

she gradually internalises these collective representations as a private person – in her professional formal utterances (in the forms of academic writing-up) she does not allow the collective representations she has studied the benefit of the doubt, nor the respect she pretends to be due to the collectively other.

The tacit point of departure of the cultural anthropological professional practice (and in this respect it does not distance itself from condescending and hegemonic North Atlantic society as a whole) is: *the collective representations of other societies under study cannot be true, unless they coincide one hundred percent with the collective representations of the researcher's own society of origin.* Of course, both the researcher's society of origin and the cultural orientation under study construct a truth-creating life world – which is a situation suggestive of a relativist approach. But according to the conventions of ethnography such a life world may be one-sidedly broken down if it is the other's life world, and left intact when it is the researcher's own. Just try to realise what this means for the confrontation, throughout the modern world, in institutional, political and media settings, between such major and powerful North Atlantic institutional complexes as democracy, medicine, education, Christianity, and pre-existing local alternatives in the respective fields (e.g. Islam!). Anthropologists may pay lip service to the local alternatives from a humanitarian and aesthetic point of view but – they for their own sanity and professional survival they have to abide by the adage that they cannot be true. May I be permitted to try and objectify myself as an example:

N. FROM PARTICIPANT OBSERVER TO PARTICIPANT *TOUT COURT*: A EUROPEAN'S PATH THROUGH AFRICAN RELIGION. Born in the Netherlands (1947), I was trained at the university of my home town as an anthropologist specialising in religion. From my first field-work (1968), when I investigated saint worship and the ecstatic cult in rural North Africa, I have struggled with the problem of *the truth of the others' belief* – which I am inclined to consider as the central problem of interculturality. With gusto I sacrificed to the dead saints in their graves, danced along with the ecstatic dancers, experienced the beginning of mystical ecstasy myself, built an entire network of fictive kinsmen around me. Yet in my ethnography I reduced the very same people to numerical values in a quantitative analysis, and I knew of no better way to describe their religious representations than as the denial or North Atlantic or cosmopolitan natural science (van Binsbergen 1985b; 1980, 1985b). It was only twenty years later when, in the form of a novel (*Een Buik Openen – 'Opening up a Belly' – 1988*) I found the words to testify of my love for and indulgence in the North African life forms which I had had to keep at a distance as an ethnographer; and my two-volume, English-language book manuscript on this research is still lying idly on a shelf. In the course of many years and several African field-work locations, always operating in the religious and the therapeutic domain, I gradually began to realise that I loathed the cynical professional attitude of anthropology, and that I had increasingly difficulty sustaining that attitude. Who was I that I could afford to make believe, to pretend, wherever the undivided serious commitment of my research participants was involved? Several among them have played a decisive role in my life, as examples, teachers, spiritual masters, lovers. In Guinea-Bissau, in 1983, I did not remain the observer of the oracular priests but I became their patient – like nearly all the born members of the local society were. In the town of Francistown, Botswana, from 1988, under circumstances which I have discussed at

length elsewhere (van Binsbergen 1991; 1998) – the usual professional routine for field-work became so insupportable to me that I had to throw overboard all methodological considerations. I became not only the patient of local diviner-priests (*sangomas*), but at the end of a long therapy course I ended up as one of them, and thus as a believer in the local collective representations. At the time I primarily justified this as a political deed, for me as a White man in an area which had been disrupted by White monopoly capitalism and nearby South African apartheid. Now more than then I realise that it was also and primarily an epistemological position-taking – a revolt against the professional hypocrisy in which the hegemonic perspective of anthropology reveals itself. It was a position-taking which in fact expelled me from cultural anthropology (although I did go by my own choice) and which created the conditions for the step which I finally made when occupying my chair in intercultural philosophy.

At the time (but see the Introduction to this book, above), this step meant liberation, not only from an empirical *habitus* which, along with existential distress, has also yielded me plenty of intellectual delight, adventure, and honours; but also liberation from such far-reaching spiritual dependence from my mentors and fellow cult members as originally characterised my *sangoma*-hood. Becoming a *sangoma* was a concrete, practical deed in answer to the contradictions of a practice of intercultural knowledge production which I had engaged in for decades, with increasing experience and success. Becoming an intercultural philosopher means a further step: one that amounts to integrating that deed in a systematic, reflective and intersubjective framework, in order to augment the anecdotal, autobiographical 'just so' account with theoretical analysis, and to explore the social relevance of an individual experience. For what is at stake here is not merely an autobiographical anecdote. If I struggled with intercultural knowledge production, then my problem coincides with that of the modern world as a whole, where intercultural knowledge production constitutes one of the two or three greatest challenges. If it is possible for me to be at the same time a Botswana *sangoma*, a Dutch professor, husband and father, and an adoptive member of a Zambian royal family, while simultaneously burdened by sacrificial obligations, cultural affinities and fictive kin relationships from North and West Africa, then this does not just say something, about me (a me that is tormented, post-modern, boundless, one who has lost his original home but found new physical and spiritual homes in Africa). Provided we take the appropriate distance and apply the appropriate analytical tools, it also says something about whatever 'culture' is and what it is not. It implies that culture is not bounded, not tied to a place, not unique but multiple, not impossible to combine, blend and transgress, not tied to a human body, an ethnic group, a birth right. And it suggests that ultimately we are much better off as nomads between a plurality of cultures, than as self-imposed prisoners of a smug Eurocentrism.

So far for the argument from intercultural epistemology. The second point is much shorter. According to de Certeau (quoted with great approval by Mudimbe) religion is not only thwarted epistemology but also action by which an incredible belief is rendered credible:

The ambiguity of theological projects cannot but lead us back to an essential question: how can we comprehend the credibility of Christianity in the Third World? The late Michel de