

radical criticism of anthropology with an equally radical (self-) criticism of the adoptive strategy of 'going native' – for the latter is inherently problematic as a form of intercultural appropriation and as a movement that obscures, rather than illuminates, the problems of rationality, representation, instrumentality, hegemony, existential encounter and identity, in intercultural knowledge formation.

This personal development in the course of my career has put me in a position from which I can appreciate the way in which modern scholars both dissect and feel strangely attracted to traditional expressions of wisdom, and in which I have realised that the 'nostalgia' implied in such attraction, is in fact an epistemological critique of the hegemonic and totalising pretensions of modern science. It is also a recognition of the fact that much of what 'other cultures', outside the North Atlantic, have achieved in the way of expressions of traditional wisdom, must not be ignored or slighted as invalid or obsolete. On the contrary, it deserves to be acknowledged as genuine knowledge in its own right, as essential elements in the global knowledge heritage of humankind, based on an epistemology of its own, capable of solving some of the dilemmas of the human conditions as well as, or better than, dominant global / North Atlantic science.

This is claiming far more than I can substantiate in the present Chapter. All I can do here is offer some brief illustrations of what I mean. Let me therefore conclude by briefly discussing four forms of African traditional wisdom which I find particularly convincing as complements or alternatives to modern science, and capable of being reformulated in a global format, and globally circulated.

16.7. Four examples of viable African traditional wisdom with potentially global applicability

I refer to my four examples of 'tacit modern unwisdom' set out in Section 16.4 above, and contrast them with African traditional wisdom.

1. (V) THE HUMAN BODY IN AFRICAN TRADITIONAL WISDOM. Much traditional wisdom in Africa is concentrated on the human body,⁶⁷⁸ whose life cycle and fertility are celebrated. Thus death may become the highest, and with all its sense of bereavement yet essentially festive, culmination of life; and puberty rites (especially female ones) appear as a vital resource of meaning spilling over to the other fields of the entire culture. Symbolic parallelism between the body and the land, and between the body and the structure of socio-political organisa-

⁶⁷⁸ From the very extensive literature on African corporality I mention: Ngubane 1977; Kubik 1977; Devisch 1985a, 1985c, 1990a, 1995b, 1995c, 2000; Rasing 2001; Jacobson-Widding 1991; Maw & Picton 1992; Fernandez 1990; Kimmerle 1989; Fédry 1976; Turner 1969b; de Boeck 1995.

tion, makes macrocosmic phenomena understandable at a human scale. Frequently the body is marked and covered with substances derived from other bodies, from surrounding nature, and from humans' local artefact production – yet the celebration of the undressed, and of the cleaned and cleansed body is an implicit articulation of purity and trans-moral innocence in the face of the continuity of life force (locally often conceptualised as the ancestors, or the spirits of the wilds). The movement of the body in space and time confirms dance and music as the most obvious way of situating the individual in its social and cosmological position, and of re-finding that position after illness, crisis and bereavement. Orifices are points of transformation between the cosmological, the social and the individual, articulating life as a constant flow of life force in and out the human individual, and between individuals – *e.g.* in a sexual context. Especially healing practices reconstitute the connections between worldview, social organisation, and body; they not only redress and restore, but effectively *create* the human individual. Most importantly, it is the body that situates individuals in a chain of continuity across generations, whose perpetuation is implied to be the true meaning of life. The African traditional wisdom of the body, expressed and mobilised in every ritual and every act of therapy, contrasts forcefully and convincingly with the alienating body practices of the North Atlantic region today, as evoked in Section 4 above; as well as with the time-honoured bodily conceptions and practices (often far more restrictive and rigid than their African counterparts) of the world religions (Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, *etc.*) which have become increasingly dominant in the Old World over the past three millennia. In African systems of corporality we find a wisdom which not only has remained vitally important to African people today, but which has also proved to be capable of reformulation into a global format, and of being globally transmitted in the form of African-inspired musical practices, dancing, healing, and sexual practices; ever renewed and increasingly amalgamated with globalising practices from elsewhere, African corporal wisdom continues to conquer the world.

