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*‘An incomprehensible miracle’ – Central African clerical intellectualism versus African historic religion: a close reading of Valentin Mudimbe’s Tales of Faith**

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Tales of Faith is also, and perhaps mainly, about an incomprehensible miracle – that is, an extraordinary event in the world. These lectures constitute an invitation to meditate on my composite narrative, which contemplates difficult statements that are contradictory in their effects and, in any case, unbelievable for the agnostic that I am (Mudimbe 1997: 202).

To Patricia Saegerman, my beloved wife, born in Stanleyville, Belgian Congo

ABSTRACT *This piece seeks to address Mudimbe as one of the great creative cosmopolitan minds of our times. The abundance of autobiographical detail in his oeuvre allows me to situate him in a particular social and intellectual context. I read his oeuvre as a sustained attempt at autobiographical self-definition. I concentrate on Mudimbe’s Tales of Faith (1997), and show this book to be an intellectual and spiritual autobiography disguised as a detached history of ideas of Central African intellectuals and their work and aftermath in the twentieth century. I look at Mudimbe from two different perspectives: the historical and anthropological study of Central African religion as an established academic sub-discipline (which he virtually ignores), and African historic religion (which does not play a role either in his personal self-construction). I will be very critical, mainly because the fundamental issues of Africa and of African studies today manifest themselves around Mudimbe as a central and emblematic figure. After identifying and discussing Mudimbe’s discursive methods as essentially poetical (under the guise of modern philosophy) I shall try to pinpoint what Tales of*

* An earlier version of this paper was read at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), London, 1st February, 2001, as the opening lecture in a series of four, entitled ‘Reading Mudimbe’, organised by Louis Brenner and Kai Kresse. I am grateful to the organisers for creating a stimulating framework in which I could articulate and refine my thoughts about Mudimbe’s work; to the African Studies Centre, Leiden, and to SOAS for financing my trip to London, and to Patricia Saegerman, Louis Brenner, Kai Kresse, Richard Fardon, Graham Furniss, and other participants in the seminar for stimulating comments on an earlier draft.

Faith is about (*i.e.* the adventure of clerical intellectualism in Central Africa during the twentieth century), what meta-contents it contains (*i.e.* homelessness as Mudimbe's central predicament), and what all this means for the practice and the study of African historic religion, the uninvited guest of *Tales of Faith* and of Mudimbe's work in general. This will allow me to critique Mudimbe's quest for universalism which, in my opinion, seduces him to court the very European hegemonism he of all people has so clearly exposed, and to ignore such a way out of his predicament as the cultivation of an African identity and of African historic religion might have offered him. Finally, I will compare Mudimbe's itinerary with my own; our two paths will turn out to have been amazingly parallel even if they appear to have ended in opposite destinations.

1. Introduction

Born in 1941 in the former Belgian Congo (subsequently Zaire and Congo), and now holding appointments at Stanford and Duke in the United States, as well as being Chair of the Board of the International African Institute, London, Mudimbe is one of the leading Africanist scholars of our time. His large oeuvre spans the fields of *belles lettres* (poetry and novels), philosophical essays, classical philology, the history of ideas, and edited works assessing the state of the art in African studies especially philosophy and anthropology. In Africanist circles he is probably best known for two books which trace the political and intellectual trajectory of concepts of Africa from Antiquity to the late twentieth century: *The Invention of Africa*, and *The Idea of Africa* (Mudimbe 1988, 1994a). There is no way in which, in the scope of the present argument, I can begin to do justice to what is clearly one of the great creative cosmopolitan minds, and one of the great intellectual and literary oeuvres, of our times. I have to substantially narrow down the scope of my argument, and I will do so on the basis of a number of related considerations. In this opening seminar, I think it is fair to situate Mudimbe in a particular social and intellectual context, and this is not difficult since his publications abound with salient autobiographical detail – not to say that his entire oeuvre may be read as a sustained attempt at autobiographical self-definition.¹ One of his latest books, *Tales of Faith* (1997)² happens to be an intellectual and spiritual autobiography disguised as a detached history of ideas of Central African intellectuals and their work and aftermath in the twentieth century:

Here, in concluding what is more a reflection on myself than strict research on African representations of *Tales of Faith*, I discover that I personally witness to these tales. The fact that I might not believe in God or in some kind of divine

¹ Unfortunately, I have not yet been able to consult his explicitly autobiographical book: Mudimbe 1994b.

