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UBUNTU AND THE GLOBALISATION OF SOUTHERN AFRICAN THOUGHT AND SOCIETY

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Ubuntu in various Southern African contexts and in a researcher's personal itinerary

Over the past twenty years,[2] *ubuntu* (a word from the Nguni language family, which comprises Zulu, Xhosa, Swati, and Ndebele) and the equivalent Shona word *hunhu* have been explored as viable philosophical concepts in the context of majority rule in South Africa and Zimbabwe. In the hands of academic philosophers, *ubuntu*/ *hunhu* has become a key concept to evoke the unadulterated forms of African social life before the European conquest. The world-view (in other words the values, beliefs, and images) of precolonial Southern Africa is claimed to survive today, more or less, in remote villages and intimate kin relationships, and to constitute an inspiring blue-print for the present and future of social, economic and political life in urban and modern environments, at the very centres of the economy and the political system. It is thus that *ubuntu*/ *hunhu* also serves as a concept in management ideologies in the transitional stages of post-apartheid. How does one manage the contradictions of the post-apartheid situation? That situation comprises: Africa's most viable economy; a highly complex, largely urban and industrial society; an overdeveloped state apparatus originally geared to oppression of the majority of its population; caste-like intra-societal divisions in terms of wealth, education, information, and concrete social power; the newly-gained constitutional equality of all South African citizens; the rising expectations among Black people who have historically been denied the White minority's privileges of class and colour; the majority's simmering resentment, both about past wrongs and about the slowness of present compensations and rewards; a drive among individual Blacks to gain financial and occupational security as quickly as possible; the highest rates of violent crime in the world today; and above all the general traumatisation that comes with having lived under, and having survived, the apartheid state: being forced to realise that no amount of economic gain and political power can erase the permanent damage to the personality through earlier humiliation, oppression, exclusion, and loss – and the desparate question as to what source of wisdom, identity, meaning, salvation could heal such trauma. The contradictions which this combination of traits presents, have been manifest in myriad forms over the past decade. To confront these contradictions by an

effective, factual renewal of social, economic, judicial and political life is a formidable task, that needs new and historically insuspect concepts, new sources of meaning and transformation, among which that of *ubuntu* has been proposed prominently.

The form of the word *ubuntu* (and all equivalent forms in neighbouring languages) is purely productive in the morphological linguistic sense. It is the result of coupling the prefix generating abstract words and concepts (i.e. *ubu-*, in the Nguni languages) to the general root *-ntu* which one and a half centuries ago persuaded the pioneering German linguist Bleek[3] to recognise a large Bantu-speaking family: the entire group of languages, spoken from the Cape to the Sudanic belt, where the root *-ntu* stands for 'human'.[4] Several morphological combinations involving the root *-ntu* are possible in any Bantu language; e.g. in the Nkoya language of western central Zambia, the following forms appear: *shintu* 'human', *muntu* 'a human', *bantu* 'humans, people', *wuntu* 'human-ness, the quality of being human, humanity (as a quality, not as a collective noun denoting all humans)', *kantu* 'Mr Human', *Buntu* 'the country of humankind', etc.

Now, it is only human for such a basic word to have a very wide and internally richly textured semantic field, a vast area of possibilities and implications, out of which in concrete contexts a specific selection is being made, triggered by the juxtapositions which accompany the root *-ntu* (in its specific morphological elaborations) in that context.

Such a semantic field may be mapped out by born speakers of Bantu languages on the basis of their introspection, but it is also open to empirical study by anyone who assesses the characteristics of the various situations in which expressions featuring the root *-ntu* can be overheard.

Thus in the context of ritual in a Southern African village setting without strangers present, *-ntu* will primarily be used in opposition to the non-human visible world of the animal, vegetal and mineral kingdom, and to the invisible world of the supernatural, spirits, ancestors, gods, God. In this cosmological domain, not too much emphasis would be placed (as would be the case in Islam and Christianity) on the differences between *-ntu* and other ontological categories, but instead the essential continuity between these categories would be acknowledged. When a hunter after killing a large animal (lion, elephant) cannot simply return to the village but has to be cleansed first at the village boundary as if he were a murderer, this rule defines both the village as the purified, domesticated domain of the human by contrast to uncontrolled nature, and also the anthropomorphic qualities attributed to the animal in the sense of being capable of taking revenge and requiring propitiation.[5] The notion of supernatural transcendence is only weakly articulated in this Southern African world-view. Hence the difficulty of attributing the inevitable element of decay, death and destruction in human life to a

transcendent divine agency; instead, in a sorcery-based conception of evil, humans tend to be blamed for the negative side of life.

Somewhat contrasting with the cosmological application of *-ntu*, in a socio-legal context, when articulating the nature and degree of a person's transgression of social and religious norms, *-ntu* is likely to be used in order to juxtapose the inhuman, not in the sense of 'being bestial or divine', but in the sense of being 'of humans, but transgressing the scope of humanity'. The latter applies to sorcery; to extreme and uncalled-for violence especially between kinsmen; and to the extreme transgression of codes of conduct which regulate the behaviour between genders and between age groups (blatant disrespect vis-à-vis elders, overburdening under-age children, committing incest and murder etc.). There is a clear link here with the world-view discussed in the preceding paragraph: under such human transgressions, nature is supposed to grind to a halt, life force reduced to a minimum, and as a result crops fail, births stagnate, and death prevails, until the cosmological order is restored by socio-legal-ritual means, by a king if the society as a whole is affected, by a lesser chief or a diviner-priest in cases of more restricted scope. Two ways are open to handle the contradiction between 'human' and 'no-longer-human' under this aspect of *-ntu*: the transgressing person may be coaxed back into the folds of humanity (by means of collective reconciliation, prayers at the ancestral shrine, elaborate admonitions, ritual cleansing, judicial action, payment of a fine), or declared to be hopeless and treated accordingly. In the latter case the return to humanity is ruled out by killing the perpetrator — either by administering the poison ordeal under supervision of a king, chief or diviner-priest, or in the absence or behind the back of these authorities, by lynching. This shows that *-ntu* as a legal category is not infinitely accommodating, not without boundaries: extreme anti-social behaviour is its boundary condition.[6]

Finally, when strangers are part of the social situation in which the concept of *-ntu* is being used, especially in the colonial and postcolonial situation in Africa, *-ntu* invokes *local*, *autochthonous* humanity, by contrast to beings who somatically and historically clearly stand out as *not* autochthonous, and whose very humanity therefore may be called in question, or even denied. The colonial officer, the missionary, the anthropologist, the capitalist farmer, the industrial manager and entrepreneur, for a century or more right up to the to the establishment of Black majority rule in Southern Africa, could never (and would never) aspire to the status of *muntu* in the eyes of the African majority population. In the colonial situation therefore the word *muntu*, or in its plural form *bantu*, emerged, in English and Afrikaans as spoken by the White dominant group, to contemptuously denote African colonial subjects — by opposition to their political, industrial and spiritual, self-styled 'masters', the Whites.[7] 'White *muntu'*, '*muntu*-lover' etc. was a common insult used by Whites against those who, despite European somatic features and

origin, yet transgressed the boundaries of colonial society and identified with Blacks against the perceived, short-term interest of the White colonial presence. For a White person entertaining such *Wahlverwandschaften*[8] with Blacks in the colonial and post-colonial situation, part of her or his struggle for an Africa-oriented self-definition was to be accepted, by African friends, as *muntu*.

> Indeed, I shall never forget how deeply moved I was when, after more than ten *years* of intensive contact with the Nkoya people in the context of anthropological and historical fieldwork in Zambia, one of my close Nkoya friends explained my position to another Nkoya man who, not knowing me personally, was uneasy about my presence in an otherwise fully Nkoya environment. My friend said:
>
> > *Byo, baji muntu, baji kankoya* — 'no, can't you see, he is a [Black] person, he is a Nkoya'

Against this background it was a shock for me to be denied *muntu*-status in the urban, capitalist environment of Francistown, Botswana, and the surrounding Northeast district, a part of Botswana that ever since the late 19th century had been thoroughly exposed to the devastating effects of White monopoly capitalism. There any person having (like me) Dutch as his ethnic identity and mother tongue, was irrevocably[9] a hereditary enemy, a *liburu* ('Boer-thing', *li-* being the prefix reserved for inanimate objects), and could never become a *motho* ('person-human', in the Tswana variant of the *-ntu* root). Being denied person-hood landed me in a depression from which after a few years, thanks to the local treatment that was extended to me, I emerged as a *sangoma*:[10] a local, i.e. African, diviner-spriest, specialist in divination and healing, by public rituals and initiations confirmed in the status of *autochthonous human person*, and moreover, like all traditional religious and therapeutic specialists in Southern Africa, a recognised guardian of the spiritual principles that underlie local society. It is then also that I could realise how much my earlier identity as an investigating, empirical anthropological field-worker, professionally insisting on the otherness of my African research subjects and on my own strangerhood, constituted an ideology of absolute otherness embarrassingly similar to the restricted concept of *muntu / bantu* in the apartheid sense of African colonial subject. It is this insight that made me leave cultural anthropology behind and instead pursue a form of intercultural philosophy where dialogical intersubjectivity is taking the place of scientific objectivation.

This stance informs the peculiar methodology of the present argument. While I do make use of social science insights into the nature of contemporary Southern African societies (including those based on my own research), I will

attempt not to objectify from a scholarly distance; neither to fall in the trap of accepting the codifiers' reifications of *ubuntu* as standard philosophical texts, merely offering philosophical criticism but ignoring the specific sociology of knowledge to which this reification owes its existence and appeal. Instead I shall make a personal participant's contribution to the continuing dialogue on issues of identity, values, and conflict. Recognising the utopian and prophetic nature of the concept of *ubuntu* will allow me to see a vast field of positive application for this concept at the centre of the globalised, urban societies of Southern Africa today. *Ubuntu* philosophy, I will argue, constitutes not a straight-forward *emic* rendering of a pre-existing African philosophy available since times immemorial in the various languages belonging to the Bantu language family. Instead, *ubuntu* philosophy will be argued to amount to a remote *etic* reconstruction, in an alien globalised format, of a set of implied ideas that do inform aspects of village and kin relations in at least many contexts in contemporary Southern Africa; the historical depth of these ideas is difficult to gauge, and their format differs greatly from the academic codifications of *ubuntu*. After highlighting the anatomy of reconciliation, the role of intellectuals, and the globalisation of Southern African society, my argument concludes with an examination of the potential dangers of *ubuntu* as mystifying real conflict, perpetuating resentment (as in the case of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission), and obscuring the excessive pursuit of individual gain. Finally the potential released by *ubuntu* will be brought to bear on this argument itself, in a bid to overcome what otherwise might appear to be merely a stalemate between South and North intellectual production.

Ramose on ubuntu and globalisation

The book *African philosophy through ubuntu* which my friend and former colleague Mogobe Ramose published in Zimbabwe in 1999,[11] is in several respects a remarkable and refreshing contribution to African philosophy. Its background is not (as in most other African philosophy) the societies of West or East Africa but those of Southern Africa; current philosophical work from Africa, Belgium and The Netherlands features among the book's references while the French influence is limited; and the author's specialisation in the field of the philosophy of international relations (instead of metaphysics, classics, or African Studies) is reflected in the book's emphases. The book's final chapter deals with globalisation and *ubuntu*, and here the argument may be summarised as follows. The globalisation process in which the modern world is increasingly drawn, amounts to the ascendance of a market-orientated economic logic of maximalisation, in which the value, dignity, personal safety, even survival of the human person no longer

constitute central concerns. This process is reinforced by the North Atlantic's region's drive for political and cultural hegemony. African societies have suffered greatly in the process, but their lasting value orientation in terms of *ubuntu* holds up an alternative in the sense that it advocates a renewed concern for the human person. This alternative, Ramose argues, is already applied in the peripheral contexts of villages and kin groups in Southern Africa today but is also capable of inspiring the wider world, where it may give a new and profound meaning to the global debate on human rights.

