] , *i.e.* the configuration where all tablets are upside down except for the senior male tablet.

tial area, a distance of some fifteen kilometres all across the sprawling town."[13]

shaded symbols: reverse side up

Fig. 9.2. A four-tablet divinatory set from Southern Africa.

Before we can state the case for the Southern African four-tablet oracle being essentially geomantic, and spell out the implications of this finding for the relation between Islam and so-called African traditional religion, we need an introduction to geomancy in general.

9.2. General characteristics of the geomantic system

First introduced into West European intellectual life in the 11th century CE, when numerous Arabic texts were translated into Latin, geomancy as a divination method became associated with the most prominent representatives of the occult sciences in medieval and Renaissance times, including Bernardus Silvestris, Roger Bacon, and Albertus Magnus. In Arabic the geomantic system was originally known as ᶜilm al-raml, ḫaṭṭ al-raml or ḫaṭṭ bi'l raml. It was treated extensively by such learned authors as Muḥammad al-Zanātī, ᶜAli b. ᶜUmar, Fadhl b. Sahl al-Saraksi, and Ahmad b. ᶜAli Zunbul (Klein Franke 1973). In Europe, this imported system was pursued by major Renaissance magicians such as Agrippa (1967 / 1533) and Fludd (1687 / 1707), and subsequently popularised through mass-produced 'Books of Fate'. 'Punctuation' (as it was called after its characteristic patterns of dots) became a self-help oracle even in the rural peripheries of European life right up to modern times. An example of West European popular geomancy comes to us in the person of the nineteenth-century farmer Hinrich Fehse, one of the characters in Theodor Storm's (1817-1888) novelette 'Draussen im Heidedorf':

> "...he produced my mother's punctuation book from the sewing box. He set himself opposite me and then started to produce dots with chalk on the table. He did this with such urgency and got such a blush in the process that I asked him: 'Hinrich, what is it

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[13] Author's field-notes.

that you are punctuating on, after all?' 'Shut up, shut up', he said. 'Keep to your sewing job!' – But without him noticing I leaned over the table and saw at which number in the book he held his finger.– So the question was as if the sick person would get better? – I kept quiet and went on with my work, and he stipulated on, counted 'even' or 'odd', and finally punctuated the figures [= configurations] with chalk on the table." '[14]

One of the earliest documentary attestations of geomancy in an Islamic context was identified by Faḥd (1966: 196) in his monumental study *La divination arabe*, in the writings of Ibn al-Aᶜrābī, who died 230 AH. / 844 CE.

> 'Ce procédé [*i.e.* geomancy], considéré par Doutté comme une modernisation d'*attarq bil-'hasat*[15], est déjà décrit par Ibn al-A'rabi [16] en ces termes: "Le *hazi* s'assied et fait tracer, par un jeune garçon à son service, des lignes sur le sable ou de la poussière; il les trace avec agilité et promptitude, de manière qu'il soit impossible de les compter. Puis, sur l'ordre du maître, il les efface deux à deux, tout en disant: 'Vous deux, témoins oculaires [de la volonté des dieux],'[17] faites apparaître promptement l'évidence" ![18] S'il n'en reste à la fin que deux lignes, c'est signe de succès; mais s'il n'est reste qu'une, c'est signe d'échec et de malheur." (Faḥd 1966: 197 *f.)*

In subsequent centuries, the system's astrological format and idiom became more and more pronounced. It rapidly spread over the Islamic and Jewish intellectual world, and hence into Europe, Africa and the Indian Ocean region. After the thirteenth century CE, much of this spread was due to a famous and much circulated treatise known, among other titles, as *Kitāb al-faṣl fi uṣūl ᶜilm al-raml* ('Book on Discerning the Principles of Sand Science') written by Abū ᶜAbd Allah Muḥammad al-Zanātī. The latter probably flourished in the first half of the thirteenth century CE. Two arguments support this dating. In the first place, Zanātī is considered a contemporary of 13th-century geomancer Ibn Mahfūf al-Munajjīm, who died before 664 H. / 1265 CE (Faḥd 1966: 201); and secondly, his treatise on geomancy was translated into Greek verse, from the Persian, by the monk Arsenius[19] in 1266 CE (Faḥd 1978). Exceptionally for an Islamic author,

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[14] Helm 1985: 72 *f.* My English translation is based on the Dutch text, since I could not locate the German edition.

[15] 'Casting of pebbles' [italics added – WvB], *i.e.* lithoboly, which is incidentally a prescribed ritual feature of the *hajj*, the sacred pilgrimage to Mecca, as one of the five pillars of Islam.

[16] Died c. 230 AH / 844 CE, 81 years old; *cf.* Brockelmann 1937-42, Supplementband I: 179; the source is: al-Alusi, n.d.: II, 323; *cf.* Faḥd 1966: 195 n. 4. This Ibn al-ᶜArābī is of course not to be confused with that great religious writer of the same name, who flourished several centuries later; *cf.* Chittick 1994.

[17] The plural for a designation of the divine is, for an Islamic writer, most remarkable, and implies that writer's awareness that the practice in question is pagan, pre-Islamic.

[18] Here Faḥd (1966) gives a long philological footnote citing passages from the work of al-Alusi and al-Zabidi; and refers to: Goldziher 1902: 139 *f.*; all of which is suggestive of an intimate link between geomancy, belomancy (divination by the shooting of arrows) and ornithomancy (divination by observing the behaviour of birds).

[19] Steinschneider 1956: 7, in his typical stenography, refers to a MS copy of Arsenius's translation, which however I failed to locate:

> 'Arsenius, ein Mönch, *übs* [übersetzte] (126) die arab. Geomantie von al-Zanati aus dem Persischen (daher Z. als 'Perser' bezeichnet in griechischen Versen, Probe aus ms Wien in Lambec, Comm. ed. Kollar p. 554 n. 140; Nicoll, Catal. p. 327; vgl. HÜb 855)'

Zanātī's name always appears without a patronym, as if he was an adopted stranger in the context where he gained fame and where his works were preserved. The epithet al-Zanātī links him with the Moroccan tribe of the Zanāta (Monteil 1931: 89; Faḥd 1966, 1978). In other contexts however he is considered a Persian, probably because the *Kitāb al-façl fi uçūl ᶜilm al-raml* gained fame particularly in its Persian version, which may or may not have been the original.

Although there is – as we shall see – an overwhelming scholarly consensus that the latter-day *Ifa* and *'Sixteen Cowries'* in West Africa derive directly and demonstrably from the Islamic prototypes, an early, original North West African input into the overall geomantic system is suggested by the early circulation of Berber names for the sixteen basic geomantic configurations,[20] and by the prominence of proto-geomantic cultural forms in the latter-day North West African material (*cf.* Pâques 1964). Considering this great variety of local geomancies one is tempted to hypothesise that North West Africa was one of the original independent source areas for the later, classic geomantic system, before its codification in Abbaṣid Iraq by the turn of the first millennium CE Al-Zanātī, with his obscure origin, may then perhaps have been not so much a Berber *shaykh*, let alone a Persian, but a West African who mediated the West African proto-geomantic tradition and formalised it in line with the evolving geomantic format of mainstream Islamic scholarship at the time. Blacks could and did rise to positions of great esteem and authority in the classical world of Islam, *e.g.* the Iraqi literary writer Djāhiz / Jahiz is reputed to have been black. However, a far more likely explanation for the absence of stated antecedents of al-Zanātī is suggested by Corcos' insistence that there are extensive Jewish influences in various Moroccan tribes especially the Zenata; the latter continued in large numbers to adhere to Judaism or Christianity despite the Islamic conquest; Zenata or Znata is even openly used as a Jewish name.[21] Rather than admitting a Jewish background to so popular an author of Islamic magic, tradition may simply have stripped al-Zanātī of all background identity. Yet, as we shall see shortly, it is not very likely that this form of geomancy originated from within Judaism – where also time-honoured and religiously sanctioned divinatory alternatives had been available in the form of *gematria* and the *Kabala*.

The latter reference coded 'HÜb' is to: Steinschneider 1893. Note the designation 'Persian' for al-Zanātī, which Steinschneider exclusively interprets in terms of the use of Persian as a medium in translation. Perhaps al-Zanātī had actual Persian connections; *cf.* his appeal to that other legendary authority with eastern connotation, Ṭumṭum al-Hindi. But the name Zanātī suggests a North West African origin.