² *Tales of Faith* was originally delivered as a series of lectures, the Louis H. Jordan Lectures in Comparative Religion, at the School of Oriental and African Studies in 1993.

spirit has not prevented me from facing with sympathy the complexity of their fate and modalities of their cultural appropriations. In fact, the language I speak, the phenomena I comment upon, and the stories I have chosen to share in these lectures on conversion are, indeed, not only unthinkable outside of a space circumscribed by African elements but also well determined by anthropology and the colonial saga, as well as the practices and missionizing of Islam and Christianity. Thus, *Tales of Faith* is about any post-colonial individual (Mudimbe 1997: 198).

The study of Central African religion has for decades been my own main contribution to African studies. I will therefore eventually link up the discussion of Mudimbe's work with my own, towards the end of this article. I will concentrate on *Tales of Faith*, but connecting as much as possible to the rest of Mudimbe's work, and to his person, to the extent this transpires in the published texts. I will be very critical, not out of lack of respect and admiration, but because the fundamental issues of Africa and of African studies today manifest themselves around Mudimbe as a central and emblematic figure, and we need to bring out those issues. After discussing Mudimbe's surprising methods I shall pinpoint what *Tales of Faith* is about (the adventure of clerical intellectualism in Central Africa during the twentieth century), what metacontents it contains (homelessness as Mudimbe's central predicament), and what all this means for the practice and the study of African historic religion,³ the uninvited guest of *Tales of Faith* and of Mudimbe's work in general. This gives me the opportunity to articulate and substantiate what I have wanted to say about Mudimbe's work for a long time. I will also take the opportunity of comparing his itinerary with my own, and our two paths will turn out to have been amazingly parallel even if they appear to have ended in opposite destinations.

2. *Mudimbe's method in 'Tales of Faith'*

These lectures are presented as stories of faith and adventure in intercultural problematics, created by the expansion of Christianity to Africa. [. . .] From the outset I like to make it clear that I am concerned with how representations of religious systems bind, fuse or oppose each other in synthetic discourses which, at a different level, might transmute into metadiscourses, such as those represented by histories of Christianity and Islam (Mudimbe 1997: ix).

When we try to pinpoint the method by which Mudimbe constructs his texts, the first thing that meets the eye is that his method is kaleidoscopic and eclectic. In *Tales of Faith*, his approach is alternately

³ I prefer the expression 'African historic religion' to alternatives such as 'African traditional religion' or 'African religion' *tout court*, in order to denote forms of religious expression which existed on the African continent more or less independently from and often prior to the penetration of such world religions as Islam and Christianity, and which have persisted in changed but recognisable form into the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when many of these forms were drawn into the orbit of professional outsider description. The word 'traditional' has been used in so many ideologically charged contexts as to have become meaningless; and Islam and Christianity have ranked among the religious forms of Africa ever since the first millennium of the common era.

- definitional (especially the first chapter, where he seeks to define religion);
- autobiographical (*passim*, and especially parts of chapter 2, where he most convincingly evokes and clarifies the micropolitics of Central African education for the priesthood in the middle of the twentieth century by reference to his own trajectory through this education (Mudimbe 1997: 50–55); micropolitics is here taken in the Foucaultian sense of the instilling, in individual minds through the construction and manipulation of small-scale interaction situations, of the preconditions for submission to, or for the hegemony of, a macro-level system of domination, such as (in this case) the colonial state and the Roman Catholic church (Foucault 1975);
- exercises in the field of the history of ideas (especially in the second and third chapter, where he explains the processes through which, in African-based ethnotheology and philosophy during the twentieth century, the *liberation of difference* was effected within the seedbed of missionary Roman Catholicism);
- critical, in the narrowly described manner of the *book review* neatly summarising, situating and appraising one or more specific items of academic or literary production within the limited space and with the limited ambitions of a published book review;
- deliberately and explicitly hagiographic, in his treatment of Jean Ishaku and of Alexis Kagame;
- philosophical, when he seeks to articulate difference, identity, knowledge and representation in the context of his Central African historical narrative.