2. (W) CONFLICT REGULATION IN AFRICAN TRADITIONAL WISDOM. African local-level practices of conflict regulation constitute an important expression of traditional wisdom, to be shared with the wider world. The relatively old and exhausted state of many African soils and eco-systems has been an important factor in the vulnerable and ephemeral nature that has been a recurrent feature of African state systems both in the past millennia and today, well after the end of colonial rule. Therefore, the grand logic of formal organisation (elsewhere the hub of political and economic expansion and innovation in the last few millennia and especially since the 19th century CE) has often remained an imported dream in Africa – repeatedly turned nightmare in post-colonial-state contexts. But on the basis of such principles as the complementarity of oppositions, and the awareness of sharing a fundamental humanity in the face of which *total* social exclusion of particular individuals and groups is literally un-

thinkable, African small-scale communities have managed to persist and to renew themselves by virtue of a particularly effective mode of conflict management. African local-level traditions of conflict resolution are typically based on the recognition of plural truth, of plural positions of integrity, and the symbolically creative invention of real or pretended common grounds that would allow the parties involved to yield and be reconciled – for if two opponents are both right then there can be no logical road to reconciliation except via the ternary logic of sleight-of-hand. These mechanisms have, however, turned out to be surprisingly ineffective at the national and international level (although post-apartheid South Africa may yet prove us wrong on this point), and as a result Africa has stood out, during the last half century, as a place of state collapse, civil war and genocide. Yet great African statesmen of the last few decades, such as Julius Nyerere, Nelson Mandela, Desmond Tutu, and Kofi Annan, seem to have been able to effectively transmit some of this traditional wisdom of conflict regulation to a level beyond the local community. A closer, comparative and theoretical study⁶⁷⁹ of these African modes of conflict regulation as forms of traditional wisdom may help to reformulate them into a globally receivable format, which may also prove more effect at the national and international level in Africa.

W.W. THE AFRICAN SENSE OF COMMUNITY: SELF-EVIDENT INPUT OR PRECARIOUS PRODUCT? In the discussion following my oral presentation on which the present argument is based, Niels Weidtmann stressed, rightly, that these African modes of conflict regulation do *not* spring from any exceptionally powerful sense of community in African societies – on the contrary, such a sense is often surprisingly weak. I totally agree, having stressed in various publications on the Nkoya people of Zambia how their villages are really communities of *strangers*, people who were not born together and who will not die together, but whose lives are only temporarily intermeshing in the context of a particular small village and / or kin group, whilst each individual is personally and uniquely involved in a life-long merry-go-round of rural and rural-urban geographical mobility, marrying, divorcing, and serially exploiting a whole range of potential kin alliances in the process. Other Africanist studies, for instance those from the Manchester School context (cf. van Binsbergen 2007a and extensive references cited there), show that such a setup is not peculiar to the Nkoya people but has a much wider African applicability. Given the loose and vulnerable sense of community in many African contexts, conflict resolution, just like marriage, *rather than being predicated on an already existing sense of community*, is an attempt to actively *create* community in the first place, because it articulates people into complementary opposing groups, and formulates an idiom in terms of which their opposition can be negotiated with minimum social and symbolic destructiveness. Conflict regulation can do this, not by virtue of any fixed, well-defined and well-sanctioned politico-legal system of clearly allocated individual and collective rights, prerogatives and obligations, but precisely by virtue of the inchoate nature (Mitchell 1971; van Velsen 1971) of African socio-political organisation, in other words by virtue of the existence of a complex web of *conflicting ties* which each potentially lay a total claim on the groups and individuals involved (Gluckman 1955, 1965; Colson 1960). In such a situation, where one may typically belong to more

⁶⁷⁹ Cf. Norbeck 1963; Gluckman 1955; Simonse 1992; Assefa 1996; Ngwane 1996; van Binsbergen 2003c.

than one conflicting group at the same time, and where more than one party in conflict may have an equally justified claim to truth, honour, compensation, bride-wealth, and other scarce resources, conflict regulation can only be through creative sleight-of-hand, invoking a ternary logic that allows one *to have one's cake and eat it at the same time* – in other words, the wisdom of negotiation, symbolic rhetoric, and finitude.

