

Expressions of traditional wisdom: What Africa can teach the world today

Wim M.J. van Binsbergen

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ABSTRACT ENGLISH

Expressions of traditional wisdom: What Africa can teach the world today: Wisdom is initially defined (cf. Aristotle) as creative practical knowledge that allows one to negotiate the contradictions of human life (especially in less rule-governed domains manifesting uncertainty and incompatible multiple truths), thus accepting that human life is social and finite. The argument begins with noting (1) the resilience of wisdom as a topic in modern thought and science. Next we deal (2) with the dilemma of *expression* of wisdom: while scholarship thrives on specialist explicit language use, wisdom is often secret and risks being destroyed by expression and translation. Section (3) offsets expressions of traditional wisdom against four modes of ‘tacit modern unwisdom’ (in such fields as corporality, conflict regulation, the concept of mind, and myth). The four modes of tacit modern unwisdom are then contrasted (4) with African perspectives, where the human body is the recognised focus of wisdom; where conflict management stresses (at least at the local level) practical wisdom over impersonal and divisive rules; where the human mind is considered to be porous hence accessible through extrasensory means; and where, in the deep history of Anatomically Modern Humans, up to 60,000 years ago the foundations were laid for all the myth we all live by today, while also later mythological developments were to be percolated all over the world including Africa.

SAMENVATTING NEDERLANDS

Expressies van traditionele wijsheid: Lessen uit Afrika voor de wereld van vandaag: Wijsheid wordt aanvankelijk gedefinieerd (cf. Aristoteles) als creatieve praktische kennis die het iemand mogelijk maakt om in te spelen op de tegenstrijdigheden van het mensenleven (vooral in minder gereguleerde domeinen, waar zich onzekerheid en elkaar uitsluitende meervoudige waarheden aan de orde zijn), en die aldus het leven doet aanvaarden als sociaal en eindig. In sectie (1) wordt aangegeven hoe wijsheid steeds meer belangstelling geniet in hedendaagse filosofie en empirische wetenschap. Sectie (2) behandelt het dilemma van de *uitdrukking* van wijsheid: wetenschap bestaat bij de gratie van gespecialiseerd uitdrukkelijk taalgebruik, maar wijsheid is vaak geheim en loopt het gevaar door uitdrukking of vertaling vernietigd te worden. Sectie (3) contrasteert uitdrukkingen van traditionele wijsheid met vier vormen van ‘stilzwijgende moderne onwijsheid’ (op gebied van lichamelijke, conflict regulatie, het begrip ‘geest’, en mythe). Deze vier vormen van stilzwijgende moderne onwijsheid worden dan gecontrasteerd met Afrikaanse perspectieven (4), waarin het menselijk lichaam het erkende brandpunt van wijsheid is; waar conflictbeheersing (althans op het plaatselijk niveau) praktische wijsheid voorrang verleent boven onpersoonlijke, verdeeldheid zaaiende regels; waar de menselijke geest gedacht wordt als poreus, open voor buitenzintuiglijke waarneming; en waar, in de dieptegeschiedenis van de Anatomisch Moderne Mens, tot 60.000 jaar geleden de basis werd gelegd voor alle mythen die thans ons leven bepalen, terwijl ook latere mythologische ontwikkelingen de ganse wereld beroerden inclusief Afrika.

1. The resilience of wisdom as a topic in modern thought and science [1]

In the first booming period of Western philosophy, the fourth century BCE, the analytical mind of Aristotle distinguished [2] between *sōphía σοφία*, as specialist theoretical knowledge including that of the philosopher, and *phronēsis φρόνησις* as creative practical knowledge that allows one to negotiate the pitfalls and contradictions of human life. *Phronēsis* deals with sensitivity to life's problems in concrete situations – the wisdom that we also find in the widespread genre of 'wisdom texts'. Emphasis here is on those domains of life of which we would say today that they are not tightly rule-governed – cf. Wittgenstein 1967 – and thus carry considerable uncertainty, ambivalence and mutually incompatible multiple truths), and to accept both the social nature of human life, and its finitude. The concept of *phronēsis* has been influential throughout the history of Western thought and especially in the twentieth century has been reconsidered from various angles. [3]

Throughout, the perspective on finitude has remained important in approaches to wisdom. Already prominent in Plato, it plays a central role in the work of Dilthey, Heidegger and Ricoeur. [4] On the psychological side, Taranto, in a synthesis on the preceding decade of wisdom research, concludes – and I find this very illuminating –

‘that factors relating to wisdom (age, experience, intelligence, knowledge, intuition, common sense, and personality) can be unified theoretically if wisdom is viewed as *the recognition of and response to human limitation*’ (Taranto 1989, my italics; also cf. Fowers 2003).