It is important to realise what this methodological strategy positively amounts to, and what it does *not* comprise:

In the first place I must make one general point which I will reelaborate throughout this paper. The kaleidoscopic effect of the intertwined use of various genres, the frequent lapses into autobiographical reminiscence, the fact that his book is more of a heterogeneous (and hasty!)⁴ collage than a sustained argument, has a deeper

⁴ Apart from the use of unintegrated scraps of book reviews, the book's level of copy-editing is remarkably low. The spelling of proper names in Mudimbe's work is often defective; e.g. Blummebach, p. 150, and Blumenback, p. 188, for Blumenbach; cf. Blumenbach's contemporary Heeren read Heeren (Mudimbe 1992b: 119); Barret, read Barrett (Barrett 1968) (Mudimbe 1997: 74); Livingston, read Livingstone (ibid. 44) – p.188 has it correctly; Al-Hjj Umar, read Al-Hajj 'Umar, (ibid. 90 and index – if he has the transliteration *jihâd* whereas that -i- is usually not explicitly represented in written Arabic, then he should also have the common transliteration Hajj where the same is true for the -a-). It is not only the copy-editing of *Tales of Faith* which is surprisingly defective. Also the bibliography shows major lacunae. The entire, massive oeuvre of Kagame is cited in the text (Mudimbe 1997: 139–141) without a single entry in the end bibliography. And a Tempels publication of 1959 is quoted without appearing in the bibliography (ibid. 155); this must be simply the English translation (via the French) of *Bantoe-filosofie*; a Sally Falk Moore's 1984 book is mentioned in the text but not listed in the bibliography (cf. Moore 1994). Fortes & Dieterlen (1965), *African Systems of Thought*, is listed as edited only by Dieterlen, yet on page 161 a reference to 'Fortes 1965' appears which can only be this book; a very important quote is derived from a 1978 article by Mveng which does not appear in the bibliography (ibid. 173).

significance, especially since as a literature scholar Mudimbe knows full well what he is doing. What these stylistic and compositional techniques convey is the fact that he resigns himself to his incapability of resolving the contradictions of his situation, and that instead he mediates these contradictions in a fairly unprocessed form to his readers. Below we shall see that this resignation at incomplete consistency marks *Tales of Faith* as primarily a literary collage, whose constituent elements happen to look like fragments of state-of-the-art scholarship. In fact Mudimbe *is* and expresses the contradictions between and within the constituent elements of his tale, and he *is* the homelessness which the heterogeneity of their genres suggests. At a function organised on the occasion of his delivering the Jordan lectures in 1993 at the School of Oriental and African Studies, he solemnly passed around his United Nations passport for the stateless, as if this constituted his main or only existential and academic credentials.⁵

The critical or rather 'book review' method prevails to such an extent that *Tales of Faith* often reads as a barely disguised concatenation of individual book reviews written for separate publication. Sometimes the transitions from one pasted-in review to another are very abrupt (e.g. Mudimbe 1997: 47). At times the author cannot help himself and inadvertently inserts into his text (in other words, forgot to delete) the typical phrases peculiar to this genre, such as 'the book under review' (ibid.: 97), even where in the book's text not the slightest indication has been given that at the point reached in the current chapter's argument so far, we are proceeding to the discussion of specific texts, and which texts. The disadvantages of the 'book review' method are clear. The original reviews largely retain their format, contents, and lengths, regardless of the differences in importance and in specific contribution of each of the books within the author's book as a whole. Moreover, each review is to a considerable extent determined by the specific argument and conceptual apparatus employed by the author of the book under review, and hence a concatenation of such reviews tends to display a higher level of disparity and a lower level of sustained discursive unity than one would expect from an author of Mudimbe's intercontinental reputation.

The insistence on the 'book review method' suggests how Mudimbe identifies himself in his authorial practice. The effect of this method is the avoidance of a systematic conceptual framework, the avoidance of faithful submission to any established academic discipline except the discipline of literary studies, whence Mudimbe seems to derive, as the main model of his intellectual products, the virtually unbounded conventions of the 'essay', with its generous allowance (ever since the emergence of the essay as a genre in eighteenth century Great-Britain) of conceptual freedom, literary originality, and limited empirical expectations or requirements. Not for nothing is Mudimbe a professor of French, Comparative Literature and Classics at Stanford University.

⁵ Personal communication, Richard Fardon, Graham Furniss, and Louis Brenner, London, 1st February, 2001.