3. (X) THE ACCESSIBLE INDIVIDUAL MIND IN AFRICAN TRADITIONAL WISDOM. As a third example of African traditional wisdom I would cite African elements of a philosophy of mind, such as articulated by Gyekye and Wiredu, for instance, in their rendering of the ontology of the Akan ethnic and linguistic cluster in West Africa⁶⁸⁰. In the Western philosophical tradition, the philosophy of mind has faced aporias for a number of reasons:

- the heritage of Platonic / early Christian / Cartesian body-mind dualism (critiqued by, for instance, Ryle 1949),
- well-known pitfalls of the 'other minds' problem,⁶⁸¹
- the Western stress on the concept of the individual, undivided self – conceived not as a socio-cultural construct peculiar to a particular time and place, but as a self-evident given of the human condition in general – as the central cosmological and ontological entity.

The latter claims that it is impossible for minds to communicate directly with one another, leaving only the indirect transmission of mental contents via material signs (including speech) received through the senses. Such an individualistic and atomistic conception of the mind, whilst a basic tenet underlying most world religions today, leads us into great difficulty, since the actual direct communication between minds (as implied in the ideas of telepathy and precognition)⁶⁸² is simply an everyday experience to many people from all cultural orientations and all times. Anthropologists

⁶⁸⁰ Cf. Wiredu & Gyekye 1992; Gyekye 1995; Wiredu 1980. The accounts of these two philosophers of the Akan system do not completely match. Cf. Müller 2002.

⁶⁸¹ Bilgrami 1993 and references cited there.

⁶⁸² Philosophical problems of (the claim of the existence of) paranormal phenomena are discussed in, *e.g.*, Eisenbud 1982; Brier 1974; Mundle 1964; Grim 1990. I discuss these themes in connection with African divinatory practices in van Binsbergen 2003b. An authoritative synthetic overview of the empirical evidence for paranormal phenomena, in the face of ill-informed and entrenched modern Skeptics movement, is Radin 1997, with extensive bibliography. Dean Radin holds a PhD in physics; one of his own contributions to this field was that, together with R.D. Nelson, he managed to have an authoritative, mainstream physics journal publish a discussion of nearly a thousand cases of consciousness-related anomalies in random physical systems, *e.g.* computers that, not only in their overall design, but – against all mainstream expectations – also in the details of their actual functioning (*e.g.* in the outcome of digital random generators), prove to be demonstrably influenced by the conscious thought of the humans operating them. (Radin & Nelson 1989).

working on African divination and trance have similar phenomena to report which seem to go against the dominant, 'Skeptical' natural-science paradigms of today. It must be emphasised that there are huge epistemological and methodological difficulties inherent in such claims (Olivier de Sardan 1988). On the other hand, contrary to what most modernist Skeptics, and their lay parrots, seem to realise, the theory of *non-locality as an aspect of main-stream quantum mechanics* does provide an excellent theoretical basis for the possibility of such paranormal phenomena.⁶⁸³ Since such insights, in locally encoded cultural forms, are common-place in many African contexts but repressed from public circulation (especially among non-specialists) in the post-Enlightenment North Atlantic region, paranormal phenomena may be argued to constitute a domain where the truth claims of African wisdom are not just valid within the local African space of culturally created self-evidence, but may deserve to be globally mediated as a statement of a transcultural truth, and hence superior to current collective representations in the West. Yet most anthropologists with such experiences hide in psychological rationalisations that make the diviner merely a skilful manipulator of plain sensory information and an articulator of, essentially widely circulating, village rumour. Of course, there is no denying the ordinary psychology of the interpersonal information flow, by virtue of which clients often sensorily transmit information to diviner-healers without the client being aware of this, thus allowing the diviner-healer to spuriously claim paranormal sources of knowledge. However, my own two decades as an African diviner have absolutely convinced me that these normal processes of communication and impression management, coupled with the trance-like techniques of trans-individual sensitivity that one learns as an African wisdom specialist, create fertile grounds also for non-sensory forms of knowledge transmission. Such transmission can hardly be explained by the publicly dominant, global / North Atlantic scientific ontology, but is eminently accounted for in the worldview of African wisdom. In the Southern African divinatory idiom, extrasensory production of what appears to be valid knowledge is explained by the (in that cultural context) self-evident intercession of possessing or guiding ancestors. In the Akan version, by contrast, individual minds are, as forms of what is locally called *sunsum*, considered to be semi-autonomously subsumed in a universal World Soul, *okra*, and it is this interconnectedness which eminently accounts for telepathy,