According a declared and recognised Afrocentrist,[12] such a line of argument should be music to my ears. The argument is in line with the recent exhortations toward an African renaissance.[13] The general attitude implied in this position may be summed up as follows:

> 'Africa, which the force of North Atlantic hegemony has for centuries relegated to the periphery of global social, economic, and cultural life, proudly and defiantly declares that it possesses the spiritual resources needed to solve its own problems even though the latter were caused by outside influences — and recommends the same spiritual resources as remedy for the ills of the wider world beyond Africa'.[14]

Ubuntu as a form of African philosophy thus blends in with other potential, imagined or actual gifts of Africa to the wider world: African music and dance, orality and orature, kingship, healing rituals in which trance and divination play major roles, a specific appreciation of time, being and personhood — all of them cultural achievements from which especially the North Atlantic could learn a lot and (to judge by the latter's dominant forms of popular music and dance throughout the twentieth century) is increasingly prepared to learn, in a bid to compensate such spiritual and corporeal limitations and frustrations as may be suspected to hide underneath the North Atlantic's economic, technological, political and military complacency.

Recognising the utopian and prophetic nature of ideology; the dilemmas of deconstruction

We should appreciate such a line of argument as utopian and prophetic.

The word 'utopian' comes from the ancient Greek *ou-*, 'no-', and *topos*, 'place'; it designates the act of evoking an ideal society which is — as yet — nowhere to be found except in the philosopher's blue-print. The production of utopias constitutes a most respectable philosophical tradition: starting with Plato

(whose work described *utopias* in *Timaeus* and *Republic* without using the technical term; and whose treatment of Egypt[15] is often utopian); then Plutarch (whose idealised description of Sparta is decidedly utopian); then via Thomas More's *Utopia*, and via Swift's and Montesquieu's caricatural utopias of the early Enlightenment which were only thinly disguised descriptions of their own times and age, to Engels, Mannheim, Bloch, Buber, Dahrendorf — after which the concept ended up as a cornerstone of intercultural philosophy in the work of Mall.[16]

Less of a recognised philosophical concept is the term 'prophetic', associated as this term is with philosophy's pious twin-sister theology, with the epistemological pitfall of foreknowledge, and with the mystical distancing from rationality.[17] I use 'prophetic' here not in the sense of speaking in the name of[18] God, but as addressing the ills, contradictions and aporias of one's time and age: conditions which one shares with many other members of one's society, which one therefore has felt and grappled with in one's personal life, and which, once articulated in more general terms on that personal basis, are recognised by one's fellow-humans as illuminating, encouraging and empowering.[19] It is this 'prophetic' methodology that largely informs the present argument; the other methodological theme is my conviction that it is pointless to study the contents of a philosophy (such as *ubuntu*) in isolation — *in vitro* — without constant reference to the particular sociology of knowledge by which it came into being and by which it is perpetuated.

Serious problems await the intellectual if she or he fails to perceive utopian and prophetic statements as such, and instead proceeds to an empirical critique as if such statements are meant not primarily to muse and to exhort, but to give a factual description. Let me be allowed a personal example once more:

> As beginning lecturers in sociology at the University of Zambia, in the early 1970s, my colleague Margareth Hall and I were invited by that institution's department of extra-mural studies, to tour the capitals of outlying provinces in order to lecture there on State President Kaunda's contributions to political philosophy and ideology, 'Zambian humanism'[20] — which had become the official philosophy of the country's ruling United National Independent Party (U.N.I.P.). Inexperienced, and still without any real-life understanding of African political and social realities, we fell into the trap of publicly and lengthily critiquing Zambian humanism for presenting a distorted, nostalgic, one-sidedly positive portrayal of South Central African village life in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. The message was jocularly received in Mansa, Luapula Province, where U.N.I.P. had nothing to fear and where the two of us constituted a welcome, though juvenile, intellectual divertimento straight from the national capital. However, things were very different in Mongu. This provincial capital had recently been renamed Western Province to stress the central state's

supremacy after that province had for more than half a century entertained semi-independence as the Barotseland Protectorate.[21] Elections were approaching, Mongu was a stronghold for the opposition, and our visit coincided with a vote-rallying visit of U.N.I.P. leader Fines Bulawayo. In a formidable public speech the latter contested our right, as recently arrived expatriates straight from our European universities, to meddle in local political thought. For weeks we were kept in suspense, fearing to be declared prohibited immigrants, when finally a personal, remarkably appreciative letter from Mr Kaunda himself saved the situation.

Reflection on this Zambian case may help to bring out the dilemmas that attend, thirty years later, the concept of *ubuntu*.

Viewed as a moral and political exhortation and an expression of hope for a better future, *ubuntu* (just like Zambian humanism) creates a moral community, admission to which is not necessarily limited by biological ancestry, nationality, or actual place of residence. To participate in this moral community, therefore, is not a matter of birth-right in the narrower, parochial sense. If birth-right comes in at all, it is the birth-right of any member of the human species to express concern vis-à-vis the conditions under which her or his fellow-humans must live, and to act on that basis.[22] This moral community consists of people sharing a concern for the present and future of a particular local or regional society, seeking to add to the latter's resources, redressing its ills, and searching its conceptual and spiritual repertoire for inspiration, blueprints, models, encouragement in the process. In South Africa this is the programme of the *African renaissance*.[23] Afrocentricity[24] creates another such moral community, focusing not on a particular locality or region, but on the African continent as a whole. The people thus implicated may be expected to identify with each other and to be solidary in the pursuit of their concern. Whoever sets out to publicly deconstruct and even debunk the available conceptual and spiritual repertoire, dissociates from this moral community, rents its fabric, and jeopardises its project. From this perspective, Mr Bulawayo, in the above example, was certainly right; and we can understand how Mr Kaunda was able to save the situation by explicitly (re-)admitting, by his charismatic personal intervention, two young Europeans into this moral community.

Leaving the moral and politically mobilising aspect aside, and speaking at a more detached and abstract plane of analysis, we could say that whoever attempts such deconstruction of ideology is guilty of overlooking the distinction between locutionary (≈ factual), illocutionary (≈ putative) and perlocutionary (≈ persuasive) speech acts — a distinction that ever since Austin has proved so fertile.[25] It is easy to see that Zambian humanism and *ubuntu* are not in the first place factual descriptions. They primarily express the speaker's dreams about norms and practices that allegedly once prevailed in what are now to be considered *peripheral*

places (notably, within the intimacy of allegedly closely-knit villages, urban wards, and kin groups), while the speaker herself or himself is situated at or near the national or global centre. Such dreams about the past and the periphery are articulated, not because the speaker proposes to retire there personally or wishes to exhort other people to take up effective residence there, but because of their inspiring modelling power with regard to central national and even global issues — in other words because of these dreams' alleged persuasive / perlocutionary nature[26] outside the peripheral domain in which they are claimed to originate and to which they refer back.[27]

If, thirty years later, I have much less difficulty in identifying, in my capacity as a social actor in a concrete Southern African setting, with Zambian humanism, and with *ubuntu*, it is because I have enjoyed, for these many years, the (part-time) membership of the kind of local communities by distant reference to these two ideologies have been constructed in the first place. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s I have learned Zambian humanism and *ubuntu*, not so much as a value system spelled out explicitly (although there was that element, too: during court sessions, weddings, initiation rites, funerals), but especially more implicitly: as a diffuse value orientation informing the lives of others more local than I was then myself. I shared their lives as, alternately, they now applied and affirmed, then transgressed and rejected, these values, within the dynamics of conflicting pressures brought about by personal aspirations; by the sociability expected in a village and kin context; by the multiplicity and mutual incompatibility of their various roles and social ties; and by urban and modern goals, incentives and boundary conditions. It was in terms of this very value orientation that I was allowed to share their lives, and despite frequent transgressions both on my part and their own, this admission to their communities has been one of the greatest sources of pride and joy in my life. It is an honour from which I do not wish to dissociate myself permanently by an act of conceptual deconstruction — even though this refusal greatly complicates my life as both an analyst and a participant.[28] This stance has brought me to embrace the status of diviner-priest and to identify with and to vocally represent *Afrocentricity*.

The value orientation of the village and the kin group is not standard in Southern Africa today

The value orientation of the village and the kin group, as sketched above, is not within easy reach of the globalised, urban population that has become standard in Southern Africa. Outside contemporary village contexts, it is only selectively and superficially communicated to the Southern African population at large. Much as I

endorse Ramose's point that Southern Africa has something of great value to offer to the globalised world, we differ with regard to the role we assign to globalisation in this connection. For Ramose, globalisation is an outside phenomenon to be countered by *ubuntu*; I on the contrary argue that both contemporary Southern Africa, and *ubuntu* itself, are among the products of globalisation, and can only be understood as such products.

In the final analysis our two positions will turn out to be much more compatible than this juxtapositions suggests. We simply attach different meanings to *ubuntu*. Playing down the well-established hermeneutical insight that all representation is distortion, Ramose sees in *ubuntu* the value orientation of precolonial Southern African villages, which in his opinion is faithfully rendered in the contemporary academic statements of *ubuntu* philosophy. For Ramose, globalisation, while a world-wide process, in Southern Africa specifically stands for the European, Northern conquest, which has resulted in the large-scale destruction of *ubuntu*-based communities. From this perspective, a revival of *ubuntu* counters the course of Southern African history and is a remedy to the trauma caused by colonisation and by the imposition of capitalist relations of production. I on the other hand see *ubuntu* in the first place as a contemporary academic construct, called forth by the same forces of oppression, economic exploitation, and cultural alienation that have shaped Southern African society over the past two centuries. With Ramose I subsume these forces under the term of globalisation. However, on the basis of an extensive discussion of format I deny the identity between the academic evocation in the form of *ubuntu* philosophy, and the actual value orientation informing precolonial Southern African villages. Therefore, although *ubuntu* philosophy may be able to curb some (certainly not all) of the contemporary traumatic effects of globalisation/conquest, it is a new thing in a globalised format, not a perennial village thing in an authentic format.

Let me elaborate. In South Africa today (and by extension throughout Southern Africa) the established, socially approved and public norm, especially in urban areas, revolves around the emphatic consumption of globally circulating manufactured products; formal education; world religions; formal organisations that structure the state, industry, schools and churches, and civic self-organisation; and notions of authority, causality and truth patterned by constitutional democracy, the Enlightenment, and modern global science. For the Southern African urbanite, especially the urbanite under forty years of age, to fall short of this norm is to admit personal failure, backwardness, rebellion, sin. Of course, this means that, as a result of destructive Northern conquest and the subsequent imposition of colonialism and capitalism, there are hardly any ways left to render the contemporary urban and national situation meaningful in terms of an ancestral local cosmology. Urban consumptivism and cosmopolitanism form the other side of historic trauma.

In such a situation, religious and therapeutic leaders have a number of options open to them: from traditionalist defiance, via a combination of the old and the new,[29] to an emphatic rejection of local historic cultural forms (as among African Independent church leaders — who often however smuggle into their Christian practice historic local elements in disguise). To ordinary people without any religious or therapeutic specialism, the strong pressure of globalisation in the public culture leaves open mainly three strategies to adopt vis-à-vis local historic cultural and religious forms.

The first lay strategy, adequately recorded in the extensive descriptive literature, is that of joining any of the many thousands of Christian churches that have abounded in Southern Africa since the nineteenth century. Here an essentially imported symbolic idiom, often implicitly blended with local historic elements, creates 'a place to feel at home' – a sense of identity and agency largely dependent on the forces of globalisation, yet often capable of restoring dignity.

