

Part VII. General and comparative studies

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Chapter 13. Challenges for the sociology of religion in the African context

Prospects for the next fifty years

At the request of *Social Compass*, on the occasion of its fiftieth anniversary as a leading journal for the sociology of religion, I was asked to define the challenges which the sociology of religion will face in the African context over the next fifty years. After retrospectively sketching both the African situation (with its three pillars of historic African religion, Islam, and Christianity) and some Africanist themes in the sociology of religion, globalisation is discussed as the first challenge: how does it affect religion and identity, and how does the model of the formal (self-) organisation which it favours, have an impact especially with regard to representation and resilience of African religious forms. The next major challenge clusters around the problematic state of civil society in Africa: in the face of disorder and violent conflict, can African religious forms contribute to the societal consensus that is central to modern statehood? The third challenge is situated in the spatial and temporal framework for the sociology of religion in Africa, which should be neither presentist, nor confined to the African continent since this is only a recent geopolitical construct. Finally, an attempt is made to identify a major challenge underlying the social and political performance of religion in Africa: the fundamental immanentalism of African traditions of thought.

13.1. No prospect without retrospect

The sociology of religion in Africa has been only sparingly represented at the International Society for the Sociology of Religion (ISSR)'s conferences and the journal *Social*

Compass. Attending the conference sessions on the North Atlantic region and selected other parts of the world made me realise how very different from those colleagues' research experiences the study of religion in Africa has tended to be.

In terms of the central theories and debates informing religious sociological research, the theoretical continuity *vis-à-vis* the founding fathers of the sociology of religion (Durkheim, Marx, Troeltsch, Weber), and of sociology *tout court*, is far more apparent in North Atlantic studies than with regard to Africa. The main reason for this is social continuity. The urban, industrial class society; the formal organisation as that society's main social technology – especially in the religious field; the self-evidence of the capitalist economy in league with an effective bureaucratically organised state; and the high extent to which citizens (through formal education and other state-supervised experiences) entertain a societal consensus in which the rationality of the state and of the economy appear to them as virtually inescapable – this was more or less the format of North Atlantic societies when the sociology of religion emerged from their midst a century ago, and whatever massive changes have since taken place, that format can still be made out, especially from the contrastive, distant perspective which modern Africa affords us. Thus the North Atlantic sociologist of religion derives confidence from the fact that the phenomena under investigation are continuous with that investigator's native social experience, and have greatly inspired his discipline from its inception.

In Africa, however, the generally recent (19th-20th century CE), incomplete, ineffective, and by now eroded (Davidson 1992; Mbembe 2001), implantation of the North Atlantic model of state and society has meant, for much of the 20th century, that the Africanist sociologist of religion is on relatively unfamiliar grounds, facing a plurality of highly fragmented and historically heterogeneous forms of ritual practice which have resulted in only a precarious, partial and (to judge by the level of internal violent conflict) ineffective societal and political consensus; moreover, these forms have been largely studied by other social sciences than the sociology of religion (notably anthropology and history).

Yet, over the past fifty years, the social-scientific study of religion in Africa has grown from a mere trickle to a massive undertaking, now pursuing a variety of paradigms largely unheard of at the beginning of that period. The older studies¹ concentrated on church dynamics; church independency; religious organisation as an urban adaptive mechanism; syncretism (as an unsatisfactory designation of processes of interaction between 'historic'² African religion on the one hand, Islam or Christianity on the other); healing cults; prophetic movements largely interpreted as protest against the colonial state; and the parallelism or complementarity between a local society's secular and religious structural and sym-

¹ For general reviews of these older themes, cf. Ranger & Kimambo 1972; Ranger & Weller 1975; Ranger 1986; Hastings 2000; van Binsbergen 1981b; van Binsbergen & Schoffeleers 1985.

² My preferred euphemism for 'traditional'.

bolical themes. Studies along such lines have not exactly faded away but they not longer constitute the bulk of Africanist religious studies. Instead, the following themes have come to be prominent: identity; youth; globalisation; inter-continentalisation; commodification; multiplicity of reference; agency; complex interactions between Islam, Christianity and historic African religion;³ fundamentalism; disorder, violence, human rights, the collapse and – hopefully – subsequent reconstruction of civil society and the state; the environment; witchcraft and modernity; divination; health implications of religious beliefs and practices; the details of Islamic social and political life in Africa, and its transcontinental connections; representation; and epistemology. Ethnicity, gender, popular culture, territorial cults, royal cults, possession and mediumship, the sacralisation of space, cosmologies, and modes of production linger on from among the themes of the 1970s-1990s.⁴

Meanwhile, the African continent itself has moved from relatively effective colonial domination via a period of political and economic euphoria in the first decade of independence (1960s-1970s), to economic and political decline, and most recently resilience, in subsequent decades. Over the past fifty years, the trajectories of Islam, Christianity and ‘historic’ African religious forms – the three main pillars of Africanist religious studies – have been very different, and all three of them largely unpredictable. World-wide, the rise of Islam to a spiritual and political power complex of the first magnitude, as well as the relative decline of organised Christianity in the North Atlantic region, have constituted two processes which over the past half century have greatly influenced the dynamics of these world religions on African soil, as well as scholars’ perceptions of these dynamics.

Sociologists will appreciate that the most powerful and most amazingly successful *social* technology implanted on African soil in the course of twentieth century, has been: the formal, voluntary or bureaucratic organisation as defined along Weberian lines, which (despite all its malfunctioning) yet within a century has almost completely transformed all spheres of African life, from the state to education and health care, and which particularly has come to provide the dominant organisational model of religious self-organisation, among Christian churches, but increasingly also in the Islamic domain and even in the domain of African historic religion.⁵

While the spread of two world religions (Islam and Christianity) to Africa, and their subsequent developments there, in itself has been part of an earlier phase of (proto-)globalisation in the course of the past two millennia, the most recent decades have seen an intensification of globalisation in the narrower sense, governed by technologies of communication and information that have dramatically reduced the social cost of time and space to an unprecedented minimum.

³ *E.g.* Gnamo 2002; Kilani 2000; Sharkey 2002.

⁴ *Cf.* Bediako 2000; Bureau 2002; Raison-Jourde 1991; van Dijk & Pels 1996; Comaroff & Comaroff 1993.

⁵ For Islam, *cf.* Renders 2002; Salih 2002. For African historic religion, see below., as well as above, ch. 5, pp. 215f.

Fifty years ago it would have been absolutely impossible to predict these developments with any degree of precision. The visionary mind which would have hinted correctly at them would have been banned from the field of scholarship, to that of science fiction. Proposing prospects for the next half century is not any simpler, for there is no reason to assume that the pace of religious, social, political and technological change in the world is slackening now that mankind has managed to survive, barely, into the twenty-first century.

However, in religious studies we are familiar with a particular *kind* of fools that is most relevant in the present context: *prophets*, who legitimate their pronouncements by claiming that they 'speak on behalf of' the divine (as is the etymology of the word *prophet* in ancient Greek). Such prophets' *sociological* significance⁶ is that, in their personal life, they have internalised and grappled with the central contradictions of their time and age in such a way that the pronouncements they make on that basis resonate profoundly with many of their fellow-members of society, organising the latter's experience and granting it a genuinely new, revelatory meaning. If I may be permitted to interpret my present role in such a secularly prophetic sense, my reading of such challenges as the Africanist sociology of religion presents, may not attract a large following (but what prophet is honoured in his own country, anyway?), but may at least ring a bell – to stay with the ecclesiastical imagery so abundant in this field.

13.2. The challenges of globalisation in the African religious context

13.2.1. How globalisation affects religion

Recent globalisation has by and large resulted in a blurring of the above ideal-typical difference between Africa and the North Atlantic region. Under post-modern conditions typical of globalisation, North Atlantic societies, too, have experienced large-scale erosion of meaning and consensus, fragmentation of identity, and erosion of the nation-state by elusive intercontinental corporate powers in the economic domain. In Africa, the percolation of global *linguae francae*, of global media such as television, the cell phone, and the Internet, of globally circulating manufactured consumer goods, and of globally available religious expressions such as Islamism and Pentecostalism, have brought the forms of African social and religious life closer to those in other continents today. Increasingly also for Africa and for an increasing number of Africans, the neat compartmentalisation of the world into sharply demarcated continents has become an idea of the past. Not only have the concerns of North Atlantic political, ideological and economic hegemony and of Islamic counter-hegemony found their way to what used to be distinct and distant local settings in

⁶ Cf. van Binsbergen 1981b: ch. 4; Dozon 1995; Tonda & Gruénais 2000; Jones 2002.

Africa. Also the religious, ethnic and cultural expressions which used to be restricted to local settings in Africa, in the course of recent globalisation have spilled over to Africans' diasporic communities world-wide. Modern technologies make it possible for local African religious and artistic expressions to assume a new global and commodified format; this offers them a new lease of life albeit that in the process they have become greatly transformed, shedding much of their original local symbolic frame of reference. For the first time in post-Neolithic history, distinctive local and regional African religious expressions (music, dance, divination, specific cults, more diffuse personal spirituality – cf. Olupona 2000) have gained a substantial presence and impact in the North Atlantic *also among people not of recent conscious African descent*. The latter effect is caused both by the increasingly diasporic demographic presence of Africans, and by their appropriation of modern communication technologies also for the expression of local (and not just global) religious ideas and practices. This effect in the religious domain has however been amply foreshadowed: for decades, in the adoption of transformed African expressive culture (cf. jazz, popular music) into secular popular culture throughout the Americas and Europe; and even for several centuries in the Americas, among people of (partial) African descent – both processes as a result of forced transcontinental migration: the trans-Atlantic slave trade as a form of proto-globalisation.

If the decline of organised religion in the North Atlantic goes hand in hand with the destruction of socially underpinned, collectively shared meaning, could it then be that the resilience and continued flourishing of religion in Africa has implications, not only for the African continent but world-wide? Already we have had, for decades, a situation where Africa is the major growth area of both Christianity and Islam; African religious personnel has been known to be subjected to a brain-drain, with, for instance, African parish priests filling some of the open ranks in the North Atlantic Roman Catholic and Anglican clergy. However, it is not only established, organised religion which is fed back from Africa into the North Atlantic region, but also diffuse notions of magic and evil, for instance around the concept of 'voodoo', which has become detached from any original meaning and content it had in the original context (in *Vodun* in Benin / Togo / Nigeria), and now has become a blanket term in global circulation, to denote any African spiritual force murky defying global rationality (cf. van Dijk *et al.* 2000; van Dijk 2001).

Christianity and Islam have been among the most significant globalising projects ever since the era of proto-globalisation, and it therefore stands to reason that religions have loomed large in globalisation studies from the very beginning.⁷ Here the standard was set by Ranger (1993). Further work on Pentecostalism puts the Christian side of globalisation in Africa in relief.

A series of articles edited by Corten & Marshall-Fratani (2001) deals specifically with the

⁷ Cf. van Binsbergen, van Dijk & Gewald 2004.

issues of global flows, migration and nationalism in relation to Pentecostalism. The editors note that over the past two decades, Latin American and African societies have experienced a phenomenal growth of Pentecostal movements. Describing a 'bricolage' of extremely heterogeneous elements, the editors argue that modern Pentecostalism provides a striking example of the paradox of difference and uniformity, of flow and closure, that seems to be at the heart of processes of transnationalism and globalisation. The dazzling complexity and (class-wise) social diversity of the Pentecostal phenomenon in Africa, and its globalisation overtones, are well captured in that volume.

On the Islamic side, Kane (1997) examines the historical role and structure of Sufi orders in West Africa. In the context defined by globalisation, the breakdown of the state, and mass migrations, Kane argues that the networks which Sufi orders create, function in fact as a substitute to the state in the providing of social security. With increased mobility, the Sufi networks have now been strengthened over ever greater distances, often well beyond Africa. Parallels to Kane's work are to be found in the work of Stoller (1999, 2002), and Dilley (2004).

However, globalisation has also had an impact on historic African religion. Much research has concentrated on the collective imagination, the fantasies, which globalisation brings about especially in the periphery of the global system. Economically and socially marginalized,

'thrown out of the circle of full humanity' (Ferguson 1999: 236),

Africans have developed strands of reasoning that seek to explain and provide solutions to this exclusion. They have come up with explanations of the world which to outside observers may appear to be absurd, fantastic, and beyond the bounds of the rational. Such ideas and explanations had seemingly withered and disappeared in Europe in post-Enlightenment times. However, it is worth remembering that the European past and present provides a rich corpus seeking to identify and to control this fantastic world.⁸

Research conducted on the issues of witchcraft and magic in Africa in the context of globalisation has come to be dominated by the work of Geschiere.⁹ For Geschiere, the obsession with witchcraft in many parts of present-day Africa is not to be viewed as a survival, as some sort of traditional residue. On the contrary, it is claimed to be particularly present in the more modern spheres of society. Geschiere notes that also in other parts of the world modern developments coincide with a proliferation of 'economies of the occult' (Comaroff & Comaroff 1999). The power of modern African discourses on occult forces, according to Geschiere, is that they relate people's fascination with the open-endedness of global flows to the search for fixed orientation points and identities. Both witchcraft and spirit cults exhibit a surprising capacity for combining the local and the global. Both also have specific implications for the ways in which people try to deal with modernity's challenge.

⁸ Cf., from among a very extensive literature, Thorndike 1923-1958; Ginzburg 1966, 1989; Thomas 1978; Clough & Mitchell 2001; Ellis 2001.

⁹ Geschiere 1995, 1998; cf. Taussig 1980; Bongmba 2001; Bond & Ciekawi 2001, to which I have contributed a chapter (reprinted in the present book as ch. 14).

Writing of commodities in the global space, van Dijk (1999: 72) challenges the common 'enchantment' approach to this topic, because it :

'seems to primitivize the other's capacity to deal with the uncertainties and the porous quality of social life which result from engagement with the global economy'.

Personally, I have sought to correct Geschiere's presentism, advocating instead that witchcraft in Africa today is about the 'virtualised boundary conditions of the kinship order' – an order whose basic format at least goes back to the Neolithic, as does its basic defiance through witchcraft, even though under modern conditions of globalisation the specific forms and occasions of witchcraft beliefs and practices have been subject to specific changes (van Binsbergen 2001c; and ch. 14, below).

