

The Topicality of Wisdom Today and its Intercultural Challenges

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Introduction: The topicality of wisdom today

For many decades, the notion of 'wisdom' used to be confined, in the general academic understanding and within the scope of anthropology, to either antiquated complexes of local esoteric knowledge devoid of objective truth, or to equally antiquated complexes that had relevance only within a limited context of space and time, and within a limited field of scholarship – such as the wisdom books of the תנ"ך *Tanakh* also incorporated in the Christian *Old Testament*, or 易經 *yì jīng* / *I Ching* as a wisdom book widely used for divination in East and South East Asia. My own interest in wisdom was kindled by the writings of my close colleague and friend Richard Werbner on 'Kalanga wisdom divination' in Botswana – a practice that was not text-based then, but whose textual basis in the medieval Arabic divination form called علم الرمل, *'ilm al-raml* ('*Sand Science*'), which I was to explore extensively from 1990 onward. Today however this intellectual landscape has been transformed due to, among others, the following influences:

¹ I am indebted to the following persons and institutions: in the first place, my research hosts in various fieldwork settings in Africa and Asia, for stimulatingly and patiently awaiting whatever slight understanding of and growth towards wisdom I was to manifest; then Joe Alter and Phil Kao, the conveners of the present workshop, for inviting me and making the necessary financial arrangements; the Belgian Royal Academy of Sciences, for prompting my first explicit writings on wisdom in the late 2000s; the African Studies Centre, Leiden, the Netherlands, for stimulating and facilitating my research from 1977 on in every possible way; the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study, Wassenaar, the Netherlands, for co-opting me to the 1994-1995 Working Group on Religion and Magic in the Ancient Near East, where I, as an ignorant Africanist anthropologist, had the great good fortune to familiarise myself with many of the most ancient wisdom texts available, and brought my ongoing comparative research into geomantic divination worldwide on a more solid historical-philological footing; Michael Witzel and the Department of Sanskrit and Indian Studies, Harvard University, Cambridge MA, USA, for eminently generous involvement in comparative mythology and Asian studies since 2004; to those of my colleagues mentioned *passim* in the text of this paper; and my wife and children, without whose love all my dabbling in exotic wisdom would have left me 'as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal' (St Paul, *1 Corinthians* 13:1). I consider wisdom the privileged domain where knowledges meet, merge and reinforce each other, and by this Christian quote I identify, not as the renegade Christian I have been for over half a century, but as an avid searcher for wisdom.

- new technologies of information and communication, especially the creation of the Internet, which have brought about greatly increased, worldwide access to, communication about, and attempted appropriation of, the wisdom traditions of remote regions and periods
- the above has been an aspect of globalisation (the dramatic reduction of the effects of time and space on contemporary actors), but another aspect has been the erosion of hitherto habitual and moderately comfortable boundaries of knowledge, groups, identities; in reaction, a new, increasingly insistent and violent, politics of identity has emerged, in which new identities and new distinctions proliferate in the face of their apparent annihilation under conditions of globalisation.

The amorphous *New Age* movement is an example of the now worldwide circulation of wisdoms that were earlier far more confined to their original cultural, linguistic and geographical niche. Fundamentalism, Islamism, creationism, are some examples of movements revolving on the retreat within hardening boundaries as a response to boundary- and identity-threatening globalisation. Such movements on the one hand themselves rely on, and seek to militantly, what they consider unique wisdoms; on the other hand, the combination of truth claims with physical and / or ideological violence requires from those not involved in such movements, a new kind of wisdom: dealing with the dilemmas rising from the fact that now, again,² the wisdom of others may take on life-threatening features.

This argument, inchoate and inconclusive as may be expected from a first-draft conference paper meant for a setting unfamiliar to the author, and to incorporate the inspiration from the conference discussions, reflects my grappling with wisdom issues and intercultural epistemology during the past two decades, and especially some of the ideas now being worked out in my book project in progress, *Sangoma science: From ethnography to intercultural ontology: Towards a poetics of the globalising exploration into local spiritualities*.

‘On the way to language’ (Heidegger)

With its emphasis on the ineffable, our workshop title focuses on what cannot be said (was is considered to be too great to be said) in language. Implicitly therefore, this workshop is about the critique and the limitations of language. This is noteworthy in several ways.