Mudimbe is aware of the literary status of his argument as, more or less, fiction:

Finally, my presentation of *Tales of Faith* might be judged too controversial, aggravated by the weight of theoretical preoccupations. To this I would respond that what I am offering is not *sheer fiction* [my italics —WvB]; it can sustain critical examination and, more importantly, can and should be checked against empirical studies, above all the experiential authority of serious Africa scholars and ongoing objectivist researches in the field. Despite its avowed status as a representation interrogating already highly worked and stylized representations, both in spirit and method it is far removed from metanarratives concerned, say, with the history of histories of philosophy (e.g. Lucien Braun [Braun 1973 —WvB]), the antihistory of histories of literature (e.g. Deconstruction and Cie),⁶ or even – should I dare? – the possibility of a multivolume on ‘anthropological theories and Africa’, as Sally Falk Moore menaces in the foreword to her stimulating *Anthropology and Africa* (1994)⁷ (Mudimbe 1997: xi–xii).

On the negative side, this self-definition also means that Mudimbe considers himself to be at liberty not to identify with any of the conceptual or methodological canons of any of the academic disciplines which might reasonably be taken to touch upon his project in this book. We shall come back to the disciplines below. Often Mudimbe chooses to observe a pristine definitional and conceptual originality which, to non-Foucaultians like myself, risks appearing pedantic.

In the beginning of *Tales*, Mudimbe tells us what the book is emphatically not: ‘I do not intend a disciplinary monograph that would actualize faithfully some prescriptions entertained validly or otherwise by a scholastic coterie.’ (ibid.: ix). In this intention, with a claim to total originality, he succeeds admirably. He writes on religion, but rather than adopting any of the current definitions of religion from late twentieth-century religious studies, religious anthropology,

⁶ An oblique reference to Derrida’s oeuvre. The eminently Derridean concept of difference is also one of Mudimbe’s central concepts; the entire book can be said about the ‘liberation of difference’ (Mudimbe 1997: 110) in the context of missionary Roman Catholicism in Central Africa during the twentieth century. Yet apart from a passing mention (on pp. 190–1, on the deconstruction of the binary opposition in Derrida’s critique of logocentrism, significantly so indirectly that not Derrida, but Rotman on Derrida is quoted by Mudimbe; Rotman 1993: 98), all possible references to Derrida are avoided, probably merely because both are prominent francophone/America-directed writers, and Mudimbe wishes to avoid stating the obvious. Yet it remains remarkable that in his explication (Mudimbe 1997: 21f; based on Dumézil’s reading of ancient Roman myth and rites; Dumézil 1980: 108) of why the day should begin at midnight and not at dawn, the notion of ‘an absence which is also a presence’ (as embodied in midnight conceived as the beginning instead of the opposite of the day), the obvious reference to Derrida is omitted. And when Mudimbe wishes to criticise Western absolute dualism, it is his own sometime senior colleague at Paris-Nanterre, Lévi-Strauss (cf. Mudimbe 1991a: ix, and for a discussion on Lévi-Strauss and Sartre pp. xiff), despite the latter’s reliance on binary oppositions, who was to be cited as the authority leading out of the impasse, rather than Derrida, whose critique of binary oppositions marks the transition from structuralism to post-structuralism.

⁷ Moore 1994; repeatedly mentioned in *Tales of Faith* (Mudimbe 1997: e.g. xii, 27f), but not listed in that book’s bibliography.

theology or philosophy of religion, as a classicist he reverts back to a Latin etymology of the word 'religion' borrowed from the authoritative Indo-Europeanist Benveniste.⁸

Likewise, Mudimbe uses the word 'politics' in the title of his book, but again the concept of politics is not taken in any of the more established senses canonised by late twentieth-century academic usage in the social and political sciences, history, political anthropology etc., but in an original etymological sense of 'commenting on the *polis*', – again, the classicist, the philologist, is allowed to take precedence over any of the expectations with which the unprepared reader may approach Mudimbe's text: 'politics in the etymological sense of the word [...] That is [...] comments on the *polis* as city and locus of the *analyst's* culture' (Mudimbe 1997: 15; my italics).