The second lay strategy, blatantly obvious yet relatively little reflected in the available social-science literature, is to become a 'nominally-local non-initiate'. Today the majority of inhabitants of Southern Africa, and especially of the Republic of South Africa, have been so effectively exposed to globally circulating cultural, productive, reproductive and consumptive models, underpinned by equally global technologies of information and communication (including the printed press, radio, television, the Internet, and globally circulating styles of dress, self-definition, recreation and work), that they are no longer in any direct contact with, have no longer any real competence with regard to, the values, beliefs and images of Southern African village societies. If these non-initiates would wish to tap these resources (and their most likely reason for occasionally doing so would be a profound existential crisis calling for traditional therapy), they have to learn the values, beliefs and images of the village more or less from scratch, as if they were cultural strangers. It is for this reason that the practice of traditional healer in Southern Africa today in large part involves re-education and re-conversion of modernised clients: from nominal locals (who are effectively non-believers in historic African religion) into local initiates who are at least competent at the lay level and who can thus begin to play the role of therapeutic and ritual clients of these ritual specialists. For the same reason the images of traditional life circulating in urban Southern Africa are superficial and stereotyped at best, and often substantially beside the truth.

The third strategy, frequently pursued by moderately globalised persons in Southern Africa today yet only sporadically recorded in the social-science literature, is to submit publicly to the pressures of displaying a globalised modern culture, while in the more hidden niches of life, village forms are allowed to play some part, as long as this part is publicly hidden and dissimulated by the person in

question.

> Thus one can easily be a smartly dressed office clerk pursuing a modern career during the day-time on weekdays, a patron of fashionable cocktail bars after work, and a prominent Christian church elder on most Sundays, spending the rest of the weekend on the construction of a modern house along municipal regulations at some site-and-service residential scheme, while on certain nights in the wee hours one frequents shebeens where alcohol consumption and casual sex are combined with the chanting of ancient songs featuring clans and totems and jokingly challenging those present from other clans, — only to return to the village (at a distance of up to a few hundred kilometres) once a month in order to engage there in ritual obligations imposed by the ancestral and High God cults. The latter activities would be kept completely invisible at the urban scene: one will deny — except before people hailing from the same village — all knowledge of and allegiance to them once back in town. In other words, village cultural and religious forms go into hiding under this strategy — they exist only underground and cannot be publicly articulated within the globalised urban space, given the fact that public culture is largely under the spell of Northern conquest and of the subsequent denial of local historic identity under South African apartheid and Zimbabwean colonialism.[30]
>
> Incidentally, this third strategy, if pursued by intellectuals, is the main source of first-hand knowledge of village conditions as a basis for theorising on *ubuntu.*

Under the circumstances produced by these three strategies combined, the majority of the population of Southern Africa today cannot be properly said to know and to live *ubuntu* by virtue of any continuity with village life. They have to be educated to pursue (under the name of *ubuntu*) a *global and urban reformulation* of village values. And they learn this on the authority, not of traditional diviner-priests to whom one cannot appeal in the globalised space without great personal embarrassment, but of recognised opinion leaders of the globalised centre: politicians, university intellectuals. And the latter can only reach the globalised urban population if — and this is a point we shall have to come back to below — they cast their message in a format that has currency and legitimacy both for themselves and in the globalised space at large. *Ubuntu* as a model of thought therefore had to take on a globalised format in order to be acceptable to the majority of modern Southern Africans.

This brings us to an examination of the format under which the values, beliefs and images informing village and family life are historically produced. But let us first take a closer look at the most obvious context in which the concept of *ubuntu* is being applied, that of reconciliation at the central, urban sectors of post-apartheid South African.

The anatomy of reconciliation and the role of intellectuals in Southern Africa today

As a transformative concept in Southern African large-scale societies recently emerged from devastating armed conflict, *ubuntu*'s general application is in the sphere of reconciliation.

Now, reconciliation is called for whenever two conflicting parties are opposed to one another yet each may be recognised to have substantial reasons to claim that right is on their side; in such a situation (typical of intercultural contexts, when two life worlds, two universes of meaning, confront each other; but not limited to such intercultural contexts) no appeal to legal rules will offer a way out of the impasse, because it is precisely the subjective perception, on both sides, of what is right which has created the impasse. Reconciliation now creatively invents an argument of an higher order, in the light of which both parties may voluntarily let go of their subjective conviction of being right, persuaded by considerations of a higher value which, on second thoughts (and with a considerable amount of inventive prodding on the part of the conciliator) both parties turn out to share. Reconciliation therefore amounts to the active creative redefinition, by conceptual and emotive sleight-of-hand (in other words, the deliberate bending of reality for the sake of the solution of conflict), of a situation which, without such redefinition, could only remain a stale-mate.

This is how conflict settlement seems to work in numerous cases. In African societies, which tend to be incompletely domesticated by formal organisations including the state, interpersonal and intergroup conflict often dominate the social process. The social fabric is woven not out of the avoidance but out of the settlement of conflict, by elaborate social technologies (including litigation, ritual, reconciliation) which — at least at the small-scale and intermediate level — are among the most effective in the world.[31]

Such a model of reconciliation will go a long way towards the identification, and the solution, of the kind of conceptual, legal, religion and moral stale-mates which largely make up the contemporary, globalising, multicultural world. Reconciliation can be produced by sleight-of-hand, by pressing into service a Grand Narrative or Myth, which often has been invented *ad hoc* and which is ultimately performative and illusive.

If parties in a conflict define themselves by some kind of particularism that ties them to a locality, a form of production, gender, age, ethnicity, collective excperience etc., then an appeal to universal mankind would provide the ultimate high-order argument, not just in the case of *ubuntu*, but in all human situations. We must realise that in many other contexts, outside Southern Africa, the appeal to

human-ness or humanity occurs in ways very similar to those proclaimed by *ubuntu.* The very term 'human rights' suggests so much: it defines not primarily — for such would be superfluous — the ontological entities to whom these rights apply (*humans*), but especially the extent of their application: universal, applying to *all* humans.[32]

Where do such effective Grand Narratives come from in the modern world? The term we owe to Lyotard,[33] but it is Foucault[34] who has called our attention to the fact that at least in the North Atlantic region during modern times, the societal legitimation and micropolitical underpinning which used to be provided by religion, since the Renaissance and certainly since the Enlightenment has increasingly derived from scientific knowledge production. First in the North Atlantic, and subsequently (after the colonial conquest and its postcolonial consolidation under U.S.A. hegemony) on a global scale, science has become the main recognised source of truth, morals, rights and justifications. A conciliator seeking to invent a higher-order reason to bring about reconciliation between two parties locked in a stalled argument, could do not better than to appeal to the world of academia, finding there a new argument which the conflictive dialogue between the parties has hitherto overlooked.

The dominance of North Atlantic scholarly, legal and expressive forms, and the commodified formats defined in those contexts (books, articles, Internet documents, videos, movies, CDs etc.) mean that also arguments originating outside the North Atlantic, from a totally different and historically fairly unrelated context, stand a good chance of gaining greater conviction if paraded in the name of global (but effectively, as far as their most recent history is concerned, North Atlantic) scientific knowledge production. It is the irony of many identity constructions and identity claims outside the North Atlantic today, that in order to succeed, in order to be taken seriously by their actual and potential adherents and by others including national and international governmental bodies, they need to be formulated in the academic and commodified format stipulated (even imposed) under North Atlantic hegemony.[35] A familiar technique to sweep under the table the intolerable submission to North Atlantic models which this process entails, consist in playing down the North Atlantic nature of the format, calling it universal or global instead. And it is quite possible that a genuine transformation, a genuine trans-hegemonic redefinition, takes place in the dominant format, once it is successfully appropriated, adapted and improved upon by intellectual and social constructors who are not in or from the North Atlantic. Elsewhere I have explored the global yet North Atlantic positioning of Information and Communication Technology, in the light of its subsequent, fairly successful African appropriation.[36] There I have argued that it is not the denial of

(a) North Atlantic antecedents, nor of
(b) successful African appropriation and enculturation,

but the recognition of the irresolvable polarity, of the tension relationship between (a) and (b), which provides us with a model helping to understand the cultural and political contradictions of the modern, globalised world. Applying the same insight (which I consider fundamental for intercultural philosophy), we could acknowledge the tension between ancestral and global formats and contents in *ubuntu*, without seeking to resolve that tension by opting for either of these complementary poles and denying authenticity and legitimacy to the other pole. Let us now investigate both poles in their own right.

The format of values, beliefs and images informing village and family life

For a proper understanding of the nature and the societal locus of the concept of *ubuntu* in Southern Africa today it is of the greatest importance to appreciate the specific format under which the ideas, beliefs and images informing today's village communities and family situations present themselves. Both as an anthropologist and as a diviner-priest I have familiarised myself somewhat with these formats. In these contexts, the village and family world-view is presented by the people as time-honoured, ancestral, unchanging. But this may be deceptive, after the by now all-too-familiar model of the 'invention of tradition'.[37] All we know for sure is:

- that these values, beliefs and images are propounded *today*,
- that (like any world-view wherever and whenever) they inform people's thought and behaviour *only partially and far from totally*, and
- that even in the remotest places and most intimate, most strongly signified situations these values, beliefs and images are *often confronted with antagonistic pressures deriving from more globalised domains of contemporary Southern Africa.*

Also as ethnographers and analysts we are often brought to project the world-view we encounter during out research, back into the past, at least by a few centuries, perhaps the time of the emergence of the Bantu language family, or even a few further to the invention of agriculture and animal husbandry — the productive basis of the African village. It is especially tempting to see in today's village life an unaltered continuation of the normative patterns governing nineteenth-century villages as peopled by the direct ancestors of present-day villagers.[38] But we could only be reasonably sure of such continuity on the basis of

extensive historical research, which (although frequently conducted and leading to numerous published products, whose enumeration and critique however is beyond the present scope) is severely handicapped by the paucity of vernacular nineteenth-century sources and by the fact that the nineteenth century is sinking below the horizon of living memory and reliable oral tradition. What is more, on theoretical, epistemological and comparative grounds we have to suspect that the Southern African village and the social and normative patterns that governed it, instead of constituting a perennial lived reality, have to some extent been a creation of colonial administration, missionary activities, industrial relations based on labour migration, and social anthropological aggregate description.[39] Anyway, even if it ever were a reality, in the course of the twentieth century the Southern African village increasingly became a myth[40] — not only in the hands of anthropologists, administrators, industrialists and missionaries, but also as re-appropriated, from such alien sources, into African perceptions and expressions of identity and nostalgia — as happened also to the concepts of tribe, ethnicity, and culture.[41] In other words, we cannot be sure that even at the level of late-twentieth-century villages in Southern Africa, the concept of *ubuntu* (or Zambian humanism, for that matter) is more than perlocutionary or illocutionary: constituting not so much the enunciation of an actual practice, but at best a local ideology to which appeal is made whenever actual practice is initiated (e.g. at initiation rites and weddings) or whenever actual practice is argued (in conflict settlement, divination) to stray too far from this ideal. On such occasions, and in line with my general characterisation of reconciliation as presented above, utterances invoking principles of sociability reminiscent of those which Southern African philosophers have summarised under the heading of *ubuntu*, are set in a context of elaborate rhetorical arts in which the available cultural material is presented in a strategic, eclectic, and innovative manner. These verbal elements are often so complex, cryptic, multi-layered and internally contradictory,[42] archaic, and multi-referential,[43] that the socio-ritual events in which they feature produce *implied* meaning (as a vehicle of sociability within the village and the kin group, but also leaving open the possibility of the opposite of sociability) much more than that they articulate *explicit and codifiable* meaning. Traditional religious leaders and therapists (locally called *banganga*, *dingaka*, *basangoma* etc.), as well as village elders, chiefs and the specialists (both women and men) supervising puberty initiation, are the guardians and articulators of this world-view. Their specific ritual, therapeutic, linguistic (cf. proverbs, archaic and honorific expressions, tabooed words), legal and historical knowledge, in the way in which it is socially utilised in its own proper context, is not systematised, not codified. It is oral, vernacular, rambling, situational. It does not exist in the itemised, linearised, generalised, objectified format of discursive academic descriptions whose globally converging format has crystallised out in the

course of the last few millennia, in a context of literacy, the state, formal organisations, world religions, world-wide trade, universalising science, and other globalising tendencies. The embeddedness of the Southern African local specialist knowledge in the day-to-day physical and social environment of the rural community and its productive and reproductive processes lends to the local expressions of this knowledge a tacit meaningfulness, a powerful self-evidence, which is practically impossible to reproduce or even to obliquely indicate or suggest outside this original setting except perhaps — *under a totally different format* — by the elaborate technology of the imagination at the disposal of the novelist and the film-maker. I have never witnessed the technical terms *ubuntu* (or local morphological equivalents) or *Zambian humanism* to be used as a matter of course, of accepted parlance, in these concrete situations of the village and the family. At best they were used as in quasi-quotation, introducing into the vernacular world of the village and the family a stilted (and often somewhat ironical) reference to the outside world of literacy, politics and ideology. These terms do not belong to the format of expression proper to those situations. The *meanings* covered by those terms are admittedly at home in the village and the family but (because of the various perspectives of *-ntu* as discussed in the opening section of this argument, and because of the complex, largely implicit way of expressing local social models as indicated in the present section) this semantic complex cannot be said to be articulated predominantly, let alone exclusively, by reference to various nominal forms of the root *-ntu*.