13.2.2. *The challenge of identity*

The recent globalisation process, with its profound changes in the nature of post-capitalism and the North Atlantic state, has led, throughout the world today, to a situation where (superimposed upon a structure of world-wide inequality along continental, national-constitutional, regional, class, gender and age lines, and largely obscuring the latter from view) there is a representational structure of *identity* (cf. Doornbos & van Binsbergen 2017). From the local to the global level, politics is less and less conceived as a struggle for scarce material resources, but as a struggle for recognition of identity (Taylor 1992) – which, if successful, will imply access to the underlying structure of scarce resources anyway. By the same token, *denial* of identity is increasingly seen as the most brutal act of exclusion. Religious forms, in Africa and elsewhere, have lend themselves for the production of contrastive identities within the socio-political arenas at all levels. They have (often as a result of the local historical contingencies of Christian and Islamic proselytising in Africa) either reinforced existing ethnic, linguistic, regional and class boundaries, or offered alternative (usually more universal) identities in the light of which non-religious identity boundaries can be crossed or rendered irrelevant. Empirical studies exploring these processes have formed an established genre of Africanist religious research for decades.

Challenges arise here in a number of ways.

The *first* challenge concerns what has emerged as a major paradigm in the interpretation of organised religion in the postmodern North Atlantic region: *believing without belonging* (cf. Davie 1996): the dissociation between adherence to a set of beliefs, on the one hand, and involvement in a voluntary formal organisation propounding such beliefs, on the other hand. In Africa, it is very much still 'believing *and* belonging', in the sense that especially in Christianity (but increasingly also in Islam and even in African historic religion) formal self-organisation is the obvious context for belief and ritual.

In the *second* place we have to consider the proliferation of new boundaries and new identities under the very impact of globalisation – contrary to the naive expectation that globalisation is all about unimpeded flow. Political processes,

especially those of an imperial nature, have carved out geographical spaces within which a plurality of identities tend to be mapped out. An unstructured, diffuse social field cannot be named nor can it inspire identity. The apparently unlimited and uncontrollable supply of intercontinentally mediated images, symbols, ideas and objects which is swept across modern Africa by the media, commodity distribution, the educational services, cosmopolitan medicine and world religions, calls for new identities. People seek to define new boundaries so as to create or salvage their identity in the face of this incessant flow. By imposing boundaries they may either appropriate for themselves a specific part of the global supply, or protect themselves in order to keep part of the global flow at a safe distance. Such boundaries are in the first place constructed by human thought, as *conceptual* boundaries. However, they are mainly maintained and ever again re-constructed, in *interaction*; and for such interaction the relatively new formal organisations of Africa constitute the most obvious context. Let us for instance consider such a widespread phenomenon as the laundering of globally mediated commodities and of money in the context of modern religious organisations. We have seen how many African Christian churches appear as a context for the managing of elements belonging to the inimical domain of commodities, consumption and the market. But much the same process is at work among syncretistic or neo-traditional cults.¹⁰ If such organisations can selectively manage the global and construct a security screen of identity around their members, they are at least as effective in keeping the local (ancestors, spirits of the wild, local deities) out of their charmed circle of identity, or allowing it in only at severe restrictions. There is a remarkable variation in the way in which local religious forms are allowed to be voiced in a context where the globally mediated religious forms (Islam, Christianity) are clearly dominant. Creating identity – ‘a place to feel at home’, to borrow Welbourn & Ogot’s apt expression first applied to Independent churches in Western Kenya, – means that the Christian or Islamic converts engage in a social process that allows them, by the management of boundaries and the positioning of people, ideas and objects within and outside these boundaries, to create a new community which, in principle, is independent from whatever pre-existing community attachments they may have had on the basis of their kinship affiliations, rural homes, ethnic or political affiliations (cf. Long 1968).

This second point implies the *third*, which has been elaborated by the cosmopolitan African philosophers Mudimbe (1988) and Appiah (1993b) in their critique of Afrocentricity¹¹ and ethnic identity politics; these philosophers are

¹⁰ E.g. in an urban variety of *Sangoma* mediumistic cults widespread in Southern Africa (van Binsbergen 1999b, 2003b, 1991a, 1990a / the present book, chapter 4.

¹¹ Seminal Afrocentrist writings include: Diop 1955; Asante 1987. For well-documented but largely dismissive critical assessments, cf. Fauvelle-Aymar *et al.* 2000; Howe 1999; for arguments opposing Howe (and similar views, like Mudimbe’s), and defending Afrocentrism in academia, cf. van Binsbergen 1997b, 2000a, 2000b, 2001d / 2005a / 2015: ch. 12: 383–342, 2011j.

claiming that African identities today, including religious identities, are so unmistakably and deceptively constructed that, rather than take them seriously, we should only deconstruct them.

In an Africa rife with the reification of, and conflict over, identities, such a theoretical *caveat* is likely to have less practical implications than a *fourth* type of challenge in the domain of identity. This arises when local and global identities percolate and merge to form a tangle with far-reaching political implications. For instance, the identity options of Igbo immigrants in Hausaland, Northern Nigeria (notably: ‘will they convert to Islam or not?’), are no longer primarily determined by a consideration of the networks of local and regional trade and other economic opportunities, but by the Islamist attacks on the eastern USA on 9 September 2001, and their aftermath. Whereas assuming a Christian identity (although perceived as a path to modernity) was rarely a sufficient condition for an African person’s acceptance in North Atlantic circles, possessing or assuming of an *Islamic* identity now in principle incriminates the same African person by virtue of the deceptive construction, by American-British hegemony, of Muslims as collective enemies of the North Atlantic political and economic order and security. Of course, the expansion of Christianity in Africa has been part of a North Atlantic hegemonic project from the nineteenth century CE onwards, and in this sense the recent projection of extra-African concerns on African processes of identity is nothing new under the sun. We should resist the temptation of turning Africanist religious studies into a hegemonic exercise puppeteered from the Foreign Offices in Washington and London.¹² Instead, we should try to find a sociological answer to the question – no longer particularly Africanist – as to why Islam has such a massive and increasing appeal in Africa today.¹³ Islam appears as an alternative route to modernity, ensuring (or at least promising) a meaningfulness, dignity, boundedness, and (as a stepping stone to Islamic diasporas in the North Atlantic region) world-wide *belonging*, which Northern hegemony (even in its Christian expressions) denies the vast majority of the inhabitants of Asia, Africa and Southern America. It may be time to break out of our decades-long fascination with identity for identity’s sake, and re-address ourselves to the study of underlying *inequalities in resources and power*.

13.2.3. *The challenge of formalisation, representation, and resilience*

The increasing dominance of formal organisations after the North Atlantic model has inevitably an impact on the representation of African religious forms. The insistence on formal (self-)organisations in the religious domain offers the possibilities of firm boundaries, as stipulated by the socio-legal format of such organisations, their registration with the state, and their clear distinction between who is a member and who is not.

¹² Pace Akhahenda 2002; Center 2002.

¹³ Cf. Belmessous 2002; Jhazbhay 2002; Mumisa 2002; Omar 2002.

However, the plurality of religious organisations in modern Africa should not make us close our eyes to the fact that in social practice the boundaries between them tend to be very porous: people shop around for religious affiliation, many have multiple memberships or at least affinities, and in practice one easily shifts from one organisation to another for reasons of convenience, sociability, socio-economic appeal of a reference group, existential appeal, more than of doctrine.

Representation is an ubiquitous feature, even a precondition, of social life. The very perpetuation of religious forms even in the hands of their own qualified adepts depends on representation, which enables these participants to coordinate the social process of their ritual organisation, to recruit and instruct newcomers, and to present themselves both self-reflectively and towards the outside world.

From the introduction of writing to that of the Internet, technological innovations have revolutionised the domain of self-presentation of African religious forms: from self-reflexive ethnography (introduced already a century ago, when early Kongo converts began to produce written texts describing their traditional religion – cf. Janzen 1985); subsequently raised to the genre of ‘retro-diction’ (‘evoking historic African religion as if one still believed in them’) which Mudimbe (1997) has so aptly identified for the Roman Catholic clerical intellectuals living the articulation of difference in late colonial Central Africa; to self-representation through photographs, film, video, and especially on globally available websites today. Adopting a new technology of representation also means making aspects of African religion available for circulation and appropriation outside Africa, even among non-Africans.

Africanist religious studies are also a form of representation (cf. Leland Cox 2001): the *etic* translation of *emic* local concepts,¹⁴ activities and structures of social relations, towards the alien language of social and cultural analytical description after the evolving paradigms of North Atlantic scholarship. Here the classic empirical naivety (‘if we carefully use the right methods, we will arrive at a faithful representation African religious forms’) has gradually been supplanted by an ever increasing awareness of *the violence of representation* (cf. van Binsbergen 2003b, 2015). This insight has made us aware that African religious forms (e.g. a serenely propitiatory African ancestral ritual; an African Independent Church hymn sung passionately; a profound Islamic lecture on the meaning of a particular Qur’anic passage) – that these cannot possibly be rendered in scholarly texts without violence to the original. *The representation exists on a different plane from the original, yet it is circulated in the wider world of national and intercontinental power relations as if it were a faithful replica of the original.* Such academic representation of African religious forms can however be made less violent if it actively, in a dialogical form, seeks to accommodate such *emic* forms of representation as the participants themselves engage

¹⁴ On the paired concepts *emic* and *etic*, cf. Headland *et al.* 1990; also see the General Index, s.v. ‘meaning’.

in, and if the products of representation (in the form of published sociological studies) are subsequently made available to the participants for appropriation and criticism. But once we try to do this, we hit upon the epistemological challenge that divides the believers from the (typically non-believing) analytical describers, and that unjustifiably privileges the latter as if African religion is only there to be deconstructed as illusory (*cf.* van Binsbergen 1991a, 2003b, 2015).

The reformulation in a new organisational format is a major reason why, over the past decades, *African historic religious forms* have displayed a far greater resilience than could ever have been predicted considering the onslaught of North Atlantic secular rationality, the state, formal education, Christianity, Islam, and biomedicine. For such major domains as territorial cults,¹⁵ puberty rites (Rasing 1994-1995, 1999, 2001), chieftainship¹⁶ (which throughout Africa involves royal cults), possession and mediumship,¹⁷ and divination¹⁸ there is considerable evidence to the effect that, far from disappearing under modern conditions, these have made a remarkable comeback in the late twentieth century. North Atlantic research on these topics has not produced this resilience, but merely recorded it and identified its probable causes. The available studies suggest two other factors of resilience in addition to their reformulation within formal organisations:

1. These institutions are time-honoured ways, of proved effectiveness, to deal with perpetual central issues facing local societies (authority, order, the management of conflict, role preparation, gender and age differences, the acquisition of an effective social identity);
2. These institutions draw on sources of cosmological meaning and self-identity whose continued relevance may have been eroded by recent globalisation, yet were far from destroyed by it.

Examples abound. In modern western Zambia, various historic religious forms survive under the aegis of the Kazanga Cultural Society, which is formally registered under the Societies Act, and whose urban executive manage to articulate, in the context of an annual festival, the cults and traditional leaders in the countryside to high-ranking national politicians from the capital (van Binsbergen 1992a, 1999f). By the same token, in modern Botswana the Mwali high-god cult and the divinatory and healing activities of traditional practitioners have come to articulate themselves organisationally towards the state and the wider public under the guise of formal organisations under the Societies Act; this strategy leaves the activities and power relations of their senior personnel intact, while expanding their scope to accumulate and manage modern resources such as real estate, motor vehicles, retail businesses *etc.* (*cf.* Chapter 5 of the

¹⁵ *Cf.* Werbner 1977; Schoffeleers 1979; Flynn 2002; Greene 2002; Sheridan 2000; Wamue 2001; Gadou 2001.

¹⁶ *Cf.* van Rouveroy van Nieuwaal & van Dijk 1999; van Binsbergen 1999f; Ballarin 2000.

¹⁷ *Cf.* Dupré 2001; Fiorelli 2000; van Dijk *et al.* 2000; Wastiau 2000; van Binsbergen 2003b, 1981b,

¹⁸ van Binsbergen 2003b, 2013a; Hammond-Tooke 2002; Teixeira 2001; Pemberton 2000; Devisch 1985d, 2008.

present book). Among middle-class urban Zambians, female puberty rites survive and are increasingly popular partly because of the modern reformulation in the form of 'kitchen parties' celebrating a young woman's attainment of nubile adulthood by a festive shower of modern kitchen utensils and other household gear; the modern format, informed by world-wide models (especially from North America) helps to lend respectability and continuity to what is still in essence a time-honoured puberty rite.¹⁹

Meanwhile, the most obvious context for the resilience of historic African religion is provided by formal organisations in the context of the world religions: Christian churches,²⁰ Islamic brotherhoods and mosque-centred congregations. However, we have already pointed out that these organisations' adoption of historic elements is highly selective and transformative, generally reducing such elements to a muted and implicit state in which they have become deprived of dynamics of their own.

13.3. The challenge of disorder, conflict and violence – religion and the civil society in the African context

Religious forms in Africa either reinforce or cut across existing socio-political, ethnic, regional, class, age and gender identities and their boundaries. Therefore, whenever we encounter religious processes in Africa (be they in the Islamic, Christian or historic African domain) conflict is always within our field of vision, and violence is never far away.

The empirical documentation of the varieties of violence²¹ and their religion-related contexts constitutes a meaningful and urgent field of research, not only from an analytical but also from a humanitarian point of view. Postcolonial African states have often failed to extend economic and physical security to their citizens, and in about a dozen African countries the state only exist on paper any more. This has had a profound impact on the religious domain: established forms of religious self-organisation come under pressure, or may even collapse; there is a resilience of other forms (especially historic ones) and their mobilisation for survival, protest, and liberation; world religions' intercontinental connections are used to create contexts of negotiation and reconciliation to reduce or terminate conflict, and to further democracy; political, regional and ethnic conflict may be articulated in terms of two rival world religions (Islam versus Christianity), sometimes as an invitation to massive violence.

The challenge here lies particularly in the formulation of more adequate models

¹⁹ Cf. Rasing 1994-1995, 2001; van Binsbergen 1998b / 2015: ch. 1.

²⁰ E.g. Adogame 2000; Olajubu 2001; Werbner 1985; van Binsbergen 2000d / this volume, chapter 3.

²¹ Cf. Marlin 2001; Cooper 2002; Devisch 1995; Konings *et al.* 2000.

of social analysis. A powerful tradition in the sociology of religion (that of Durkheim 1912) puts religion at the centre of the construction of the social order, and hence lets religion appear as a context in which conflict is attenuated and reconciliation may be negotiated in avoidance of violence. This approach has proved reasonably enlightening for socio-political processes at the grass-roots level of the village, the localised ethnic group in a rural setting, and the urban ward. Here the participants' dominant frame of reference tends to be modelled after kinship, and religious groups with their rituals enhance the intra-kin social process or provide the alternative of fictive kinship. Religious institutions in Africa (Islamic, Christian, and historic African) tend to offer highly effective social technologies of reconciliation at the local level (van Binsbergen 1999e / 2003b: ch. 11, pp. 349 *f.*). However, at the regional and national level, and in the light of world-wide processes leading to the negative stereotyping of Islam in untutored North Atlantic eyes, religion has proved to be more a divisive than an integrative force in Africa. All the same, religious organisations, both Africa-based and international, have been active in reconciliation with regard to present-day ethnic and racial conflict in, for instance, East Africa and the Republic of South Africa (the Truth and Reconciliation Commission).