In other words Mudimbe appears to be saying here that the study of other religions is essentially self-reflection on and by the society to which the researcher belongs, and hence part of a North Atlantic project of ethnocentrism and hegemony. Another definition which Mudimbe gives of the political is scarcely more encouraging for empirical researchers of politics in Africa:

Any conciliation between a represented and its representation is a matter of permanent negotiations. These presentations are political in nature, insofar as they operate as metaphors of something else, existing out there in a sociohistorical context (ibid.: 200).

After this follows the example of Conrad's sophisticated play on colours in *The Heart of Darkness* (1899/1971), which while not devoid of all political implications, in the eyes of a political scientist or political anthropologist can hardly count as a convincing evocation of the political domain.

As a result of all these departures from common expectation among Africanists, *Tales of Faith* is scarcely about 'religion and politics in Central Africa' as many empirical Africanists would expect it to be. There is hardly any discussion here of the way in which the political as an institutional sphere linking local and regional processes of power and performance to the national state and to intercontinental power relations, takes a religious guise or is informed by religious phenomena, however defined. Such major popular responses in the religious history of Central Africa as: Kongo religion, cults of affliction in the field of diagnosis and healing, Kimbanguism, the emigration of the defeated Lumpa church from Zambia to Congo, the close alliance between church and state under the Mobutu regime, the selective caricatural virtualisation of African historic culture in the context of Mobutu's *politique d'authenticité*, the emergence of local independent churches and mass movements such as *Le Combat spirituel* (see below) which specifically address the effects of colonial intellectual and spiritual alienation in a framework that has departed very widely from missionary Roman Catholicism and from the existential and signifying predicaments of Roman Catholics priests

⁸ Benveniste 1973; incidentally, exactly the same passage from the same author features in Derrida's recent major piece on religion, in Derrida & Vattimo 1996.

as an intellectual elite – all these and many other themes are surprisingly and shockingly absent from this book.

Reading this book, it was as if I suddenly found myself in a totally different part of the African continent from that on which I have concentrated my historical and anthropological research for the past thirty years. ‘Religion and politics in Central Africa...’ that is Lemarchand, Janzen and Fabian, Jewsiewiecki and Devisch, de Boeck, Verhaegen, de Craemer, Vansina, de Heusch, Vellut, MacGaffey, A.F. Roberts, de Lame, but presumably also (if one takes Central Africa slightly larger than just Congo) Fernandez, Shepperson and Price, Daneel, Ranger, Taylor, Schoffeleers, van Binsbergen, to mention only a few... Some of these authors do feature in Mudimbe’s *Tales of Faith*. Yet by and large one gets the impression of such intellectual isolation and idiosyncrasy, that for instance an admittedly excellent book published in 1994 by the French historian of Africa Bernard Salvaing is praised by Mudimbe for doing, as a methodological innovation, precisely the things that were already standard historiographic procedure for Ranger and his school in the 1970s (Salvaing 1994; Ranger & Kimambo 1972; Ranger & Weller 1975: 42–47). Mudimbe’s approach is too narrowly confined to Congo and to Roman Catholicism. The excursions into parallel processes in the Islamic domain are too short to be more than perfunctory. Closer attention to varieties of Protestantism in Congo and Central Africa in general (now mainly touched on in the puzzling hagiographic section on Jean Ishaku) would have shown that the liberation of difference in the context of missionary Christianity in this region from the late nineteenth century onward did not exclusively take the road of Roman Catholic clerical intellectualism and was not confined to textual polemics over ideology and dogma but also, and frequently, extended into open struggles over organisational and financial control (the context for thousands of fissions leading to the proliferation of independent churches typical of Central and Southern Africa in the twentieth century), to open armed confrontations like in the cases of the Chilembwe uprising and of the Lumpa church, to secular contestations towards territorial independence, and to a whole range of religious expressions (prophetism, witchcraft eradication, healing cults, and the broad syncretistic periphery of African independent Christian churches) in which historic African religion was highly visible and, far from being denied and suppressed, engaged with Christian elements of doctrine, ritual and organisation on a far more equal footing (Shepperson & Price 1958; van Binsbergen 1981; Fields 1985).