Ubuntu as a deceptively vernacular term for an etic concept formulated in a globally circulating format

Therefore, to describe the values, beliefs and images at operation at the village and family level as 'the Southern African indigenous philosophy of *ubuntu*' amounts to a rendering (in discursive academic, specifically philosophical, terms which exemplify globally circulating conceptual usage) of ideas that are certainly *implied* in Southern African village practices and ideas but that exist there under different, much more diffuse and situationally varying, linguistic formats. *Ubuntu* in the sense of the conceptual complex which modern exponents of *ubuntu* philosophy claim to exist around that term, is at best a transformative rendering, in a globally mediated, analytical language, of vernacular practices and concepts which are very far from having a one-to-one linguistic correspondence with the phraseology of *ubuntu* philosophy.

Half a century ago the social anthropologist and linguist Pike coined the paired concepts of *emic* and *etic* to capture a similar distinction.[44] The systema-

tisation of *ubuntu* as an alleged indigenous philosophy is an *etic* practice that remotely, analytically and transformingly represents *emic* i.e. vernacular practices that take place in peripheral contexts in present-day Southern Africa, and that in meaning, but not in strict format, may more or less correspond with the explicit, rational, discursive statements as published.

The self-proclaimed experts on *ubuntu* form a globally-informed, Southern African intellectual elite who, remote in place and social practice from the *emic* expressions at the village level which they seek to capture, have officially coined the concept of *ubuntu* as a cornerstone Southern African self-reflexive ethnography.

While the format in which the philosophy of *ubuntu* is cast in contemporary treatises is that of the Western tradition of discursive philosophical argument, these intellectual productions have a more specific ancestry in the spate of writings which, under the general heading of 'African philosophy', have been published by African intellectuals in the second half of the twentieth century CE.

Valentin Mudimbe, a famous analyst and critic of this form of intellectual production, has characterised a major division of such writings (those produced by Roman Catholic or post-Catholic intellectuals with a seminary education) as 'the liberation of difference' — of the difference that speaking in an African voice makes — in the context of the White-dominated emergent intellectual climate of colonial and early post-colonial Africa, under strong North Atlantic cultural and political hegemony.[45] In order to pinpoint the peculiar handling of historic African cultural and religious material in the context of the intellectual genre of 'African philosophy', Mudimbe coined the term *retrodiction* ('speaking backwards'): African clerical intellectuals like Kagame and Mveng are said to have engaged in retrodiction when they reconstructed and vicariously represented a precolonial, pre-Christian African village-based life-world, which they themselves no longer lived nor believed in, and which yet was dear to them as a source of inspiration and pride —, as an identity recaptured in the face of the North Atlantic rejection of Black people and their powers of thought and agency. In these, in majority francophone, attempts to reconstruct, re-appropriate, and assert a philosophical perspective that is Western in format yet is proclaimed to be pre-colonial African in content, historic[46] African thought is depicted as revolving on a human-centred ontology, which African authors and sympathetic European observers[47] already have a century ago habitually cast in terms of the same Bantu-language root *-ntu* that was later, to emerge as the cornerstone of *ubuntu* philosophy.

In Southern Africa the liberation of Black difference through philosophical (as distinct from literary and artistic) production has lagged behind to that in West and East Africa. The adoption of the globally circulating genre of African philosophy by Southern African intellectuals was retarded by the language barrier

between English / Afrikaans on the one hand and French on the other; by the relatively late rise to popularity of African philosophy among anglophone intellectuals (including African intellectuals working or studying there) in the North Atlantic region; and by the general intellectual isolation in which South Africa was shrouded as a result of the international boycott to which the apartheid state was subjected in the 1970s and especially 1980s.[48]

Ubuntu is a tool for transformation in a context of globalisation. As an *etic* rendering in a globally mediated format, it has emerged, and takes its form and contents, in the realities of post-apartheid South Africa today. The concept of humanity is by definition extremely wide, with many different applications in many different specific contexts. Of these, the current use of the concept of *ubuntu* in South African political and management discourse is likely to be restricted to a few eminently 'usable' varieties — usable, not because they betray or deny the past, but because they help to negotiate the future despite the divisiveness of the past and the present. Therefore, looking for the 'true' precolonial or nineteenth-century meaning of *ubuntu* through etymological, ethnographic and historical procedures would be based on a misunderstanding of what *ubuntu* is, and is meant for. Nonetheless, like most ideologies, *ubuntu* is legitimated by the claim (which in principle amounts to a locutionary statement, open to empirical substantiation or falsification) that this concept sums up the ancestral value orientation of the majority of the Southern African globalised urban population today.

In the works of Southern African writers on *ubuntu*, that concept is presented as a major philosophical achievement, as one of Africa's great intellectual and moral contributions to mankind as a whole. Here we should distinguish between two points of view:

(a) the systematic, expert, and loving reconstruction of African systems of thought, and
(b) the view of culture as integrated and unified,[49] as if organised around one alleged key concept artificially raised to star status, in this case the concept of *ubuntu*.

As a long-standing intellectual endeavour of the greatest value, the pursuit of (a) has been, and will continue to be, one of the important tasks of cultural anthropology, African philosophy and intercultural philosophy. This pursuit depends, for its epistemological acceptability, on explicit, collectively underpinned scholarly procedures whose specific nature is critically defined by the disciplinary community of Africanists researchers in continuous debate. In this process the contribution from the part of African researchers and non-academic sages[50] is more and more substantial, and more and more taken into account. The present argument

is a contribution to that endeavour. The current *ubuntu* industry, however, has largely resorted to (b). Distantly, and without recourse to explicit and systematic methodological and empirical procedures, but instead driven by academic philosophers' and management concultants' intuitive linguistic analyses and childhood reminiscences. If *ubuntu* is to be Africa's great gift to the global world of thought, it is primarily not the African villagers' gift, but that of the academic and managerial codifiers who allowed themselves to be distantly and selectively inspired by village life: ignoring the ubiquitous conflicts and contradictions, the oppressive immanence of the world-view, the witchcraft beliefs and accusations, the constraint oscillation between trust and distrust, and merely appropriating and representing the bright side.

Why ubuntu can yet be expected to make a difference

Having said this, the major questions remains: Can *ubuntu* philosophy be expected to bring the positive change advocated in its name? And how would we substantiate our answer to this question?

Statements of *ubuntu* philosophy suggest that, now that the mists of North Atlantic hegemonic subjugation and the ensuing self-censorship have been lifted from the minds of African thinkers, the true African thought can come out in an unadulterated form that, since the urban, modern consumers of such a restated philosophy can largely identify as Africans, will inspire their actions in majority-rule South Africa and Zimbabwe for the better. We have to take considerable distance from this suggestion, without totally dismissing it.

The production of *ubuntu* philosophy is better described in the following terms:

> A regional intellectual elite, largely or totally weaned away from the village and kin contexts to which ubuntu philosophy explicitly refers, employs a globally circulating and in origin primarily North Atlantic format of intellectual production in order to articulate, from a considerable distance, African contents reconstructed by linguistic, ethnographic and other means which are largely unsystematic and intuitive.

'Liberation of Black difference' as an expression is not far from the creation of a moral community of people concerned about the present and future of Southern Africa, which in the opening paragraphs of this argument I identified as the obvious goal of the *ubuntu* philosophy. Since most of the forces that have shaped the societies of contemporary Southern Africa can be subsumed under the heading of globalisation, it stands to reason that an intellectual product meant to overcome the negative effects of these forces has to be global in format, even

though its contents is largely inspired by the local intimacy of village and kin group. If in concrete situations of social transformation and conflict the appeal to *ubuntu* is going to make a positive difference, the global format lends recognition and respectability in ways the original, implicit normative orientation of contemporary Southern African village and kin situation could never claim in an urban, globalised context. In this respect the intellectual exponents of *ubuntu* may be said to have created a potentially powerful tool. Since the tool is to be used exhortatively in Southern African situations that are largely globalised, it does not really matter whether the ethnographic and linguistic underpinnings of *ubuntu* philosophy are empirically and epistemologically impeccable in the way they should be if *ubuntu* philosophy were primarily locutionary (an *etic* restatement of *emic* concepts and agency), instead of an exhortative instrument at the service of modern urban society at large. Being prophetic, *ubuntu* philosophy seeks to address fundamental ills in the make-up of urban, globalised Southern Africa: the social life world of its academic authors. Being utopian, the images of concrete social life featuring in statements of *ubuntu* do not have to correspond to any lived reality anywhere — they are allowed to refer to 'No-Place', and to merely depict, through social imagery, desired changes to be brought about by an application of the precepts contained in *ubuntu*.

How then could *ubuntu*, conjuring up images of a viable and intact village society, be expected to make a difference in the utterly globalised context of urban Southern Africa and its conflict-ridden social, industrial, ethnic, and political scene? Would not the rural reference, because of its obvious irrelevance in the urban globalised context, annul any advantages that may be derived from the globalised format of *ubuntu* philosophy?

I can see at least three reasons to expect considerable success for *ubuntu*.

One reason I take from the analogy with girl's initiation rites in contemporary urban Zambia,[51] a social context that (despite its poverty and defective infrastructure) is in many respects comparable to South Africa and Zimbabwe. Girl's initiation rites are cast in a time-honoured rural idiom revolving on female identity, as underpinned by a detailed knowledge and appreciation of the female body, and a celebration and sacralisation of productive and reproductive capacities, often in forms and with emphasis way out of line with current urban life. One would have expected such rites to decline and disappear, but on the contrary they are only becoming more and more popular, especially among the middle classes: the construction of female identity with powerful, ancient symbols is apparently a lasting, major concern even, or especially, in the face of globalisation. *Ubuntu* could serve an analogous purpose.

In the second place, the symbolic technologies offered by local village-based symbols, concepts and practices, be they girl's initiation, *ubuntu*, or otherwise,

constitute a form of symbolic empowerment for the very people who (in Zambia in the late 1950s, in Southern Africa in the 1970s and 1980s) fought to attain majority rule and cast off the yoke of North Atlantic cultural and symbolic, as well as political, military and economic, dominance. *Ubuntu* offers the appearance of an ancestral model to them that is credible and with which they can identify, regardless of whether these urban, globalised people still observe ancestral codes of conduct — of course in most respects they do not, regardless of whether the ancestral codes are rendered correctly (often they are not).