[20] Steinschneider 1877, where a table gives the Berber nomenclature of geomantic configurations, among others; also *cf.* Steinschneider 1864: 177 *f.*

[21] Corcos 1964, espec. (54:) 273, 278 *f.* n. 18; when Corcos traces the West African peregrination of the Muslim Zenata tribe of Kunte, we are perhaps hitting on a possible transregional source of West African geomancies.

no.	fig.	Arabic name	Latin name	standard interpretation	planet	zodia-cal sign	value
1	⸬	al-nusrat al-dakhil inward victory	fortuna major	The most fortuitous geomantic figure: happiness, success in all domains, fulfilment of all desires, fortune, money	☉	♌ (≈≈)	+
2	⸬	al-nusrat al-kharidj outward victory	fortuna minor	Medium happiness, a moderate success. Favourable to moderate ambitions, but not to great risks, nor to excessive desires. The culmination point of a period of success or happiness is past, but the period itself continues.	☉	♌ (♉)	+
3	⸬	tariq road	via	Road, route, waterway, journey, the traveller, to depart, to roam, to visit, means of transport, life, guide.	☽	♋ (♌)	o
4	☰	djama'a meeting	populus	People, crowd, populace, large collections of people, big cities, democracy, to collect, to concentrate, to bring together without order	☽	♋ (♋)	o
5	⸭	idjima' assembly, meeting, communion	conjunctio	Conjunction, union, encounter, unity regained. Friendship and love. Grouping, assembly, meeting. Communion, community. To participate, to sympathise, to converge.	☿	♊/♍	o
6	⸬	bayed whiteness	albus	White, whiteness; purity; cold. Ice, snow. The calm of death. To sleep; to slow down. Peace, light, spiritual elevation.	☿	♊/♍ (♋)	o
7	⸭	nakiy al-khad gracious cheeks	puella	Girl, woman, female sex. Female animals. Virginity, chastity. Gentleness and grace.	♀	♉/♎	+
8	⸬	al-kabd al-kharidj outward capture	amissio	Loss; failure to obtain. Lack of success, to be shipwrecked, to decline. To go away, to end. To fall in ruin, to ruin oneself	♀	♉/♎ (♏, ♍)	-
9	⸭	djaudale/ kausadj/ fatkh downy/with scarce beard/chick/joy	puer	Boy, man, young man, the male sex. Solidity and limness; power	♂	♈/♏ (♊)	+
10	☰	hamrah redness	rubeus	Red, redness. Excitement, stimulus; force, violence. To desire, to take, to capture, to kill. Blood, fire, war.	♂	♈/♏ (♊)	-
11	⸭	al-kabd al-dakhil inward capture	acquisitio	To acquire, to possess, to take home. To take, to capture, to steal. To gain, to carry the prize, to be admitted. To benefit; to pass to a higher grade.	♃	♐/♓ (♈)	+
12	☰	al-lahyan/ al-ahyan beard/ (propitious) times	laetitia	Joy, happiness, health, light, success, victory, advantages of all kinds. Agreement	♃	♐/♓ (♌)	+
13	⸭	'uklah closed circle, link	carcer	Prison, to be imprisoned (literally and figuratively). Diabolical possession, magic. Egoism, solitary confinement, pregnant woman. To enclose, to conserve, to protect, to attach.	♄	♑/≈≈ (♓)	-
14	☰	ankis reversed	tristitia	Distress, unhappiness, pain and illness. Shadows and obscurity. Defeat; disad-vantages of all kinds. Disagreement, difficulties, irritation. Sorrow; mourning.	♄	♑/≈≈ (♏)	-
15	⸭	rayat farah/ al-'ataba al-dakhil flag of joy/inward threshold	capul draconis	Internalisation, introversion, the inside orld. Mysticism, meditation. Development of the faculties of the soul. Philosophical deepening of the world.	☊	no agree-ment	+
16	⸭	al-'ataba al-kharidj outward threshold	cauda draconis	Externalisation, extroversion, the outside world. Action, development of the facul-ties of the body, the active and intensive life. Illusion, fraud and deception.	☋	no agree-ment	-

Table. 9.1. The sixteen geomantic figures, their names in Arabic and Latin, their meaning, planetary and zodiacal association, and their overall benefic or malfic nature.
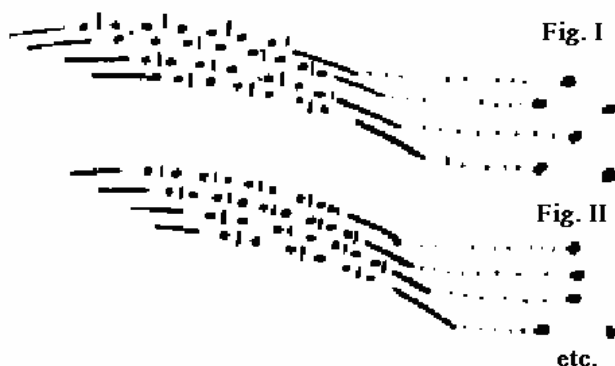
338

Les seize figures du sikidy.

Fig. 9.3. Striking the soil in order to form a geomantic configuration (after Ferrand 1891-1902: I, 76).

Geomantic divination can be said to consist of three interrelated features:

(1) a physical apparatus serving as a random generator

> *e.g.* the diviner strikes four times with his walking stick on the ground in a sideways, bouncing movement, thus producing four separate sets of a fair number – say, 23, 17, 32, 12 – of distinct indentures on the soil; *cf.* Fig. 9.3.

(2) a set of rules which allow for the translation, i.e. coding, of the numerical outcome of the random generator in terms of culturally agreed specific values with a divinatory meaning

> in the same example, the totals of 23, 17, 31 and 12 yield, for bottom to top, distinct scores for the four lines out of which the geomantic configuration is to be composed: two dots or a horizontal line for even, one dot for uneven, so: ⦂ or ⋮ ; in the most elaborate, standard variants of geomancy four independent configurations are produced initially (out of sixteen runs of the random generator, here: sixteen times striking the soil), and through simple algorithms (see Fig. 9.5) a further twelve dependent configurations are calculated out of these four; the fifteenth and sixteenth configuration are then decisive for the overall interpretation, while the first twelve configurations provide additional shades of interpretation in the light of the widely-held conventional meaning of the twelve astrological houses,[22] the imaginary aspects (astrologically meaningful angles between projected planets) to be constructed between the various configurations, *etc.*

(3) an interpretative catalogue listing such divinatory meanings and accessing them through the assigned codes

> (in our example, ⦂ or ⋮ is named (al-Zanātī 1923) 'Inside Threshold' (*al-ᶜataba al-*

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[22] *E.g.* House I: bodily, psychological and intellectual constitution; House II: finance, mobile property; House III: siblings; House IV: parents, heredity; *etc.*

dākila) or 'Flag of Joy' (*rāyat farah*), a name inspired by the formal, strictly graphic characteristics of the geomantic configuration (*cf.* ⁞ or ⁞ *al-Ṭarīq* 'Path'; in ⁞ or ⁞; the upper horizontal line then becomes the threshold – *i.e.* where the road ends – or a flag, in the latter case the three lower dots a flagpole), underneath which lurks the astrological concept of the Dragon's Head (*al-Rās al-Tinnīn,* Latin: *Caput Draconis*).[23] The interpretation varies considerably but is often positive, exulting, regal, subject to qualifications and refinements depending on a more elaborate astrological reading of the configurations in combination.

In geomancy, the features (2) and (3) as outlined above tend to considerable standardisation, which is mainly enforced by the literate Islamic context within which the geomantic system has spread all over the world: interregional trade, conquest, and the spread of Islam. Whatever the specific forms and internal mechanics of the random generator used in a particular time and place, the divinatory process stands out as geomantic in so far as its numerical outcome tends to be translated into the conventional geomantic configurations: sixteen different configurations which are arrived at by the construction of four horizontal rows, each element consisting of one dot (for the outcome 'odd' of a particular chance procedure, *e.g.* making an uncounted number of dots on the ground (*cf.* Fig. 2) or on a piece of paper; throwing pebbles, shells, sticks *etc.*) or two dots (for 'even'). In this way patterns of the typical and well-known geomantic configurations are produced:

$$\vcenter{\text{[sixteen geomantic dot-configurations]}}$$
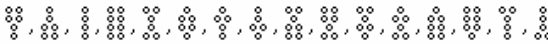
Two dots on the same horizontal line may also be connected so as to form horizontal lines (an obviously secondary usage common in Arabic contexts):

$$\vcenter{\text{[sixteen geomantic line-configurations]}}$$
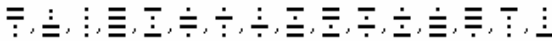
A further point of standardisation is that these configurations tend to be interpreted according to literate or memorised catalogues in which these geomantic configurations continue to carry an association, however remote and distorted, as *e.g.* in the case of these three examples) with astrological concepts. By contrast, the first feature, the material apparatus serving as a random generator, shows enormous variation as well as a tendency towards localisation: the numerical outcomes needed for geomantic interpretation can be elaborate or simple, involving dice, wooded or ivory tablets, stones, pebbles, grains, palm