In the first place, the production of scholarship, and a fortiori of anthropology, *is production in language* – and even in discursive, written language, usually in one of the few international *linguae francae* of today, especially English. Whatever transformations anthropology as an academic subject may have undergone in the most recent decades, with its obsession with the politics of identity, with Foucault and Deleuze, with multi-sited fieldwork, the relative abhorrence from prolonged, expensive fieldwork in distant places) *anthropology has come*

² Not for the first time, of course. When, exhorted by monks, a Christian mob lynched, among others, the female ‘pagan’ philosopher Hypatia in Alexandria, 4th c. CE, this was a similar case; her image adorns the cover of a book on African women philosophers Sanya Osha and I did a few years ago. Similar cases were also the Crusades, the Inquisition, the genocidal *auto-da-fés* enacted among pre-Christian inhabitants of the New World, the witch craze of the Early Modern Europe, and the witchcraft eradication movements of early 20th-c. sub-Saharan Africa. The violent aspects of the pursuit of (un)wisdom remind us of the close link between belief, language and violence throughout history; also cf. Schroeder 1996. .

into being the art of covering with texts that part of the world that was not already so covered out of its own internal dynamics. Hence there is a marked and crucial contradiction between anthropology and the ineffable. Cf. Vic Turner in his seminal analyses of South Central African symbols, and the Louvain school of Anthropology (e.g. Devisch, De Boeck, Stroeken):³ reconstructing in words, what never was expressed in so many words by the local participants themselves, with all the risks and uncertainties of such an ethnographic attempt.

My own life as a literary and scholarly writer has been predicated on the assumption that nearly everything can be said. Almost obsessively, I have been trying to extend the realm of what has been said – ‘creating history where previously there was none’—but also creating ethnography, description, on the same basis. Inevitably, I hit on contradictions:

- what was effectively expressed in the routinised, globalised discourse of professional anthropology (preferably in an international language, such as English – nearly all my anthropological publications have been in that language), on second thought turned out not to capture the existential thrust of the fieldwork encounters on which it was based, and what was even more regrettable, did not make any sense to my original fieldwork hosts, and could hardly be a source of pride and identity to them
- and what came closer to the latter (e.g. my 1988 novel in Dutch, *Een Buik Openen*, on my first fieldwork in North Africa, 1968; and many of my poems) was, with some exceptions, considered irrelevant to the furtherance of anthropology.

Language increasingly appeared to me as a trap and a danger – as *violence* inflicted on my research hosts, and as utterly unable to express many of the most important aspects of the human experience

The ineffable has been the inevitable and conscious boundary condition of all my fieldwork since the late 1960s. How did it manifest itself? Let me briefly highlight some of the main instances.

Khumiriyya, the highlands of NW Tunisia, North Africa

Here I did research on popular Islam and local social organisation (1968, 1970):

This was my first encounter with peasants’ popular religion (rather similar to the folk Roman Catholicism that, with folk Judaism, had been a major influence during my childhood). The fieldwork took place well before the rise of formal Islamism in the late 1970s, and except in terms of prestige I had little benefit from the Arabic I had studied, for this folk complex was largely illiterate, and millennia-old regional traits (which decades later I was to subsume under the heading of ‘Pelasgian’) blended almost imperceptibly with the stipulations of a much more recent, and alien, formal Islam. I was immensely impressed by the way in which especially the local women, and the male attendants of the formalised, white-washed local domed shrines (many more shrines were only frequented by women – these were mostly megalithic structures dating from the Bronze Age, and I suspect so where largely the

³ I have repeatedly represented and assessed the Louvain School as a commendable and daring, yet risky form of ethnography through introspection; detailed references to appear in the next version of this paper.