⁶⁸³ Cf. Einstein *et al.* 1931, 1935; Bell 1964; Walker 1977; Bohm & Hiley 1993.

precognition and veridical divination (see Chapter 15, above).

Meanwhile there is an important point to be appreciated here, which throws further light on the peculiar rationality of divination and healing as a wisdom practice. True enough, the art of the diviner-healer includes specific technical procedures, which are well-defined, managed and transmitted among the specialist owners of such wisdom. We have seen how these largely seem to be forms of knowledge production based on procedures, guided by the specific conventionalised interpretations of conditions defined by explicit limiting conditions, of the type 'if the lob of the liver turns out to be darkened, then...'. If this were truly the case, such formal procedures would in principle produce (proto-) scientific knowledge, not wisdom; and to the extent to which the implication triggered by the limiting condition (for instance: '...then the king will die') in reality – under the regime of truth construction that informs our modern science – can only be said to be totally unrelated to the limiting condition, such implications are false and such science can, from our present viewpoint, only be called pseudo-science.⁶⁸⁴ On the other hand, if the diviner-healer's lay client (and often the diviner-healer himself) consciously finds that he believes in the diviner-healer's pronouncements, this is so not only on the basis of the latter's authority (as in wisdom), but also and particularly because of the objective infallibility attributed to the divinatory procedures followed, as patent truth-producing techniques of a repetitive, objectifying, technical nature. We are left with a puzzle, an aporia, for if the material instruments of divination (*e.g.* four tablets, a collection of bones or figurines, the chance traces left by nocturnal visitors from the animal kingdom, the painstakingly calculated chart of the position of planets at a particular place and time) are strictly applied in accordance with the rules, which formally do not leave any degrees of freedom, they could not – under today's global scientific assumptions – possibly produce veridical divination. Yet they do, in my extensive experience. My solution is that in fact the procedures are not strictly followed, and cannot be. Every divinatory outcome displays what the divination specialist Werbner (1973) has called 'the superabundance of understanding': there is never just one clue but there are always several, and these are always more or less incompatible and contradictory. For instance, in Southern African four-tablet divination,⁶⁸⁵ every fall of the four tablets (and with back and front of each tablet being marked as different there are $2^4 = 16$ different falls possible) can be inter-

⁶⁸⁴ As today's astrology is justifiably called pseudo-science today, although 3,000 years ago it was in the forefront of (proto-)science. Probably, and hopefully, the paroxysms of today's science (the theory of relativity, quantum mechanisms, and neurobiology) will end up as pseudo-sciences within a few centuries, to be replaced by better science...

⁶⁸⁵ See the various treatments of this topic throughout this book, with full references in the bibliography.