A central challenge, therefore, inspired by the performance of African religious forms in the social and political domain, is: *can religion in Africa contribute to the construction of societal consensus as the backbone of civil society?* Can the two world religions, each separately or in combination, ever succeed in binding the extreme fragmentation of African socio-political experience into a consensus at the regional, national, even international level?

In principle, the answer on this point is rather affirmative despite (*cf.* Mbembe 1997) far-reaching qualifications. In addition to the adoption of the formal organisation, and closely related to this process, the transformation of African societies in the course of the twentieth century has consisted of the creation of a new, national societal order, and the religious underpinning of that order by elements derived from a world religion. In the northern half of Africa, where Islam has often been dominant since well *before* the advent of European colonial rule, this process evolved more gradually than where (very roughly: in Africa south of the 10° North parallel) Christianity emerged as the main world religion in question (albeit, more recently, under pressure from a rapidly increasing Islam). In Islamic Africa the process subsequently intensified with the global rise of Islamism in the last decades of the twentieth century. As far as Christianity is concerned, one can hardly overestimate the rapidity and the force with which this world religion, so closely associated with the colonial state, modern education and health care, in less than a century managed to establish itself as an implicit 'Great Tradition', not so much eradicating historic African religion but relegating it to the rural and the private sphere, as an unobtrusively surviving, often even resilient, 'Little Tradition'.

Although there are notable exceptions (*e.g.* Benin and Swaziland, where his-

toric ecstatic and royal cults are frequently mediated towards the public sphere and the centres of national power), by and large, in modern Africa, historic African religion tends to be inconspicuous. While surviving as a private expression in the kinship domain and as a local public expression in many rural contexts, it is as a rule not conspicuous in the urban areas and at the political centre. This does not mean that African historic religion is absent from modern life, but that it has largely gone *underground* (cf. van Binsbergen 1993d), since its numerous private adherents are generally unwilling or incapable to publicly withstand the allegations of primitiveness, heterodoxy, evil, which has been projected upon these local religions expressions ever since the introduction, on African soil, of Islam and Christianity. It is these two world religions which dominate the public sphere and which may, and often do, offer such (admittedly limited) ideological consensus as national African societies yet display in the postcolonial era. Historic African religion yet plays a role there in a number of ways. It may be explicitly co-opted (albeit in a form which has lost its dynamics and meaning) to the public centre, at selected places and times (e.g. Independence celebrations and other political ceremonial) to help construct a sense of national identity through folklore. It may be nostalgically re-invented (cf. Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983) not so much by politicians but by intellectuals, in order to derive, from the realm of ancestors and precolonial kingship, alternative solutions for contradictions which the world religions, given their strong links with the political centre, cannot in themselves reconcile – such as in the case of *ubuntu* philosophy in Southern Africa today (van Binsbergen 2001b / 2003b: ch. 14, pp. 427 *f.*, and references cited there). However, historic African religion is mainly articulated in the public and central sphere in order to provide a *contrast* with the norms and values claimed to inform that sphere. When this happens, African historic religion appears in a negative light – as witchcraft, Satanism, human sacrifice, paganism. This state of affairs may also lead to a point where antisocial violence assumes the trappings of a cult of evil re-invented on the basis of the selective appropriation of elements of African historic religion devoid of their original context (Toulabor 2000). By contrast, when civil war confronts what is seen as an exploitative national or colonial state associated with a world religion, more intact and original forms of African historic religion may be adopted as important props of identity (e.g. in Southern Senegal, and in the Zimbabwe liberation struggle).²²

Comparison with the situation in other continents (most nation-states in the Americas, Europe, North Africa and the Middle East) suggests that when one world religion effectively dominates the national political space this may create the kind of societal consensus conducive to a viable national polity. The presence of competing world religions of comparable strength within a national space often goes together with violent conflict, like in India (Hindus-Muslims)

²² Cf. Geschiere & van der Klei 1988, and Marut 2002, for Senegal; Ranger 1985b, Kriger 1992, and Lan 1985 for Zimbabwe.

and the Balkan (Christians-Muslims) – and the same may be said about denominations of world religions, like Protestantism / Roman Catholicism in Northern Ireland, the religious wars in early modern Europe, and the struggles between *sunna* and *shi'ite* Islam in Iraq. In Africa, some major violent conflicts have been fought in postcolonial states comprising rival Muslim and Christian populations (Sudan, Chad, Nigeria in the Biafra crisis). However, one needs only consider the many postcolonial African cases of regional and ethnic conflict without a major component of world-religion rivalry (e.g. Rwanda, Burundi, Eritrea) to realise, for Africa and beyond, the one-sidedness of Huntington's (1996) stress on world religions in the 'Clash of Civilizations'. Not any allegedly irreconcilable contradiction of world religions, but other features of the postcolonial African states (personalised leadership, a shallow constitutional tradition, prominence of ethnic and regional conflict, elite appropriation of the state and its international relations), of their national economies and of their global political and economic environment, would explain such conflicts.

With the continued decline of African postcolonial states, the world religions tend to provide the organisational backbone of civil society as well as its mouthpiece. This implies that they are in a highly strategic position to mediate between Africa, on the one hand, and the North Atlantic and Middle Eastern political and religious organisations active in the fields of development cooperation, education, and human rights. The rôle of Christian and Islamic organisations in the democratisation wave and the call for 'good governance' which swept across Africa around 1990, shows the advantages of such a situation. However, its implication is a further marginalisation of historic African religion from the public domain and the political centre; also the filtering of North-South contacts via a local African, religiously-underpinned development elite contains the risk that the local grassroots level no longer actively participates in the intercontinental production and circulation of knowledge, which then tends to become a circulation of ignorance under what I have elsewhere described as the Janus effect (van Binsbergen 1999g / 2003b: ch. 10).

Revelation and Revolution, the Comaroffs' (1991-1997) monumental historicising sociological study of Tswana Christianity in Southern Africa, may leave the superficial reader with the impression that the implantation of a world religion in Africa was inevitably a process of sustained hegemonic subjugation and nothing more. However, processing largely familiar material through the sieve of their Foucaultian discourse does not make the Comaroffs overlook the converts' agency. Africans' adoption of Christianity was generally not a passive process of hegemonic submission. Very soon already (cf. Shepperson & Price 1958) it became, and was recognised as, an act of appropriation and empowerment. In this connection Mudimbe (1997) has stressed, for first generation African Christian intellectuals, the role of Christianity in the 'liberation of African difference', while Mbembe (1988) highlighted similar processes in his *Afriques Indociles* (also cf. Eboussi-Boulaga 1981). Christianity has created, in the course of the twentieth century, a 'mutant cultural order' (Mudimbe 1997) whose outlines, far beyond

the individual Christian thinkers (Kagame, Ki-Zerbo, Mulago, Mveng) whom Mudimbe highlights in this connection, may be illustrated with the following impression, which I derive from the Ph.D. research of Julie Ndaya (*cf.* 1999, 2008) under my supervision:

In July, 2000, Kinshasa, the Congolese capital, was the scene of a major church conference of the *Combat Spirituel* ('Spiritual Combat') movement. The conference involved close to 20,000 people, many of whom had travelled to Kinshasa from western Europe and other places of the Congolese diaspora. Obviously we are dealing here with a highly significant social phenomenon at a massive scale. The movement caters for upper middle class and professional people, especially women, who play leading roles in the movement's organisation. The movement's doctrine and ritual combine an original re-reading of the Bible with techniques of self-discovery and purification under the direction of female leaders. The spiritual battle that members have to engage in, is a struggle for self-realisation in the face of any kind of negations or repressions of personal identity, especially such as are often the fate of ambitious middle-class women in diasporic situations. In order to achieve this goal, it is imperative that all existing ties with the past, as embodied in the traditional cultural norms of historic Central African society, and as represented by the ancestors, are literally trampled underfoot. [Elsewhere (van Binsbergen 2015: 434 *f.*) I discuss the same case and present a comparative argument to the effect that trampling may be a traditional sign of respect rather than of contempt – although no longer so understood by middle-class Congolese diasporic women.] Thus a major part of regular church ritual is to go through the motions of vomiting upon evocations of the ancestors, and of violently and repeatedly stamping on their representations. The catharsis that this is to bring about is supposed to prepare one for the modern, hostile world at large. Some actual and intended members experience great difficulty in thus having to violently exorcise figures and symbols of authority and identity that even in the diffuse, virtualised kinship structure of urban Congolese society today have been held in considerable respect. But while this predicament suggests at least some residual resilience of historic African religion (otherwise there would be no hesitation at trampling the past and the ancestors), it is practically impossible for diasporic Congolese to tap, for further spiritual guidance, the resources of historic African religion in the form of divination, therapy and protective medicine: at the original time of writing (2003), not one reliable and qualified Congolese specialist in historic African religion (*nganga*) is said to be found in, for instance, The Netherlands or even Belgium, where thousands of Congolese live.

Here we see much of the pattern of middle-class African Christianity towards the end of the twentieth century: the literate and Christian format appropriated as self-evident yet subjected to personal selective transformation, the rejection of an ancestral past and of African historic religion, the total inability to derive any spiritual resources from the latter, and the effect of being propelled into a mutant cosmopolitan cultural and spiritual solution that is African by the adherents original geography and biology, but not in substance.

13.4. The spatial and temporal framework as a challenge

The current situation in Africa offers plenty of challenges for the sociology of religion to meet in the next fifty years. Meanwhile, it may not be superfluous to remind sociologists of religion of the fundamental historical requirements of any attempt to interpret current religious situations, in Africa or elsewhere. In many respects, today's religion is the symbolic condensation of the social, ethnic, political and economic contradictions of the recent and distant past – in

other words more *en vogue* today, 'the memory'.²³ Any interpretation of similarity and difference on the basis of an examination of modern distribution patterns of religious phenomena needs to take into consideration their short-range and long-range history. This means that we have to create the institutional and financial means for historical research in addition to research into the topicalities of today, for which institutional and financial resources may be more readily available. It means that we have to actively protect sources of social and religious history, by creating collections of ephemeral and local documents (for which the religious sphere is notorious; *cf.* Barber & Maraes Farias 2000), and supporting the upkeep of regional archives, institutional (*e.g.* church, mission and mosque) archives, and national archives, which especially in Africa is an arduous undertaking.

Attention for the historical dimension particularly means that we do not allow ourselves to be imprisoned in the geopolitical self-evidences of today. Africa is a recent intellectual construct, as the great African scholar Mudimbe (1988, 1994) has reminded us persistently. In the euphoria of the immediate post-Independence period, and in acknowledgment of more recent Afrocentrist trends among African American and African intellectuals, many Africanists worldwide have come to engage in an 'Africa for the Africans' attitude. As concerns the creation of intellectual facilities for study, research and appointment such an attitude is wise and laudable, but it must not develop into the, quite common, self-censorship by which Africanists have increasingly refused to consider social and cultural phenomena on the African soil as part of wider movements involving other continents, while at the same time engaging in a mystique that sees a uniquely African quality, a general converging unity, in everything pertaining to the African continent. Such an attitude flies in the face of everything discussed above in terms of recent globalisation and proto-globalisation

Africa was the cradle of all mankind a few million years ago, and it was the cradle of Anatomically Modern Humans less than 200,000 years ago. In these respects the Afrocentrists among us cannot be beaten – Africa does occupy a unique place in global cultural history. However, in historical times, for the past few thousand years, Africa has been very much part of the wider world, contributing to intercontinental cultural and social developments as well as receiving its share from such developments in other continents. Many Africanist religious topics, including Islam, Christianity, spirit possession, mediumship, territorial cults, divination, have their origin mainly or at least partly outside the African continent, and any attempt to interpret these phenomena exclusively by reference to local social structure and symbolism is bound to fail (van Binsbergen 2003b, 2012c, 2012e, 2012b / this book ch. 10).

A case in point is Hammond Tooke's analysis of mediumistic divination among the Nguni peoples,

²³ *Cf.* Davie 2000; de Vries & Weber 2001; Asad 2003; Werbner 1997; Greene 2002; van Binsbergen 1981b: 74 and *passim*.

which he declares an exception because all other Southern African peoples use the four-tablet oracle or a variant, for objective divination by means of a physical apparatus. This leads him to resort to two modes of explanation: a social-structural one ('the strong patrilineal groups and the subordination of women among the Nguni'), and a diffusionist one but conceived entirely within the regional context ('Nguni trance divination must largely have come from the San'). The social-structural argument is unconvincing, because it applies equally to the Tswana, who (until well into the 20th c. CE) did not have trance divination but relied on objective divination (Werbner 1989; Campbell 1979). The San argument, while potentially valid, must yet be dismissed as too partial and in fact unconvincing, in the light of my own research, which (as highlighted throughout the present book) reveals strong South Asian elements in Nguni trance divination, going back to South Asia, not 10 ka like some of the South Asian ancestors of the San (Cavalli-Sforza *et al.* 1994), but only a few ka.

Admitting such intercontinental indebtedness for the last few millennia is not in the least a disqualification of Africa, for exactly the same argument, and even more so, may be made for so-called European characteristics and achievements, including Christianity and modern science. Our admission on this point is only a reminder that broad continental categories are part of geopolitics, of ideology and identity construction, and not of detached analytic thought. There is a famous passage in Linton's *The Study of Man* (1936) in which he describes the morning ritual of the average modern inhabitant of the North Atlantic: from the slippers he puts on his feet to the God to whom he prays, the cultural items involved have a heterogeneous and global provenance, nearly all hailing from outside the North Atlantic region. The cultural and intellectual achievements commonly claimed as exclusive to the European continent, are a concoction of transcultural intercontinental borrowings such as one may only expect in a small peninsula attached to the Asian land mass and due north of the African land mass, both continents several times the size of Europe. What makes things European to be European, and things African to be African, for that matter, is primarily the *transformative localisation* after diffusion.²⁴ Transformative localisation gave rise to unmistakably, uniquely and genially Greek myths, philosophy, mathematics, politics, although virtually all the ingredients of these domains of Greek achievement had been borrowed from Phoenicia, Anatolia, Mesopotamia, Egypt (and so by implication from Africa), Thracia, and the Danube lands. And a similar argument could be made for many splendid kingdoms and cultures of post-Neolithic Africa.