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[23] The Dragon's Head ☊ is the astrological term for the northern lunar node, *i.e.* the northern end of the imaginary line marking the intersection between the ecliptic (the plane shared by Earth and Sun), and the plane in which the Moon revolves around the Earth; with its counterpart, the Dragon's Tail ☋ marking the southernmost extension, this imaginary point moves against the zodiac. Both Dragon's Head and Dragon's Tail received, in Indian, Arabian and in (Medieval and later) European astrology, the connotations of additional planets, and as such were marked on horoscopes, were involved in the calculation of aspects *i.e.* meaningful angles between planets, *etc.* For Dragon's Head and Dragon's Tail, these aspects were largely interpreted in negative terms.

kernels, marks on the ground or on a rimmed board covered with sand, dots on paper, *etc*. These surface forms may differ so much, and reflect the local culture's technology, style of decoration, and cosmological orientation to such an extent, that it is often difficult to detect, underneath the visible random apparatus, the converging geomantic features of the encoding rules and of the interpretative catalogue. Indeed, in many peripheral, localised forms of geomantic divination the encoding rules have become eroded and simplified (notably in many geomancies of the African interior), even the production of recognisable geomantic configurations may have been dispensed with (like in the case of the Southern African Hakata system), and besides decontextualised, isolated conceptual reminiscences of the original Islamic catalogue, it is merely the catalogue's 2^n-based mathematical structure which reminds us that we are still dealing with geomancy.

Fig. 9.4. Title page of Abu Hali [^{C}Ali] ben [^{c}]Omar's geomantic handbook printed in Freystadt, Germany, 1704 CE.

Each of the sixteen possible configurations is identified by name, and for each a number of standard interpretations is given in an interpretative catalogue which in principle is in written form, although in less literate peripheries it may simply have been committed to memory. Naturally, in the course of their

transmission over vast expanses of space and time the contents of these catalogues may have come to vary considerably, but an underlying identical structure and contents remains detectable. Below we shall look at some of these catalogues in detail. In the Southern African case, the chance procedure leading to the selection of one out of the sixteen configurations consists not of uncontrolled, spontaneous production of a repetitive series followed by elimination and assessment in terms of 'odd' or 'even', but, as we have seen at Jane's session, by the fall of four tablets which can each take two values, notably 'face up' and 'face down'; in this far corner of the Old World, where the presence of geomancy and Islamic influence in general has so far gone unnoticed, the interpretative catalogues as applied by individual diviners tend to be very idiosyncratic yet, as will be shown below, they derive from the same original geomantic corpus as the catalogues found throughout the Islamic world and in Europe.

A central feature of classic, Islamic geomancy is the construction of a 'complete geomantic theme': from the original four *tetragrams*[24] (the four 'mothers') twelve other configurations (four daughters, four nephews, two witnesses and two judges, of which the last one is often called 'arbitrator') are derived by a special form of addition, based on the following computational rules:

```
even + odd  = odd,  i.e. oo + o  = o,
odd  + even = odd,  i.e. o + oo  = o,
even + even = even, i.e. oo + oo = oo,
odd  + odd  = even, i.e. o + o  = oo.
```

In passing we note the strange mixture of a kinship idiom, with a legal idiom of witnesses and judges.

There are indications however that the mothers here do not primary stand for a kinship reference, but for fundamental cosmological entities: planets, or more particularly, elements.[25] In very rare variants it is fathers and sons, rather than mothers and daughters, that are being constructed.[26]

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[24] A *tetragram* is simply any combination of four signs or letters. The Greek expression *tetragrammaton* is reserved for the Hebrew four-letter word יהוה *YHWH*, denoting the name of God.

[25] Carra de Vaux 1974; mothers as 'the elements' also among the Iḫwan al-Safaᶜ / Brothers of Purity, *cf.* de Boer 1921: 90; also *cf.* de Boer 1967.

[26] The point is not without significance. In an Arabic environment, it would elicit comment if the dominant patrilineal and patriarchal idiom is not observed; the descent series mothers / daughters / nephews is distinctly matrilateral. Should this be read as evidence that the system was imported from a non-patrilineal environment? And what milieu in the ancient and medieval Near East would qualify as such an environment? Or, somewhat more likely, could it be taken – within the generally patrilineal context of the Near East – as another example of the widely attested general rule, first expressed by Meyer Fortes (1953) that such symbolic domains as religious specialism, spirit possession, magical expertise *etc.* tend to be inherited not in the dominant but in the *submerged* line of descent, *i.e.* matrilaterally in a patrilineal society. Another widely attested application of this rule is the fact that when, in West Asian including Arabian magic, a client is to give a parent's name, it is usually the name of the mother, not the father, which is required.

Fig. 9.5 should suffice to explain the complex construction of the full geomantic theme of sixteen configurations, out of the original input of the four mothers – which forms the only original information which the system contains, since all the other twelve configurations to be constructed are completely determined by fixed operation of the derivative rules upon the four mothers. The feet of the four mothers, in reverse order, and rotated from horizontal to vertical position, produce configuration V. In the same way, configuration VI is produced from the mothers' legs, configuration VII from their bodies, and VIII from their heads. Configuration IX is produced by adding, line by line, the dots of configurations I and II, applying the computations rules specified above. In the same way, configuration X is produced from configurations III and IV; XI from V and VI; and XII from VII and VIII. Configuration XIII is then obtained by adding, line by line, the dots of configurations IX and X; XIV is similarly obtained from XI and XII; XV from XIII and XIV; while configuration XVI, the judge, is produced by addition, line by line, of configurations I and XV.[27]

For the mathematician, these procedures offer all sorts of possibilities for further combinatorial and (since they involve all kinds of symmetries) topological manipulation (Jaulin 1957, 1966, 1968), which would largely seem to be empty mental exercises not conducive to increased insight in the geomantic system. However, there is one important, and unexpected, implication of the mathematical properties of the generation of the complete geomantic theme: although all configurations have an equal chance of occurring among the first four elements (the mothers), the computational rules in combination with the rotational symmetry of the tetragrams are such that out of the sixteen geomantic configurations (16 possible 'mothers'), only eight can be produced as judges. This means that while 16 different combinations are equiprobable inputs into the calculation, only 8 of them are possible outcomes. Now it just so happens that among the eight possible outcomes those with a positive meaning prevail – as if to further the geomantic oracle's public relations! This tilted effect does not occur with the simpler versions (without derived geomantic theme), nor with the attenuated African versions.

In the simpler form, the fifteenth element, the 'judge', decides the entire outcome of the oracle; the specific configuration it displays is interpreted primarily

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[27] For readers not familiar with geomancy it may be useful to point out that the appearance of a series of sixteen elements in two related but essentially different contexts may at first present a source of confusion:

(a) mathematically, there are 16 possible *different* configurations which can be formed out of four lines, having in each line one element which can take two values ('even' or 'odd', 'oo' or 'o'). Whenever a geomantic configuration is constructed by means of a chance process, one and only one of these sixteen will be produced;

(b) The construction of a full geomantic 'theme' (*i.e.* horoscope') out of four original mothers resulting from chance operations, necessarily produces a series of sixteen and only sixteen configurations, several of which may occur more than once, as is clear from the example in Fig. 9.5, where only ⸭, ⸭, ⸭, and ⸭ occur only once.

by reference to a catalogue listing the specific oracular meanings of the sixteen named configurations. Here the literal semantic contents of the name (in Arabic, Greek or Latin) of the configuration usually serves as a point of departure for the interpretation. The interpretation tends to be enriched by taking into account the planetary and zodiacal associations of each of the sixteen names, and by interpreting the sixteen configurations of the full geomantic theme as sixteen houses, of which the first twelve at least tend to retain their fairly standard astrological interpretations, while a new nomenclature from the legal sphere was invented for the remaining four. This results in a kind of geomantic (or 'terrestrial'; Greek γῆ *gē* = 'earth') astrology. From astrology the geomantic system could then derive the complex correlative pattern of correspondences (planets, zodiacal signs, parts of the body, houses as defining specific spheres of life, hours of the day, *etc.*) though which a total world view and a rich and resourceful divinatory framework is produced. In the more complex versions like al-Zanātī's (1922-1923, 1908-1909), the first twelve of these sixteen configurations are identified with the twelve astrological houses and interpreted accordingly, while taking into account the usual correspondences and conventional meanings of the twelve houses, the planets and the zodiacal signs.
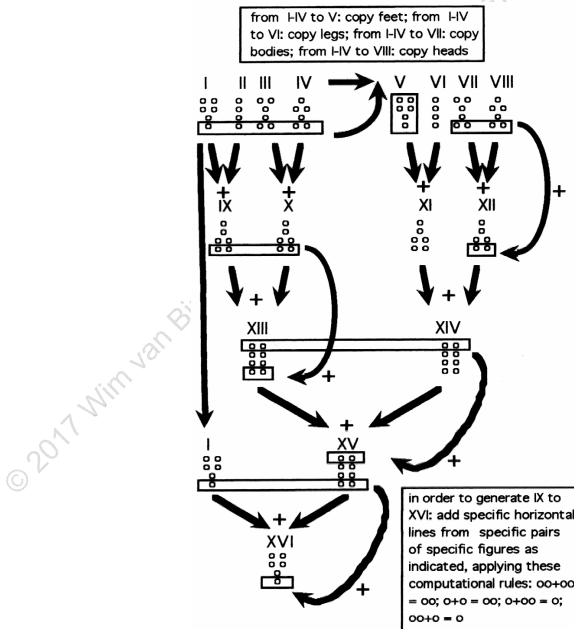

Fig. 9.5. An example of the production of a full geomantic theme of 16 configurations, starting from the four 'mothers'.