The fresh outlook with which Mudimbe approaches the field occasionally makes him bump his head against an open door. The overt dialogue between missionary Christianity and African historic religion is as old as David Livingstone’s famous exchange with the ‘witchdoctor’ during one of his travels up north (Livingstone 1858/1971; Kuper 1979). It is against the background of this ready model that Michael Kirwen, a century later, ‘converses with a diviner/witchdoctor on such subjects as the idea of God, the source of evil, divination’, etc. (Mudimbe 1997: 83). Mudimbe misses this intertextual reference to the most famous Protestant exponent of and writer on ‘the expansion of Christianity to Africa’ (*ibid.*: ix), which shows him to be parochially eclectic in his reading when preparing for the

present book. Mudimbe's fixation on one particular ideological transmutation process which happened to be part of his own biography is so strong that he fails to identify the collective representations proper to other African responses to Christianity, for instance when Ela lets slip into his text one of the most cherished clichés circulating in popular African anti-colonial protest:

When Christianity was implanted in Africa, something important happened at the same time: while the converts were distracted by the Bible thrust into their hands, their land was stripped from them (Mudimbe 1997: 83, cf. Ela 1989: 147).

This is not just Ela speaking; this is Ela lazily adopting an expression which in the second half of the twentieth century could be heard all over Africa from the Cape to Kenya.

A subtitle like 'religion as political performance' makes the uninitiated reader expect a discussion of a wide range of religious contexts in which political performance may be detected and subjected to exegesis: not just the struggles of Christian (more specifically Roman Catholic) and post-Christian African intellectuals, but also those of the millions of non-intellectual adherents of the same Christian denomination. I shall come back to this point towards the end of my argument. And if the explicit aim of the book is to present 'stories of faith and adventure in intercultural problematics created by the expansion of Christianity in Africa' (Mudimbe 1997: ix), one can hardly entertain (like Mudimbe seems to do) the illusion that such an expansion took place in a context where religious alternatives to Christianity were entirely absent, muted, insignificant, or too insufficiently documented to deserve explicit discussion. Territorial or ecological cults, royal cults, professional cults of hunters and blacksmiths, ancestral cults, diagnostic and therapeutic cults of affliction, prophetism, sorcery beliefs and sorcery eradication movements, and to top it all the expansion of Swahili-related Islam towards the continent's interior – the very texture of nineteenth and early twentieth century socio-cultural life in Central Africa was saturated with non-Christian religion, and one cannot simply take for granted (as Mudimbe through his silence on these issues appears to do) that the prospective clerics who entered the study for the Roman Catholic priesthood, did so without the slightest exposure to or knowledge of these alternatives and were completely indifferent about them.

Let me add that *Tales of Faith*, one of Mudimbe's latest books, is extreme in this respect. Elsewhere he did touch on aspects of historic African religion, e.g. prophetism,⁹ creation myths, and everyday African life in *Parables and fables*,¹⁰

⁹ Early eighteenth century Christian Kongo prophets, and twentieth-century Christian prophets in Southern Africa, are discussed briefly in *Tales of Faith* (Mudimbe 1997: 71f).

¹⁰ Cf. Mudimbe 1991a. Especially in his discussion of the Luba genesis myth Mudimbe poses as one who, while not an anthropologist, has rubbed shoulders with anthropologists and moreover lays claim to a relevant lived experience apparently considered by him as the equivalent of anthropological fieldwork as a source of ethnographic authority: 'One may ask: Whence comes this authority [to speak on aspects of Luba or Songye culture in anthropological terms]? (...) My answer will be simple. It is true that I am

whereas sorcery forms the topic of the important book by the Congolese anthropologist Buakasa entitled *L'Impensé du discours* (1973), which Mudimbe discusses in a short chapter of his *L'Odeur du père* (Mudimbe 1982: 144–155).

It soon transpires that the 'political' 'performances' Mudimbe has in mind, are merely instances of selected authors' textual self-presentation – as if the production of written texts is the only performance humans are capable of, and the most compelling manifestation of religion. A European medieval theologian, a West African Islamic saintly writer, and the first Roman Catholic priest from Central Africa are paraded to demonstrate that they

connect the practice of their lives to a belief, and their narratives are in reality performances referring to an external 'something': an incredible transcending everyday practice and its obvious rationality, a *Word* signifying both revelation and salvation. Thus, the body of the text by Saint Anselm, Cerno Bokar or Kaoze does not seem to belong to the text itself but to this something that is both its embodiment and justification (Mudimbe 1997: 5).