attending practices), understood the local landscape, their privileges and obligations as peasants, the shrines and their invisible saints, and the likewise invisible army of جنون *jnūn* ('jinns'), as one coherent and meaningful system for the production and distribution of blessing, *baraka*, thus sanctifying the steep hills and haunted rivulets where I was learning to be an anthropologist. And secondly, a major aspect of the administration of *baraka* was the ecstatic cult of the local *فوقره* *fūqra* ('*feqīrs*'), nominally members of the *قدرية* Qadiriyya brotherhood that is found all over the world of Islam; under the trance-producing music from frame drum and flute, *taballa* and *zūkra*, séances of a varying public nature were stages, in which the faqir entered into trance, summoning the local saint from his tomb, and manipulating thorny cactus leaves, pointed women's claps, and fiery coals and scythes, as a sign of the saint's *baraka*-emanating presence. Just turned 21 years of age, I was impressionable, and I was immensely impressed indeed, successfully joining the *fūqra* at their repeated invitation, experiencing my first trance, opening up my urban eyes to the sacred and meaningful beauty of the countryside, studying pilgrimage practices in much detail, and entering into a lifelong ritual obligation towards the valley saint Sidi Mhemmed, which I have kept up ever since. However, I soon steered away from the original sacred inspiration, by concentrating on a highly formalised, statistical approach to social and religious interaction in this community, allowing myself to be alienated from its wisdom until much of that finds its way into my 1988 novel. Moreover, in order to understand the myriad local shrines within the landscape I had to reconstruct, from scratch, a detailed local history of over twenty agnatic descent groups with their socio-political struggles in the course of two centuries, and while this made me a oral-historian and proto-historian, it meant that the promise of wisdom deriving from this fieldwork remained dormant.

When engaged in this first fieldwork, I was still a very young anthropological apprentice, shy, inexperienced in interviewing and in managing my presence in an alien environment. I had not yet thought about the violence which my incessant emphasis on verbal utterances was imposing on the largely implicit, scarcely ever verbalised world-view of my informants. Although much of my insights came from observation, participation and unobtrusive conversation ('small talk', where my assistant *حسنأوي بن طاهر* *Ḥasnāwi bin Ṭahar* compensated in a masterly way for the extreme limits in my knowledge of local spoken Arabic), I insisted on conducting formal interviews, recording all the utterances verbatim, and exploring (especially with the aid of spun-out hypothetical cases laid before my informants) what the uses and semantic fields were of such basic concepts as *baraka*, *ulī*, *harām*, etc. It was a most unwise approach, largely based on the implicit false assumption of a one-to-one relationship between local emic terms and their ethnographic, etic rendering, and devoid of any awareness of the hegemonic and artefact-producing effects of such a strategy in the field. Going through the myriad ways in which the word *baraka* could be used in everyday local parlance, and persecuting the peasants with ever more refined alternatives put before them to choose between, their complaint was not only boredom and fatigue, but also the reproach that it was as if I believed they were lying about their own cultural knowledge. What little wisdom I ultimately (years later) I managed to thresh out of the experience, came not from verbal utterances but from accepting the lead of one of my key

informants in her enthusiastic exclamations about the local saint in his tomb –
جدودنه ‘our grandfather’.

The Nkoya of South Central Africa (rural W. Zambia and urban Zambia)

Here my research concentrated on ecstatic healing cults (rather in continuation of a line stated in North Africa), kingship, as a indispensable keys to these two topics, the details of an immensely complex implicit kinship system, and local settlement history over an area larger than my (admittedly small) home country. Now leaders in the major ecstatic cults were no longer ‘informants’ but my close fictive kinsmen, and my association with them was to last from early 1972 till today; in the process I became effective member of several villages and kin groups (which in the local system is not a contradiction), adoptive member of a royal family, sponsor of ecstatic ritual, and (after my apprenticeship in Botswana) even an active local diviner and healer. I edited and published the standard Nkoya ethnohistory, also in Nkoya, and was played a certain role in their remarkable ethnic resilience over the decades. I internalised Nkoya language, culture and society to a much greater extent than I had the Khumiri equivalents. Although the Nkoya are small-scale agriculturalists, the main identity especially of the Eastern group (Mashasha) on whom I have concentrated, is that of hunters, and their ties with the land are limited and shifting. Here not the sacralised landscape as the main vehicle of wisdom, as among the Khumiris, and even a trait that never struck me as wisdom in the first place: the framing of *all* primary relationships in the kin group and the local community in terms of an idiom of sorcery – with the attending magical practices of sorcery, and the incessant suspicion of sorcery practices in others. The atmosphere of immense paranoia which this orientation generates (and from which I found it often impossible to shield myself as a fieldworker over the years) lends an edge of bitter doubt and disappointment to even the most intimate and trusted, closest relationships – as I was to painfully experience myself. However, in the several extensive discussions I have devoted to the Nkoya kinship system I have identified sorcery, not as the core of the social process within Nkoya villages and kin groups (also extending into urban contexts), but as a vital boundary condition, within which the riches of care, reciprocity, trans-generational continuity, altruism, self-sacrifice, non-violence, unconditionality, and reticence would thrive without the otherwise damaging effect upon the individual. Considering myself (in ways that are immaterial here) a life-long victim of the North Atlantic kinship system in transition, I have always had the greatest admiration for the Nkoya kin system, and have considered it a locus of great wisdom, and also of personal comfort and signification. Having internalised the Nkoya life-world to a considerable extent over the decades, and having realised the central place which music and dance occupy there, I began to ask more fundamental questions, e.g. if my initial impression was true that *transcendence* – the backbone, I would say, of the North Atlantic experience since Early Modern times – has no proper place in Nkoya life. In their ecstatic cults of the last 100 years and more, such as *Bituma*, *Moba*, *Mwendapanchi*, etc., impersonal spirits of alienness and contagion have largely replaced the ancestral and royal spirits that – to all appearances – were in control of the life-world until late pre-colonial times. They know a creator god, Nyambi (this theonym, with minor phonological variations, is ubiquitous throughout West and Central Africa), but even Nyambi’s gender is undetermined (the Nkoya language knows no gender), Nyambi is not, or no longer, the object of a cult, and (except in the Christian context) very rarely prayed to. The deep forests (where, dozens of kilometres away from the village, big game used to be hunted – or poached, depending on who is speaking – until the 1980s) are considered to testify vocally to the creative presence, glory and beauty of Nyambi, and moreover are the haunts of a unilateral being Mwendanyangula (‘The One Whose Identity is On High’), often conceived as snakelike, and