In such a context of recognised variation within Africa, and of increasingly perceived intercontinental exchanges of religious forms between Africa, Asia and Europe, it is dangerous to make general pronouncements concerning the African religious situation as a whole. Such generalities are invariably part of a specific ideological appropriation of African life worlds and religious forms for specific political and identitary goals, as pursued by such categories as: North Atlantic and South African Christians, North Atlantic African Americans in the construction of Afrocentricity, Southern African academic philosophers, *etc.* Yet I will venture one such generalisation, in conclusion: on African immanentism.

²⁴ On this concept cf. van Binsbergen 1997c / 2011 e.

13.5. The challenge of immanentalism: Causation in African thought traditions

What the world religions (Islam and Christianity) have brought to Africa, in addition to new idioms of religiously-underpinned sociability and new idioms of power legitimated in supernatural terms, is a new *interpretation of causation*:²⁵ one in which the notion of *transcendence* could become not only a theoretical possibility contemplated from a distance, but a deeply felt reality in everyday life and death. Having intensively participated in all three major domains of African religion for decades, it is my contention that here lies the one fundamental distinction between the world religions on the one hand, and historic African religion on the other. Witchcraft beliefs and practices, the implausibility of natural death, the manipulative elements in the diviner-priest-healer's art, the captivating hold of the occult – all this does not *rule out* attitudes of adoration, surrender, dependence, humility, *yet* boils down to the fact that in historic African world views the human tends to be the measure of all things (not unlike classical Greek culture), while the supernatural tends to be considered either manipulable (as ancestors and spirits), or remote and otiose (as the High God).

Transcendentalist religion arose in the Ancient Near East (including Ancient Egypt) along with the emergence of writing and the state, and these three elements are intricately connected; together they have shaped much of the history of Asia and Europe in the last five millennia. The case of Ancient Egypt already demonstrates that these developments have far from passed by Africa, where writing, statehood and transcendentalist religion have never been completely absent in historical times; yet for most of that period large parts of Africa have had to do without. Instead, we have seen the survival and even resilience of historic African religion, and the failure to establish viable modern states based on the transcendence of the legal word and of the bureaucratic authority it generates. This state of affairs, which clearly has implications even beyond the religious field, and affects the entire texture of modern African societies, including their incapability of generating a viable civil consensus as a basis for statehood. It is here that we hit upon the greatest challenge for the immediate future of Africa.

In a context in which the preservation of socio-cultural 'biodiversity' is globally advocated, where the assertion of identity is politically the royal road (Freud 1961-1973) to national and regional scarce resources, and where therefore the survival of historic African religion may be considered a good thing, how can African societies today yet install, in their members, the kind of views concerning causation and transcendence on which the functioning of modern societies

²⁵ Cf. Comaroff & Comaroff 1991-1997; Marmura 1973; Mitchell 1965; Hammond-Tooke 1970; Pool 1994; van Binsbergen 1981b; Horton 1967, 1971.

elsewhere have used to be largely dependent? (Or rather, used to be largely dependent, before the crises of postmodernity and globalisation.)

The question is far from simple, for transcendence is not only a prerequisite *but also a product* of literacy (through the violent distance which the written word creates *vis-à-vis* its referent) and of statehood (for the violent distance the state creates between its citizens and their immediate desires). So where should one begin? What renders the case even more complicated, is that we have become fully aware of the *hegemonic implications* of the kind of argument that I just presented. In order to construct itself and its science as universal, rational and objective (*cf.* Harding 1994, 1997), the North Atlantic region has needed to create, 'to invent' (in Mudimbe's words) Africa as the proverbial antithesis, as the ultimate Other. In the face of the unmistakable humanity which Africans share with Europeans, that invention in itself is a result of the dubious capabilities of transcendence as contained in the scholarly word of North Atlantic science and philosophy. In an immanentist world view, the ultimate other scarcely exist – even the stone, plant and beast, even the witch, even the demon of the wilds, even the apartheid state's executioner, even the North Atlantic objectifying social researcher, may be approached, given an anthropomorphic shape, and received back into the folds of humanity (van Binsbergen 1999e / 2003b: ch. 11). The resilience of African historic religious forms (even if largely underground, aloof from the public gaze and the political centre) reflects, perhaps, the continued functioning of the immanentist domain as a secure conceptual home, where the transcendentalist *othering* (on the part of North Atlantic, Christian or Islamic hegemonic forces) does not penetrate so effectively and painfully, and where the fruits of millennia of African cultural resourcefulness (including a generally more egalitarian and complementary conception of gender) may still be reaped. The real challenge on this point may lie in the creation of a worldwide context in which there is a place for African historic religion, both in Africa and outside, both among diasporic Africans and among non-African others, as a transformed spirituality of the village, although no longer in the village. The massive presence of an enormous variety of African religious forms, cults of divination and therapy, on the Internet, and their persistence and spread in and beyond diasporic communities in the North Atlantic, all testifies to the global potential of African religious forms today. It matches with the increasing retreat of the state, of book-based (as distinct from electronic screen-based) literacy, and of organised transcendent religion in the North Atlantic, and seems to foreshadow (for better or worse) a new era of post-rational, post-transcendentalist, multicentred global culture.

Chapter 14. Witchcraft in modern Africa

as virtualised boundary conditions of the kinship order

The study of witchcraft in Africa poses the same epistemological problems as any other attempt to study religious beliefs and practices with the concepts and theories which the social sciences have developed in the course of the twentieth century. Personally I have eagerly accepted the offer to exchange my chair in anthropology for one in philosophy because I am convinced that without such epistemological reflection anthropology is not going to fulfil its promise, at a time when – with globalisation and the rise of multicultural societies in the North Atlantic region – the intercultural knowledge production which anthropology promised to deliver is more needed than ever. However, at this stage I feel I have more to offer as a long-standing anthropological and historical student of witchcraft, than as a gate-crashing philosopher.

The steps in my argument are inspired by two excellent texts written by my long-standing colleagues and friends¹ Peter Geschiere and Matthew Schoffeleers,² both in the forefront of the Dutch contribution to African religious studies. Geschiere's argument is contained in a beautiful and thoughtful book,³ which has been widely acclaimed in its French version and whose English version has played a major role in the current revival of the study of witchcraft in a context of globalisation – Geschiere signals not (with Schiller and Weber), a *disenchantment*, but on the

¹ van Binsbergen & Geschiere 1985b; van Binsbergen & Schoffeleers 1985.

² Geschiere 1995; Schoffeleers 1996.

³ Geschiere 1995; also *cf.* Geschiere 1996.

contrary a 're-enchantment of Africa'. Matthew Schoffeleers' paper serves to suggest a perspective from which I can focus on Geschiere's.

The present argument operates at a high level of aggregation and generality. I try to contribute to the construction of an analytical context for the description and analysis of witchcraft beliefs and practices. But admittedly I scarcely enter into a discussion of specific descriptive details; this is to be reserved for a later study.

Throughout the argument I shall deploy the concept of *virtuality*, which I have found helpful towards the definition of relationships of broken reference and meaning gone astray,⁴ such as characterise social and cultural phenomena in Africa today. Therefore, let me begin by defining the concept of virtuality and provisionally indicating its use for the study of modern Africa.

14.1. Introduction

For many decades, anthropologists have dominated the academic study of African societies and cultures, and for a similar period most anthropologists have scarcely bothered to investigate the epistemological premises of their discipline. The common assumption was that prolonged field-work would take care of whatever nasty questions epistemologists could ask. In the first half of the twentieth century, anthropologists were busily engaged in a professionalisation process which made them surround their juvenile discipline with high walls of institutional and paradigmatic isolationism – through which general developments on the intellectual scene only selectively and reluctantly penetrated. Moreover, the mainstream of Western philosophy had been remarkably Eurocentric, philosophers had their hands full with one language and one culture, and were not particularly equipped to illuminate the interlingual and intercultural quest for knowledge of which anthropology and African Studies form part. From the early 1970s onwards, the epistemological complacency of anthropology has been increasingly assaulted by a series of debates on the imperialist background of anthropology, on decolonisation, on orientalism, on alterity or otherness, on male-centredness, on ethnographic authority, on Afrocentrism, and so on. The title of the panel of the international African Studies Association Annual Meeting where the present chapter was presented for the first time: 'Epistemological and ideological approaches to witchcraft analysis within African Studies: A critical assessment' indicates a new phase of reflection on the problems and possibilities of academic knowledge production in the modern world. Since Marx, Mannheim, and Michel Foucault we have been deeply aware that power relations largely determine – often inconspicuously – any production of knowledge. In the context of African studies this observation is of crucial importance. For here a massive volume of knowledge is being produced by outsiders who cannot by any standards identify as Africans (*cf.* Robert Sobukwe: an African is anyone who considers Africa home).

⁴ van Binsbergen 1997e, 1998a, 2015: ch. 1.

Moreover, this knowledge addresses a part of the world which was subjected to outside domination for long periods, and whose dependence and marginalisation in the modern period of globalisation is only increasing. As Africanists we must constantly consider the foundations of our knowledge production, and we must be prepared to thresh out the contradictions in this production in genuine debate with those of our colleagues who (as Africans, as African Americans, as members of Asian, South American, and Oceanian societies) occupy strategically different positions in a world which is at the same time globalising and (until quite recently) under North Atlantic hegemony.

The study of witchcraft occupies an important place in this endeavour, since for a long time Africa has been identified as the proverbial abode of witchcraft. This started in Late Antiquity, when Egypt was already singled out in similar terms in the Graeco-Roman perception (Barb 1971). More recently, throughout the colonial period, witchcraft featured in racist and imperialist constructions of alterity and inferiority as projected onto members of African societies. A number of phases may be discerned in the academic study of witchcraft as a major topic in African studies:

- the insistence on witchcraft as a manifestation of Africans' allegedly fundamentally different modes of thought as compared to those of inhabitants of the North Atlantic (Lévy-Bruhl, Evans-Pritchard, 1920-1940s);
- the vindication of the African subject's rationality by insistence on the logic of social relations behind witchcraft, against the background – considered to be more or less stable and timeless – of the stable institutions of African village society; Gluckman (1955, 1964: 240 *f.*, 1969: 301 *f.*), Marwick (1965, 1970), the Manchester School in general, 1950-1970s;
- witchcraft as one of the symbolic expressions of the African subject's active confrontation of problems of evil, meaning and competition in a context of rapid social and political change (*e.g.* the study of African religious change centring on Ranger, 1960-1980s; also see of my own work situated itself here);

and, after a slack period during the 1970s and 1980s,⁵

- the massive insistence on witchcraft in modern Africa interpreted as an African path to modernity in the context of globalisation (Geschiere, the Comaroffs, *c.s.*).

Witchcraft has meanwhile featured in specifically philosophical arguments. These initially reiterated Lévy-Bruhl's position or Frazer's contention that witchcraft (and magic in general) was misguided proto-science, in other words, should be understood as constituting an alternative theory of the natural world and its inner workings. A major breakthrough occurred in this field when the

⁵ Which however brought us the seminal: Hallen & Sodipo 1986.

philosopher Winch,⁶ a follower of the later Wittgenstein, cogently argued the fallacy of the Frazerian approach. Far from expounding a theory of the natural world which is demonstrably false – which would racistically call in question Africans' capability of empirical observation and logical reasoning, therefore would be in conflict with the anthropological tenet of the unity of mankind and with the epistemological principle of charity;⁷ and would be academic-political dynamite under modern conditions – Winch argued that African witchcraft, like any other religious belief the world over, *comes in where knowledge* (the knowledge of members of an African society, but also the knowledge of cosmopolitan natural sciences) *runs out*. African witchcraft is no more a theory of the natural world than that the Christian and Islamic dogma of Divine Providence is – what these three belief systems have in common is that they seek to articulate what is *beyond* empirical knowledge; all three are often pushed to a point where they imply the possibility of miracles, *i.e.* incidental departures from physical laws. African witchcraft is a way of speaking about the unspeakable, and as such perhaps understandable to believers, poets, philosophers and anthropologists, but outside the realm of natural science testing. If we accept this position, epistemology takes away our political embarrassment since clearly our study of African witchcraft no longer implies that Africans' intellectual capabilities are in any way different or deficient as compared to those of the rest of mankind. But for the great majority of Africanists like myself, who did not need Winch to arrive at this insight in the first place, this does not exhaust the potential of African witchcraft as a topic of research.⁸

14.2. Virtuality and the virtual village

14.2.1. *Virtuality defined*⁹

The terms *virtual* and *virtuality* have a well-defined and instructive trajectory in the history of ideas. In its broad sweep of space and time, its multi-lingual aspect and its repeated changes of meaning and context, this trajectory reminds us of the context we seek to illuminate by the use of these terms: that of globalisation.

Non-existent in classical Latin (although obviously inspired by the word *virtus* there), *virtual* and *virtuality* are late-medieval neologisms. Their invention became necessary when, partly via Arabic versions of Aristotle's works, his con-

⁶ Winch 1970. For a complex historical theory of magic combining natural, psychological, social and political factors, cf. van Binsbergen & Wiggermann 1999, reprinted in the present book as Chapter 8.

⁷ Lepore 1993; Davidson 1984; Malpas 1988. Cf. the kindred 'principle of humanity': Grandy 1973.

⁸ However, see Horton's criticism of Winch in: Horton 1993.

⁹ On *virtuality*, cf. Jules-Rosette 1990; Jules-Rosette 1996; Korff 1995; Rheingold 1991, 1993; van Binsbergen 1997c, 1998a, 2015: ch. 1.; Woolley 1992.

cept of δύναμις *dúnamis* ('potentiality, power, quadrate') had to be translated into Latin. While the Scholastic / Aristotelian philosophy, with its emphasis on general potential to be realised in the concrete and the specific, gradually retreated from most domains of North Atlantic intellectual life, our term found refuge in the expanding field of physics, especially mechanics, where *virtual velocity*, *virtual moment*, *virtual work* became established concepts around 1800. This was a century after optics – another branch of physics – had formulated the theory of the *virtual image*: the objects showing up in a mirror image do not really exist in the place where we see them, but they are merely illusory representations, which we believe to observe at the end of the refracted light beams connecting the object, the surface of the mirror, and our eye.

In our age of information technology the term *virtual* has gained a new lease of life. While in the context of modern automatics *virtual* largely takes its cue from the meaning given to the term in optics ('illusion'), it has also incorporated the mechanics sense of 'potentiality capable of actual realisation'. In the globalisation perspective we frequently refer to products of the electronic industry; the furtive, intangible projection of texts and images on electronic screens is an obvious example of *virtuality*. *Virtual reality* has now become a cliché of the post-modern experience: computer games and simulations which – with extreme suggestions of reality – conjure up, for the consumer, experiences which are *as real as they are vicarious*.