Meacham (1983), emulating Socrates's famous paradox, stresses another dimension of finitude in the context of wisdom: *knowing that one doesn't know*. One and a half decade later, Ardel (2004) in a review of the Berlin Wisdom Paradigm in psychology (with such names as Baltes, Kunzmann, Sternberg and Achenbaum), in an attempt to steer away from the latter's expertise-centred orientation [5] makes significant additions to the Taranto position, adding compassionate love and forgiveness as aspects of wisdom. Also Kramer (1990) speaks of the 'primacy of affect-cognition relations' in the conceptualisation of wisdom.

However, another major form of finitude which so far has been understudied in the context of wisdom, is *the awareness of the finitude of one's own and the other's specific cultural orientation in intercultural situations, hence the awareness of plurality, incompatibility, conflict, and the need to negotiate these within a wider socio-political framework*; we shall come back to this point repeatedly.

In recent decades, there has been considerable philosophical and general-intellectual / academic effort directed at affording wisdom a more central position within philosophy, science, and modern thought in general. This heterogeneous movement can be seen as responding to a number of major developments in the North Atlantic region and the world at large:

1. *Beyond the Enlightenment heritage*. The recognition that the project of the Enlightenment, with its firm belief in the liberating and world-innovating force of specialised reason, has been shattered in the wars and genocide of the North Atlantic region in the twentieth century. These violent conflicts have further intensified, for a considerable part of the world population, a crisis of meaning already brought about by secularisation, urbanisation, and scientific and technological advancement; from this crisis, time-honoured local and foreign wisdom may offer relief in a new bid for survival through spirituality (cf. Waaijmans 2002, pp. 335f).

2. *Globalisation*, which after the demise of European colonialism and despite subsequent North Atlantic claims (recently less and less convincing) of global hegemony, yet drove home (partly through such globalising knowledge strategies as anthropology, intercultural philosophy and (however criticised, cf. Said 1978) Orientalism; partly through millions of people's personal experience with intercontinental travel and migration; partly through the quest for transcontinental roots) the irreducible potential of modes of knowing (often designated as 'wisdom') outside the Western mainstream tradition of thought and science. These modes of knowing are now being recognised,

- a. not just for their own intrinsic value in their original geographical context, but also
- b. because they have been subjected to globalising reformulations (one conspicuous form of such a globalising reformulation is the appropriation of ancient 'non-Western' wisdom – especially from South and East Asia, Africa and North America – into the global New Age movement, where it is blended with selectively appropriated state-of-the-art science and technology), and particularly
- c. because effective globalisation has produced complex problematics concerning the co-existence and conflict of worldviews, religions, cultures, ethical systems, legal systems, for which North Atlantic thought and experience (caught in an Aristotelian and Cartesian logic of insurmountable opposition and difference) does not offer ready answers, and which may only be negotiated through a combination of practical wisdom strategies (especially those aiming at the avoidance, reduction and termination of violent conflict) from various origins. It is worth noting that scholars from all continents have contributed to this exploration. [6]

3. *New technologies and ancient wisdom*. Globalisation has inevitably brought the encounter between the technologies of the developed countries, and local technologies in other parts of the world, in the agricultural, medical, organisational, and other fields. After hegemonic North Atlantic ethnocentrism had dominated the development scene for several decades from the middle of the 20th century on, in the most recent decades the awareness has grown that, since any specific technology is part of the culture and worldview of its owners, the one-sided hegemonic imposition of technology is as violent as it is ineffective, whereas a combination of imported technology with 'ancient wisdom' often stands a better chance of success – perhaps in terms of the maximising rationality informing developed technologies but especially in terms of such ecological considerations as have come up recent decades. [7] Remarkably, traditional wisdom not only may appear to be *complementary* to modern technology and science – it may also be argued to be based on parallel and similar modes of thought. [8] And apart from highlighting ancient local forms of competent and efficient interaction with the forces of nature, these ancient wisdom traditions must also be recognised as empowering peripheral local communities and reducing their vulnerability and dependence vis-à-vis the encroachment of a global capitalist economy and ideology. [9] However, the more typical effect in a context of globalisation is destruction of traditional wisdom, and then outside researchers and local specialists may be exhorted to join hands to preserve and record local ways of knowing that may be unique in the world (Balick 2006).