A sample from the beginning of al-Zanātī's highly influential *Treatise on the principles of sand-science* may convey the general tone and the imprecise, elliptical style of this author, a specimen of which will appear on the following pages in Arabic and English translation.

The planetary correspondences attributed to the zodiacal signs in subsequent sections of Zanātī's argument, as well as those attributed by other Islamic geomantic authors, are fairly standard considering the astrological tradition as codified by Ptolemy and Manilius in Imperial Antiquity, but the geomantic zodiacal correspondences often so deviate from this tradition that – given the present state of our knowledge of the history of astrology in the Babylonian, Greek, Hellenistic, Hebrew, Islamic, Indian and Chinese contexts – they may help to situate the original emergence of geomancy in time and place; a problem, however, outside our present scope.

Ibn Ḥaldūn's *Muqaddima,*[28] written by the end of the 13th century CE, explains the emergence of geomancy as resulting from a situation when would-be astrologers, typically poor, under-educated and urban, had no longer access to the astronomical tables and the complex mathematical techniques necessary for calculating a proper professional horoscope, and therefore replaced the empirical input (the actual, astronomically absolutely correct, position – in most cases simplified to a mere longitude – of the heavenly bodies at the particular moment which the horoscope seeks to interpret) by the mock-astrology of geomancy: a series of chance outcomes of simple manipulations with a stick on sand, with pebbles, beans, shells or with pen on paper, but subsequently interpreted in the light of a conventionalised or better ossified astrological idiom deprived from all spatio-temporally specific astronomical input. This status as a 'poor man's astrology' is confirmed by the fact that only the first four astrological houses receive an independent input, while the contents of the eight others is merely secondarily derived – which is comparable with a hypothetical situation in which some astrologer would only calculate the planets and zodiacal signs for the first four houses, and ignore the others, or (and this as been widely attested practice astrological since Antiquity)[29] as if the horoscope would be based not on the painstaking calculation of the heavens at the time of birth, but on the mere casting of dice.[30]

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[28] Ibn Ḥald[o]un 1863-1868, 1980.

[29] A full discussion falls outside our present scope. Let me merely mention as an example the once enigmatic Tabula Bianchini, which was effectively and lucidly interpreted as a dice-operated pseudo-astrological divination instrument, and gradually recognised as specimen of an entire class of cleromantic pseudo-astrological instruments in Graeco-Roman Antiquity and Medieval Islam; *cf.*: Boll *et al.* 1966: 60, 191 *f.*

[30] In fact, geomantic dice are being used in India and Iran: Culin 1890-91: 65. Of course, the Southern African *Hakata* four-tablet oracle could be regarded as consisting of geomantic dice, but (despite the extensive South Asian influences on Southern African *Sangomahood, cf.* van Binsbergen 2003b: ch. 8; and ch. 10, below), it is impossible to regard these tablets as direct modifications of some South or South West Asian geomantic dice. The latter are cubic and four are pivoted together on a rod, so that each can independently show any one of its four available faces; the *Hakata* are unstrung when in use,

'In the name of ALLAH,
the Compassionate, the Merciful
and peace be upon Our Lord Muhammad,
the most exalted of all prophets,
and upon his kith and kin and all his companions

Now this book is the treatise on the principles of sand-science according to the bases of the Idrī-sian[31] facts. Shaykh Zanātī – may the forgiveness of Allah be upon him[32] – has said that every science has a beginning and every work an introduction and we want to introduce the bases of sand-science which give satisfaction to beginners and foundations to who is already advanced in this science. We begin in the name and with the help of Allah, saying that sand-science goes back to that prophet of Allah by the name of Idrīs, may the forgiveness of Allah be upon him and upon our prophet Muḥammad and all other prophets before him. Idrīs has seen facts in his dreams and the scientists and wise people have found that all the creatures consist of four elements: Fire, Air, Water, Earth[33] and then four results heat, cold, moist, dry, and four directions east, west, south, north. And they have looked at people's activities finding that there are four measures: weighing, counting, planting, and farming. And the name of Allah is four letters and 'Īsa is four letters and Muḥammad is four letters[34] and each house[35] must have four corners. Then everything is stabilised on four corners, four configurations, four extremities [of the human body], four elements. They have built configurations up from them designating them 'Mothers of the houses'. The first house is the future and it is enunciative, because it is the first you see when the mystery of the world is explained in terms of reality and practice. That is why they call it the future of the client,[36] moreover it is the soul's house, the 'self of men'. Then they have formed a second house called the house of capital. It informs you of the conditions of capital and money. And they have formed a third house called house of movements because when a person gets capital he can move and act...[*etc.* the fourth house is introduced, as well as the formation of up to sixteen houses – *i.e.* configurations – basically by regrouping of elements in the first four configurations, along the lines set out in my Fig. 9.5, above] ...and they have formed a new configuration called 'sand ruler' and it is the 'friendship balance' and sand too, and it can never be a person. It is the fifteenth house. Then they have formed from the first and the fifteenth house a new configuration called 'the end result'. It is the sixteenth. From that house you get sand from sand. When you see happy configurations in the sand you pronounce good news and success. When you see distressful or tragic configurations in the sand you pronounce bad news from whatever is the object of the consultation. When you see in the sand a mixed configuration you pronounce middle results 'difficult in the beginning and easy at the end'. The happy configurations are five in number: ⸬ ⸬ ⸬ ⸬ ⸬. The strong configurations for happiness are three: ⸬ ⸬ ⸬. The distressful negative [configurations] in the sand are four: ⸬ ⸬ ⸬ ⸬.[37] The mixed configurations are five: ⸬ ⸬ ⸬ ⸬ ⸬ ...' *etc.* (al-Zanātī 1995.)

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and each can show only two faces. There are however many mixed sets of *Hakata* dice which include four-sided dice made out of quadruped's hoofs or astragali.

[31] Reference to the prophet Idris, often identified with the Biblical and Islamic Enoch; see further.

[32] *I.e.* 'the late'; al-Zanātī is here implied not to have written this book himself.

[33] Arabic: *trobiyya*, an adjective referring to both 'earth' and 'dust', and hence coming close to 'sand' (Arabic: *raml*) on which the sand-science (^{c}ilm al-raml) revolves.

[34] Sc.: 'four letters in Arabic'. In Arabic, Muḥammad is written with four letters; the central 'm' has a duplication sign but is apparently still counted as but one letter. ^{c}Isa, likewise composed of four letters in Arabic, is the Arabic name for the founder of Christianity.

[35] Arabic: *bait*, meaning 'human dwelling', but also the established Arabic astrological technical term 'house' as a section (usually 1/12) of the zodiac specific to a particular person, place, and moment of time.

[36] In the present translation, this word designates 'the one who consults the oracle'.

[37] Repetition of first and third element in the original.

بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم

وصلى الله على سيدنا محمد وعلى آله وصحبه وسلم تسليما . الحمد لله
وكفى ٠ وسلام على عباده الذين اصطفى ٠ (وبعد) فهذا كتاب الفصل،
في اصول علم الرمل على حكم القواعد الاصلية الادريسية قال الشيخ
محمد الزناتي رحمه الله تعالى ان لكل علم بداية ولكل عمل مقدمة وزيد
أن نظرى مقدمات في علم الرمل مافيه كفاية للمبتدى واصول ترضى
العارف المنتهى فنبتدى بعون الله تعالى فنقول ان علم الرمل منسوب
الى نبي الله ادريس عليه وعلى نبينا أفضل الصلاة وأتم السلام وانه
أوحى اليه في المنام وعنه ورثته العلماء والحكماء ونظروا في أمر العلم
فوجدوا جميع المخلوقات قامت من أربع طبائع وهى النارية والهوائية
والمائية والترابية وأربعة استقصاصات وهى الحرارة والبرودة
والرطوبة واليبوسة والجهات اربعة شرق وغرب وجنوب وشمال ونظروا
في معاملات الناس فوجدوها اربعة مكيول وموزون ومعدود
ومزدروع واسم الله تعالى من أربعة حروف وعيسى عليه السلام من اربعة
حروف ومحمد صلى عليه وسلم من أربعة حروف وكل بيت لابد له من
أربعة اركان فلما علموا أن الاشياء جميعها استقامت من أربعة أركان
وأربعة صور وأربعة أيادى واربعة طبائع فأقاموا منها أربعة اشكال
سموها الامهات البيت الاول الطالع وعليه يقع الحكم وفيه من المسائل
لانه أول شكل ظهر من عالم الغيب الى عالم الشهادة فسمى بيت طالع
السؤال وهو بيت النفوس ثم أنهم أقاموا شكلا ثانيا فسموه بيت المال

The English translation, opposite, extends well into the bnext Arabic page

Fig. 9.6. Opening page of a popular Cairene edition of al-Zanātī, 1320 H. / 1923 CE.