Guattari has introduced a related but significantly different use of the term *virtuality*: for him the term refers to new, unprecedented worlds, which are conjured up by creativity – contrasting science as knowledge of the real with philosophy as knowledge of the virtual. The evocation of these forms of *virtuality* in the context of art and philosophy is the most inspiring and hopeful aspect of Guattari's work, who however tends to ignore the structures of domination prevailing also in the production of art and philosophy.¹⁰

We need a further abstraction in order to make the concept of *virtuality* amenable to the analysis of modern Africa. Let *virtuality* stand for a specific relation of reference as existing between elements of culture (A_1, A_2, \dots, A_n). This relation may be defined as follows:

Once, in some original context C_1 , A_{virtual} referred to (i.e. derived its meaning from) A_{real} ; this relationship of reference is still implied to hold, but in actual fact A_{virtual} has come to function in a context C_2 which is so totally dissimilar to C_1 , that A_{virtual} stands on its own; and although still detectable on formal grounds to derive from A_{real} , A_{virtual} has become effectively meaningless in the new context C_2 , unless for some new meaning which A_{virtual} may acquire in C_2 in ways totally unrelated to C_1 .

Virtuality then is about disconnectivity, broken reference, de-contextualisation,

¹⁰ Cf. Deleuze & Guattari 1991; Guattari 1992; also cf. van Binsbergen 1999d, 2012g, 2015: ch. 10.

through which yet formal continuity shimmers through.

Such an approach to virtuality allows us to study the process of the appropriation of globally available objects, images and ideas in a local context, which constitutes itself in the very process of such appropriation. Under conditions of globalisation, this process occurs everywhere in the world today. However, it takes on a particularly marked form in Africa, where new technologies, like the computer, television and video, appear to be particularly discontinuous *vis-à-vis* pre-existing social and technological practices, and where the economic situation moreover imposes exceptional constraints on the introduction and spread of these new technologies. Far better than the classic research tradition which imagined bounded and integrated local 'cultures' to be drawn into contact with the wider world, the concept of virtuality offers a context for the analysis of modern African actors' production and sustaining of meaning in a context of globalisation. Virtuality equips us for the situation (which the global spread of consumerism and electronic technology has rendered increasingly common also in Africa) that meaning is encountered and manipulated in a context far removed, in time and space, from the concrete social context of production and reproduction where that meaning was originally worked out; where meaning is no longer local and systemic, but fragmented, ragged, absurd, maybe even absent.

But let us not forget that virtualising appropriation need not be limited to new forms coming in globally from very distant places. When today in South Central African towns there is a revival of girl's puberty rites whose imagery celebrates a rural cosmology and forms of female productive work no longer operative any more even in the rural areas, this is an instance of urbanites appropriating a virtualised rural model. It is my contention in the present chapter that a similar process is at work in modern African witchcraft beliefs and practices as found among African elites and middle classes.

14.2.2. The virtual village

We are all familiar with the obsolete classic anthropological image of a multiplicity of African 'cultures', where 'each' culture was taken to be holistic, self-contained, bounded, integrated, locally anchored, effectively to be subsumed under an ethnic name. This image was deliberately constructed by ethnographers from the 1930s onwards so as to constitute, for the people supposed to adhere to one such culture, a local universe of meaning – the opposite of virtuality. Such a culture was thought to form an integrated unity, so all its parts were supposed to refer to that same coherence, which in its entirety gave the satisfactory illusion of localised meaningfulness. Marxist anthropology of the 1970s and 1980s represented only a partial, not a radical departure from this holistic classic position. Both the Marxist and the classic position would tend to agree that African historic societies have offered to their members (and largely in order to accommodate unmistakable contradictions) a fairly coherent uni-

verse, in which the human body-self, interpersonal relations, the landscape, and the supernatural all featured in one composite, comprehensive world-view, whose symbolism and ritual elaboration were to reconcile and conceal, rather than articulate, such internal contradictions as constitute the whole and render it dynamic. The agreement between the classical and the Marxist anthropological position should not be taken as a sign of validity, or as a sign of agreement on my part, given the theoretical position I hold today. African historic societies in the present millennium have invariably displayed cleavages in terms of gender, age, class, and political power, revealing historical and structural factors which cannot be meaningfully approached within a narrow spatial and temporal horizon. Classic anthropological theory as well as Marxist modes-of-production analysis is not incapable of casting light on these factors, but when doing so fail to justify the classic obsession for the local and presentist horizon, while even Marxist anthropology in the African context has tended to concentrate on specific social formations whose confinement to narrow spatial and temporal horizons was taken for granted (*cf.* above, ch. 7). However, what is involved here is socio-cultural forms of production and reproduction which are very widespread in space (over much of the African continent, if not beyond) and time (several millennia), not only because of their typological similarity, but also and particularly because they form part of one comprehensive historical transformation process from the Neolithic onwards. Moreover, historic African societies and their cultures have always contained elements whose local integration was only partial: beyond the local society, they derived from, and partially still continued to refer to, other cultural complexes which were often remote in space and time. Both the classic and the Marxist approaches have been incapable of coping with these continuities through time and space.

In this context, the meaning of an element of the local society and culture may be said to consist in the network of referential relations at the centre of which that element is perceived and conceptualised by the participants;¹¹ through this relational network the element is taken, by the actors, explicitly or implicitly, as belonging to that general socio-cultural order, cognitively and emotively linked to many other aspects of that order – a condition which produces a sense of proper placement, connectivity and coherence, recognition, identity as a person and as a group, aesthetics, bodily comfort and even healing.

In Africa, village society still forms the context in which many present-day urbanites were born, and where some will retire and die. Until recently, the dichotomy between town and village dominated Africanist anthropology. Today we admit

¹¹ This comes close to the current holistic definition of meaning, which Peacocke cites as the basic stance of global holism:

'The meaning of an expression depends constitutively on its relations to all other expressions in the language, where these relations may need to take account of such facts about the use of these other expressions as [reveals? – WvB] their relations to the non-linguistic world, to action and to perception.' (Peacocke 1999: 227)

that, considering the constant movement of ideas, goods and people between town and village, and the increasing economic, institutional, political and ideological continuity between the two, the dichotomy has lost much of its explanatory value. Town and village have become complementary, even converging options within the social experience of Africans today; their difference has become gradual, and is no longer absolute. However, while of diminishing value in the hands of us analysts, the dichotomy between town and village remains relevant in so far as it informs African actors' conceptualisations of their life-world and social experience. *Here the idealised image of the village stands for an imaginary context* (no longer to be found in the real villages of today) where production and reproduction are viable and meaningful, pursued by people who – organised along the lines of age and gender divisions, and historic ('traditional') leadership – are turned into an effective community through an un-eroded kinship system, symbolism, ritual and cosmology. Vital in this set-up is that – largely through non-verbal means – ritual manages to construct the bodies of the members of the residential group as charged or inscribed with a shared meaning, a shared identity, and while the body moves across time and space this indelible mark yet remains, to be carried over into new contexts.

Even in the village context, the effective construction of community cannot be taken for granted. Central African villages, for instance, have been described¹² as the scene of an uneasy truce between strangers, only temporarily constructed into community – mainly through kinship rituals which take up an enormous part of available resources and even so barely conceal or negotiate underlying contradictions among the village population. Such rituals of kinship (some articulating reconciliation after conflict, and others articulating such life crises as pregnancy, birth, adolescence, marriage, and death) transform biological human individuals into competent social persons with a marked identity founded in the local community (or, in the case of death: transform such social persons into ancestral spirits or transfer them onto living heirs in the face of physical decomposition). Kinship rituals construct, within the overall community, specific constituent identities, e.g. those of gender and age. They refer to, and to a considerable extent reproduce and perpetuate, the productive and social organisation of the village society. Perhaps the central characteristic of the nineteenth-century village order was that the construction of community was still so effective that in the villagers' consciousness their actual residential group, despite periodic conflict, self-evidently appeared as the realisation of the community ideal.

It is crucial to realise that in the twentieth century CE and later, even with reference to rural settings, we are not so much dealing with 'real' communities, but with rural folks' increasingly problematic *model* of the village community. Perhaps we could say that throughout the twentieth century, *the village in*

¹² Turner 1968a, cf. 1968b; van Velsen 1971; van Binsbergen 1991b, 2014, in press (a).

South Central and Southern African discourse has been in the process of becoming a virtual village. During the heyday of studies of African religious history, rural ideological change in Africa during the twentieth century¹³ came to be regarded as a process of people actively confronting the erosion of that model, its becoming irrelevant and impotent in the face of political and economic realities. Employing numerous forms of organisational, ideological and productive innovation combining local practices with outside borrowings, rural populations in Africa struggled to reconstruct a new sense of community in an attempt to revitalise, complement or replace the collapsing village community in what was remembered as its viable nineteenth-century form. The ideological history of twentieth century Africa could be largely written from this perspective. Peasants have been constantly engaged in the construction of new, alternative forms of community on the basis of rather new principles such as derived from political, cultic, productive and consumerist ideas introduced from the wider world. Many of these movements have sought to re-formulate the notion of the viable, intact village community in new terms and with new outside inspiration and outside pressure. Healing cults, prophetic cults, anti-sorcery movements, varieties of imported world religions and local transformations thereof *e.g.* in the form of Independent churches, struggles for political independence, involvement in modern national politics including the post-Independence wave of democratisation, ethnicity, involvement in a peripheral-capitalist cash economy with new symbols of status and distinction, – these have been some of the strategies by which villagers have sought (often against many odds) to create and bring to life the image of a new world, and a continued sense of meaning and community, when the old village order was felt, or said, to fall apart. And that old village order, and the ethnic cultures under which it was usually subsumed, may in itself have been largely illusory, strategically underpinned by the ideological claims of elders, chiefs, first-generation local intellectuals, colonial administrators and missionaries, open to the cultural bricolage of invented tradition on the part of these comparatively actors.¹⁴

If the actual construction of community in the rural context has been problematic, the village yet represents one of the very few models of viable community among Africans today, including urbanites. It is the only model which is part of a collective idiom pervading all sections of modern society. As such it features massively as a nostalgic reference in ethnic identity construction. Whatever alternative models of community are available, are shallowly rooted and reserved to specific sections of the society: Christians or Muslims (the local religious congregation as a community; and by extension the abstract world-wide collective of co-religionists), cult members (the cultic group as a community), members of a specific ethnic group (where the – usually newly invented – eth-

¹³ Ranger & Kimambo 1972; Ranger 1972; Ranger 1975a; Fields 1985; Bond 1976, 1979; Schoffeleers 1979; van Binsbergen 1981b.

¹⁴ Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983; Vail 1989.

nic group is constructed into a community, often with emphatic reference to the village model as a focal point of origin and meaning), the elite (for whom patterns of consumerism replace the notion of community-through-interaction, with the notion of virtual or vicarious global community through media transmission and the display of appropriate manufactured symbols – status symbols in clothing, transport, housing *etc.*).

Having identified the village featuring in modern African expressions of self-identity and meaning, *as a virtual village*, let us proceed to examine two Dutch approaches to African witchcraft and healing, one by Peter Geschiere, the other one by Matthew Schoffeleers.

14.3. Two Dutch discourses on witchcraft and healing in Africa

14.3.1. A Malawian healing movement

Schoffeleers deals with a short-lived healing cult in Malawi, around the healer Billy Goodson Chisupe (Probst 1996). During a few months in 1995 – grabbing an opportunity which fell away with the aged protagonist's death – tens of thousands of people flocked to Chisupe's village home in order to obtain the cure for AIDS which had been shown to him – an ordinary villager until then – in a dream only a few months earlier.

In terms of the story of the prophet's calling, and the massive pilgrimage to his rural dwelling, the cult replays a scenario that is familiar to students of popular religion in South Central Africa in the twentieth century, from the Ila prophet Mupumani who appeared in the midst of drought and effective colonial penetration in the 1910s, to the Bemba prophetess Lenshina in the 1950s and 1960s; both attracted a following of many thousands of people in Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia) and even adjacent territories (van Binsbergen 1981b). In the most admirable and convincing way, Schoffeleers situates the brief contemporaneous history of Chisupe's movement both within the time-honoured cosmology of the Malawi countryside of which he has become the principal recent ethnographer (Schoffeleers 1992, 2008); and within the national political and social developments in Malawi during the 1980s and early 1990s. Predictably, considering the accumulated literature on religious movements in South Central Africa, Schoffeleers interprets Chisupe's cult, beyond its claimed therapeutic effectiveness against AIDS, as an attempt to revitalise the country, *i.e.* the nation-state.

Chisupe dispensed a reddish herbal solution. The Malawian public and the media – contrary to the healer's own choice of words – insisted on calling this medicine *mchape*. Of course Schoffeleers would be the first to realise that *mchape* is the central concept which, while retaining its basic meaning of 'ablution', in the colonial history of Malawi and adjacent parts of South Central Af-

rica has acquired a more specific meaning: that of ‘witchcraft-cleansing medicine’; by extension it has come to denote the young men, often returning migrants, who, ever since the 1920s, would come to the villages forcing people to surrender their witchcraft materials and to be cleansed (Redmayne 1970; van Dijk 1992). However, in the context of Chisupe’s cult, references to witchcraft have been so minimal that Schoffeleers sees no reason to refer to such witchfinders.

Let us now turn to Geschiere’s analysis of witchcraft in Cameroon today.

14.3.2. *Witchcraft in Cameroon today*

We are generally aware of the unsatisfactory nature of ‘witchcraft’ as an analytical (‘etic’) term; yet the term is acceptable since, far from being an alien imposition, it is the (inevitably defective) translation of a ‘emic’ concept found in many African languages and consciously informing actors’ practices. Geschiere rightly argues that we should not waste time over terminological issues before we have considered the actual language usages of the people we write about. In his comparative work, as well as in his earlier book on the Maka of Cameroon, he proposes to use a term which he suggests to be more neutral, ‘occult forces’ (Geschiere 1982). However, the intra-disciplinary dynamics of anthropological labelling have persuaded him to largely retain the term *witchcraft*, and that is what I shall do.

We may distinguish at least four different contexts where various sets of actors make pronouncements concerning witchcraft:

- the village and the local language prevailing there;
- the popular culture of the town with its oscillation between local African languages, one or more urban *linguae francae* of African origin, and an intercontinental language such as French and English;
- the national elite and its preferred intercontinental language; and
- the domain of intercontinental scholarship, expressing itself again in intercontinental languages.

Geschiere now implies – and this lends to his argument its unique quality – that these four contexts are intimately interrelated and even overlapping in the case of modern Cameroonian beliefs and practices relating to witchcraft.