4. *The psychology of wisdom*. In the field of psychology, intensive work over the last few decades on such topics as personality, life span, maturity, aging (in other words, gerontology), moral reasoning, and acceptance / forgiveness of finitude including failure and death (stimulated, in part, by the progressive aging of the population of the developed countries) has produced a focus on wisdom that is empirical, comparative, theoretically orientated, and conceptually highly sophisticated. Here, in the consideration of what makes a good life; what a wholesome society and future; what forms of interaction and communication are conducive to

well-being and meaning; and what attitudes and skills can be identified and taught towards these goals, an extensive and exciting psychology of wisdom has come up, developing more and more to re-unite intelligence with wisdom. [10] Here there is generous attention for wisdom texts and teachings belonging to literate traditions (including world religions) from all over Eurasia; [11] spirituality; the reception of diffuse, oral wisdom traditions from all continents; the analysis of expertise and expert systems; along with the psychological discipline's habitual methods of conceptualisation and theorizing, measurement and both qualitative and quantitative analysis. [12] Especially illuminating are studies in which the world's various regional traditions of wisdom are compared and contrasted. [13] Among the many remarkable findings I cite the following: the interaction of minds facilitates wisdom performance (Staudinger & Baltes 1996); and the narrative is a typical context for the production and transmission of wisdom (Kenyon 2003) – which reminds us of the closely-knit face-to-face relations and fire-side recreation in small-scale groups, as the typical situation in which traditional wisdom is being enacted in real-life situations in historic settings. Whereas in these studies the emphasis is on the significance of wisdom for the individual, the sociologist Schloss (2000) has offered an approach to wisdom as part of (cf. Parsons 1949) the integrative mechanisms of society at large.

5. *Recent rapprochement of wisdom and philosophy.* The gradual dissociation of the empirical sciences from the domain of philosophy proper, and philosophy's concentration on questions of logical, conceptual and theoretical foundations, made that, in the course of the history of Western thought, we have tended more and more to see philosophy, in practice, as the opposite of the quest for wisdom. Perhaps we should see this as an apt illustration of the question Robert Sternberg (a leading wisdom psychologist) has sought to answer: '*Why Smart People Can Be So Foolish*' (Sternberg 2004). Yet the quest for wisdom, and the encounter with the wisdom of others, has continued to inform some of greatest minds, including de Spinoza, Leibniz, Schopenhauer, Heidegger, Levinas, and Derrida. [14] The intellectual developments, as outlined above, outside the field of philosophy proper have made that 'wisdom', far from remaining an obsolete and antiquarian topic, has become one of the main growth points of a global intellectual culture, and as such constitutes an obvious bedding for modern (or rather, post-modern) scholarship aware of its social and existential responsibilities as well as of its limitations. It stands to reason that philosophers, in such fields as the history of philosophy, philosophical anthropology, and intercultural philosophy, have risen to this challenge, and have sought to contribute to the growing literature on wisdom by studies investigating the nature and development of the various wisdom traditions in philosophy world-wide, [15] philosophical foundations for wisdom psychology, for the encounter of wisdom traditions with each other and with modern science, for the interaction between cultures (or rather, the situational articulation, dissimulation, and fusion, of 'cultural orientations') [16] within today's globalising space, and for the reconstruction of meaning and practice under post-Enlightenment conditions. [17] In fact, a wisdom orientation could be argued to be implied in all of Continental philosophy, whereas Analytical philosophy, with its exclusive concentration on specific procedures by which the truth claims of a statement may be substantiated, are more in line with procedural, repetitive approaches to the construction of knowledge. In other words:

$$\begin{array}{ccc}
 \text{Continental Philosophy} & & \text{expressions of traditional wisdom} \\
 \text{-----} & = & \text{-----} \\
 \text{Analytical Philosophy} & & \text{academic philosophy}
 \end{array}$$

as if what we are dealing with here are two complementary modes of knowing which kaleidoscopically, or rather fractally, reproduce and proliferate at whatever level we approach them.