preted along nine different dimension: ancestral, witchcraft, social, health, economic, etc. Moreover, each fall has its specific conventionalised praise text – which is ambiguous and dark, just like the pronouncements of the Delphi oracle in Ancient Greece (Fontenrose 1978), or those of the *yì jīng* 易經 ('I Ching') oracle and wisdom text of classical China (Legge 1993). By the same token, a full astrological theme ('horoscope'), analysed with all the possible aspects (in degrees, with each cohort of degrees having its own conventional *benefic* or *malefic* connotations), with very specific meanings and elaborate correspondences – of colour, musical tone, geographical location, gender, mood, moral quality, etc. – very specific to each of the various planets and secondary astrological points) is an array of immense complexity, a bunch of contradictions and incompatible associations from which simply not one unequivocal outcome can ever result, *unless through drastic selection and weighing i.e. by sleight-of-hand (even if performed in good faith)*. As I have stressed in earlier accounts (e.g. 2003b), the diviner-healer may use this complexity to enter into a trance-like state in which he may be argued to become particularly receptive for extrasensory perception. But even regardless of the possibility of such an extrasensory contribution, the diviner simply engages in *wisdom*: juggling the abundance of clues, many of them mutually contradictory, which the oracular procedures provide in combination with the diviner's background knowledge of the client and of the latter's situation, and pressing all the loose ends into an increasingly coherent complex narrative, which (due to the intensive interaction between diviner and client during the session) the client will increasingly recognise as revealing and as relevant. Thus the diviner engages in wisdom as practical knowledge, – along lines that are not essentially different from the creative skills (of selective synthesis and massaging over contradictions, and rhetorical persuasiveness) that allow a scholar to produce a convincing and publishable argument. In doing so, the diviner makes intensive use of the multi-interpretability and of the degrees of freedom which the oracular apparatus provides, yet the diviner at the same time derives his own authority from the fact that he can nonetheless let this sleight-of-hand pass as the immutable, unequivocal, authoritative outcome of technical oracular procedures. The conclusion seems inescapable that the authority attributed to such divination is already predicated upon a proto-scientific wider context, where (even in the eyes of the individual lay client, having somehow adopted the specialists' proto-scientific outlook) it is procedures rather than divine authority that produces truth. But even though the diviner and the client believe that the oracular pronouncements are compellingly determined by the strict application of the intersubjective, standard oracular procedures, *is fact they are not*. From complexity and contradiction, via techniques of negotiation, weighing and selection, to meaningful pronouncement – this is what above we have identified as the path of wisdom, not of science. *What the*

diviner does, is the production of unique, bricolaged practical wisdom under the disguise of the production of systematic and unassailable knowledge by means of repetitive standard procedures that enhance the authority of his pronouncements.

4. (Y) MYTHOLOGY IN AFRICAN TRADITIONAL WISDOM. My final example of expressions of African traditional wisdom derives from a field on which I have concentrated over the last few years, comparative mythology, in a project whose rationale was to establish the empirical basis for my thesis of the fundamental cultural unity of humankind, in particular of Anatomically Modern Humans – a complement therefore to my hyperbolically challenging adage ‘cultures do not exist’.⁶⁸⁶ Here I will concentrate, not on meaning and content, but on formal processes in the global history of mythology, which spans at least 200,000 years. Myths are expressions of traditional wisdom in the sense that they articulate and support a culture’s view of the world and of man; offering aetiological explanation of specific natural phenomena, human institutions, and names; and providing models for emulation and edification in real life. Many expressions of traditional wisdom are in the format of myth, not in the modernist pejorative sense as collective representation constituting untruth, but as collective representation in narrative format, *tout court* (cf. van Binsbergen 2003d). Although Ancient Egypt, one of the earliest, most powerful and enduring civilisations of the ancient world, was located in Africa and displayed many African traits, and although the African continent contained major sites of early Christianity and of medieval Islam, yet prior to the 19th century CE writing remained peripheral to most of African life, and African cultures have excelled in orality including storytelling. Anatomically Modern Humans emerged in Africa c. 200,000 years ago, and only began to trickle to other continents c. 80,000 years ago in the context of the Out-of-Africa Exodus. Genetically and culturally the African continent still contains some identifiable traces of the long pre-Exodus period. Such traces are also to be found everywhere outside Africa – it is these traces that allowed us to discover the Out-of-Africa Exodus in the first place. So before we fall into the trap of hegemonically inventing Africa (Mudimbe 1988) as the ultimate domain of primordiality (Conrad’s *Heart of darkness*, as Africa has so often appeared in North Atlantic colonial and post-colonial stereotyping), let us consider the following points which are particularly important for an appreciation of the global importance of the traditional wisdom contained in myths.⁶⁸⁷