9.3. The worldwide distribution and diffusion of geomancy

Let us now turn to the distribution and diffusion of geomancy. The available evidence allows us to map the geographical distribution of the geomantic family as in Fig. 9.7, as a basis for the reconstruction of its geographic and historical diffusion in Fig. 9.8. From our above discussion one would prefer to approach the history of geomancy along three, not necessarily coinciding, lines: the history of the random-generating apparatus (which is often strictly local and reflects local technology and symbolism); the history of the coding procedures and that of the interpretative catalogue – the latter two being more universal and often supported and standardised by literacy.

■ : *Sikidy* of Madagascar/Comores; ◨ : *Ramlaśastra* of India; □ : Arabian and European geomancy

▤ : *Ifa*, 16 cowries; ◈ : *Hakata (Four Tablets)*; ▬ : 易經 *I Ching*; ◥ : simple geomancies of African interior
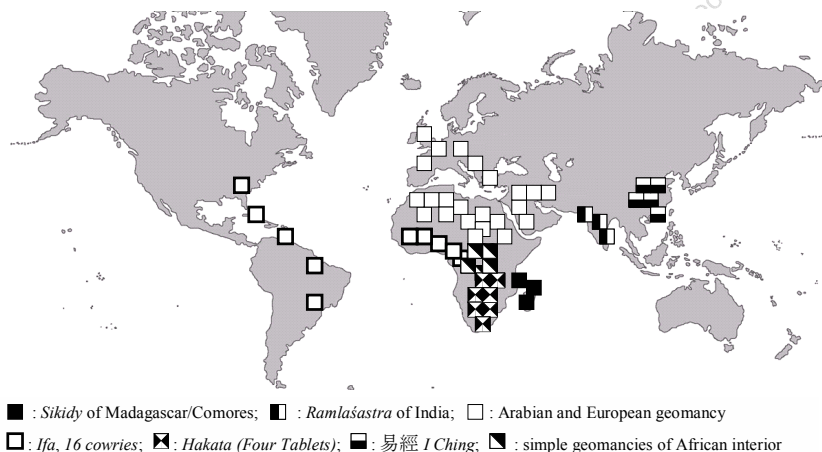
Fig. 9.7. The distribution of system of geomantic divination (van Binsbergen 2012d: 79, Fig 2.18; see there for further explanation).

According to the current state of historical reconstructions, the Hellenic, Hellenistic, Hermetic, Jewish,[38] Persian, African, Indian and Chinese borrowings[39] into the Is-

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[38] Although there have been Hebrew geomancies, there is not enough evidence to suggest that geomancy was an original invention of medieval Hebrew scholars. Yet al-Zanātī's possibly Jewish connotations, the possibly astrological symbolism of Masoretic vowel pronunciation signs (*cf.* Ettisch 1987) which came up a few centuries before geomancy, and the prominence of another tetragram (that of the Divine Name) in Jewish religion and magic, remind us not to rush to conclusions on this point. Medieval Hebrew geomancies are referred to by Steinschneider 1864, 1877, and in: Trachtenberg 1939; my colleague at the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study, 1994-95, Shaul Shaked, who catalogued the famous texts from the Cairo Geniza (*cf.* Shaked 1964) tells me that he encountered several geomantic fragments among this material, in addition to a very extensive geomancy claiming to be composed by the well-known Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra (c. 1089-1164 CE). However, as we ascertained in a provisional reading, this geomancy is little original and scarcely deviates from the pattern established in Arabic texts a century or longer earlier. A Latin version of a geomancy by Ibn Ezra from the fourteenth century CE is cited by Skinner 1980 as: 'Royal 12.C, xviii f, 26, Abraham Ben Meir Aben Ezra,

lamic literate corpus of geomancy point to a drafting (after unsystematic earlier forms) of the classic, astrological geomantic system in Southern Mesopotamia (probably Baṣra) in an Ismāᶜīlī context in the tenth century CE.

The Indian Ocean trade, and the Silk Route, took care of cultural transmission back and forth from China to the Persian Gulf. The land route via the various ramifications of the Silk Road appears to have been less important in this exchange although it cannot be ruled out as a possible channel of diffusion: Chinese trading vessels frequently called at the port of Baṣra; a fairly factual nautical guide to the lands of Hind and Sin was available from the late first millennium CE (Ahmad 1989; Sauvaget 1948). However, when a few centuries later Marco Polo, Rubroeck and others travelled the Silk Road and among many other things reported on divination methods there, not a trace of geomancy perspires (Muller 1944; Bellonci 1985).

Geomancy was a central feature of Islamic high civilisation (Ibn Ḥaldûn 1958: I, 226-234), capable of spreading not only (in Hebrew, Byzantine, Greek and Latin versions) over Europe, but all over the Old World:

> 'Like oneiromancy [the interpretation of dreams as a form of divination – WvB], Arab geomantic science extends beyond the frontiers of the Muslim empire, both to the In- dian coasts and the coasts of Byzantium, and to the Latin West and Black Africa and Madagascar (...). This expansion has led to a great number of manuals and treatises, examples of which can be found in almost all the Arab collections in the East and the West.' (Faḥd 1978: 1129)

After the geomantic system was formulated in Islamic circles, the Indian Ocean was again the main context for its broadcasting.

The distribution area of geomancy encompasses the entire Islamic world, most of Africa (including large non-Islamic sections), most of Europe, and large sec- tions of a para-Islamic periphery in Asia and the Indian Ocean region.

Meanwhile it is important to realise that Arsenius' translation of Zanātī was by far not the earliest geomantic text to reach the West, as the 11th century trans- lations by Hugo Sanctalliensis and others demonstrate.[40]

Spanish Rabbi and astrologer (d. 1174 [*sic*]), Electiones Abraham'. Steinschneider still considered the attribution of a geomancy to ibn Ezra pseudo-epigraphical, but (in the face of the Cairo Geniza text discovered a few decades later) there is little reason to doubt the author's identity, even though we only have a posthumous copy. At the time that Ibn Ezra wrote, the great diffusion of geomancies had already started, and whatever his great qualities in other domains, here he did not lead, but followed.

[39] Not by accident, a similar mix (except the Indian and Chinese material) went, in the same period, into the compilation of that famous piece of Arabic magic writing, *Ghāyat al-Hakīm* also known as *Picatrix* (Pingree 1980; Hartner 1965; Ritter & Plessner 1962).

[40] A rather full if cumbersome catalogue of such geomantic translations can be extracted from Stein- schneider 1906; also *cf.* Carmody 1956 (*non vidi*). It remains a point for further research to ascertain to what extent these early, pre-Zanātī geomancies, in Arabic, Hebrew, Greek, Latin and presumably also Persian, had already taken on the full astrological science of symbolic correspondences which made Zanātī's treatise so very effective and (despite its defective style) attractive.
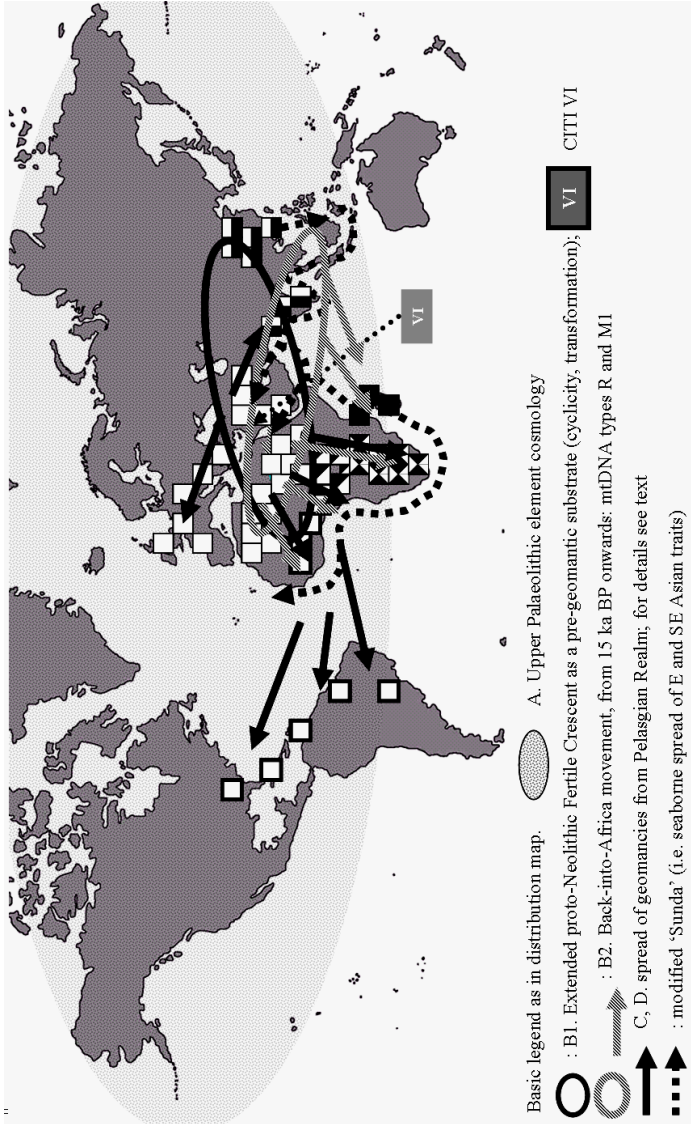
Fig. 9.8. Proposed reconstruction of the world history of geomancy (van Bins-
bergen 2012d: 79, Fig 2.18, see there for detailed explanation).