often difficult to distinguish from Nyambi – but although they are thus epiphanies of the sacred, no further commentary has become available to me over nearly half a century now. Graduating over the decades from an erring young fieldworker to a Nkoya elder and royal, responsible for a recognised treasure of historical and cultural knowledge, I may have succeeded somewhat to afford Nkoya wisdom the informal and largely tacit, yet central place it has in its original context.

The sangoma cult in urban and peri-urban N.E. Botswana

I skip here my experiences, however instructive, as a fieldworker investigating local psychiatric healing methods among the Manjacos of Guinea Bissau (1981, 1982, 1983), and proceed to my third major fieldwork experience, that in the context of urban healing cults in modern Francistown, Botswana. Although my research here was initially conceived in far more secular and sociological terms, my own specialist orientations as an anthropologist of religion; in combination with my professional network involving such colleagues as Richard Werbner, Terence Ranger, Inus Daneel, Matthew Schoffeleers and Renaat Devisch; with the vicissitudes of our urban experiences as a family; and with the peculiar way in which traditional orientations had been forced to go underground in this globalised, commoditified, South-Africa dominated boom town of NE Botswana, meant that I soon came to concentrate especially the *sangoma* ecstatic ancestral cult. Here within a few years (1988-1991) I graduated from being a distressed client seeking redress (in itself not a stance of hegemonic ethnographic detachment), to being an initiated, publicly qualified, certified and even state-recognised ritual leader and diviner. The wisdom proffered in the context of this cult – although much later found to border, as always perhaps, on un wisdom – included the possibilities and strategies of precognition, veridical divination, telekinesis, far-reaching healing capabilities, and the sense of being one of the very scarce (roughly, one in a thousand) living people who had been elected by the ancestors to wield these powers among the living as sign of the ancestors' presence and of being elected by them. Learning to divine means spending weeks on end at the lodge, practicing every afternoon with one's fellow-novices, until coherent readings can be made of the successive falls of the oracular tablets – readings out of which the learning can finally produce a coherent, liberating and healing account of what is wrong with the client, and what can be done to remedy the client's predicament. This, in particular, is the local wisdom which I have propagated, in my writings and as a practising sangoma through face-to-face sessions with African and Europeans, and through the Internet, far outside its original cultural and linguistic niche – while discovering, in the process, that that wisdom was far from originally Southern African but belonged to a very widespread family of geomantic divination systems, whose history and transmission I have since traced in several scholarly studies. However, divining and healing are part of a more comprehensive practice of caring for clients' existential problems, there was a 'bedside manner' to be learned, as well as self-presentation in dancing, ritual, sacrifice, the gathering and administration of herbal medicine, and the intricacies of detecting the influence of the dead in the vicissitudes of the lives of the living. It was a wisdom with limitations – it helped others but not myself when in crisis, and the token remunerations what were extended to me by my spiritual leader, literally, in the form of a big gold nugget, proved fake – a pebble covered with gold paint. Yet I had heard the voice of Mwali, had entered, and been received, and cloaked in a leopard skin where most others had been refused and rejected, and what is more, when I brought to bear my (fortunately unimpaired) scientific methods of objectivity and statistics onto the results I was getting as a diviner, I could only admit that going through the initiation and the preparatory ritual, the sacrifices, donning the uniform etc., enabled me –

much to my surprise – to produce veridical divination, not just once, but invariably, in many dozens of cases....!⁴