All of the above drives home the message of the topicality of traditional wisdom as an object of modern scholarship. The initiators and organisers of the present International Symposium may therefore be congratulated on the relevance, the wisdom indeed, of their choice.

Meanwhile, the word wisdom is often used vainly in academic texts today, to denote, not time-honoured modes of knowing complementary to scientific knowledge, but rather, within a given North Atlantic / globalising discipline (e.g. physics, law, econometrics) the obsolescent conventional approach of an earlier vintage. Thus an experimental physicist may chide the ‘conventional’ or ‘traditional’ wisdom’ of measuring the interaction of particular particles by means of a specific experimental setup – thus referring to intradisciplinary practices of global physics that may only be one or two decades old, and that have nothing to do with ‘expressions of traditional wisdom’ as understood in the context of our Symposium.

While such usage of the word ‘wisdom’ is still transparent and neutral (although irrelevant in our present context), an extensive inspection of the enormous literature referring to wisdom also shows a usage that is far from neutral, but rather appropriative, distortive and ethnocentrically implying that the perspective from the North Atlantic is the only permissible one. This occurs when the term ‘wisdom’ is perfunctorily and alteringly used in order to designate representations and practices which originate from outside the Western tradition and which deviate from common-sense views of a North Atlantic moderately educated middle class; these practices are indicated in sweeping stereotypical terms. The use of the word wisdom in such cases merely serves to smother, under a cloak of a politically correct term suggestive of respect, the implicit rejection of these alien traits. The internet, in its tendency to identity-biased nutshell formulations of dubious reliability and authority, is the typical site for such usage. Modern organisational management may develop into another such site (Small 2004). In these specific cases, the phrase ‘expressions of traditional wisdom’ refers to a quality that we ourselves imply to lack, and by that reference we are constructing ourselves by contrast with some stereotypical other. Thus we emphatically claim not to have wisdom by ourselves, but we reserve wisdom (euphemistically, again) as an attribute of that which we are not and do not wish to be. Such contrastive wisdom constructing, by negation, our own self-image then is likely to turn out as: knowledge that is obsolete, local, essentially invalid and incapable of generalisation. It is typically the kind of knowledge non-specialists in African affairs, and non-Africans, attribute to Africans, *in a deceptive bid at contrastive self-construction as more rational, universalist and objective non-Africans*. Understandably, therefore, that among champions of secular, democratic modernity ‘wisdom’ may become a pejorative term implying retarded divisiveness (e.g. Jacoby 1994)

Our initial overview of approaches to traditional wisdom has brought up a number of interesting and promising ideas and perspectives. In our present, extremely limited scope (but see van Binsbergen, in press) we must suppress the urge to go and search for specific expressions of traditional wisdom in the many literate and illiterate traditions represented at the Colloquium reflected in the present Proceedings. Let us now try to penetrate a little deeper into this fascinating but difficult matter.

2. The dilemma of expression in wisdom

It is important to stress that our International Symposium has been about *expressions* of traditional wisdom, and not about traditional wisdom as such. Given our own reliance on method in the production of our academic scholarship, traditional wisdom can only come within the orbit of our investigations if it does not remain implicit, *not* a totally unrevealed secret, *not* a totally tacit assumption, but if it is laid down, in whatever oblique and distorted form, in an expression that has some material manifestation: for instance in the sound waves

carrying the spoken words of our living informants; or the clay tablets, bamboo leaves, papyrus sheets, or knotted *quippus* of the texts at our disposal; or the stone reliefs, rock paintings or masquerades that may express traditional wisdom iconographically. Our subject matter in the present Symposium is well defined in so far as, without such *expressions*, we would scarcely be able to make scholarly pronouncements on traditional wisdom.

Thanks to the generosity of the organising institutions, our Symposium could meet in a splendid palatial hall in Brussels as the heart of the new Europe. Since this is the former abode of William of Orange, the sixteenth-century founder of the Dutch state of which I am a citizen, our proverbial Dutch arrogance is discretely reminded of the fact that our Father of the Nation was merely a senior official at the Brussels court. No striking expressions of traditional wisdom are attributed to him, and his nickname, ‘the Taciturn’, suggests that he was alive to the traditional wisdom that ‘speech is silver but silence is golden’ – later somehow paraphrased in Wittgenstein’s

‘Wovon man nicht sprechen kann darüber muss man schweigen’ (Wittgenstein 1964, section 115, § 7).