In the third place, *ubuntu* is especially appealed to when it comes to the settlement of seemingly unsolvable conflicts and insurmountable contradictions — such as massively dominate life in Southern Africa today. Against the background of the anatomy of reconciliation discussed above, *ubuntu*, when appealed to in the modern management of urban and national conflicts, can be effective, but *not* because it summarises the internalised cultural orientations of the Africans involved in such conflict — very far from it, for these Africans are largely globalised in their world-view and practices, and are no more governed by village rules and allegiances than people in similar urban and national arenas in other continents. Despite having rural and small-scale face-to-face relationships as its referent, *ubuntu* can be effective, in the first place because it is appreciated as an African thing, but in the second place and especially because, despite its globally-derived format, it introduces non-global, particularistic and intimate elements in the very heart of Southern African globalisation. *Ubuntu* can work precisely because it is novel, out of place there where it is most appealed to. It allows the conflict regulator to introduce an unexpected perspective to which (for historical, identity and strategic reasons) few parties could afford to say 'no'.

Limitations and dangers of ubuntu

Ubuntu then appears as a lubricant of social relations at the globalised urban centre of contemporary Southern African society, as a *deus ex machina* offering a way out where little else can. If it helps to overcome otherwise insurmountable contradictions, it produces sociability and alleviates tension. It may do so in situations where avoiding or overcoming the manifestation of open conflict is to the benefit of all parties involved.

When in contemporary South African situations of transition an appeal is made to *ubuntu*, this means in the first place an invocation of the fellow-humanity of all involved in the concrete situation at hand. It is a way of saying:

'Admittedly, we have so many things that divide us, in terms of age, gender,

> class, wealth, somatic appearance, cultural style, language, ethnicity, political allegiance; all these identities refer to past experiences which may have been very different and in the course of which the various sets of human beings which make up the present concrete situation may have found themselves in opposite but complementary positions of exploitation, suffering, violence, denial, wrong-doing. It is no use denying these differences and the historical experiences that are tied to them; it is in fact impossible to deny them. Yet, by stressing our common, shared humanity we hope to define a common ground which may help us to find a way out of the impasse which our historical difference have ended us up in.'[52]

So far so good. But we hit here on a theoretical danger of *ubuntu*. Use of this term tempts us to deny all other possibilities of identification between Southern African actors (i.e., fellow-citizens of the same state, fellow-inhabitants of the same *local* space) except at the most abstract, most comprehensive level of mankind as a whole: as fellow human beings. It is as if in a gathering of humans one appeals to the fundamental unity of all vertebrates, or of all animate beings, instead of resorting to the lower, relatively local, and obviously more effectively binding, category of *humans*; or as if one addresses the members of one's family appealing to their shared identity, not as family members, but as fellow-nationals, co-religionists, fellow-Africans, or any other category far wider than the comfortably narrow scope of the family. It is in short the *perplexing* and *demobilising* choice of the wrong level of aggregation. An appeal to *ubuntu* implies that the speaker can see no other grounds for identification between the locals involved in a given Southern African situation, than their belonging to mankind at large (including the inhabitants of Patagonia, the ancient Mesopotamians, probably even the Neanderthals), thus implicitly taking for real and insurmountable the divisions of class, somatic appearance, ethnicity, language, gender, religious denomination and political affiliation that – once grotesquely emphasised under the apartheid and colonial state – still enter into any concrete social situation in Southern Africa. Appealing, in any Southern African gathering of local citizens, members of the same local community, the same polity, speaking the same *linguae francae*, having lived through the same traumatic experience of apartheid, enjoying the same benefit of South Africa's restored esteem and economic hegemony among the nations of Africa and the world — appealing, in such a context, merely to a shared humanity, amounts to denying, in effect, the entire moral, historical, informational and cultural *local* basis out of which any nation-state consists, even a traumatised and globalised one like South Africa.

Moreover, I fear that *ubuntu* would also serve as a lubricant or a pacifier (in the child-care sense) in situations where conflict is real and should not be obscured by smothering it under a blanket of mutually recognised humanity of the parties

involved. I shall briefly discuss two such instances: the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (T.R.C.), and continuing class conflict after the attainment of majority rule.

Probably the most widely advertised public application of the concept of *ubuntu* (although the concept itself remained largely implicit in that context) was that of the T.R.C., which reviewed the crimes against humanity perpetrated under apartheid, and offered the perpetrators re-acceptance into the new South African society at no greater personal cost than admission of guilt and offering of apologies. Here *ubuntu*, from a quality that a person could have or have not, obtained a relational dimension: it became something that one could generously extend to those who had shown to have too little of it. The semantic field of *ubuntu* came to include *'the perpetrator's restored personhood as granted by the very individual they wronged.'* Underlying this is a concept of reconciliation that is profoundly Christian. It can be no accident that no traditional diviner-priests (guardians of the ancestral world-view) participated in the T.R.C. context, where they could have articulated historic Southern African viewpoints on evil, sin, i.e. not only the possibility *but also the limitations* of expiation. In the absence of such experts, the concept of *ubuntu* was to supply what little traditional guidance was allowed to inform the situation. The Black African population of South Africa, having been immensely wronged by White people with a European background, was in the end not even free to define the terms under which it would be prepared to leave this past behind them, and to include regional historic elements of an African culture of justice and expiation among these terms; no, even the terms of reconciliation had to be set by European and White dominance — even if this dominance had the amicable, integrity-exuding, and unmistakably Black face of Archbischop Tutu. The T.R.C., and the occasional appeal to *ubuntu*in that connexion, conveyed the suggestion that unconditional forgiveness and cleansing merely on the basis of a verbal admission of guilt is part of the Southern African ancestral cultural heritage, and who has ever heard of an appeal being made against an ancestral cultural heritage? Such an appeal would place one, to repeat my earlier expression, outside the moral community which the T.R.C. proceedings tried to create and reinforce at all costs. But, as we have seen above when discussing *-ntu* under its socio-legal aspect, it may be misleading to suggest that a Roman-Anglican Christian model of confession and absolution epitomises the ancient Southern African world-view as subsumed under the concept of *ubuntu.* The perpetrators of atrocities under the apartheid state might qualify as sorcerers and might have been treated accordingly. For such treatment a number of precepts are available, ranging from capital punishment to re-admission into the folds of humanity, but the latter at far greater personal costs than just a verbal admission of guilt. This is one major example of how under contemporary conditions *ubuntu* is pressed into service at

the centre of national political affairs, in mystifying ways that deny or pervert time-honoured African values, under the pretence of articulating those very values. In years to come South African society may yet have to pay the price for the massive and manipulative repression of resentment and anger caused by the historically questionable use of *ubuntu* in the context of the T.R.C.

Something similar can be seen in the handling of *ubuntu* in the context of continuing and acerbating class conflict in Southern Africa today. The transformation of Zimbabwe after 1980, and that of South Africa after 1990, has involved a massive reshuffle of social, economic and political power. In both countries, the White-Black contradiction that dominated the decades before majority rule, has resulted in the overthrow of White supremacy, but in most other respects the fundamental relations of inequality were not radically confronted: those between town and country, between land-owners and the landless, between middle classes and the urban poor, between men and women, between the educated and the non-educated, and between the middle-aged and the young. Here *ubuntu* often does serve as a liberating, empowering and identity-building transformative concept in the hands of those who wish to build the country. But it may also be wielded as a mystifying concept in the hands of those who, after the post-apartheid reshuffle, were able to personally cross over to the privileged side of the huge class divide, without being over-sensitive to the wider social costs of their individual economic and status advancement. This process is widely noticeable in South Africa today. It is what people euphemistically call the Africanisation of that country's economic and public sphere. In such a situation of post-apartheid class formation, Africans with widely different access to power resources increasingly confront each other in conflict over scarce resources within industry, formal organisations, neighbourhood affairs, politics. It there not the danger here of *ubuntu* being turned into a populistic, mystifying ideology, dissimulating the real class conflict at hand, and persuading the more powerless Blacks involved to yield to the more powerful ones as soon as the latter wave the flag of *ubuntu?* The newly emerging Black elite seem to be saying to their opponents:

> 'How could you, our fellow-Africans, possibly question our decisions? We are merely applying, in yours interest as well as in ours, our most cherished common African ancestral heritage, our *ubuntu*!…[53]

For a Black South African already dropping out of the process of material self-advancement in the post-apartheid era, calling the bluff of such manipulative usage of *ubuntu* would only be asking for further marginalisation. Thus the concept emphatically meant for the restoration of identity and for re-empowerment, risks to be deployed against the very people whose ancestral culture it seeks to celebrate.

With a crime rate that is by far the highest in the world, post-apartheid South Africa needs, in addition to the sociability of *ubuntu*, more factual, locutionary, and urban-based tools of self-redress — including a profound commitment to class analysis and gender analysis; an admittance that certain contradictions are simply too real to smother under expressions of sociability and populism; a positive appreciation of legitimate force, even violence (if truly monopolised by a truly democratic state), in the creation and maintenance of socially essential boundaries — boundaries that protect the values they enclose, instead of excluding a majority of people from partaking of those values; and a sustained reflection on the dangers of repressed anger, resentment, and grief.

Without the further elaboration stipulated in the previous paragraph, *ubuntu* runs the risk of sinking back to the semantic field where the kindred words *muntu* and *bantu* (as well as the originally Arabic *kaffir*, 'infidel') were situated for many decades in South Africa under apartheid: pejorative expressions for financially robbed, easily exploitable, legally unprotected, socially excluded and mentally broken Black subject-hood.

> That *ubuntu* carries, in principle, the potential of referring, not to the liberation of Black African difference but to its subjugation to White class interests, and by extension to elite interests in general, became clear to me when in 1999, as a member of a team further comprising Mogobe Ramose, Vernie February and the local Roman Catholic pastor, we interviewed a village elder in a rural district about 60 km north of Pretoria. A straight-forward translation of the (Nguni) concept of *ubuntu* was impeded by the fact that the conversation was conducted in the Tswana language (where *ubuntu* translates as *botho*). Expecting to trigger, with our magical concept, a full indigenous philosophical account on local values of human-ness, this unmistakable 'sage' utterly failed to oblige, and instead treated us to a long and shocking story on the history of his village throughout the twentieth century — a history in which *bantu*-hood (for that is another, obvious meaning of the word *ubuntu*) was clearly conceived, in the apartheid sense, as the experience of suffering at the hands of local White self-styled landowners.

This is a usage of the root *-ntu* that was explicitly acknowledged in the beginning of this paper when setting out that root's semantic field. I suspect that this meaning continues to adhere, marginally and implicitly, even to the most transformative, liberating usage of *ubuntu* in modern urban Southern Africa, as an ironical reminder that this concept carries, in the best dialectic (Marx) or deconstructive (Derrida) traditions, the seeds of its own opposite or denial. We must not underrate such a concept's rhetorical and manipulative potential, also for

mystification and not only for positive exhortation.

In the light of these moral, humanitarian and political concerns, I may be justified in presenting this critical argument. Probably for some exponents of *ubuntu* this criticism will expel me, after all, from the moral community for whose creation *ubuntu* philosophy was intended in the first place. Such an expulsion may not entirely be in the spirit of the concept of *ubuntu*. Perhaps a moral community constructed, with some explicable success, by *ubuntu*, is not the only moral community that Southern Africa needs in these difficult times. In addition to the entrancing (and often deceptively vulnerable, manipulable and ephemeral) communities created by the articulation of identity, invented tradition, and common humanity, it is no shame to also aspire to membership of the moral community that (in the best radical, Marxist tradition of South African intellectual life) sees the intellectual discharge of solidarity in the expression of social contradictions, and not in their dissimulation.

Conclusion: The vindication of ubuntu *as an escape from violence*

However, if I would conclude my argument at this point it would defeat its whole purpose. Certainly, African philosophers theorising about *ubuntu* invite academic criticism simply by their very choice of adopting an academic, globalised format of expression. I have offered such criticism in good faith. However, in conclusion it is imperative to make explicit, and to neutralise, a number of fundamental dangers, and, if possible, to nip a number of possible misunderstandings in the bud.