The ineffable in fieldwork

In all these three situations, Khumiriyya, the Nkoya, and the *sangomas*, the ineffable in fieldwork manifested itself in the first place by the near-total absence of ‘subtitles’: the local actors were scarcely structuring – at least, not in my presence! – their society and reality in terms of explicit verbalisations, and I had the greatest difficulty (especially during my first fieldwork) to generate texts that seemed to fit their practice and experience. I began to understand why in his analysis of ritual symbolism Victor Turner (doing research in a among the Ndembu Lunda, who were closely related in culture and language to the Nkoya) had to rely so much on his own introspection, on reading between the lines of a non-existent text, and could hardly rely (as would have been sound ethnographic practice) on recorded utterances from his informants; the Louvain School, mainly researching the Northern extensions of the Lunda complex of Central Africa, worked largely on the same principles, and the ethnographic method of ‘speaking like a Yaka’ (Devisch) – where a fieldworker would produce valid ethnographic pronouncements in the vernacular on the basis of the local knowledge gather – much like a non-native speaker may teach the language he has acquired as an adult – , was considered by them not an artefact and anathema, but a privilege and – even after only a few years of fieldwork – a matter of course. Among the *sangomas* very similar handicaps attended the fieldwork – even though by that time I had already graduated from being an ethnographer looking for data, to being an apprentice seeking spiritual enlightenment and spiritual techniques including the four-tablet divination; there was never any explicit elaboration of the underlying principles of the ancestral cult, or of the fixed and named interpretations associated with each of the sixteen (2⁴) basic divination configurations in which the four tablets could fall – the spiritual leader’s non-subtitled example should suffice. This model for knowledge transmission bewildered me, until in the course of my subsequent explorations into Asian proto-historic influences on Africa, and my short spells of actual fieldwork in South Asia and South-East Africa, I recognised that this was very much the model of the *ashram* – one of the many jigsaw pieces of Asian-African continuities gradually into place, ill-prepared as I was for them as an Africanist. More recently I have even been able to identify the very considerable South Asian strands in Nkoya society, culture and occasionally even language, but I have not yet specifically addressed the question as to what such South Asian influence means for Nkoya wisdom.

Anthropology as negotiating the ineffable as it manifests itself as local self-evidence

The shadow – or should I say, the invitation? – of the ineffable hangs over the entire practice of ethnography, especially in the classic, extended-fieldwork-based form⁵ which this form of

⁴ However, this fact or appearance of producing veridical divination, was only brought about under conditions of genuine and *bona fide* practice. I could never *will* to produce specific results – but that is a common outcome in research on the occult and the paranormal, well documented in the abundant literature.

⁵ The last three decades, under the influence of globalisation, the rise of Internet, reduced budgets for prolonged fieldwork, and lessening awareness of the severe limitations of approaching a local life-world in one of the world’s *linguae francae* (which, admittedly, have considerably gained in scope in that period –today one can somehow get by in English even in Indonesia, and France!), we have seen in many ways adulteration of the

intellectual production acquired from the 1930s on (at least in Europe; in the USA, the Boasian School was a bit earlier). As stated above, anthropology is a verbal, textual practice, projected onto human phenomena which are often not, or scarcely, verbal and textual. A central tension derives from the contradiction between

- the prolonged, day-to-day practice of *fieldwork as total social, cultural and linguistic immersion in a local community* (when the acquisition of discursive, cognitive and distancing insights in that local situation is constantly accompanied and guided by a process of mainly implicit social control: the fieldworker publicly displays emulations of local practices which are noticeably approved or disapproved by the fieldwork hosts to the extent to which these emulations give signs of having absorbed and taking into account, or having ignored and rejected, the collective representations which, in that community, produce the self-evident life-world in other words, constitute the ineffable)
- the violent distancing from this day-to-day intercultural interaction, its patterns of obligation, reciprocity and identification, its displays of submission to locally publicly shared representations, values and beliefs, *in the process of the construction of ethnographic text*, meant for circulation outside the host community, and structured by conventions (including choice of language and stylistic register) alien to the host community, and conducive to career objectives and ulterior existential concerns alien to the host community.