Here we must acknowledge the problematic status of ‘expression’. Many wisdom traditions, from all parts of the world and from all documented periods, have *restricted, veiled, or downright prohibited expression*, and have tended to organise themselves around the secret – even if in itself meaningless and void – that binds and unites the initiated happy few (cf. de Jong 2007). As far as the history of Western specialist thought is concerned: ever since the pre-Socratics many philosophers have realised that language (even though allowing us to name, organise and lend meaning to the world) at the same time *obscures* Being, smothering it under a deceptive layer of enunciation that may well be the opposite of wisdom. The Chinese counterpart of this insight is in the famous second line of the opening chapter of *Dao De Djing* 道德經:

名可名 非常名 *míng kě míng fēi cháng míng* ‘naming that fixes the reference is not true naming’. [18]

Thus we meet one particular awareness of finitude as the organising principle of wisdom: *the finitude of language*, both in its limited capacity to express essentials of life and the world, and in the multiplicity of human languages, which makes for grossly imperfect transmissions from one language to the other.

Perhaps my best, wisest option would be simply to shut up here. And I would be inclined to do just that, if the scholarship in whose collective pursuit we are in the context of this International Symposium were coterminous with traditional wisdom – but there are indications that it is *not*. The interplay between modern scholarship and traditional wisdom is complex and paradoxical, as my entire argument goes to show.

3 ‘Tacit modern unwisdom’...

Further aspects of the meaning and heuristic uses of the phrase ‘expressions of traditional wisdom?’ may also be captured, somewhat flippantly, if we take the multiple opposite of ‘expressions of traditional wisdom’, which would be something like ‘*tacit* (taken for granted – as opposed to explicitly expressed and argued) *modern* (as opposed to traditional) *unwisdom* (as opposed to wisdom)’. It is not difficult to give a few examples (albeit, admittedly subjective,

even tendentious) of such tacit modern unwisdom. I will quickly pass over such obviously spurious modern myths as that of the market and of commodification or commoditisation (according to which all is merchandise), and that of rational maximising, especially as far as the attainment of material goals is concerned; [19] and the myth of North Atlantic cultural superiority and independent origin – recently exposed in the *Black Athena* debate and its aftermath. [20] Let me merely outline four examples of ‘tacit modern unwisdom’, which in a later section will then be contrasted, one by one, with African traditional wisdom:

1. The immensely alienating myth of *the human body as basically an industrial product*, [21] i.e.
 - uniform and standardised (hence advertisements’ emphasis on young, healthy and perfect)
 - modular in its composition, so that body parts may be modified, overhauled and replaced at will
 - and saturated (ever since the times of de la Mettrie (1747 / 1999) with the imagery of the machine, so that the same language (‘check-up’, ‘engine’, ‘plumbing’) may be used for our body and our motor vehicle (which is said to have its own ‘body’).
2. The myth of *the fundamental closedness of the human person*, who thus is depicted as
 - in the first place an individual, rather than a member of a group
 - whose mind, by an inveterate axiom of modernist science, is to be considered a closed system impervious to other minds except, indirectly, through conscious reflection upon sense impressions (including those produced by speech) that may be taken to express the movements of other minds (cf. Dennett 1991)
3. The myth (going back to Aristotle, [22] as far as the Western tradition is concerned) of *the excluded third and of logical consistency*. In many ways this allows us to respond adequately and pragmatically in our interaction with the non-human world (which therefore can be argued to display, most of the time, and at the meso[23] -level of our conscious human interaction with it, a structure similar to that of our binary logic. Yet we cannot close our eyes to the fact that, in the interaction between human individuals and between human groups, the same logic incessantly creates intransigent positions of recognised and emphasised difference which cannot come to an agreement since both sides, by their own logic, are justified to consider themselves right, yet their respective truths are mutually incompatible and in conflict. The main conflicts in our globalising world of today (e.g. those between North Atlantic military capitalism on the one hand, and militant Islam on the other hand, as rival paths through modernity; those between economic short-term maximising globalism and a future-orientated ecological responsibility; those between consumption on the one hand, and integrity and global solidarity on the other hand) remind us of the potentially paralysing and destructive implication of such consistency. In Western thought it is only recently that such poststructuralist concepts as *différance* and *differend* [24] and the elaboration of ternary and multi-value logics have created a context where we can think beyond binary logic.
4. Typically but paradoxically, again, in this discussion of ‘Tacit modern unwisdom’ we have taken the word *myth* itself in the modernist sense of: ‘widely held collective representation that yet constitutes an untruth’. Usually such a use of the word ‘myth’ carries the implication that specific modern science is available to explode that myth –

which implies (contentiously) that in all situations modern science is the source and the touchstone of truth.