Z. WHY MYTHEMES MAY PERSIST OVER MANY MILLENNIA. While we must acknowledge the possibility of parallel invention due to the common structure of the mind of Anatomically Modern Humans, and the converging effects of cultural globalisation, still an important partial explanation of the very many universals and near-universals of human cultures worldwide (Wiredu 1990, 1996; Brown 1991; Oruka 1990a) is the following:

⁶⁸⁶ van Binsbergen 2006, 2008; the adage is the title of 2003e.

⁶⁸⁷ Also see my discussion of the theonym Nyambi in the Introduction, above.

these universals may be seen as elements (surprisingly constant and persistent over tens of thousands of years, as if deeply programmed into human culture) of our common cultural heritage long pioneered inside Africa before the Out-of-Africa Exodus, and subsequently spread all over the globe. I have called this common heritage 'Pandora's Box'. Considering the incomparable importance of narrative for creating and perpetuating human groups, and acknowledging articulate language as one of Anatomically Modern Humans' principal distinctive traits, Pandora's Box must have contained a basic mythological repertoire which the Out-of-Africa Exodus caused to spread all over the world, and which painstaking comparative research is now beginning to reconstruct – around such themes as the moon, the trickster, the fire, the rainbow snake, the tree of life, the reptile erroneously announcing death *etc.*

However, most of the development of world mythology took place after the Out-of-Africa Exodus, in the course of tens of millennia of ecological, cultural and cosmological development outside Africa, especially in Asia. Here, as transformations and innovations upon the mythological contents of Pandora's Box, and also linked, in identifiable ways, with the emergence of new modes of production and new linguistic macro-families, some of the major cosmologico-mythological themes emerged, such as (c. 30,000 years ago in Central Asia) the cosmogony based on the separation of Land and Water (with the Flood as cataclysmic annihilation of that separation, requiring world order to be restored by a second creation); and the alternative and somewhat later cosmogony revolving on the separation of Heaven and Earth,⁶⁸⁸ which made possible the idea of the demiurge and other forms of re-connection (tree, mountain, bird, pyramid, ladder, stairway, rainbow, demiurge, shaman, king, twin) between Heaven and Earth – which have constituted central themes in the theological and iconographic repertoire of civilisations from the Neolithic onwards. Much of the familiar mythological repertoire of Eurasia (faintly echoed in the Americas, more clearly so in Oceania that was mainly populated during the last few millennia) emerged in this phase along lines that we are now beginning to make out.

⁶⁸⁸ Hilde Link (2007) refers to the stage preceding such Separation in the narrative of the tight embrace of Heaven and Earth, in South Asia and in Ambon, Indonesia. This mytheme (generally worked out in such a way that the incessant mating of the two primal gods Heaven and Earth obstructs the birth channel through which reality is to be produced, and one of the infant gods thus locked in the womb has to force the way out *e.g.* by castrating the untiring father: Ouranos, Kronos, an Oedipal fate *avant la lettre* which was also predicted for Kronos' son Zeus) has extensive further attestations: Ancient Greece (Hesiod, *Theogonia*), Nigeria (the Yoruba primal gods Obatala and Oduduwa, *cf.* Scheub 2000), Oceania (Dixon 1916-1920; Poignant 1967; Willis 1994: 294; Cotterell 1989: 148, 164, 241f, 244 (Rangi – Heaven – and Papa – Earth, Polynesia; the same obstruction motif obtains in Hawaii and among the Maori), thus also (after failing attempts by the storm god Tachiri-wa-tea – which reminds us of his Japanese counterpart スサノオ Susanoo – Rangi is pushed upward by the forest god Tanemahuta to form the sky, *cf.* Egyptian Shu, who performs exactly the same act of separation for this children  Nut (Heaven, here female) and  Geb (earth, here male); *cf.* te Velde 1975-1986; Bonnet 1971 / 1952; de Buck 1947). Incidentally, this Oceanian / Greek parallel is only one out of several such parallels between Oceanian and European mythology – others include the invention of the sail, the fishing up of the land (both mythemes compatible with the idea of seaborne Sunda spread), and specifics of Flood stories (for a full listing and analysis, *cf.* van Binsbergen, in press (f)). These parallel attestations must be considered historically related, however distantly – *e.g.* through eastbound Pelasgian transmission from West Asia to East Asia, Taiwan, and finally Oceania; or through westbound Sunda influence (the latter is also suggested in the Nigerian context by attestations of headhunting, van Binsbergen 2014a and extensive references cited there).