My childhood experiences had served to free me from excessive chauvinistic identification with the NW European society and languages in which I was reared, I was a published poet before I became a successful anthropologist, and it was also thanks to the exhortations by my gifted and generous teachers of anthropology in the 1960s (among whom I should mention, in the first place, Douwe Jongmans, André Köbben, and Klaas van der Veen), that I have always tried to conduct my fieldwork in such a way as to let the locally ineffable seep in with maximum effect while in the field, and to salvage as much as possible from that ineffable in my subsequent writing. When the conventions of academic ethnography seemed to thwart that intention, I have used poetry, short stories (notably *Zusters dochters*) a novel (e.g. *Een buik Openen*, on my North African fieldwork), photography and more recently video as media. And failing all that, I have eagerly and wholeheartedly adopted locally available statuses and roles to internalise experience and pay homage to the ineffable I was encountering in fieldwork. Thus I became (but only on one or two occasions) a North African ecstatic faqir dancing to the honour of the local saint Sidi Mhemmed, a Zambian adopted royal, and a Botswana *sangoma* diviner-healer; and these identities – among other ones – I have kept up over the decades, as sources of anchorage, identification, and inspiration in the midst of my North Atlantic urban existence, and as sites of introspection-based ethnographic experiment and increasing understanding.

classic fieldwork model through a number of recent developments, including, *inter alia*, ‘multi-sited’ approaches, Internet searches, commissioned applied research by unqualified researchers, lessening recognition of the local cultural and linguistic specifics of communities and the need to approach them, unobtrusively and humbly, on their own terms. Many European candidates today seeking a doctorate on the basis of their ethnographic fieldwork in distant places, have remained largely incompetent in the local language and the general culture of their host society. I suspect that the situation in the USA is not dramatically different. Needless to say how much I regret these developments – as someone who, in the course of nearly half a century, and at the cost of very considerable effort and existential commitment, has gained local cultural and linguistic competence in three or four local African settings. This, however, is not the place to engage in a critical discussion of this new mode of fieldwork.

The collective representations that are being generated within a specific local cultural context of language, are in the most literal sense *world-creating* – they install the local self-evidences on the basis of which sense phenomena and human utterances are endowed with local meaning. They are therefore the criteria for the generation and the evaluation of truth. There is a cherished (though since the work of Gettier, somewhat dated and to be amended) definition of knowledge as *justified true belief*. Justification may take place on the basis of strictly formal criteria from logic and mathematics, but real justification must be felt to be justified, in other words must be culturally supported in terms of the local self-evidences. Hence truth is inherently tied to local cultural domains, and in principle cannot be affirmed or verified outside the affirmer's or verifier's own truth domain, i.e. outside the latter's culture.

Eminently typical of our contemporary, globalised world is the fragmentation of myriad truth domains (*'truth enclaves'*, we might call them), and the increasingly complex, intolerant and violent struggle between their respective representatives, who tend to be driven by a nostalgic, essentialist assumption of one, all-embracing, all-overriding truth. While we may easily identify globalisation (the shattering of local cultural horizons and of the microcosms contained within them) as the cause of such fragmentation, the relativism that, since the middle of the 20th century, has been anthropology's main contribution to this debate is not a convincing way out. For no matter what the promises the relativism as a theoretical tool, at the level of the thinker's and actor's existence the inevitable self-evidences she or he lives by in a more or less coherent and meaningful world, are inevitable surrounded by a halo of utter and non-negotiable truth – of relativism-defeating self-evidence.

The challenge of wisdom-seeking approaches in our time and age is therefore to both

1. affirm the local truth of the self-evidences constituting local cultural domains, and
2. to find a way to negotiate these local truths into a wider context where they simply cannot be the whole truth and nothing but the truth, yet may be allowed to contribute their modicum of truth to the knowledge heritage of humankind as a whole.