Has the purpose of my argument been to humiliate my African colleagues and friends, an arrogant exercise in *Besserwissen* (‘narrow-minded and fanatical ‘’knowing better’’ ’), with me going at length to reduce to a specific sociology of globalised knowledge the position of the academic authors of *ubuntu* philosophy, whilst at the same time protraying my own knowledge production as informed by timeless, universal scientifically underpinned truth? If that had been my intention I would commit a great injustice, considering the fact that *ubuntu*, while being an academic philosophy emulating a globalised format, is in the first place born out of pain, exclusion, justified anger, and the struggle to regain dignity and identity in the face of Northern conquest and oppression. When I situated the total transformation of Southern African societies under White domination, the need to produce *ubuntu*, and the production of *ubuntu* itself, in a context of globalisation, this globalisation was clearly not a neutral process (not the myth of universal limitless access propagated by liberal proponents of globalisation) but a form of violence. Surely one does not help erase the effects of such violence by an argument that boils down to more violence from the North, and leave it at that.

One cannot present elements of an anatomy of reconciliation (like I did above) yet end the argument in a formidable contradiction between Southern theoreticians of *ubuntu* on the one hand, and me as a Northern critic on the other. Therefore let us go one step further, and admit the amazing similarities that exist between these two parties. The reader has been looking in on a frank, dogged, at times heated conversation between members of the same family, who have grown up without totally casting off the irritations they caused in each other when still children, yet know that they are irrevocably inseparable, produced by a shared history. If the format of the *ubuntu* philosophy *(and of all African philosophy, for that matter)* is globalised and alien to the village and kinship matters it tries to explicate – so is the format of the present argument, of intercultural philosophy, and of ethnography. The same paradox applies to both sides: that of being at the same time inevitably and fundamentally distortive, and yet constituting a serious and valuable interpretation carried by the quest for integrity. If the relationship between the theoreticians of *ubuntu*, and the peripheral situations they try to represent, are distant, strained, contradictory, vicarious, yet intimate and legitimate – so is the relationship between the present writer and the communities of Southern African communities of which he is a part-time member. If globalisation produced Southern African intellectuals including the theoreticians of *ubuntu*, so it produced social anthropologists and caused them to insert themselves into Southern African peripheral communities. If the production of *ubuntu* philosophy is prophetic and utopian, so – as I admitted explicitly above – is my own stance in this argument. If the theoreticians of *ubuntu* produce a Grand Narrative, so are other Grand Narratives hovering over my own side of the argument: the idea that scientific ethnography produces valid knowledge, and the idea that one can place oneself outside the course of hegemonic history by identifying closely with the peripheral victims of that history. If the theoreticians of *ubuntu* readily oscillate between perlocutionary blueprints and locutionary factual description of village and family situations, so do I oscillate between on the one hand an hermeneutical reading of my own predicaments as a post-ethnographer, and on the other (vis-à-vis the *ubuntu* theoreticians) a critical stance that cannot possibly be hermeneutical but amounts to ideological critique. The precarious nature of the relationship between *ubuntu* theoreticians and Southern African villages has everything to do with the history of Northern violence and cultural destruction, which has produced globalised African intellectuals but at the double cost of expelling them from a local home of meaningfulness, and of nearly destroying these homes anyway. For a European professional anthropologist, becoming a Southern African diviner-priest, as well as becoming the adoptive son of king Kahare Kabambi of the Nkoya people (my two main credentials when– however uncertainly and inconvincingly – posing as more or less of a local to Southern African affairs), manifest the same

commitment to countering the course of Southern African history as is at the root of *ubuntu* philosophy.

The point is not whether my part-time membership of Southern African peripheral communities has created a setting where, through the skilful application of the professional empirical procedures of state-of-the-art ethnography, more valid knowledge is being produced than by the introspection, childhood memories, linguistic reflection and occasional rural visits of the theoreticians of *ubuntu*. On the contrary, the very idea of such superiority would mean that we are still blind to the power implications of launching, and contesting, *ubuntu*. Claiming an ethnographically underpinned superior insight simply means yet more Northern violence, inviting Southern counter-violence. The point is that any social situation in which one truly, existentially takes part, breeds through the experience of such participation a subjective reality from which one cannot and will not distance oneself. My 'insights' into the peripheral Southern African situations that I have lived intensively and for a long time, are inescapably true to me, not because I applied state-of-the-art ethnographic techniques in those settings and therefore feel (but are not) justified to lay claim to epistemologically validated truth for my ethnographic pronouncements – no, they are (subjectively) true in the first place *because they are me*, because I constitute myself as a person on the basis of those experiences, because I am not in the least prepared to suffer the self-destruction that a relative stance vis-à-vis these experiences would entail. Exactly the same mechanism informs the situation of the *ubuntu* theoreticians: their pronouncements on the essential African village before, or outside the reach of, Northern destruction are true, not for procedural epistemological reasons but because such pronouncements sum up an uncompromisible personal identity constituted out of the experiences of exclusion, humiliation, anger and contestation.

It is not mutually exclusive, monopolistic claims to truth and sanity (and the attending responses in terms of ideological critique, and psychoanalysis), but differences of interests,[54] that divide the participants in this argument's conversation on *ubuntu.* And these interests are not primarily academic status and honour, nor struggles over the right to officiate on African philosophy, nor struggles over a birthright, but *the interest of not being destroyed by the implications of the other's self-construction.*

If I am not mistaken, *ubuntu* contains an effective precept for the management of such interests: the secret of the village headman's skill who, while lacking all formal sanctions, yet through the imaginative power of reconciliation manages to safeguard the conflicting interests of the members of his little community, without destoying any of them. But those who have lived Southern African village life, also know that these subtle and eminently constructive skills often go unappreciated when running counter to the individual village members'

short-term self-interests, and then a rumour of sorcery readily attaches to the incumbent of the headmanship.

Ultimately, then, this conversation about ubuntu *revolves on the question of how to avoid or domesticate violence*: the violence that is produced by text (the texts of African philosophy, intercultural philosophy, Africanist ethnography); the violence that is produced by representation (by intellectuals, of aspects of human life that are lost to them or that never were theirs in the first place); the violence that is produced by the formal organisation (of academic disciplines, their validity-underpinning epistemological procedures, and the built-in rivalry between their members; of the colonial state; of the capitalist economy); the violence that is produced by globalisation as a vehicle of all the above. Seen in this light, the concept of *ubuntu* is historically determined to constitute a bone of contention, to remind us of past violence and to lead us into new violence, until we realise that above all *ubuntu* is the invitation to confront this determination and, together, rise above such violence. Only then can our work, on or about *ubuntu*, benefit the poor and powerless people of Southern Africa, with whom the theoreticians of *ubuntu* clearly identify even more than I do.

Notes

[1] The ethnographic passages in the present paper are largely based on my anthropological and historical fieldwork in Zambia and Botswana, with extensions to Zimbabwe and South-Africa, since 1971, for which I owe acknowledgments to: my family; to my African friends and relatives participating in these researches; to the African Studies Centre, Leiden, The Netherlands; the Trust Fund, Erasmus University, Rotterdam, The Netherlands; the University of Zambia; the Ministry of Lands, Local Government and Housing, Botswana; the University of Durban-Westville, South Africa; the Human Sciences Research Council, South Africa. For the present paper I am indebted to Pieter Boele van Hensbroek, Vernie February, Mogobe Ramose, Simon Simonse, Marleen Ramsey, and the participants in the inspiring conference in *African Renaisance and Ubuntu Philosophy* held in May 2001 at the University of Groningen where the first version of this paper was presented; and finally to the members of the department of the Philosophy of Man and Culture (Erasmus University Rotterdam), as well as to Renaat Devisch, Peter Crossman, and Koen Stroeken (Africa Research Centre, Louvain), for illuminating criticism of later versions.

[2] The earliest publication on *ubuntu* known to me is: Samkange, S., & Samkange, T.M., 1980, *Hunhuism or ubuntuism: A Zimbabwe indigenous political philosophy*, Salisbury [Harare] : Graham. Further see: Bhengu, M.J., 1996, *Ubuntu: The essence of democracy*, Cape Town: Novalis; Khanyile, E., 1990, *Education, culture and the role of Ubuntu* (*non vidi)*; Khoza, R., 1994. *African humanism*. Ekhaya Promotions: Diepkloof Extension SA ; Louw, D.J., n.d. [1997] , 'Ubuntu: An African assessment of the religious order', http://www.bu.edu/wcp/Papers/Afri/AfriLouw.htm; Makhudu, N., 1993, 'Cultivating a climate of co-operation through ubuntu', *Enterprise*, 68: 40-41; Mbigi, L., 1992, 'Unhu or Ubuntu: The basis for effective HR

management', *Peoples Dynamics*, October 1992: 20-26; Mbigi, L., 1996, *Ubuntu: The African dream in management*, Randburg (S.A.): Knowledge Resources, second impression; Mbigi, L., & Maree, J., 1995, *Ubuntu: The spirit of African transformation management*, Randburg: Knowledge Resources; Prinsloo, E.D., 1996, 'The Ubuntu style of Participatory Management', in: Malherbe, J.G., ed., *Decolonizing the mind: Proceedings of the 2nd colloquium on Afican philosophy held at the University of South Africa*, October 1995, Pretoria: Unisa, pp. 112-122; Prinsloo, E.D., 1998, 'Ubuntu culture and participatory management', in: Coetzee, P.H., & Roux, A.P.J., 1998, eds., *The African philosophy reader*, London: Routledge, pp. 41-50; Ramose, M.B., 1999, *African philosophy through ubuntu*, Avondele (Harare): Mond.

[3] Bleek W., 1851, *De nominum generibus linguarum Africae australis, copticae, semiticarum aliarumque sexualium*, Ph.D. thesis, Bonn University

[4] There are indications that the root *-ntu*, and its semantic field, are not really unique to Bantu languages. In Proto-Austronesian i.e. Malayo-Polynesian languages an essentially similar root, *taw*, appears with the same meaning 'human'; cf. Adelaar, S., 1994, 'Asian roots of the Malagasy: A linguistic perspective', paper presented at the congress on Malagasy cultural identity from the Asian perspective, Leiden, 28-29 March 1994, conference meanwhile published by the International Institute for Asian Studies, Leiden. It is quite possible that we have another cognate, in the Indo-European domain, in the root **endh*, 'low' 'turned towards the earth', which has been argued to underlie ancient Greek *anthropos* and *Athena*; and which incidentally we may also suspect under the Germanic words *under / unter / onder*. Cf Ode, A.W.M., 1927, 'Reflexe von ''Tabu'' und ''Noa'' in den Indogermanischen Sprachen', *Mededelingen der Koninklijke Akademie van Wetenschappen*, afd. Letterkunde, 63, A, 3: 73-100.

[5] This is the situation among the Nkoya and throughout South Central Africa; cf. Marks, S., 1976, *Large mammals and a brave people*, Seattle/ London: University of Washington Press.

[6] van Binsbergen, W.M.J., 2001, 'Witchcraft in modern Africa as virtualised boundary conditions of the kinship order', in : Bond, G.C., & Ciekawy, D.M., eds., *Witchcraft dialogues: Anthropological and philosophical exchanges*, pp. 212-263, also at: http://come.to/african_religion; van Binsbergen, W.M.J., 1981, *Religious Change in Zambia: Exploratory studies*, London/Boston: Kegan Paul International, esp. ch. 4.

[7] Cf. Branford, J., with W. Branford, 1991, *A dictionary of South African English*, 4th edition, Cape Town: Oxford University Press, reprint of 1st ed. of 1978, p. 208, s.v. *munt(u)*: 'An offensive mode of reference to a black person.'

[8] Goethe: 'identifications not by blood but by choice'.