These are some of the themes of tacit, modern unwisdom against which we can begin to appreciate the wisdom of earlier times and different continents. Such appreciation, of course, is not possible without an exploration of the possibility of an intercultural transmission of wisdom, within and outside an academic context; nor without an explicitly epistemological perspective, in which wisdom as a particular mode of knowing orientated to practical life with its comparatively low level of explicit verbalisation, its contradictions, its relative paucity of effective rules, and its abundance of situations containing multiple truths that are mutually exclusive, may be contrasted with scientific knowledge that is usually based on standardised, repetitively applied, knowledge-generating procedures revolving on conditional statements of the ‘if...then’ format. Regrettably, however, also such explorations are outside our present scope (cf. van Binsbergen, 2007 and in press). I will not be able to indicate how the struggle with these questions has informed my academic life, first as an empirical social scientist and historian, then the last decade as an intercultural philosopher. However, in order to indicate the general direction of my thought, let us return to my four examples of ‘tacit modern unwisdom’, and reconsider them in the light of African expressions of traditional wisdom.

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

1. *The human body.* Much traditional wisdom in Africa is concentrated on the human body, [25] 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 organisation, 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 wis-

dom 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 corporeal wisdom continues to conquer the world.

2. *Conflict regulation.* 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 postcolonial-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 unthinkable, 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 study [26] of these African modes of conflict regulation as forms of traditional wisdom may help to reformulate them into a globally receptive format, which may also prove more effect at the national and international level in Africa.

3. *The accessible individual mind.* 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 Africa.[27] 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; [28]
- 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) [29] is simply an everyday experience to many people from all cultural orientations and all times. Anthropologists working on African divination and trance have similar phenomena to report which seem to go against the dominant, ‘Sceptical’ 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 Sceptics, 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. [30] 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, precognition and veridical divination. Of course, the idea of the World Soul is not limited to African worldviews as recorded in historical times. It is found in the literate, specialist traditions of the East [31] and the West. [32] Considerable correspondences between Akan and classical Greek culture have been pointed out (cf. Graves 1964, pp. I, 22f), and it is not impossible that one is indebted to the other, or that both partially derive from a common African source (cf. Arnaiz-Villena *et al.* 2001). But whereas in the Western tradition the idea of the World Soul has become a specialist and minority idea without vital anchorage in popular collective representations, in West Africa it has been an expression of widely held traditional wisdom as recorded in the 19th and 20th centuries.

4. *Mythology.* 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’. [33] 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 story-telling. 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 primordality (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:

- a. While we must acknowledge the possibility of parallel invention due to the common structure of the mind of Anatomically Modern Humans, and recently 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 1990) is the following: 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 heritage 'Pandora's Box', freeing the image from the negative connotations it has had since Hesiod [34] and going back to the original meaning of the Greek name Pandora, 'the All-giving'. 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.
- b. However, much 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, [35] 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 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 recently populated Oceania) emerged in this phase along lines that we are now beginning to make out.
- c. As these themes proliferated, mainly in Asia, a Back-into-Africa population movement made for what recent genetic research has discovered to be a feed-back migration from Central and West Asia into Africa, from c. 15,000 ago, [36] 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.

So much for the essentialisation and alterisation, in the hands of scholars, of the traditional wisdom as expressed in African narratives. The North Atlantic culture (which in recent 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 whole of humankind –, in myriad fragmented, transformed and innovated yet more or less continuous, local forms, that were subjected to localising transformation when travelling beyond their initial cultural bedding, and whose underlying continuity we could scarcely have suspected until, in the most recent times, globalisation created a framework for the recognition of pan-human difference in unity.