Witchcraft is the central issue in Geschiere’s argument, and at first glance he appears to confirm the image well-known from the literature written by missionaries and colonial administrators from the late nineteenth century till the middle of the twentieth century:¹⁵ an Africa which is the abode of witchcraft. But, contrary to the expectation of these earlier European observers and actors on the African scene, Geschiere proceeds to demonstrate at length that witchcraft has not disappeared under the onslaught of modernity, but has installed itself at the

¹⁵ A few examples out of many: Melland 1967; Mackenzie 1925.

very heart of modernity. Geschiere argues that the African actors' discourse concerning power in the post-colonial state, and concerning the acquisition and use of modern consumer goods, hinges on their conception of witchcraft. Whereas witchcraft cases in the colonial era, especially in former British Central Africa, were based on the official dogma that witchcraft is an illusion (so that people invoking witchcraft would be punished as either impostors or slanderers), in modern legal practice in Africa witchcraft appears as a reality and as an actionable offence in its own right. In Geschiere's view, the inroads of modernity and postmodernity in Africa have not rendered witchcraft obsolete. For Geschiere, however, witchcraft is, no longer a concept tied to a rural cosmological order – for that order no longer exists. Instead, new regional and national settings have emerged in which witchcraft has managed to insert itself as a central aspect of the discourse and the experience of modernity – having severed all connections with the village and its once-viable kinship order.

14.3.3. Problems raised by a view which stresses the prominence of witchcraft in modern Africa

A number of problems present themselves at this point.

Not so much at the descriptive empirical level. Those of us who, as Africans and/or as Africanists, have participated profoundly and extensively in modern African life, will tend to agree with Geschiere's observation as to the conspicuous prominence of witchcraft in the discourse of the middle classes and the elites, whenever these seek to describe power relations that have to do with the access to and control of modern consumer goods and the state; but also when they seek to define their position *vis-à-vis* their rural area of origin, which then often emerges as a shunned abode of witches – as an Africa within Africa.

Not all researchers working in this field however may agree with Geschiere that such witchcraft discourse in modern Africa is a manifestation of the existence of a variety of paths towards modernity. If we loosely define modernity as the routinisation of the heritage of the European Enlightenment, does then modern African witchcraft discourse constitute a path to modernity at all? Or does it simply manifest the fact that, to the extent to which there are witchcraft practices and witchcraft beliefs, no path to modernity is taken or can be taken?

As a characteristically late echo from developments in such provinces of intellectual life as philosophy, literary criticism, art criticism in general, cultural anthropology since the 1990s has been obsessed with defining modernity, its pluralities and contradictions, its limitations, its defeats by postmodernity. Here anthropology occupies an intrinsically problematic position in that it in itself straddles the line between modernity and postmodernity: modernist in its method and scope, postmodernist in its emphasis on identity, locality, plurality, relativism and stress on situationality. It is therefore unlikely that the dilemmas of African witchcraft research as identified here can be resolved from anthropology alone.

The matter is further complicated by the fact that North Atlantic modernity and postmodernity have had their own share of occult images – ranging from zombies and vampires to astrology and other forms of divination, shamanism, UFO-ism, gaisophy, the teachings of South Asian gurus processed for North Atlantic consumption, and whatever the constantly innovating spiritual fashion industry of New Age will bring. Are these beliefs in the proper sense of the word, comparable to nineteenth-century Dutch villagers' beliefs in the invisible world claimed by their version of Christianity, or nineteenth-century African villagers' beliefs in the powers of their ancestors to effectively interfere in the visible world? Or are these North Atlantic postmodern beliefs rather 'make-beliefs', with a characteristic high level of virtuality and performance, true and compelling on the video screen but not necessarily so in everyday life? Might not the same apply to modern African witchcraft beliefs as circulating at the regional and national level? What if these can be shown to be 'virtual' as well? And what about the relation between such a 'virtual' national and regional discourse on witchcraft, and witchcraft as an aspect of the time-honoured kinship order at the village?

Another problem concerns, not anthropological interpretation, but the political and ethical implication of such interpretation. As my friend and colleague Peter van der Veer, the South Asianist, never tires of observing, a few decades after the debates on the imperialist nature of anthropology and on orientalism,¹⁶ it is rather amazing that the mainstream of Africanist writing continues to reinforce the image of Africa as the abode of witchcraft – as the continent where even under conditions of modern technology (including advanced equipment in the domains of armament, information and communication), modern science, modern organisation (the modern state; the formal organisation as the dominant expression of civil society), and the effective inroads of Islam and Christianity as major world religions, witchcraft remains (or has become?) a dominant discourse among, of all people, those Africans participating more than others in modernity and postmodernity. Is this a true rendering of the descriptive reality of modern Africa? Or is it in the first place, as van der Veer seems to suggest, a 'localising strategy' (Fardon 1990b) on the part of Africanists: an intra-disciplinary consensus according to which it is fashionable and appropriate to write on Africa in terms of witchcraft, in the same way as South Asianists are in the habit of writing on South Asia in terms of sharply conflicting communal

¹⁶ And, as I would personally add, at a time when Afrocentrism is becoming more and more an established intellectual stance; *pace* Howe 1999; Berlinerblau 1999; Fauvelle-Aymar *c.s.* 1999, as examples of Afrocentrism-bashing. I contributed to the latter collection (not realising until the book was published, that I was the sole contributor speaking out in favour of Afrocentrism! cf. Obenga 2001), and wrote a review of the former in *Politique Africaine* (93, October 2000; van Binsbergen 2000b). Many consider the *Black-Athena* work of the late lamented Martin Bernal also a form of Afrocentrism; I have discussed this the collection *Black Athena Ten Years Later*, later reprinted with additions as *Black Athena Comes of Age* (van Binsbergen 1997a, 2011e). I also entered into an extensive discussion of Afrocentrism in the context of my assessment of Mudimbe (van Binsbergen 2005a, 2015: ch. 12).

identities (between Muslims and Hindus – reified categories which the Orientalism debate has urged us to deconstruct; Breckenridge & van der Veer 1993; van der Veer 1995, 1996a, 1996b), and on the Middle East in terms of a constant pendulum-swing between formal and popular Islam? (Gellner 1989, 1963, 1969).

At this point in my argument we can only raise these questions. Let us continue our juxtaposition of Schoffeleers' and Geschiere's argument, in the hope that this will help us clarify the theoretical issues raised in the preceding section.

14.3.4. *The absence of witchcraft in Chisupe's movement*

In Schoffeleers' argument, by contrast to Geschiere's, the witchcraft element is absent. I am inclined to think that this is a valid rendering of the actual situation. Schoffeleers is the Malawi specialist, there is corroborating evidence from Probst, van Dijk and other ethnographers, and most importantly: the extensive research on religious transformations in South Central Africa – the massive research output over the past three decades – certainly has revealed the existence of a limited number of interpretative options open to African actors besides witchcraft.

Yet in his oral presentation of the text on which I base my argument here, Schoffeleers admitted, of course, that in Malawi the term *mchape* carries general connotations of witchcraft;¹⁷ and regardless of the issue whether witchcraft might have been a more prominent aspect of the Chisupe movement than his argument suggests (apparently it was not), he also pointed out that given the primary audience he had originally in mind for his paper (notably, producers and consumers of African Theology) he could not afford to enter into a discussion of witchcraft if he did not want to lose that audience.¹⁸

Let me elaborate. Witchcraft was the main issue in some religious expressions which, having become fashionable, swept as cults across the region – but not in all. Ironically, witchcraft-eradication movements do not constitute the crucial limiting case their name would suggest, for the active confrontation of the witchcraft in others presupposes, not an interpretative alternative, but a firm belief in witchcraft as the central explanatory factor of evil. The prophetic idiom represented by the prophet Mupumani addressed an ecological *i.e.* productive concern with rain and vegetation; none of our sources suggest that his cult addressed witchcraft at all. Cults of affliction, which have formed the major religious expression in Western Zambia during much of the twentieth century, represented the African actors' radical departure from the theory of witchcraft

¹⁷ Department of Cultural Anthropology and Sociology of Development, Free University, Amsterdam, 12 April 1996.

¹⁸ For a characterisation of African theology as a field of counter-hegemonic knowledge production (and thus by implication as a form of localisation in the academic globalisation process – much comparable to and overlapping with, African Philosophy writ large), see: Schoffeleers 1988.

as an explanation of evil: not human malice, but capricious non-human alien spirits, were cited as the cause of illness and distress; these spirits were reputed to emulate the spatial displacement, to travel the very roads, of regional population movements, long-distance trade, labour migration, colonial penetration and mass consumption of foreign-produced manufactured goods. Christian churches, to cite another major alternative to witchcraft as an interpretative religious idiom, have operated a theory of evil which not so much accepts witchcraft as a mode of explanation, but offers an alternative explanation in terms of sin and salvation, and by doing so provides a shelter for many of those fearing the witchcraft of others as well as the witchcraft inside themselves. All this does not mean that the people practising cults of affliction or Christianity ceased believing in witchcraft or engaging in witchcraft practices – but at least they had access to a religious variant where witchcraft was not the all-overriding mode of explanation of evil.¹⁹ But whereas in my earlier work – following Horton (1967, 1993) rather than Winch – I have stressed this aspect of witchcraft beliefs as a theory of evil, I now feel that this approach was too intellectualist, smacked too much of the European theological and philosophical discussion of the problem of evil in terms of the theodicy (Leibniz 1874 / 17th c. CE), Job's predicament (Jung 1978), *etc.* African witchcraft beliefs, although potentially leading on to a theory of causation, would now seem to have been primarily a labelling device: naming, not explaining, evil from the perspective of the kinship order and its narrow, nearby horizon.

14.3.5. *The construction of a discursive context for analysis: (a) The village as the dominant locus of cosmological reference*

A crucial difference between the arguments of Geschiere and Schoffeleers lies in the way in which each constructs a discursive context for his analysis.

For Schoffeleers this is a regionally embedded context: the argument moves back and forth between, on the one hand, post-colonial Malawi, whose socio-cultural and political outlines we need to know in order to understand the story – and on the other hand some generalised Malawian village environment, which constitutes the setting for cosmological notions around trees and their healing power, and for the typical biography (including temporary death, a visit to the underworld or heaven, and rebirth on earth) of the prophet and the healer (van Binsbergen 1981b: 195, 239). The village is the very place where ancestors may yet appear in dreams dressed in bark-cloth (the standard pre-textile clothing in East Africa and South Asia, and many other parts of the world; *cf.* van Binsbergen 2015: 146 *f.*). Emic meaning is implied at the level of the actors, and etic interpretation is rendered possible at the level of the academic writer and reader, by Schoffeleers' dextrous juggling between these two regionally nested sets of references – the nation-state and the village. Much of Schoffeleers' argument is by imputation: the two spheres are suggested to be

¹⁹ These interpretations have been argued at length in: van Binsbergen 1981b.

distinct yet continuous and interconnected, so that meanings and conditions applying to one sphere can be carried over to the other. Is not the crux of Chisupe's dream-derived message that there is a cure for every ailment, including AIDS, including perhaps the ailment of the post-colonial state?²⁰

14.3.6. The construction of a discursive context for analysis: (b) Leaving the village and its cosmology behind, and opting for a globalising perspective

Geschiere as an author can be seen to struggle with the same problem as Schoffeleers does: where can we find a locus of meaning and reference, for the African actors, as well as for the academic discourse about their witchcraft beliefs and practices?

Both our authors derive their inspiration and their analytical confidence, rightly, from their years of participant observation at the village level. But for Geschiere the village and its cosmology is no longer a dominant reference.

Which village, in which region, anyway? Geographically, some of the data which Geschiere presents as having triggered his analytical curiosity may derive from a Cameroonian village, but on closer inspection his corpus highlights the discourse and practices among African elites and middle-classes, and between anthropologists and selected Africans who, employed as anthropological assistants, may be considered middle class. I deliberately used the word corpus, whose textual and finite nature, with its sense of procedural appropriation and processing rather than contingent and dependent immersion, differs considerably from the standard anthropological material based on prolonged participant observation. After all, Geschiere frequently boasts that his first professional identity has been that of historian, not anthropologist. These methodological procedures constitute deliberate and strategic choices on Geschiere's part. Having previously written on occult forces at the village level, in his monograph on the Maka and in a number of shorter pieces, in his comparative book he emphatically seeks to move away from the village setting. He wishes to explore how witchcraft operates in a context of 'modernity': the state, the district capital, the city, modern consumption, elite behaviour. It is here that he has a chance of making an original contribution to the already vast literature on African witchcraft, where village contexts predominate. These choices inevitably have an effect on the nature and the quality of the data at the anthropologist's disposal: they direct the research to contexts which are geographically dis-

²⁰ No piece by Schoffeleers has reminded me more strongly, in method and theoretical framework, of the best work by Terence Ranger – for instance the latter's masterly short study of the witch-finder Tomo Nyirenda, also known as Mwana Lesa, a piece which, when I read it in draft in 1972, made a more profound impression on me than almost any present-day scholarly text, provided me with a splendid model to emulate, and committed me overnight to the study of Central African religious history. Cf. Ranger 1975a.

persed and structurally far more complex than most African villages; contexts moreover which feature social actors endowed with such social and political power that they can effectively impede participant observation; and finally, contexts which are often downright intimidating, involving threats of inflicting occult injury.

It is not only the choice of a national or even international level of variety and comparison, impossible to cover by any one investigator's participant observation, that gives the specific flavour of displacement, of operating in an uncharted no man's land, to Geschiere's discourse on witchcraft in modern Africa. Having studied the village, and with his first monograph many years behind him, he is now operating at a level where the meaning which actors' attribute to their witchcraft practices is no longer informed by the cosmology of some original village environment.

Or is it, after all? When we compare Geschiere's approach to that of Schoffeleers, the difference may be tentatively expressed thus:

- Schoffeleers has access to the village cosmology and appeals to it in order to partially explain the meaning of modern events at the national level, even if he does not argue in detail the interrelations between town and country and the interpenetration of rival cosmologies in Malawi today;
- Geschiere on the other hand plays down the village cosmology and therefore, despite the close attention – throughout his published work – for the interpenetration between the village and the wider national political and economic scene particularly in modern Cameroon, is no longer interested in identifying (or may we say: is at a loss to identify) the original locus (the village) where witchcraft beliefs and practices once took shape and meaning.

It is this particular orientation of Geschiere's work on witchcraft which allows him to capture a crucial aspect of modern African life: the extent to which the village is no longer the norm, – no longer a coherent, consistent and explicit point of reference and meaning in the African actors' discourse. In contexts of modernity (in cities, in the formal organisations of the state, churches and economic life), the African actors express themselves in an idiom of witchcraft which has become virtualised – although Geschiere does not use that term. While operating in a social context which is very different from the village, and which is informed by very different structural principles than the village, these actors have appropriated into their situation of modernity the concept of witchcraft from the village, have transformed it, have given it a new meaning, and constitute themselves in the very process of such appropriation.