[9] Much to my surprise. In line with the general public view of domestic history held in The Netherlands in the second half of the twentieth century CE, I took it that the ancestors of the South African Afrikaanders or Boers parted company with their European brothers in the seventeenth and eighteenth century, then in the nineteenth century changed their language into a version of Dutch that is no longer commonly understood in The Netherlands, and finally in the twentieth century committed crimes against humanity that for the two reasons mentioned no longer deserve to be associated with the ethnonym Dutch, and that the Dutch of The Netherlands could not be held collectively responsible for. But this was a slightly naïve and anachronistic view. It did not do justice to the factual, and many-sided, linguistic, intellectual, religious, political and demographic continuity between Afrikaanders and European Dutch until the middle of the twentieth century — a continuity that was in line with racialist attitudes prevailing in The Netherlands' Asian and South American colonies right until their end. This

embarrassing continuity only came to be denied as far as the past is concerned, and to be felt as a source of embarrassment and therefore to be effectively terminated in the present, as a result of critical reflection on the atrocities of apartheid, from the 1960s onwards, when I was only a secondary school and university student.

[10] van Binsbergen, W.M.J., 1991, 'Becoming a sangoma: Religious anthropological field-work in Francistown, Botswana', *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 21, 4: 309-344; van Binsbergen, W.M.J., 1998, 'Sangoma in Nederland: Over integriteit in interculturele bemiddeling', in: Elias, M., & Reis, R., eds., *Getuigen ondanks zichzelf: Voor Jan-Matthijs Schoffeleers bij zijn zeventigste verjaardag*, Maastricht: Shaker, pp. 1-29; English version: 'Sangoma in the Netherlands: On integrity in intercultural mediation', both texts at: http://come.to/african_religion, and greatly revised version forthcoming in my book *Intercultural encounters*. The same problematic is also discussed within the wider framework of intercultural philosophy in: van Binsbergen, W.M.J., 1999, *'Culturen bestaan niet': Het onderzoek van interculturaliteit als een openbreken van vanzelfsprekendheden*, inaugural lecture, chair of intercultural philosophy, Erasmus University Rotterdam, Rotterdam: Rotterdamse Filosofische Studies; English version 'Cultures do not exist': Exploding self-evidences in the investigation of interculturality', paper read at the 'Seminar on culture and globalisation', Human Sciences Research Council, Pretoria, 21st April, 1999; revised version in *Quest — Philosophical Discussions: An International African Journal of Philosophy*. Vol. XIII, no. 1-2, 1999; also at http://come.to/van_binsbergen.

[11] Ramose, *o.c.*

[12] Amselle, J.-L., 2001, *Branchements: Anthropologie de l'universalité des cultures*, Paris: Flammarion, p. 109; Obenga, T., 2001, *Le sens de la lutte contre l'afrocentrisme eurocentrisme*, Gif-sur-Yvette (Cedex)/ Paris: Khepera/ L'Harmattan, p. 23; van Binsbergen, W.M.J., 2000, 'Le point de vue de Wim van Binsbergen', in: 'Autour d'un livre. Afrocentrisme, de Stephen Howe, et Afrocentrismes: L'histoire des Africains entre Egypte et Amérique, de Jean-Pierre chrétien [*sic*] , François-Xavier Fauvelle-Aymar et Claude-Hélène Perrot (dir.), par Mohamed Mbodj, Jean Copans et Wim van Binsbergen', *Politique africaine*, no. 79, octobre 2000, pp. 175-180; W.M.J. van Binsbergen, 2000, 'Dans le troisième millénaire avec Black Athena?', in: Fauvelle-Aymar, F.-X., Chrétien, J.-P., & Perrot, C.-H., *Afrocentrismes: L'histoire des Africains entre Égypte et Amérique*, Paris: Karthala, pp. 127-150; my pieces as cited in this note also at: http://come.to/black_athena.

[13] Cf. Mbeki, G., 1999, 'Towards the African renaissance', in: Hadland, A., & J. Rantao, *The life and times of Thabo Mbeki*, Rivonia (S.A.): Zebra/Southern/New Holland Struik; Mr Mbeki here allowed himself to be inspired by Afrocentrist ideas first formulated by Diop in one of his first published articles: Diop C. A., 1948, 'Quand pourra-t-on parler d'une Renaissance africaine ?', *Le Musée vivant*, n° 36-37, novembre, pp. 57-65; translated in: Diop , C.A., 1996, *Towards the African renaissance: Essays in African culture & development 1946-1960*, tr. from the French by E.P. Modum, London: Karnak House, pp. 33-45.

[14] This again is not a quotation but my own vicarious attempt at making the implied argument explicit.

[15] Froidefond, C., 1971, *Le mirage égyptien dans la littérature grecque d'Homère à Aristote*, Paris: Ophrys.

[16] Cf. Bloch, E., 1973, *Geist der Utopie*, Frankfurt a/M.: Suhrkamp, first published 1923; Buber, M., 1950, *Pfade in Utopia*, Heidelberg: Schneider; Dahrendorf, R., 1957, *Soziale Klassen und Klassenkonflikt in der modernen Gesellschaft*, Stuttgart: Enke, ch. entitled 'Pfade aus Utopia';

Engels, F., 1947, *Herr Eugen Dühring's revolution in science*, Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, first published 1888; Hommes, U., 1973-1974, 'Utopie,' in: Krings, H., Baumgartner, H.M., & Wild, C., eds., *Handbuch Philosophischer Grundbegriffe*, Studienausgabe, München: Kösel, vol. vi, pp. 1571ff ; Mall, R.A., 1995, *Philosophie im Vergleich der Kulturen: Interkulturelle Philosophie, eine neue Orientierung*, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft (where the 'localisingly placeless' — *orthaft ortlos*, p. 78 — plays a central part); Mannheim, K., 1936, *Ideology and utopia: An introduction to the sociology of knowledge*, New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, originally published as *Ideologie und Utopie*, Bonn: Cohen, 1929.

[17] Prophetism scarcely enters into philosophical discourse. In epistemology it may be occasionally — e.g. in medieval Jewish philosophy (cf. Rudavsky, T., 2000, 'The Jewish contribution to medieval philosophical theology', in: Quinn, P.L., & Taliaferro, C., eds., *A companion to the philosophy of religion*, Malden / Oxford: Blackwell, pp. 95-102, first published 1997, p. 101) — invoked as a boundary condition for the knowledge and agency attributed to a supreme being. However, cf. Derrida, J., & Vattimo, G., 1996, *La religion*, Paris/ Rome: Seuil/ Laterza, where Derrida in his contribution does stress messianic and prophetic traits.

[18] By its ancient Greek etymology, prophetism consists in '[officially] speaking on behalf of'. It embodies the herald's role to which, throughout the Ancient World, special sacredness and sanctuary attached; cf. Kristensen, W.B., 1966, 'De goddelijke heraut en het woord van God', in his *Godsdiensten in de oude wereld*, Utrecht/Antwerpen: Spectrum, 2nd ed, pp. 127-148, the first edition was entitled *Verzamelde bijdragen tot kennis van de antieke godsdiensten*. It is the very act of such representation and mediation that is almost universally recognised as sacred, even regardless of the divine, royal or hieratic nature of party on whose behalf is being spoken. Intercultural philosophers and ethnographers should pay the greatest attention to this cultural formatting of what is, after all, also their own role. Intercultural philosophy and ethnography are, at best, prophetic commitments.

[19] For such an approach to prophetism, developed in relation to twentieth century prophets (Mupumani, Tomo Nyirenda alias Mwana Lesa, Alice Lenshina) proclaiming radical transformations of historic African religion in Zambia, cf. my *Religious Change*, *o.c.* The underlying philosophical theory would be Marxist, as throughout that book; also cf. Torrance, J., 1995, *Karl Marx's theory of ideas*, Cambridge / Paris: Cambridge University Press / Editions de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme. In recent philosophy, similar ideas were taken up by Foucault's archaeological method, which seeks to identify, as part of a philosophically underpinned history of ideas not without Marxist inspiration, the internal relations between discursive elements without recourse to actors' explicit intentions and representations. Foucault, M., 1969, *L'Archéologie du savoir*, Paris: Gallimard, Engl. version *The archaeology of knowledge*, New York: Harper Torchbooks, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith, 1972. Ironically, Foucault's later 'genealogical' attempt to accommodate *change* in this perspective, made him stress contingency at the expense of the (Marxist- and structuralist-inspired) structural, systematic and hence repetitive correspondences between society and person on which my view of prophethood depends. Part of the irony is that here he shows himself a die-hard historian, member of a discipline that has always defended, as its hallmark, as 'properly historical', an emphasis on contingency in the face of historicising social scientists like myself; another part is that even such a disciplinary sense of *esprit de corps* has not prevented Foucault from being widely regarded as a great and innovative mind but a bad

historian. Also cf. chs 1 and 2 of *Religious change*, for a further elaboration of this problematic in the context of spirit possession and mediumship, and of the possibility of a macro-sociological theory of religious change.

[20] Cf. Kaunda, K., 1966, *A Humanist in Africa*, London: Longman; Kaunda, K.D., n.d. [1971] , *Humanism in Zambia: And a guide to its implementation*, Lusaka: Government Printer; Dillon-Malone, C., 1989, *Zambian humanism, religion and social morality*, Mission Press, Ndola, Zambia; Van Binsbergen, W.M.J., & M.E. Hall, 1972, 'A seminar on Zambian humanism and modernization', Department of Sociology/ Department of Extramural Studies, University of Zambia, mimeo, 18 pp.

[21] Caplan, G. L., 1970, *The elites of Barotseland, 1878-1969*, London: Hurst.

[22] Incidentally, the inclusive principle identified is part of the Southern African normative system at the village level, where for instance every adult has the obligation, but also the right, to guard over the interests of all children, regardless of the specific genealogical ties between adult and child.

[23] Cf. Mbeki, G., 1999, 'Towards the African renaissance', in: Hadland, A., & J. Rantao, *The life and times of Thabo Mbeki*, Rivonia (South Africa): Zebra/ Southern/ New Holland Struik; Mr Mbeki here allowed himself to be inspired by Afrocentrist ideas first formulated by Diop in one of his first published articles: Diop, C.A., 1948, 'Quand pourra-t-on parler d'une Renaissance africaine ?', *Le Musée vivant*, no. 36-37, novembre, pp. 57-65, translated in: Diop, C.A., 1996, *Towards the African renaissance: Essays in African culture & development 1946-1960*, tr. from the French by E.P. Modum, London: Karnak House, pp. 33-45; the latter book has circulated widely in South Africa.

[24] Seminal Afrocentrist writings include (also cf. previous note): Diop, C.A., 1955, *Nations nègres et culture: de l'antiquité nègre-égyptienne aux problèmes culturels de l'Afrique noire d'aujourd'hui*, Paris: Presence Africaine, 2nd ed., first published 1954; Diop C.A., 1959, *L'unite culturelle de l'Afrique noire: Domaines du patriarcat et du matriarcat dans l'Antiquite classique*, Paris: Présence africaine; Asante M.K., 1982, 'Afrocentricity and Culture', in : Asante, M.K., & Asante, K.W., eds, *African culture*, Trenton, Africa World Press, pp. 3ff; Asante M.K., 1987, *The Afrocentric idea*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press; Obenga, T., 1990, *La philosophie africaine de la periode pharaonique: 2780-330 avant notre ère*, Paris: L'Harmattan; Obenga, T., 1995, *Cheikh Anta Diop, Volney et le Sphinx: Contribution de Cheikh Anta Diop à l'historiographie mondiale*, Paris: Présence africaine. For well-documented but largely dismissive critical assessments, cf. Fauvelle, F.-X., 1996, *L'Afrique de Cheikh Anta Diop*, Paris: Karthala; Fauvelle-Aymar, F.-X., Chrétien, J.-P., & Perrot, C.-H., 2000, eds., *Afrocentrismes: L'histoire des Africains entre Égypte et Amérique*, Paris: Karthala, English tr. in preparation; Howe, S., 1999, *Afrocentrism: Mythical pasts and imagined homes*, London/ New York: Verso, first published 1998. Also cf. note 12 above.