I was educated, over forty years ago, as a specialist in the anthropology of religion, which then already was dominated by Durkheim's work. Here the solution was very simple – so simple as to be both hegemonic, and impotent. All religion was supposed to be a figment of the imagination, its truth claims could only be dismissed, and instead we were facing an interesting charade of *the social* imposing its authority through man-made but divinised symbols. Much of my work in the anthropology of religion followed Durkheim's inspiration but intended to expose the dismissive hegemonic claims accrued to it, and to formulate an alternative. In fieldwork I had communicated – repeatedly, intensely and in a handful of cultural and linguistic settings very different from one another – with local religiously-generated truths, that I allowed to spill over, selectively and situational, into the many non-scientific, non-academic aspects of my life, – even if these truths there turned out to work havoc, risked to destroy my colleague's respect for me, and militate against each other. I felt that supporting these truths was in the last analysis nothing but remaining faithful to the expectations of sociability and reciprocity engendered and utilised in my fieldwork. Religion, then, is not so much about cosmological and metaphysical truths, but about local groups constituting themselves through basically arbitrary symbols, and offering their members the protection and self-esteem of belonging (this is still very much Durkheim). Denouncing these truth would be only too easy, but it would require excessive reliance on one truth enclave (that of North Atlantic / global natural science), and thus shield us off from the majority of humankind; and at the same time, such denouncing would amount to social distancing from

those holding these truth – and, if these were truth acquired in classic anthropological fieldwork, would amount to betrayal of the expectations and practices of sociability via which these truths were acquired in the first place. On the other hand, affirming these truths would put one at the charmed, native level of the simple believer – but would at the same time amount to academic and intellectual suicide.

I have landed with the view that a wisdom approach can offer a way out of these tantalising dilemmas, which, beyond the academic ivory tower, dominate our time and age in that they inform the very real struggles on the ground between the North Atlantic cultural, intellectual, economic and military status quo, and their defiance by militant Islamism and other forms of fundamentalism (including the belief in Intelligent Design, Creationism, the Market, racism, etc.). The way out seems to be this: in stead of the common-sense conception of binary logic which – built around the principle of the *excluded third*, in other words, ‘you cannot have your cake and eat it’ – has dominated our thinking about truth ever since Aristotle, we need a different (more kaleidoscopic, situational and oscillating) conception of truth, and a different ontology – a different conception of how reality is constituted and how we may situate ourselves in reality.

Part of the promise of wisdom as a focus is that *truth enclaves* may not be entirely local and disparate, but that a mode of relevance may be found across several such enclaves. This certainly smacks of New Age, and would not sit well in an academic environment. Yet, if we could spell out the conditions under which the truth of one truth enclave could be received and admitted to be relevant in another truth enclave, it would mean that we would have found truth that does not just apply to one language, one culture but that may be shared by larger sections of humankind, perhaps humankind as a whole.

The dilemma of wisdom is that we tend to find such truths, typically outside what which is culturally and linguistically familiar to us from childhood.

But does this not explode the kind of truth that is being generated by science? That truth is very much based on complex applications of chains of binary logic, and this epistemic foundation seems to guarantee that what is true in one part of the world and one period, is still true in others. The airplane based on sound principles of aerodynamics and engineering, does not just fly properly over the part of the world where modern natural science is accepted and dominant, but also over other parts of the world, where the natural sciences are less known and less accepted. There is a big problem here to be considered. Is science just another truth enclave, from a cultural-relativist perspective at a par with the others – with African systems of magic and divination, with Indian *Tantra*, with a Native American spirit quest? Is it, to use Sandra Harding’s expression, just *an ethnoscience*? Or can it, contrary to these local truths enclaves, lay truth claims that are more comprehensive, – that are, in fact, universal? Most scientists have no time (nor the epistemological background) to grapple with this kind of questions, and simply assume unrivalled universality for what they produce as science – unhindered by the fact that their science of today will be the superstition or pseudoscience of tomorrow. Let us not forget that extispicy (‘divination by reading a sheep’s liver’) and astrology once in Ancient Mesopotamia, four thousand years ago, constituted the first proto-sciences – but today (although astrology was taught at university level well into the Enlightenment) are no longer recognised as being scientific. Modern science, and most epistemologists, are satisfied that natural laws apply invariably and universally, so that miracles cannot exist; yet most defendants of science fail to take into account that the edges of the thinkable and of the scientifically permissible have been stretched immensely with the

revolution in physics through relativity theory and quantum mechanics, a century ago, to such an extent that precognition and prediction now seem to have acquired (notably in the field of *non-locality*) a scientific basis still inconceivable in the deterministic universe of the late 19th century. And, beyond such a theoretical basis *within* science, it is possible that natural laws are temporarily suspended – that also scientific truth can occasionally be seen to apply selectively and kaleidoscopically?