5. Conclusion

Our argument has oscillated between two extreme positions, both of them wrong if taken literally and in isolation, yet in combination suggestive of an ulterior truth. On the one hand, we are tempted to declare that other people's wisdom is largely in the eye of the beholder as equipped with his distinctive cultural orientation; on the other hand, all wisdom seems to flow from a common source, which we are Anatomically Modern Humans belonging to widely divergent cultural orientations, may each call by different names yet we are equipped to recognise them as, perhaps, closeness to the essence of Being.

Modern intercontinental scholarship is one aspect of such globalisation. It is our task, in the context of this International Symposium, to respectfully record, interpret, compare, and recirculate in a globalising, more or less accessible format with various degrees of specialist scholarly rigour, and thus celebrate both the beauty and wisdom of individual local human cultural products, and the underlying connections that bring us all together.

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Notes

[1] Quotations of words and sentences from other than modern European languages in this paper preferably include the original script and its transliteration, not in order to pretend a philological expertise I do not have, but in order to affirm the right of the original expression, in its own local cultural form, to take precedence over the transformative appropriation in a modern North Atlantic language; and also to drive home the fact (of crucial importance from a point of view of intercultural philosophy) that our scholarly encounter with foreign wisdom is far from transparent and tends to be filtered through multiple layers of translation and interpretation. However, the conventions of modern scholarship are not conducive to consistency where these good intentions are concerned – for instance, I have had to confine myself to conventional English renderings of the names of Ancient Greek, biblical, and Ancient Egyptian proper names.

[2] *Eth. Nicom.* 1140a and following.

[3] Modern treatments of phronesis include Gadamer 1960; MacIntyre 1981; Bernasconi 1989; Flyvbjerg 1993; Gallagher 1997; Noel 1999; practical studies of phronesis in a concrete modern setting are Halverson 2004; Jamal 2004. Also cf., in our Symposium, the stimulating paper by Koutsoumpos & Zhuang (2007).

[4] Cf. Hyland 1995; de Mul 1993; Heidegger 1983; Ricoeur 1960.

[5] Cf. Horn & Masunaga 2000. At our Symposium, the expertise aspect of wisdom was articulated by Professor Baetens Beardmore in response to my keynote address, i.e. an earlier version of the present argument.

[6] Cf. Takahashi 2000 (who stresses, for the ancient wisdom literature from Western Eurasia, analytical ability, as contrasted for more inclusive and synthetic orientation in South and East Asia – a similar distinction is made by García & Pelechano 2004 – and who highlights the themes of void and co-dependence as central to the Asian tradition. There is no consensus in the literature as to the relation between scientific or intellectual knowledge versus wisdom-related knowledge. Coomaraswamy 1943 and Ardel 2000 rely on such a distinction. However, Strijbos 1995 sees the two forms of knowledge converge from a systems perspective, while Bethé 1968 calls science ‘a road to wisdom’ (thus also Maxwell 1984; also recent Chinese philosophers have been interested in the transformation of knowledge into wisdom: Guorong 2002) For a Neo-Thomist approach to the relation between science and wisdom, cf. Maritain 1940.

[7] Cf. Agarwal & Narain 1997; Sen 1999; Samoff et al. 2001; Berkes et al. 2000; Haverkort & Hiemstra 1999. Indian scholars have been particularly prominent in exploring these possibilities. Here we are touching on the discussions, during the last quarter of a century, of ‘indigenous knowledge systems’, which however our present scope does not allow us to go into.

[8] Cf. Jiang 2005; Jones & Culliney 1998; Capra 1978; Zukav 1979.

[9] Cf. Quanchi 2004.

[10] Blanchard-Fields et al. 1987; Kunzmann & Baltes 2003.

[11] For Islam, e.g. Choudhury 2001, Lewin 2000 (Sufism), and the work of Seyyed Hossein Nasr, cf. Norton 2004; Massignon 1922; Fahd 1966; Ullman 1972; Bakhtiar 1991; Shah 1971; Chittick 1989; for Buddhism: Levitt 1999 (Tibet), Epstein 1985, Vokey 1999, Humphreys 1987; for a Vedantic perspective, cf. Atchley 1993; Yang 2001 studies wisdom concepts in Taiwan, where Taoism and Confucianism have remained important orientations. For references to Judaism and Christianity see notes below.

[12] Cf. Erikson 1963, 1982; Stenberg 1990; Ardel 2004; Baltes & Freund 2003; Baltes et al. 1990, 2002; Hanna & Ottens 1995; Kramer 2000; Maercker et al. 1998; Maslow 1968, 1971; Pasupathi & Staudinger 2001; Brown 2000a. I have considerably benefitted from the extensive bibliography of Trowbridge 2005.