In Greek geomantic texts, presumably from the Byzantine period, we encounter the word *Rabolion* – which, as Tannery appreciated (Heiberg 1920: section: 'Le rabolion, oeuvre posthume: Traités de geomancie: Arabes, grecs et latins', pp. 297-298), can only be understood as a Greek mere phonetic rendering of an untranslated Arabic ([^c*ilm al-*] *raml,* with a phonologically predictable *-b-* replacing *-m-* , and a morphologically domesticating suffix *-ion*). Scholarly consensus[41] is that there was only one-way traffic from Islamic to Byzantine and Latin sources.

Finally, with the Atlantic slave trade the geomancy-based divination systems of West Africa crossed into the Caribbean, and Central and South America (Bascom 1980; Bastide 1968: 423 *f.*).

Geomancy must therefore be one of the most impressive examples of 'globalisation' *avant la lettre, i.e.* before the modern means of transport and communication made us take for granted the instant and world-wide diffusion of material and intellectual products. Although often practised by illiterate diviners and their clients (*e.g.* in West and Southern Africa and on Madagascar), and partly rooted in simple chance procedures (like hitting the earth, throwing tablets, bean, shells *etc.*) which do not require recourse to writing, the system in its subsequent processing and interpretation of the chance outcomes has unmistakably a literate basis. Hence the most common designation of the geomantic system of divination as *ḫaṭṭ al-raml, i.e.* 'sand calligraphy', with a definite reference to writing, to literacy.

Not only is geomancy thus an early example of globalisation, it is also a powerful reminder, especially for anthropologists and then again especially for the Africanists among them, that even conspicuous and central intellectual and symbolic products are not necessarily contained within the idiosyncratic linguistic and cosmological horizons of a localised culture, but may reflect interconnections and transmissions across vast expanses of space and time, which may render them totally incapable of explanation by reference to a local society and culture. Implied are fundamental questions of cultural meaning: in so far as the outcomes of geomantic divination have meaning, as they clearly have for the German farmer Hinrich and the Botswana typist Jane, such meaning, although mediated through local concepts of *e.g.* illness and sorcery, can ultimately derive from and be expressed in, other forms than just the local symbolic system, and may partly refer to conditions and cosmological connections way beyond the reach of the actors using the geomantic system in a particular spatio-temporal setting. Is it this very remoteness – the actors' awareness of drawing from a fount not ordinarily utilised in their everyday socio-economic experience – which adds credibility and legitimation to the system? Is it, in other words, the boundary-crossing nature of the system, its absence of recognisable cultural specificity or perhaps its having absorbed in-

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[41] Yet there are indications of an older, Hellenistic Greek contribution to the geomantic corpus; *cf.* van Binsbergen 1996a, 1996b. It is almost impossible to tell Greek Byzantine texts from those of Late Antiquity.

fluences from a great many diverse intellectual sources, which explains its power, rather than its power explaining its boundary crossing? What is, among rival divination systems at the local scene (there is nearly always a diversity in this field) the unmistakable competitive power of geomancy? Where did the incredibly successful geomantic family of divination systems come from? Why should virtually all concrete traces of the genesis of Islamic geomancy appear to have been blotted out, so that the geomantic system, when we first encounter it in the classical Islamic setting of Abbaṣid Iraq around the turn of the first millennium CE appears to have sallied forth like Athena, a young adult clad in full armour (and a cleromantic deity, at that!), from her father's forehead?

I would suggest that Islam served not only as a vehicle for geomantic divination, on its way to produce a number of fragmented local geomancies whose practitioners have lost all awareness of the transregional, Islamic roots of their practice. I think that Islam also lend its imposing, alien authority to these systems when they were being practiced in non-Muslim religions: an oblique reminiscence of what was locally perceived as a distant, more powerful and richer culture, and a more powerful god, Allah.[42]

9.4. Geomancy in Africa

In the various regions of Africa where geomantic divination is practised, the material apparatus is very diverse, ranging from divination chains (*cf.* Table 10.1, below):[43] or shells cast in a square, rimmed wooded board covered with sand in West-Africa, or four tablets in Southern Africa, to piles of grain or pebbles in

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[42] Superficially there might seem to be an echo here of Robin Horton's 'intellectualist' theory of African conversion (Horton 1975), which may be summerised in the following terms: when in West Africa the local microcosmic horizon was shattered by the inroads of mercantilism and state formation, a more universal god was needed to be commensurate with the more comprehensive political, economic and social world of changing everyday experience. But there are considerable differences between his position and mine – the latter tends more towards that of the Islamologist Fisher (1973; also *cf.* my discussion in van Binsbergen 1981b). What I am concerned with here is not in the least the revival – under specific conditions of political, economic and social transformation – of a pre-established Islamic monotheism in those parts of Africa which nominally had been Islamic for centuries, but the distant but nonetheless unmistakable awareness of Islam as a Great Tradition (Redfield 1955, 1956; Srinivas 1956) in many parts of Africa that had always been, or that slid back to end up, outside the 'House of Islam'. In much the same way, Christianity has established itself in South Central and Southern Africa in the course of the 20th c. CE, of perhaps rather earlier (given the inroads of Christian proselytising from the Atlantic and Indian Ocean in Early Modern times), as something of a detached Great Tradition hovering over yet persisting beliefs and practices from African historic religion (*cf.* Ranger & Kimambo 1972; Ranger & Weller 1975); the Zambian Nkoya are a case in point.

[43] Their essential feature is a string along which, or at whose end, a number (k, often k=8) elements (cowries or coins) are attached, in such a way that each element can pivot independently around its point of attachment; since each element has an identifiable upper side and lower side and thus can take 2 different values, the total number of possible configurations is $C=n^k$, *e.g.* $2^8 = 256$. *Cf.* Bascom 1969; Abimbola 1976.

the Indian Ocean area (*e.g.* Hébert 1961), and the forceful 'hitting of the sand' (*ḍarb al-raml*) with a stick, in North Africa and North East Africa.

With the exception of the Southern African variant (where the tablets' fall is interpreted directly, *i.e.* without the construction of a standard geomantic symbol) the result produced by the apparatus is interpreted, through a process of transformation and elimination, as contributing one line, of one or two dots, to a four-line geomantic symbol. More complex procedures may raise this number to any higher power of 2. A written or memorised key (the catalogue) provides the interpretation of each geomantic symbol, and of their combinations.

In many discussions of African culture and philosophy,[44] local geomancies are paraded as examples *par excellence* of African symbolic genius and mathematical achievement, leaving little doubt as to the allegedly primordial African nature which these authors attach to this divinatory complex. Yet Steinschneider's perceptive early analyses did reach African Studies, where *e.g.* the great explorer and Arabist Burton lost few opportunities[45] to draw attention to manifestations of geomancy, both in the Thousand and One Night (whose pioneer translator he was) and in West Africa. Later Africanists like Maupoil, Hébert, Jaulin and Bascom have identified the same links.[46]

It is no accident that the prominent anthropologist Jack Goody concludes his introduction (Goody 1968a) to a seminal collection on *Literacy in traditional societies* with an extensive reference to geomancy:

> 'The significance of writing varies widely among the societies discussed [in Goody's edited collection]. But even among pastoral peoples like the Somali, even in societies long cut off from the mainstream of literate cultures, like the Merina of Madagascar, even in religiously very mixed areas, like the western Sudan, the book is an important feature of social life, because it provides a reference point for individual and social behaviour, especially that kind of verbal behaviour we think of specifically as 'symbolic', magico-religious, mythopoeic or cosmological – though our given categories do us a great disservice here. So that when Hébert[47] offers us a "structural analysis" of divinatory systems in Madagascar and in Africa (…), he is pointing to certain features of a system of divination, crystallized out in writing, that is carried out from Kano to Calcutta, from Tananarive to Samarkand, a "symbolic" system that has little or no intrinsic connection with the myths, beliefs and categories of the peoples among whom they [*sic*]

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[44] *E.g.* Abimbola 1976; Traoré 1979; Apostel 1981: ch. vii. For a critical overview, also *cf.* Bewaji 1992.