As these themes proliferated, mainly in Asia, a Back-into-Africa population movement made for what state-of-the-art genetic research has discovered to be a feed-back migration from Central and West Asia into Africa, from c. 15 ka BP,⁶⁸⁹ which on its way also had a major impact on Europe. In the process, relatively new Asian narrative themes entered Africa and dominantly installed themselves onto the pre-Exodus mythologies that had continued to transform and innovate there. As a result, sub-Saharan Africa now has the paradoxical combination of relatively new mythologies (largely continuous with those of Eurasia) told by people with relatively ancient genes.⁶⁹⁰

So much for the essentialisation and alteration, in the hands of scholars, of the traditional wisdom as expressed in African narratives. The North Atlantic culture (which in the last few centuries has largely informed the scholar's perspective) and the cultures of sub-Saharan Africa turn out to be relatively closely related and to share highly important prehistoric substrates. What appears as nostalgic reminders of what makes the West incomparably different (and often, by implication, allows the inhabitants of the North Atlantic to construct themselves as culturally superior), is in fact part of a world-wide process of cultural history, in which the places of initiative and the flows of cultural indebtedness have shifted, as they will in the future, and in which a common repertoire of meaning and image is being managed by the

⁶⁸⁹ Cf. Hammer *et al.* 1998; Cruciani 2002; Coia 2005.

⁶⁹⁰ Strictly speaking, this textblock tells us that some mythemes do persist over many millennia, but it does not answer the question posed in its title: *why and how could they do that?* Focussing on institutionalisation and structural-functional integration, classic anthropology tended to assume that cultural items, once established, would persist indefinitely, but more recent anthropology would rightly insist that (given cultural drift; the tendency for culture to free variation, localising transformation, and innovation; the rise and fall, migration, and violent conflicts, of cultural groups and populations; the likelihood of disasters, *etc.*) such persistence cannot be assumed *unless the mechanisms bringing it about* have been identified and attested. In the course of this book we have encountered at least two such possible mechanisms:

- (a) ritual as a likely context for the enshrinement, the fairly unchanged preservation, and the transmission of cultural material across centuries, even millennia (so that prehistoric ritual iconography may still seem to carry meaning for us today, rendering it more or less decipherable) – and it is in this sense, notably, that recent advances in comparative mythology, by *e.g.* Witzel, Rappenglück, Lewis-Williams, Harrod, or myself, may begin to render hitherto enigmatic signs readable and meaningful, *cf.* van Binsbergen 2010, where I interpret Southern African Middle Palaeolithic signs in the light of present-day Nkoya puberty rites, arguing that such cosmologically central rites (surrounded, moreover, by secrecy, seclusion, and specific, prolonged training) may be considered to be particularly conservative of very old cultural items
- (b) the possibility that some mythical contents may be innate and genetically transmitted (as centrally claimed by Jung, but as anathema in the eyes of most anthropologists, who insist that the distinctive feature of culture must be that it is *learned* so that, by definition, it cannot be genetically transmitted – despite the circularity involved in this view (the requirement of being learned instead of genetically transmitted is externally imposed by our paradigm and need not be in accordance with the actual biological, behavioural and social facts; the obvious survival value of mythemes for the persistence of groups and individuals would *in principle* be compatible with a biological anchorage).

We cannot exhaust this most important discussion here, but neither should we be reproached for ignoring it.