[13] Assmann 1994; Takahashi & Bordia 2000.

[14] General: Hadot 1995. Spinoza: de Dijn 1996 – despite de Spinoza’s banishment from the Jewish religious community, Hebrew wisdom was an important influence on this philosopher. Leibniz (cf. 1994) was fascinated by Chinese Taoist thought 道教 / 道家 as mediated by the Jesuit fathers resident in China. The Indian Vedic writings, notably the Upanishads उपनिषद्, had reputedly great influence on Schopenhauer (e.g. Janaway 1999, p. 12). Heidegger’s great inspiration was the Pre-Socratic ‘wisdom’ philosopher Parmenides – Heidegger 1982, 1977, *passim*. Levinas (cf. 1976) was considerably inspired, again, by biblical wisdom. This also applies to Derrida (cf. 1999, 1996).

[15] For China: Weiping 2005; for the European middle ages, cf. Celano 1995, Hopkins 1996 (on Cusanus); European Renaissance: Rice 1958; Early Modern Europe specifically Hegel: Rosen 2000;

[16] cf. van Binsbergen 2003a, ch. 15: ‘Cultures do not exist’, pp. 459-522.

[17] Cf. de Mul 1993, implicitly on the wisdom relevance of Dilthey; Gadamer 1960; Kekes 1983, 1995; Manheimer 1992; Curnow 1999; Geyer 1989; Godlovitch 1981; Hartshorne 1987; Jacobs 1989; Kuczyński 2001; Marquard 1989; Maxwell 1984, 2004; Nielsen 1993; Smith 1998.

[18] Of the numerous editions of this text I only mention Ames & Hall 2003.

[19] Cf. van Binsbergen & Geschiere 2005; Bowles & Gintis 1993; Cramer 2002.

[20] Bernal 1987, 1991; Lefkowitz & Rogers 1996; van Binsbergen 1997.

[21] Smith et al. 2004; Sharp 2000; Martin 2006.

[22] Metaphysics IV.4, 1006b and following; IV 7, 1011b.

[23] I take the meso-level of phenomena to be that of our normal Galilei-Newton world, at the order of magnitude of the human body: 10^0 (= 1) metres. At very much higher and very much lower orders of magnitude (galaxies, elementary particles), the self-evidences of our Galilei-Newton world dissolve, and the paradoxes and wonders of the theory of relativity and quantum mechanics replace the (appearance of the) transparent logical structure and the object-subject distinction of the meso-level world, bringing out the restrictive boundary conditions of the latter.

[24] Cf. Derrida 1967, 1972; Lyotard 1983.

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

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

[27] 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.

[28] Bilgrami 1993 and references cited there.

[29] 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 Sceptics 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 demonstrably influenced by human thought (Radin & Nelson 1989).

[30] Cf. Einstein et al. 1931, 1935; Bell 1964; Walker 1977; Bohm & Hiley 1993.

[31] The idea of the World Soul is associated with the concept of Ātman आत्म / Brahman ब्रह्म . Cf. in South Asian Advaita Vedanta अद्वैत वेदान्त philosophy as formulated by Ādi Śankara आदि शङ्कर (c. 800 CE).

[32] In the Western philosophical tradition the idea of the World Soul is associated with such names as Heraclitus (e.g. fragment D. 22, A, 17), Plato (Timaeus 29f), the Stoics, Plotinus, the early St Augustine, the alchemical tradition from Late Antiquity onward, to re-surface with Spinoza, Leibniz, Newton, Lessing, the Theosophical movement around 1900, and (on the borderland between philosophy, the life sciences and New Age) most recently with Lovelock's Gaia hypothesis.

[33] van Binsbergen 2006a, 2006b; the adage is the title of 2003d.

[34] Hesiod, *Opera et Dies*, 42-105.

[35] In our Symposium, Hilde Link (2007) referred to the stage preceding such separation in the narrative, the tight embrace of heaven and earth, in South Asia and in Ambon, Indonesia. This mytheme has extensive further attestations (e.g. in Nigeria, Oceania, and Ancient Greece) which in the light of the theory presented here must be considered historically related.

[36] Cf. Hammer et al. 1998; Cruciani 2002; Coia 2005.

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