[45] Burton 1987: I, 40, n. 2, 1893a: I, 330 *f.*, 1893b: III, 55, n. 1.

[46] Maupoil 1943a, 1943b; Hébert 1961; Jaulin 1957, 1966, 1968, 1991; and Bascom 1969, 1980. *Cf.* Abimbola 1971; Ardant du Picq 1930; Trautmann 1939-1940; Kassibo 1992. A detailed treatment of the West African system as derived from ᶜ*ilm al-raml* also in: Skinner 1980.

[47] The reference is to: Hébert 1961; and thus primarily to geomancy. Yet Goody's argument here does not entirely limit itself to this form of divination, as is shown by his references to 'the names of caliphs and archangels and the sacred names of God', which refer to specifically West African forms of ᶜilm al-raml (*cf.* Brenner, n.d.). They are absent from the Southern and East African versions of geomancy known to me, as are 'the 9-cell [*i.e.* magic, and not necessarily 9-cell, for they exist for the squares of each number under 8, each number specific to a particular planet] squares'.

> are found. Even supposing that all the societies in question were equally committed to 'orthodox' Islam and acknowledged the Islamic elements in the system of divination (such as the use of the names of caliphs and archangels and the sacred names of God), many elements in the system (*e.g.* the 9-cell squares) have quite a different derivation, a much wider distribution, which makes them as much (and as little) an intrinsic part of specifically Gonja or Hausa symbolic structures as the mathematical theory of groups is of specifically Japanese or Belgian thought.' (Goody 1968a: 25 *f.*)

Finally, mention should be made of Louis Brenner's attempt (Brenner 1985, 1999) to situate geomancy, and its success especially in West-Africa, against a sound background of Arabist scholarship, drawing on African Islamic manuscripts, trying to interpret the significance (a easterly connection?) of such mythical attributions as those to Idrīs and to the mysterious but frequently cited Ṭumṭum al-Hindi, but above all adding further relief to the idea first launched by Becker (1911, 1913) at the beginning of the twentieth century CE: that the success of Islam in Africa depended less on deliberate surrender to the One Who is Compassionate and Merciful (Allah's epithets in the first Sura of the Qur'an), than on the converts' hopes of a greatly increased access to a superior yet familiar form of magic. Brenner's is an argument about geomancy in Africa and although he reminds us of the mythical traditions concerning the ultimate, and ultimately divine, origin of *ᶜilm al-raml*, he does not tangibly add to our understanding of its early history in human, specifically Islamic hands.

Uncritically copying Jaulin (1966: 14), Adler & Zempléni (1972: 63) situate al-Zanātī's work in the sixteenth century CE, at least three centuries too late. Elsewhere[48] I have presented a detailed historical and formal analysis demonstrating the essential unity of Southern African cleromantic divination systems, in their convergence towards the Zimbabwe Hakata four-tablet system as first attested in missionary documentary evidence in the earliest 17th century, and in local archaeological evidence from the Khami ruins dating from the same century. To postulate an influence from Islamic geomancy, and particularly in the thirteenth-century al-Zanātī variant, at the Zimbabwean highlands in the sixteenth century (when the first missionary, Silveira, was tried with the use of *Hakata*, and executed, at the Monomotapa's royal court)[49] would at any rate not be anachronistic. But beyond this mere historical possibility, there are also more positive reasons for such an assumption.

9.5. The Islamic connection in the context of the Southern African four-tablet oracle

These indications include the designation *Hakata* itself, at least if we are allowed to stress, with von Sicard, similarity between the name *Hakata* and the Arabic stem *hqq*. The latter means 'truth; speaking the truth' and in its various

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[48] *Cf.* van Binsbergen 1996b.

[49] Mudenge 1988; dos Santos 1901 / 1609; von Sicard 1959.

conjugations may produce the sound 'hakat'.[50] The four tablets would then literally be 'sooth-saying' ones, and have at least partially Islamic connotations. More convincing arguments for the Islamic indebtedness lie in the considerable formal parallels between the four-tablet system on the one hand, and, on the other, the divination systems (related to one another and undoubtedly derived from Islamic sources) of West Africa, the Swahili coast, the Comoro Islands and Madagascar. In contrast with the *microdramatics*[51] of elements which retain their individual meaning and reference within the ensemble, a more or less fixed, conventionalised interpretative catalogue (in which, without micro-dramatics, the constituent tablets and their individual meanings dissolve into the combined single meaning of the foursome they constitute together) some-how strikes one as a typical product of a class of literate intellectual specialists – like was prominent in the classical Islamic civilisation, to which a considerable part of Africa has served as periphery ever since the first millennium CE.

A first indication of a more than accidental correspondence lies in the mathem-atical properties of the Southern African Hakata system and East African geo-mancies. Above I stressed, in general, the importance of the mathematical aspect of divination systems. Their underlying mathematical structure can be a most effective pointer to otherwise hidden relationships, because this structure may well survive regardless of the localising transformations the systems go through at the surface. A careful examination of the binary, 2^k pattern dominat-ing the mathematical structure of both the Southern African four-tablet divina-tion system, and the more directly Islamic-derived forms of geomancy found in the Indian Ocean region (including the well-studied *Sikidy* system at Madagas-car) led me to hypothesise historical connections which were subsequently substantiated when I found identical items in the interpretative catalogues attending the divination system in these two more or less adjacent regions. It turned out that the four horizontal lines of the standard geomantic symbols (*e.g.* ⣿ / ☲), where each line can take two values (uneven or even, one dot or two, a dot or a dash), were redefined as four tablets, whether each tablet can take two values (obverse or reverse); in the process, the attending Islamic in-terpretative catalogue was partly maintained (it is still very conspicuous in the Madagascar and Comoro Islands variants), partly localised and transformed (Table 9.2).

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[50] von Sicard 1959; Al-Faraïd 1967. Within the Bantu language family, *Hakata* conveys a sense of 'round', 'ring', 'beads strung on a string', which appeares to be unrelated to the Arabic etymology.

[51] Werbner (1989) speaks of microdramatics with reference to divination systems, if the pattern according to which the constitutent elements in such a system (tokens, tablets, counters) present themselves in time and space in the course of a session, is taken by the diviner to reflect real-life protagonists and to tell a concrete story. The alternative is that a mere formal analysis is pursued, in which the concrete spatial arrangements of the elements when these are cast, is not taken into account.

In this connection it is illuminating to consider the spread, from one clearly identified geographical focus, of Islamic geomancy over Madagascar, in the form of the *Sikidy* system, on whose early forms we are well informed through the writings of the seventeenth-century French traveller de Flacourt:

> 'According to Flacourt [de Flacourt 1661: 172, 195], Matatane country in southeastern Madagascar (...) where the Antemoro (...) live was a center of astrological study as early as the fourteenth century (...). This area was also the site of early Arab settlements, although strict Islamic observances were lost centuries ago (...). Historical evidence shows that Antemoro diviners, bearers of the astrological system, infiltrated nearly all the ancient kingdoms of Madagascar beginning in the sixteenth century. (...) Today, although many persons claim to be *ombiasy* [diviners], only the Antemoro diviners are considered true professionals. The area is still a famous place of learning where specialists go for training and then return to their home communities with a certain body of knowledge. Now we can better understand the degree of similarity of divination forms found throughout Madagascar. For centuries Matitanana has remained a training center for diviners who have migrated widely, usually attaining important positions in their home communities and with various royal families.' (Vérin & Narivelo Rajaonarimanana 1991)

In view of the relatively short distance between the Zimbabwean highlands, Madagascar and the Comoro Islands we must now ask ourselves whether, in the early history of the Southern African four-tablet system, similar conditions for geographic spread in the hands of literate specialists might have obtained. Beach (Beach 1980; *cf.* Gregson 1973) estimates that on the Zimbabwean highlands in the sixteenth century CE. from one thousand to two thousand Muslims were involved in diplomatic and trading activities. Islamic influence on the Mutapa court was very considerable, as *e.g.* brought out in style of dress. Local Muslims felt the arrival of Father Silveira, the representative of a rival world religion and of a rival expanding network of mercantile and political relations, as a serious threat; the juridical divination, with four tablets, which ensured this missionary's death sentence was, as all authorities agree, most probably conducted by Muslims. *In its earliest recorded form the Southern African four-tablet oracle appears in Zimbabwe in the sixteenth century CE. in a contact situation between Muslims (presumably furnishing the* ḥaṭṭ *interpretative catalogue) and African courtly culture.*

Beyond the circumstantial evidence of identical underlying mathematics and the demonstrable presence of a literate Islamic periphery both in West-Africa, Madagascar and on the Zimbabwean Plateau in the mid-2nd mill. CE, there are concrete, decisive points of correspondence between the Islamic system, *Sikidy*, and the four-tablet system. These I have presented in detail elsewhere (van Binsbergen 1996b) and it is only reluctantly that I repeat them here as Table 9.2. The most salient points are that the common Islamic-geomantic odd and even turns out to translate systematically into 'face up' or 'face down' of the tablets; and that semantically many of the standard geomantic names of configurations ('the road', 'the assembly', 'the girl', 'the boy') reappear in the *Hakata* system, with the same positive or negative meanings associated.