And let us consider the following claims, which are self-evident in some truth enclaves but emphatically dismissed in others:

- the claim that dead ancestors may actively and significantly intervene in the world of their still living descendants – a truth shared in many parts of the world including sub-Saharan Africa and China, but rejected in the North Atlantic especially among the educated classes)
- or the claim (widespread wherever divination is being practiced by ritual specialists) that telepathy, telekinesis and precognition exist to such an extent that it can be demonstrated in the world of the senses

Is it possible that within the truth enclaves where such claims are taken for granted, they are actually and literally true, although with a kind of truth that cannot cross cultural and linguistic boundaries to a truth enclave of non-believers on this points? My extended experiences and practice as a *sangoma*, from 1990 onward, have suggested to me the following tentative answers (which admittedly raise more questions than they can answer!): ancestors do not exist, in the first place, in the sense of autonomous entities capable of intervening in tangible reality; but once a kin group has conceived that they do, and once the group engages in the cult of such ancestors, the ancestors' initial and essential virtuality may transform into a real and tangible presence and power, which can make manifest itself in the empirical world. This sounds, admittedly, as the ravings of a lunatic, yet may begin to account for subjective experience of billions of people in many parts of the world and during many periods. The creative, generative principle implicitly invoked here would be the human mind, and the whole proposition again sourly smacks of New Age, yet we may be tempted to think that, as one of the instances (so far: the only instance documented) in which the universe has become conscious of itself, it would not be unthinkable that the human mind may serve to mediate the inconceivably immense creative and productive of the universe (of God?), and thus may be a catalyst in achieving what we would not give credit for to humans out of their own limited capabilities.

Conclusion: Becoming a spokesman for apparently peripheral wisdoms

I have made it a priority in my scholarly and literary work to seek to mediate (while admitting all the theoretical, methodological and political difficulties) the local wisdoms I have been privileged to encounter in fieldwork, to a worldwide audience, in the first place through ethnographic and intercultural-philosophical texts, but also through pictures, poetry, and especially by repeatedly presenting myself as someone who, although a successful North Atlantic scholar, yet embraces these wisdoms and considers them worthy of global circulation and appropriation. I have considered this an important stance in the global politics of knowledge:

- affirming forms of knowledge that, given the hegemonic and racialist tendencies of North Atlantic knowledge formation over the past few centuries, have tended to be discarded, by mainstream scholarship, as figments of the imagination, mere ideology, the poor man's thought of peripheral populations and peripheral continents
- affirming the extent to which such peripheral knowledges are capable of being formulated in a globally understandable form, and thus to contribute to the sum total of valuable human knowledge
- affirming the extent to which knowledges that have been considered local and peripheral, on closer scrutiny may turn out to be part of a widespread, even worldwide complex – if we are most familiar with the European or North Atlantic manifestations of that complex, that does not mean that it is there that these knowledges originate in the first place
- to free those whose birth-right (as African, Asians, inhabitants of the New World, and of Oceania) in the first place consists in such peripheral knowledges, from the burden of historic irrelevance, and to affirm their place among the uniquely valuable knowledge traditions of humankind

This stance has granted me considerable recognition and esteem among my African colleagues and African intellectuals at large – and the expected punishment and ostracism on the part of my North Atlantic colleagues has been relatively moderate, although certainly not non-existent.⁶

Can one transmit wisdom and at the same time retain it as a personal resource? Can wisdom at all be transmitted across cultural boundaries? The purpose of gatherings like the present one would be defeated if the answer is 'no'. Is perhaps wisdom not so much about contents, but about strategies of transmission and selective representation / acceptance / challenge? The next version of this argument will be clearer on these points, I hope.

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[specific references still to be added to text and footnotes]

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⁶ Thus, after much input during two conferences at Brussels, I was excluded from a book on comprehensive approaches in science and scholarship, subsequently published by Aerts c.s. Also within my home institution (the African Studies Centre, Leiden, the Netherlands, with which I have been associated since early 1977, holding positions of leadership since 1980) some of the last years before my retirement were marred by similar exclusion, although this situation was subsequently redressed and I was made a life Honorary Fellow instead.

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