However, it is my contention that such new meaning as the modern African discourse on witchcraft may entail, however transformed, is likely to be illuminated by a proper understanding of witchcraft in its more original rural context.

14.3.7. Possible lessons from a rural-orientated cosmological perspective on witchcraft

Much of the well-known anthropological and historical Africanist literature on witchcraft is cited by Geschiere (1995); but his insistence on the African middle-class and elite subjects' fragmented modernist social discourse outside the village may render him less perceptive of the extreme antiquity, and the fundamental significance, of the witchcraft discourse in the village context.

This is especially manifest in Geschiere's claim that the older ethnographic discourse on witchcraft is so very moralistic in the sense that it can only present witchcraft as something evil. Geschiere chides the older authors on African witchcraft for failing to realise that in the African experience witchcraft is ambivalent, also capable of inspiring excitement, admiration, a positive sense of power; brainwashed as it were by this older ethnography, as he feels he has been, Geschiere regrets that he had to discover personally, as a serendipity, that his African companions could be positively fascinated by witchcraft. No doubt there is an element of truth in Geschiere's critique: there is in the older ethnography of African witchcraft a tendency of constructing the African subject – along familiar missionary and colonial lines – as depraved, given to immorality, with limited powers of abstract thought, with a system of thought moreover not conducive to the idea of transcendence; represented in this manner so that 'the African' would appear to be incapable of rising above the limitations of the human condition, hence to be inclined to attribute misfortune to human malice and not to such a supernatural principle as a High God actively intervening in the visible world. Yet Geschiere's attempt to relegate the moral dimension in African witchcraft at the village level to a North Atlantic ethnographic imposition and nothing more, suggests that he has only a partial understanding of the place of witchcraft in the village-based kinship order. Moral ambiguity does not imply amorality but is its very opposite.

Whatever the difference between acephalous societies and those with centralised political leadership, and whatever the variations across time and space, South Central and Southern African historical cosmologies tend to converge on this point, that they have important moral implications, defining witchcraft as primarily the transgression of the code of social obligations defined by the kinship order. The entire cosmology is an evocation of a kinship-based social universe, whose normal and beneficial flow of life force and fertility depends on a precarious balance between opposites: heaven and earth, life and death, the living and the dead, men and women, nature / forest and culture / the village, *etc.* It is the three mortal sins against the kinship order which are capable of destroying this balance and of blocking the flow of life force: incest, murder and witchcraft within the local (or by extension regional) community.²¹ By observing the taboos on incest, murder and witchcraft, the community is effec-

²¹ On this point, cf. Schoffeleers 1978; van Binsbergen 1992b.

tively constructed as based on: a recognition of extensive kinship (hence the incest taboo); on intra-community peace (hence the taboo on intra-community violence, *i.e.* murder); and on sociability and reciprocity (hence the taboo on witchcraft as a celebration of individual desires and powers at the expense of one's kin). Witchcraft has been the boundary condition of the construction of the African village community in the very many centuries that this community was the basic context of production and reproduction. I suggest that it is the individual challenge of the non-violent, sociable, reciprocal kinship order that is really at the heart of the original notion of witchcraft in the village societies of South Central and Southern Africa.

The ambivalence of village witchcraft which Geschiere rightly notes is not a modernist innovation but is inherent in witchcraft as a boundary condition of the kinship order. Before modernity, the kinship order was not virtual in the sense of defined above: it was not a transformative appropriation into a totally different setting; but even then the kinship order was certainly problematic. It needed to be continuously constructed and reconstructed. New-born individuals, in-marrying spouses, captives and migrants needed to be drawn into it and kept within it through socialisation and social control. Even so, in South Central and Southern Africa, villages as localised, spatial contexts of production and reproduction tended to have a life-span of only a few decades. They declined demographically and in terms of internal social contradictions, and new villages were constantly formed. All this required a leadership which oscillates between sociable arbitration and gentle coaxing, and occasional outbursts of assertiveness and initiative. Individuals were constantly on the move from one village to another and from one patron (a senior kinsmen) to another, fleeing the disrupted social relations in a previous place of residence and being attracted by the promises of sociability, care and protection in the next place of residence. Both in an individual's life, and in the life of a village community, there was a continuous movement back and forth between the moral ideal of community (through sociability, non-violence, and the absence of witchcraft) and the embarrassing reality of individual assertion (through anti-social egoistic behaviour, leadership initiatives, challenges, physical violence – which all implied, and usually were cast in the secret ritualistic and symbolic trappings of, *witchcraft*). This contradiction, and the contingent dynamics it takes on over time, is the heart-beat of village society in South Central and Southern Africa. The moral premium on non-violence and sociability, and against individual assertiveness, is only one side of the medal; its counterpart (conceptualised in the village discourse as witchcraft, locally expressed by such vernacular concepts as *wulozi*, *buloi*, *etc.*; see below) is as necessary and as common as it is normatively sanctioned. The fact that witchcraft often implies a violence which is hidden, still reflects the strong taboo on violence within the kinship order, as characteristic of many African societies.

Not only is the kinship order internally divided and juxtaposed against individual assertion (whose symbolic conceptualisation and ritualistic procedures are

those of witchcraft). In addition, the kinship order, and the villages which it calls into being as contexts of production and reproduction, is set off against other structural modalities in South Central and Southern Africa, which while parasitic upon the village-based kinship order, do not derive from that order, cannot be reduced to that order, and in fact in their socio-economic structure and their symbolic elaboration challenge the kinship order by a recourse to a different socio-cultural 'logic' (in the sense of coherent world-view) altogether. Whatever the cosmological and mythical elaboration of the kingship, the kinship order is never coterminous with the kinship order, hence royals' often extreme reliance on violence, social separation, emphatic denial of the very kinship ties to which they owe their lives and social position, on royal incest, and on close association with witchcraft. The single most important defining feature of the precolonial African state is not its monopoly of violence (as Weber would have it for the European state), but its radical rejection of the kinship order which informs the local communities over which the state holds sway. In lesser degrees and with different symbolic repertoires, the same departure of the kinship order characterises other specialist positions in South Central and Southern African societies prior to the colonial conquest: the trader, the blacksmith, the diviner-priest, the rain-maker, the bard, the musician. They exist by definition outside the kinship order, and therefore inevitably share with royals connotations of witchcraft, anti-sociability, and violence. Their reproduction as professional subgroups or ethnicities, meanwhile, implies forms of intra-group non-violence and sociability, which contradict their outsidership *vis-à-vis* the overall kinship order, and make for all sorts of symbolic and ritual elaborations.²² It is from these symbolic elaborations, these phantasms, that part of the later imagery of modern witchcraft can be expected to derive.

Witchcraft, one might say, is everything which

- falls outside the kinship order,
- is not regulated by that order,
- challenges, rejects, destroys that order.

As such, witchcraft is opposed to kinship, group solidarity, rules of kinship, incest prohibitions, avoidance rules concerning close kin, kinship obligations concerning redistribution of resources, the repression of intra-kin violence, and the acknowledgement of ancestral sanctions. Outside of the kinship order is the realm of witchcraft; and it is here that we must situate kingship, trade, and the specialities of the bard, the diviner, the magician and the rain-maker.

Probably it is incorrect to assume that witchcraft beliefs and practices sprang directly and exclusively, as transformations, reversals and denials, from the kinship order. The specific forms of witchcraft have a history, so has the kinship order (although its history is difficult to study in contexts where written texts

²² Cf. van Binsbergen 1992b, 1991b; For a more general formulation of this theory of the state, with specific African applications, cf. van Binsbergen 2003j; and Doornbos & van Binsbergen 2017.

are relatively scarce, like in precolonial Africa), and so has the relation between witchcraft and the kinship order. Ironically (in view of witchcraft's reputation of being hidden, dark, obscure), it is somewhat easier to reconstruct the history of witchcraft. For if witchcraft is everything which challenges the kinship order (such as kingship, trade, specialities), then witchcraft has much to do with social complexes that leave more lasting traces than the ordinary face-to-face kinship domain – social complexes that have much to do with the way in which the wider world is connected with the local societies of sub-Saharan Africa. At present we have (*cf.* ch. 8, above) a fair general knowledge of the history of the magical tradition of the Ancient Near East (especially Egypt and Mesopotamia) from c. 3000 BCE. The same applies to the history of kingship. Now, especially in the fields of kingship and the magical tradition there are such specific, numerous and widely distributed parallels between sub-Saharan Africa and the Ancient Near East, that it is now becoming possible to read the history of African magic (and that of African kingship, but that is another story) *in part* as the diffusion, and subsequent localisation and transformation, of these social complexes from the Ancient Near East. This idea was first launched by Frobenius (1931), and in the course of the twentieth century was increasingly discredited in professional Africanist circles along with Frobenius himself. Meanwhile, we should add, that there is also increasing evidence that the civilisations of the Ancient Near East, in their turn, in their emergence and early history, owed a considerable debt to Saharan and sub-Saharan Africa.

I could not agree more with Geschiere than when he claims that it is the fundamental ambiguity of African witchcraft which allows it to insert itself into the heart of modernity. Such ambiguity however, contrary to what he claims, does not at all explode but implies, as the complementary concept, the morality of the kinship order. Nor can such ambiguity entirely be relegated to some universal, innate quality of the sacred as being both benevolent and destructive, as stressed by Durkheim (1912) and Otto (1917). The ambiguity is not even adequately captured by a statement, superficially correct, to the effect that 'witchcraft is an idiom of power'. Witchcraft in the time-honoured village context does not describe power in general, but power in a specific context: the individualising self-assertion which while challenging the kinship order, constitutes that order at the same time.

In addition to the requirements of leadership and of the enculturation of new individuals, the ambiguity of witchcraft also seems to reflect the material contradictions between the various modes of production involved in African rural social formations, and the ideological and symbolic expressions of those contradictions. The prominence, in the domain of witchcraft, of references to kingship, trade and specialities which each may be recognised as specific, distinct modes of production, suggests that despite having gone out of fashion, the theory of the articulation of modes of production may yet considerably illumi-

nate African sorcery beliefs and practices (cf. van Binsbergen 1981b) – as it has been argued to illuminate African ethnicity.²³ Nor need this suggestion as to the applicability of modes-of-production analysis to witchcraft beliefs be restricted to Africa, as an analysis, along similar theoretical lines, of witchcraft and other forms of magic in the Ancient Near East may show.²⁴ Because modes of production ultimately revolve on the appropriation of nature, we can understand why the fundamental distinction, in so many African cosmologies, between the ordered human space ('village') and the forces of the wild ('forest', 'bush'), particularly empowers roles situated at the boundary between these domains: the hunter, the musician (who makes natural material sound), the healer. This brings us near to an understanding of which specific imagery, with which specific origin in real life, is likely to be employed in the domain of witchcraft beliefs.

Meanwhile, the amazing point is not so much variation across the African continent, but convergence.

Extremely widespread in Africa²⁵ is the belief that for any type of excessive, transgressive success – such as attaining and maintaining the status of ruler, diviner-priest or monopolist trader – a close kinsman needs to be sacrificed or to be nominated as victim of occult, anti-social forces. I have extensive reasons to take such beliefs as indicative of actual practices (whose empirical assessment however poses immense difficulties, both of method, of criminal law, and of the politics of knowledge).²⁶ In view of the above discussion of the kinship order and of witchcraft as its boundary condition, these beliefs are understandable as ritual evocations of how specialist statuses challenge the kinship order through their individual assertiveness, violence, and denial of reciprocity and community.

The South-east Cameroonian *jambe* as a personalised occult force demanding sacrifices of close kinsmen (in what Geschiere calls the 'old' witchcraft idiom) would appear to be closely equivalent – in belief, practice and probably even etymology – to the Zambian concept of the *chilombe* /-o or *mulombe* /-o, a snake with a human head which is secretly bred near the river, first on a diet of eggs and chicks, later demanding that his human associate nominates close kin for sacrifice in exchange for unrivalled powers and success (cf. Melland 1967; author's fieldnotes).

What however seems to be absent from the Cameroonian scene is the concept as enshrined in the otherwise widespread Bantu root -rozi, -lothi, -loi, with connotations of moral transgression, malice, murder, incest, not exclusively through the use of familiar spirits but also relying on *materia magica*: herbs, roots, parts

²³ Cf. van Binsbergen 1985c, 2008c; van Binsbergen & Woudhuizen 2011.

²⁴ Cf. van Binsbergen & Wiggermann 1999, reprinted in the present volume as chapter 8.

²⁵ It may pervade the discourse and practice of African Independent churches, e.g. the Botswana case of the Guta ra Mwari church: van Binsbergen 1993a, reprinted in the present volume as chapter 5.

²⁶ Cf. Toulabor's article on human sacrifice and present-day African political leaders (Toulabor 2000).

of human or animal bodies. The fact that this lexical root is so widespread allows us to adopt a historical perspective: since the root exists in proto-Bantu (Guthrie 1967-1971; Meeuwesen 1980), we are led to conclude that over 2000 years ago the early farmers and herders who spoke proto-Bantu already had a concept of '[abstract noun prefix]+ l/ro[th]i, whose semantic field must have largely coincided with that of its twentieth-century CE descendent linguistic forms. It is quite possible that the Bantu lexical root l/ro[th]i signifies this domain external to, and challenging, the kinship order – that its original sense is alienness rather than moral evil. This hypothesis would then cast light on the puzzling use of apparently the same lexical root in the names of the Zimbabwean Barozvi and the Zambian Barotse / Balozzi: 'outsiders', 'strangers', 'aliens' with royal connotations, certainly, but not an entire people of 'witches'. The Bantu root l/ro[th]i would then perhaps be similar to the root wal- underlying such names as Wales, Wallon, Walen, Wallis, Wallachia, in Central and Western Europe – which although often interpreted as 'Celtic' (even Celtic of a particular ethnic sub-group) ultimately seems to mean 'alien'. By a very far shot one might even surmise that the two roots l/ro[th]i and wal are etymological cognates, through a metathesis which commonly attends the relation between proto-Bantu and other *Borean-derived macrophyla (van Binsbergen, in press (c)). *Borean *TVLV, 'deceive' > Eurasiatic *tVIV, 'foolish, deceive', seems a promising point of departure for further explorations of the Bantu root but does not cast light on wal-

Rather more difficult to explain are the extensive geographical continuities attending the new idioms of witchcraft which appeared under conditions of approaching modernity, especially the advent of early-modern consumer goods with the growth of long-distance trade from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries CE onward. A belief which Geschiere describes for Cameroon, in terms of victims being in some occult way captured and made to work as zombies, I also encountered during fieldwork in both Zambia and Guiné Bissau (but so far not in Botswana). And the comparative Africanist bibliography on these topics must be voluminous.