Thus, unmistakably, the four-tablet system has at least partially sprung from northern, Islamic-associated predecessors

Substantive correspondences between Arabian geomancy, Sikidy divination from Madagascar, and the Southern African (particularly, Shona) four-tablet system

		I	II	III	IV	V	VI
Arabian and European geomancy	configuration[1]	(figure)	(figure)	(figure)	(figure)	(figure)	(figure)
	Arabic name, meaning, and zodiacal sign	al-'atabat al-dākhilat inward threshold al-Khas	al-naKT al-khad beardless cheek al-'Akrab	al-kaisadj man with scarce beard al-Mīzān	al-a'tabat al-khāridjat outward threshold al-Djuzahir	al-tariq path al-Saraṭān	al-djamā'a assembly al-Sunbalat
	Latin name, meaning, and zodiacal sign	Caput Draconis Dragon's Head[2] Sagittarius (♐)	Puella Girl Scorpius (♏)	Puer Boy Libra (♎)	Cauda Draconis Dragon's Tail[3] Cauda Draconis (☋)	Via Cancer (♋)	Populus Ear=Spica=α[4] Virginis (♍)
	bodily aspect		thigh	liver, vagina		breast	breast
Sikidy of Madagascar	configuration[5]	(figure)	(figure)	(figure)	(figure)	(figure)	(figure)
	name meaning	Alakaosy child; evil thoughts	Alakarabo robbers, thugs; misfortune;	Alikasaj medicine; mourning	Karija slave; cool speech	Taraiky emaciated; path	Asombola abundance
	De Flacourt	Caput Draconis	Puella	Puer	Cauda Draconis	Via	Populus
four-tablet system, Southern Africa	configuration[6]	(figure)	(figure)	(figure)	(figure)	(figure)	(figure)
	gender and age Shona name	senior woman Kwami	senior man Tokwadzima	junior woman Nhokwara	junior man Chirume, Mashungara	all closed Maswungaro,[8] Maten[i]o,[10] Ratsva,[13] Zvugal Zungamana[14]	all open Musasu, Manu,[9] Zara,[11] Ratsva,[12]
	Francistown name	Kwami	Chilume	Ntakwala	Lumue	Mashangula[15]	Mbanga[16]

Table 9.2. Correspondences between the Southern African Hakata and Malagasy Sikidy divinatory catalogues (after van Binsbergen 1996b: 20, Fig. 2).

9.6. Discussion and conclusion

We have established an Islamic background for what have effectively become Africa's major divination systems – and hence the continent's major system for the production of therapeutic and diagnostic knowledge, in which tens of thousands of African engage every day, right up to today. But we should not overlook perhaps the most important message of the present argument: *there is not only the Islamic connection but also its suppression from consciousness.* By and large, in the process of transformative localisation, the Islamic connotations of the geomantic practices have been lost, they have become massively oral practices in illiterate contexts dominated not by a recognised and conscious Islamic identity, but by historical African religious forms.

Whereas on Madagascar the interpretative catalogues still betray their literate origin and abound with Arabic words and concepts, in West and Southern Africa they have for centuries been in the hands of illiterates, who memorise and transfer the complex and often massive contents[52] mainly by means of the praises – without any specific reference to the Islamic origin of this body of knowledge, and in a local cultural environment where other Islamic elements are largely inconspicuous or even absent. Also the forms of the four-tablet systems, their iconography and interpretative catalogues, have become decidedly African: the themes of the Great Pool, crocodile and snake (even if possibly local projections on more widely distributed themes such as the circle-dot motif (Segy 1953) and the astrological concept of the Dragon's Head and Dragon's Tail); the central symbolism of the family unit in which (in a very un-Islamic way) a senior and a junior wife occupy decisive positions; as well as an aetiology in which sorcery and ancestors constitute the central concepts – all this leaves no doubt that the four-tablet system, even if developed under Islamic influence, has been effectively localised to become Southern African culture.

The process is similar to what happened for instance to the Semitic religious traditions which in the course of two thousand year have been localised so as to become fully-fledged parts of West European Christian culture.

Identifying, far beyond the recognised realm of popular Islamic expansion in Black Africa, an unmistakable Islamic connection in a cultural complex, notably 'bone throwing', which to most researchers would be self-evidently and undeniably Southern African (its untraced origins subconsciously projected in some particularly archaic and stereotypical local village order), raises at least three major questions for further research:

- *What about the origins, in Africa, in the Ancient Near East, in Graeco-*

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[52] *E.g.* Bascom 1969, a book of nearly 800 pages, mainly contains one Nigerian diviner's interpretative catalogue in verse!

Roman magic, or in East Asian symbolic and divinatory practices, of Islamic ḫaṭṭ itself? We have already briefly indicated how Baṣra by the end of the first millennium CE found itself at the crossroads of Old World intellectual traditions, in which the occult sciences occupied a major place. The unravelling of the antecedents of geomantic divination before its seminal formulation in Abbāṣid Iraq has received detailed attention in my ongoing historical and comparative research into geomancy as referred to throughout the present book, but since the African contribution remains conjectural at best, a discussion of these antecedents falls outside our present scope.

- *Is the indebtedness to Islam, demonstrated in the present argument for major African divination systems, limited to that specific domain of symbolic expression, or can the same relationship be established in other fields of African life?* Limitations of space do not permit me to pursue this question any further here, but elsewhere (*cf.* van Binsbergen 1996c, 1997c) I have discussed the Islamic connections of the major African family of board games: *mankala,* generally known as a game consisting of parallel rows of holes along which counters (pebbles, grains) are repeatedly redistributed until they are captured by any of the players. Remarkably, the reconstructed pattern of origin and diffusion of mankala board games is almost identical to that of geomantic divination, in the Old and the New World. Ecstatic religion may be another domain to be explored. Here again we have a symbolic expression which in the latest centuries has so captured sub-Saharan Africa that it has come to appear as eminently and traditionally African. Yet Frobenius already made a convincing argument about the relatively *recent* inroads of shamanism into Africa (Frobenius 1954: 208 *f.*, map 27; also *cf.* below, my Fig. 15.2, below). Finally there is the claim from several leading musicologists and linguists to the effect that major African musical instruments, such as the xylophone and the hourglass drum, are essentially Asian in origin (Kwabena Nketia 1975; Jones 1964; Blench 2014; also *cf.* p. 378 *f.*, below); while the African diffusion of the Indonesian wood percussion instruments may antedate the penetration of Islam in South East Asia, Nketia lists various other instruments and musical styles that, while now totally localised as traditionally African, would seem to owe their introduction into sub-Saharan Africa to the vehicle of Islam.

- *What about the possibility of more comprehensive intercontinental exchange patterns?* Must we consider African divination systems, with all their ramifications and variations throughout the continents, as just one manifestation among many, of the fact that throughout cultural history Africa has been very much a part of the wider world, – both receiving certain major cultural influences to the other continents, and offering other major achievement to these continents?

Current globalisation research has largely concentrated on the twentieth century CE, but in its wake we have seen a growing awareness of 'proto-globalisation': the world-wide spread of cultural achievements carried by the technologies, not of the airplane and the Internet, but at least those of the written word, the sailing ship, chariot, hrose-riding,, and the caravan trade. Recognising Islam as a major globalising project (in the Prophet Muḥammed's days no less than today), will help us focus on proto-globalisation and appreciate Islam as one of its major vehicles.

Further research on these three topics is certainly needed. Meanwhile the present chapter will suffice to draw scholarly attention to the Islamic antecedents of certain major aspects of 'African traditional religion'. This will help us to avoid false juxtapositions in our approach to both Africa and Islam, and to appreciate better the continued and even intensified appeal of Islam in Africa today.