[25] Austin, J.L., 1962, *How to do things with words*, Oxford: Oxford University Press. For an up-to-date review of this perspective, cf. Avramides, A., 1999, 'Intention and convention', in: Hale, B., & Wright, C., 1999, eds., *A companion to the philosophy of language*, Oxford: Blackwell, first published 1997, pp. 60-86, and references cited there.

[26] Peter Crossmann, in a personal comment, wondered whether such concepts as Austin derived from ordinary English-language use, reflecting the very specific syntactics of expressing modability in that language, could appropriately be applied to languages way out of the Indo-European language family, like those of the Bantu language family, whose syntax is very different. The question implies a specific application of the Whorf-Sapir thesis, according to

which it is language that structures our image of reality. However, in this specific case the problem does not arise, since both Zambian humanism and *ubuntu* philosophy are originally expressed in the English language.

[27] I happen to have other capacities, e.g. as North Atlantic university professor, philosopher, citizen, in which the unconditional identification with *ubuntu* and *Zambian humanism* is more problematic.

[28] Extensively on this point: my *'Culturen bestaan niet' / 'Cultures do not exist, o.c.*

[29] Like the case I described for the urban *sangomas*: representing a traditionalising ritual idiom in an urban context which not only is thoroughly globalised and commodified, but whose modern and globalised features also penetrate the very texture of the *sangomas'* everyday life and ritual practice; cf. van Binsbergen, W.M.J., in the press, ''We are in this for the money': Commodification and the *sangoma* cult of Southern Africa', in: Geschiere, P.L., & van Binsbergen, W.M.J., *Commodification: Things, agency, and identities (Social Life of Things revisited)*, Durham: Duke University Press; this paper was read at the conference 'Commodification and identities', Amsterdam: WOTRO programme 'Globalization and the construction of communal identities', 12 June, 1999; also at http://come.to/african_religion.

[30] I have expressed this view of Southern African 'traditional' culture as going underground in a number of articles, e.g. van Binsbergen, W.M.J., 1993, 'Making sense of urban space in Francistown, Botswana', in: P.J.M. Nas, ed., *Urban symbolism*, Leiden: Brill, Studies in Human Societies, volume 8, pp. 184-228; van Binsbergen, W.M.J., 1993, 'African Independent churches and the state in Botswana', in M. Bax & A. de Koster, eds., *Power and prayer: Essays on Religion and politics*, CentREPOL-VU Studies 2, Amsterdam: VU University Press, pp. 24-56. The latter article also at: http://come.to/african_religion.

[31] van Binsbergen, W.M.J., 1997, 'Verzoening: Perspectieven vanuit de culturele antropologie van Afrika', *In de marge: Tijdschrift voor levensbeschouwing en wetenschap*, theme issue on 'verzoening' (reconciliation), 6, 4: 28-39; English version: van Binsbergen, W.M.J., 1999, 'Reconciliation: A major African social technology of shared and recognised humanity (ubuntu)', paper read at the 'Seminar on culture and globalisation', Human Sciences Research Council, Pretoria, 21st April, 1999, forthcoming in my *Intercultural encounters*; also http://come.to/african_religion.

[32] The literature on human rights is vast. E.g. cf.: Renteln, A.D., 1985, 'The unanswered challenge of relativism and the consequences for human rights', in: *Human Rights Quarterly* 7, iv: 514-540; Scholze, W., 1992, 'Human rights between universalism and relativism', *Quest — Philosophical Discussions: An International African Journal of Philosophy*, 6, 1; Meron, T., 1991, *Human rights and humanitarian norms as customary law*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, paperback reprint of the first 1989 edition; and from a more general philosophical perspective: Monroe, K.R., 1996, *The heart of altruism: Perceptions of a common humanity*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

[33] Lyotard, J.-F., 1979, *La condition postmoderne: Rapport sur le savoir*, Paris: Editions de Minuit.

[34] Foucault, M., 1963, *Naissance de la clinique: Une archéologie du regard medical*, Presses Universitaires de France, trans. A. Sheridan: *The birth of the clinic: An archaeology of medical perception* (New York: Vintage, 1973); Foucault, M., 1975, *Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la prison*, Gallimard: Paris, Engl. transl.: *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison*, London, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1987. Also cf. *L'Archéologie du savoir, o.c.*

[35] There is an alternative, however, that has become more and more articulate in the most recent

years. In the final quarter of the twentieth century, as a result of a number of factors (the international oil crisis, Khomeyny's Iranian revolution, the massive intercontinental migration of Muslims to the North Atlantic, and the demise of international communism), Islam has emerged on a global scale as the main viable alternative, the main challenge, of the North Atlantic claim to cultural, economic, military, technological and spiritual hegemony. The Palestinian conflict, the Gulf War, the attacks on New York and Washington of 11th September 2001, the subsequent Afghanistan war, are among the manifestations of this challenge and counter-challenge. This is the background of the continued rapid expansion of Islam in Africa today — even though Africans have suffered under Muslim and Christian hands alike in previous centuries.

[36] van Binsbergen, W.M.J., 2002, 'ICT vanuit intercultureel perspectief: Een Afrikaanse verkenning', in: de Mul, J., 2002, ed., *Filosofie in cyberspace: Reflecties op de informatie- en communicatietechnologie*, Kampen: Klement, pp. 88-115; English version forthcoming in my: *Intercultural encounters*; also on: http://come.to/van_binsbergen.

[37] Hobsbawn, E., & Ranger, T.O., 1983, eds, *The invention of tradition*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[38] Given the great geographical mobility of most African social forms, the location of the nineteenth-century ancestral villages is unlikely to coincide narrowly with the villages, if any, of their descendants in the late 20th and early 21st centuries.

[39] Ranger, T.O., 1983, 'The invention of tradition in colonial Africa', in: *The invention of tradition*, *o.c.*

[40] van Binsbergen, W.M.J., 1998, 'Globalization and virtuality: Analytical problems posed by the contemporary transformation of African societies', in: Meyer, B., & Geschiere, P., eds., *Globalization and identity: Dialectics of flow and closure*, Oxford: Blackwell, pp. 273-303, also at: http://come.to/van_binsbergen; my 'Witchcraft in modern Africa', *o.c.*

[41] Ranger, T.O., 1982, 'Race and tribe in Southern Africa: European ideas and African acceptance', in: Ross, R., ed., *Race and colonialism*, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, pp. 121-42; my *'Culturen bestaan niet'*, *o.c.*

[42] My critique of *ubuntu* amounts to the allegation that academic codifications of local knowledge after a globally circulating format tend to streamline, linealise and rationalise that knowledge almost beyond recognition. The point can be generalised to include the entire industry, so fashionable since the 1980s and so nicely financed by donor organisations and the UNESCO, that concentrates on capturing 'indigenous knowledge systems' and brings the product of such capture into global circulation, allegedly in order to save such knowledge from extinction but in fact producing the opposite result.

[43] In ways exemplarily studied in the works of such anthropologists of religion as Victor Turner, Jim Fernandez, Richard Werbner, and Renaat Devisch; cf. Turner, V.W., 1967, *The forest of symbols: Aspects of Ndembu ritual*, Ithaca (N.Y.): Cornell University Press; Turner, V.W., 1968, *The drums of affliction: A study of religious processes among the Ndembu of Zambia*, London: Oxford University Press; Turner, V.W., 1969, *The ritual process*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul; Fernandez, J.W., 1982, *Bwiti: An ethnography of the religious imagination in Africa*, Princeton: Princeton University Press; Werbner, R.P., 1989, *Ritual passage sacred journey: The process and organization of religious movement*, Washington/ Manchester: Smithsonian Institution Press/ Manchester University Press; Devisch, R., 1984, *Se recréer femme: Manipulation sémantique d'une situation d'infécondité chez les Yaka*, Berlin: Reimer; Devisch, R., 1993, *Weaving the threads of life: The Khita gyn-eco-logical healing cult among*

the Yaka, Chicago/ London: Chicago University Press.

[44] Pike, K.L., 1954, *Language in relation to a unified theory of the structure of human behavior*, vol. 1. Glendale: Summer Institute of Linguistics; cf. Headland, T.N., Pike, K.L., & Harris, M., 1990, eds., *Emics and etics: The insider/outsider debate*, Frontiers of Anthropology no. 7, Newbury Park/ London/ New Delhi: Sage, with an interesting short contribution by one of today's most famous philosophers: Quine, W.V., 1990, 'The phoneme's long shadow', in: Headland c.s., *o.c.*, pp. 164-167. Also cf. the extensive discussion of this pair of concepts in my *'Culturen bestaan niet', o.c.*

[45] Mudimbe, V.Y., 1997, *Tales of faith: Religion as political performance in Central Africa: Jordan Lectures 1993*, London & Atlantic Highlands: Athlone Press; cf. van Binsbergen, W.M.J., 2001, 'An incomprehensible miracle': Central African clerical intellectualism and African historic religion: A close reading of Valentin Mudimbe's *Tales of Faith*, paper, School of Oriental and African Studies, 1st February 2001, also on: http://come.to/african_religion.

[46] I use this word as an alternative to the worn-out term 'traditional' (which yet occasionally filters into my prose), and more or less as a synonym of 'pre-colonial', 'autochthonous', 'pre-globalisation', 'pre-world-religion'. What is *not* meant by 'historic' here is: 'the *emic* representation of local history'.

[47] Cf. Eboussi Boulaga, F., 1968, 'Le Bantou Problematique,' *Presence Africain*e, no. 66; Eboussi Boulaga, F., 1977, *La crise du muntu: Authenticité africaine et philosophie*, Paris: Présence africaine; Jahn, J., 1958, *Muntu: Umrisse der neoafrikanische Kultur*, Düsseldorf/ Köln: Diederichs; Kagame, A., 1955, *La philosophie bantu-rwandaise de l'Etre*, Bruxelles: Académie royale des Sciences coloniales; Tempels, P., 1955, *Bantoe-filosofie*, Antwerpen: De Sikkel.

[48] Needless to add that this international boycott was otherwise highly beneficial in the sense of conducive to the end of minority rule.

[49] For a critique of this notion, cf. my *'Culturen bestaan niet', o.c.*, and references cited there.

[50] On the role which some African philosophers attribute to the sage (as distinct from the religious and therapeutic specialist) in African philosophy, cf. Oruka, H.O., 1990, ed., *Sage philosophy: Indigenous thinkers and modern debate on African philosophy*, Leiden: Brill; for a critical note, cf. my *'Culturen bestaan niet'*.

[51] Rasing, T., 1995, *Passing on the rites of passage: Girls' initiation rites in the context of an urban Roman Catholic community on the Zambian Copperbelt*, Leiden/ London: African Studies Centre/ Avebury; Rasing, T., 2001, *The bush burned the stones remain: Women's initiation and globalization in Zambia*, Ph.D. thesis, Erasmus University Rotterdam; Hamburg/ Muenster: LIT Verlag; my 'Virtuality as a key concept', o.c.; van Binsbergen, W.M.J., 1987, 'De schaduw waar je niet overheen mag stappen: Een westers onderzoeker op het Nkoja meisjesfeest', in: van Binsbergen, W.M.J., & Doornbos, M.R., eds., *Afrika in spiegelbeeld*, Haarlem: In de Knipscheer, pp. 139-182, English version at http://come.to/ african_religion, and forthcoming in my *Intercultural encounters*.

[52] This again is not a quotation but my own vicarious attempt at making the implied argument explicit.

[53] As previous note.

[54] Cf. Habermas, J., 1970, 'Gadamers *Wahrheit und Methode'*, in: Habermas, J., *Zur Logik der Sozialwissenschaften*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, pp. 251-290.