If the 'new' forms of witchcraft in the late 20th c. CE use (in the zombie imagery) the idiom of the slave trade which has been extinct for a century, than this is an anachronism – even if the slave trade belongs to a more recent history than e.g. the establishment of ancestral cults. If instead (as John and Jean Comaroff have argued – 1999) it is not downright slavery but indentured exploited wage labour which the zombie metaphor is referring to, then that too would be anachronistic to the extent to which such labour conditions no longer obtain in Southern Africa today. In other words, the reference to earlier forms of globalisation (slave trade, indentured labour) is now used in order to express and contest, in a witchcraft idiom, newer forms of globalisation, such as the differential access to consumer goods and post-colonial state power. This is comparable to the processes of selective borrowing between time frames which I tried to capture in my analysis of South Central African cults of affliction; also these I

interpreted as referring, in the late nineteenth and the twentieth century CE, to the complex of long-distance trade which by then had already become obsolete (van Binsbergen 1992b: 262 *f.*; 1981b: 155 *f.*, 162 *f.*).

14.3.8. Modern African witchcraft as an instance of virtuality

My insistence on the kinship order as the long-standing and widespread historical basis of village-centred witchcraft beliefs and practices in South Central and Southern Africa enables us to identify the virtualised and transformed nature of the modern regional and national witchcraft beliefs and practices as studied by Geschiere. This is the case, even although Geschiere does not employ the concept of virtuality nor stops to explicate the remarkable features as captured by this concept. Although he does recognise the kinship nexus of witchcraft, he refuses to make his discourse on witchcraft ultimately dependent upon some local village scene in the past or the present. Rather, he describes witchcraft as part of today's national culture of Cameroon, much in the way as one might describe, for instance, sexual permissiveness, (declining) xenophilia, and democracy based on institutionalised sub-national negotiation as parts of the national culture of The Netherlands today. Geschiere does not deny that the village context may once have engendered or incubated the witchcraft beliefs and practices which today have such an impact on middle-class and elite life in Cameroon and throughout Africa, but he claims that today such a rural reference, far from being a determining factor for the actors, at the emic level, has lost all conscious significance for them.

Being virtualised, the urban, national and elite witchcraft beliefs in Cameroon are suspended in the air. They are not endowed with meaning by any direct reference to actual, concrete practices of production and reproduction within the horizon of social experience of the actors carrying such beliefs. Instead, the conceptual and social basis of these beliefs is fragmented and eroded: a loose bricolage of broken myths and ill-understood rumours about power and transgression, fed by two main sources:

- on one side by the faint and disconnected ('nostalgic') echoes of a rural discourse and practice;
- on the other by the selective recycling of detached, de-contextualised images of African life, including witchcraft, as produced by Europeans (anthropologists, missionaries, colonial civil servants) as well as by African elite and middle-class actors, and subsequently recycled even wider in present-day African national societies.

Admittedly, whatever their rural origin, 'modern witchcraft beliefs' in Africa may share hardly more than their lexical designation with the time-honoured concept witchcraft as a boundary condition of the kinship order. That kinship order and its implications no longer seem to form part of modern witchcraft beliefs. What has been co-opted, appropriated, of ancient witchcraft beliefs into the modernist collective representations at the national and regional level,

among elites and middle classes operating in the formal organisations of the state, industry and civil society, are notions in which individual power is celebrated, and is adorned by imagery of extravagance, violence and transgression. In a modern social world where whatever is alien to the rural kinship order, has gained ever greater dominance, witchcraft is no longer a boundary condition, but has become the central norm. Modern life is the kinship order virtualised: turned inside out, invaded by, subjugated by, the outside world against it was once an effective refuge. Modern life, in short, is witchcraft. Which is also why Africans consider Europeans to be impervious to witchcraft.

The subjective experience, reported from many parts of nineteenth and twentieth century Africa, according to which people signalled a dramatic increase of witchcraft in recent times, then – far from necessarily corresponding with an actual increase of witchcraft practices – should be interpreted as scarcely more than a tautological expression for the fact that social experiences would be less and less governed by the kinship order, yet at the same time would for the time being continue to be judged from the perspective of that order.

Geschiere seeks to interpret modern witchcraft by playing down the village nexus and its perspective of the *longue durée*. Thus he is offering us a new version of Max Gluckman's (1945: 12) influential but one-sided adage: 'the African townsman is a townsman', whose social and cultural existence should primarily be interpreted by reference to modern urban conditions which by implication are supposed to render all rural and historical referents obsolete (for a critical discussion, cf. van Binsbergen 2015: ch. 1). If we yet try to bring in the rural and historical dimension, we appreciate that modern witchcraft is an instance of virtuality as an essential aspect of the modern African condition. The beliefs and practices of modern witchcraft clearly have the formal characteristics that one would associate with the counterpart, in African cultural production, of the virtual reality of electronic media and games. Modern witchcraft lacks precision and detail, and neither reveals nor claims profound cultural competence. Despite an element of regional variation (which Geschiere lists, beside the kinship link and the ambiguity, among the three major features on witchcraft beliefs in Cameroon today, and of which he shows the potential for ethnic articulation), these beliefs and practices tend to blend into broad blanket concepts, situating themselves in some sort of national or international *lingua franca* of concepts, ideas and rumours which (also because of the effect of the recycling of North Atlantic and Internet reformulations) can hardly be traced back to any specific regional or ethnic rural source of conceptualisation and meaning. Most significantly, Geschiere tells us that actors (for reasons which he does not go into, but which revolve on the virtuality I have pinpointed) often prefer to discuss witchcraft matters not in any of the original Cameroonian languages but in French or English! What a relief for an anthropologist who does not know any Cameroonian language except these two intercontinental ones!

Media research (Sandbothe & Zimmerli 1994) has stressed the fact that modern

forms of art and the consumption of images derive their impact particularly from a transformation of the temporal basic structure of human perception. In the creation of virtuality, time plays a key role. Witchcraft beliefs and practices in modern Africa provide an example of this time dimension of virtuality. Geschiere's discussion carries the strong suggestion that these beliefs are situated in some sort of detached no-man's-land, and do no longer directly refer to the village – they are no longer rooted in the productive and reproductive processes there, nor in their attending cosmology. Part of that cosmology, fragmented, disintegrated, ill-understood, and exposed to vaguely similar globalising influences from elsewhere, has been exported to function, more or less, outside the village. Middle classes and elite use English or French to discuss its blurred and collapsed notions. The reference to the village is absent, perfunctory, or meaningless. Modern Africa, inventing its own witchcraft idioms tailored to the tune of the town and the formal organisation, can do without the actual village, and in its conceptualisation of power does not even necessarily take recourse to the image of the virtual village any more.

14.3.9. The continued relevance of the old kinship order

Still we are left with a sense of dissatisfaction. Does not an interpretation of modern witchcraft in terms of virtuality simply restate the old opposition between town and country in a new idiom? If in the life of African middle classes and elites the village has been left behind for good, this is a sign that the mechanisms of social control by which the village environment seeks to enforce the kinship order as a basis for viable community, no longer effectively extend into the life of the village's successful descendants in town and abroad. In the course of the twentieth century Africanist research has monitored the succession of strategies through which the village has tried to retain a hold over its emigrants: tribal elders in town, marital ties, monetarisation of bridewealth, initiation cycles, rural-based regional cults, cults of affliction and other forms of therapy which could only be extended to urban migrants at the village, parental curses, the lure of prestigious traditional office (as headman, court assessor, chief) after retirement from a modern career, the lure of rural land as an urban migrant's ultimate security, the norm of building a house in one's village of origin, and the widespread norm of being buried in the rural home. All these strategies have consisted of power games between generations and genders, and inevitably they have constituted a fertile context for older and newer forms of witchcraft.

Let us grant that an increasing number of middle class and elite Africans have sought to escape from village-based strategies and no longer actively participate in village life – although often at the cost of cultivating a fear of the village as an imagined place of intense witchcraft, which one tries to avoid at all costs and visits to which – if absolutely inevitable – have to be cut short to the extreme. These fears already betray a measure of acknowledgement of the historic kinship order and the obligations it imposes, especially on the more successful and affluent members of the family,- such as urban migrants. Besides, one may cut

one's ties with the distant village, but that does not mean that one can entirely place oneself outside the reach of kinship – that one can totally ignore one's parents, siblings, and children, not to speak of somewhat more remote ties, or homeboy ties in town. This residual kinship may partially be patterned or re-patterned according to North Atlantic and global models, but in the case of African middle class and elites is also likely to reflect their childhood socialisation into recent versions of the historic kinship order whose boundary condition has been witchcraft.

We could go full circle and assess what the insights attained by incisive critique on Geschiere's analysis, mean in terms of a possible re-assessment of Schoffeleers' picture of the Chisupe movement.

Schoffeleers helped us to pinpoint what could have been learned from a rural-inspired reading of the distant, Cameroonian data, while taking for granted that this perspective was eminently applicable to the Malawian healing movement's discourse. But what about the Malawian actors involved? Were they really prepared for such a reading, and did they have the symbolic baggage to make such a reading at all relevant to their situation? Does Schoffeleers' reliance on such rural insights as prolonged participant observation at the village level has accorded him, yield insight in present-day Malawian actors' conscious interpretations of the problem of evil as expressed in Chisupe's mass movement? Or does Schoffeleers merely reveal the historical antecedents of such interpretations – a background which has perhaps largely gone lost to the actors themselves? Does the analytical return to the village amount to valid and standard anthropological hermeneutics, or is it merely a form of spurious anthropologising which denies present-day Malawians the right to the same detachment from historic, particularistic, rural roots as many North Atlantic Africanists very much take for granted in their own personal lives? It is this very detachment, this lack of connectivity – a break in the chain of semantic and symbolic concatenation -, which the concept of virtuality seeks to capture.

On this point the work of Rijk van Dijk is relevant, and revealing. In the Ph.D. thesis which he wrote under supervision of Matthew Schoffeleers and Bonno Thoden van Velzen (van Dijk 1992), the assertive puritanism of young preachers in urban Malawi, c. 1990, is set against the background of the preceding century of religious change in South Central Africa and of the interpretations of these processes as advanced in the 1970s and 1980s. Here the urban discourse on witchcraft already appears as 'virtual' (although that word is not yet used by van Dijk), in the sense that the urbanites' use of the concept of witchcraft is seen as detached from direct references to the rural cosmology and to conceptualisations of interpersonal power within the kinship order. Similarly, the events around Chisupe may be interpreted not as an application or partial revival of time-honoured rural cosmological notions, but as an aspect of what Van Dijk describes as the emphatic moral re-orientation in which Malawi, under the instigation of State President Banda's successor Mr Muluzi, was involved at the eve of

the 1994 elections, and in the face of the AIDS epidemic²⁷ – in other words, as very much the same kind of national-level, neo-traditional, phenomenon which Geschiere persuades us to see in the modern discourse on witchcraft in Cameroon.

As a general principle, I submit that the old kinship order is never far away from the personal lives of even the most modern and urbanised Africans, whatever their class position; the free variation of virtualised witchcraft beliefs, fertilised by whatever global images circulate in the way of vampirism, satanism *etc.*, is not totally virtualised but continues to be fed, to some extent, by the historic cosmology on which the village and its kinship order were based.

This is also what I have found, in scores of cases many of which I came to understand in detail as they evolved over the years, among my Zambian associates since 1972, and among my Botswana associates since 1988 (also *cf.* chs 3 and 4, above). Among the middle classes and elites, the adoption of new lifestyles and of new emphases in kinship (a tendency to retreat into the nuclear family, to discourage parasitism from distant kin, to recruit one's political and economic followers not among kinsmen but among client non-kin) often goes hand in hand with family dramas in which the old kinship order turns out to be not so easily discarded, and to strike back with a vengeance. At the same time, witchcraft beliefs and practices are obviously no longer confined to the kinship domain, but have penetrated many aspects of modern life, many instances of competition over scarce resources, and many instances of the exercise of power, notably within the formal organisations of government, the economy, education, health care, and churches. This is only what we would expect (in African societies more and more taken over by outside forces, images, people and organisations) if our initial viewpoint is correct that witchcraft of old has formed the boundary condition of the kinship order, has constituted the evocation of all that is foreign and alien. Largely severed from the old cosmological context, the imagery of this new witchcraft follows the symbolic repertoire of the old cosmology only to a limited and diminishing extent, and is open to all sorts of free variation, in which the global supply of images of horror, alterity and violence (often digitally transmitted) is eagerly absorbed.

14.4. Conclusion

Thus witchcraft in modern Africa emerges, not as a timeless, atavistic continuation of an essentially unaltered, historic cosmology right into modernity (Schoffeleers); nor as a predominantly new phenomenon marking Africa's road to modernity (Geschiere; *cf.* 2013); but as the resolution, through a process of virtualising appropriation (amazingly similar and converging in many parts of the continent), of the tensions between

- witchcraft as the boundary conditions – in the form of various claims of individual assertiveness – of the kinship order at the village level, and

²⁷ Van Dijk 1999.

- witchcraft as the idiom of power struggles in modern situations: the context of urban life, formal organisations, the state

The two poles represent (in structural implications for production and reproduction, in procedures, and in imagery) largely independent symbolic complexes, yet they are inseparable, in that the 'modern' pole has been constructed on the basis of a specific transformation, towards modern life, of witchcraft as it was – and to a considerable extent continues to be – available in the conception of the kinship order.

In the same way as Winch's re-analysis has exculpated the study of African witchcraft from allegations of slighting Africans' mental capabilities, my argument exculpates the study of African witchcraft from allegations of North Atlantic, alien imposition as chided by Peter van der Veer. If today Africa appears to be the continent of witchcraft, this is not because a number of prominent North Atlantic Africanists have colluded to decide that this – despite its suggestion of exotism, racialism, and imposed alterity – is how African societies are going to be represented, as part of a 'localising strategy'. It is because, on the basis of the historic underlying pattern of kinship-based village communities of agriculturalists and herdsmen going back to the Neolithic, witchcraft (under whatever local emic term) has played an important role in defining the moral and productive order in many parts of the African continent. Witchcraft was therefore available for appropriation and virtualisation by African middle classes and elites in their struggle to create meaning in modernity and postmodernity. Without acknowledgment of this shared heritage of African village society, the modernity of witchcraft cannot be understood unless as an alien analytical imposition – which it is certainly not. Acknowledging this common pool of historic inspiration allows us to admit both the continuity and the transformation in modernity. Witchcraft has offered modern Africans an idiom to articulate what otherwise could not be articulated: contradictions between power and meaning, between morality and primitive accumulation, between community and death, between community and the state. If this insistence on an African witchcraft idiom does not render the African experience of modernity and postmodernity any more transparent, it at least – in the face of the avalanche of alien, imported ingredients of modern life – casts this experience in a mode of expression whose extremely long history on African soil cannot be denied.