If, at least in *Tales of Faith*, Mudimbe does not explicitly and unequivocally choose a constituency in Africa among the African masses and their cultural, political and religious expressions, neither does he consistently and compellingly choose a disciplinary constituency in North Atlantic academic life, apart from the lack of methodological and theoretical constraint which the literary form of the kaleidoscopic, collage-like essay accords him. He has repeatedly investigated the status of disciplines in the context of African Studies (Bates–Mudimbe–O'Barr 1993: 160f), and affirms rightly and not very originally that in that context of regional studies their boundaries have faded away.

Let us consider Mudimbe's philosophical excursions in a disciplinary light. Mudimbe is a linguist by training, holder of a Louvain doctorate on the semantics of the word 'air', widespread in West-European languages yet without clear Indo-European etymology (Mudimbe 1979, Partridge 1979: 10f). Although philosophical references abound in the bibliography to his Ph.D. thesis and all his other academic books, and although Mudimbe is generally perceived as primarily a philosopher, Mudimbe's *Tales of Faith* is primarily not a philosophical text.

not an anthropologist and do not claim to be one. I spent at least ten years of my life studying ancient Greek and Latin for an average of twelve hours each week, with more than that amount of time devoted to French and European cultures, before being eligible for a doctorate in comparative philology (Greek, Latin, and French) at Louvain University. I do not know many anthropologists who could publicly demonstrate a similar experience about their speciality in order to found their authority in African studies. (...) My experience would define itself somewhere between the practice of philosophy with its possible intercultural applications and the sociocultural and intersubjective space which made me possible: my Luba-Lulua mother, my Songye father, the Swahili cultural context of my primary education in Katanga (Shaba), the Sanga milieu of my secondary education from 1952 to 1959 in Kakanda, near Jadotville (Likasi), and, later on, at the Catholic seminary of Mwera, near what was then Elisabethville, and my brief sojourn in a Benedictine monastery in Rwanda' (Mudimbe 1991a: 124–125).

True enough, it discusses in some of its chapters the work of specific African philosophers, and in other passages makes brief reference to such philosophers as Aristotle, Cicero, de Certeau,¹¹ Foucault, Heidegger, Sartre, Husserl; and to social scientists working on the borderline with philosophy, such as Bourdieu and Lévi-Strauss. Mudimbe starts sowing a field whose preparation he does not bother to explain to the uninitiated reader. Key concepts such as 'difference'¹² and 'discourse' are used practically without any formal conceptual discussion; African theologian's methods such as 'retrodiction' are clearly introduced but as the thought strategies of others, not of Mudimbe himself. The book is perhaps a philosophically-inspired essay in the history of ideas, but not a straightforward contribution to philosophy as such.

There is no denial that in recent decades, African Studies have been greatly enriched by Mudimbe's statements on the interdisciplinary nature of African Studies (Mudimbe 1997: 164), on identity and otherness, and especially on the Colonial Library, which he defines as:

[...] the scientific knowledge gathered, organized and classified by the pre-colonial and the colonial experiences. It became part of African universities, which were almost all instituted between 1950 and 1960. The drive, project and organization of these institutions were European at the heart of all subject matters, foundational principles and aims (ibid.: 173f).

Thus, the colonial library, in its contents as well as in its significance, generalizes a conceptual rule, a historical paradigm, and a political project (ibid.: 96).

Tales of Faith's departure from a disciplinary philosophical framework is already clear from the fact that Mudimbe can be seen to constantly and eclectically shift philosophical positions without making these shifts explicit: posing as a Foucaultian yet holding forth today's North Atlantic science and scholarship as capable of offering an absolute outside position, a raised pedestal from which to objectively contemplate non-Western forms of knowledge – hence Mudimbe's great disappointment when Sandra Harding's book on the *Racial Economics of Science*¹³ brings out the racist boundary conditions of modern science; describing the

¹¹ Cf. de Certeau 1984; de Certeau 1986; de Vries 1992: 441–477; de Certeau 1988. *Tales of Faith* is dedicated to the memory of de Certeau and Mveng, the theologian and historian of art (cf. Mveng 1965) who will appear below as one of Mudimbe's heroes of the saga of clerical intellectualism in Central Africa.

¹² Cf. note 6 on Derrida above.

¹³ Harding 1993; cf. Mudimbe 1997: 187f. In Mudimbe's discussion of Sandra Harding's work, he has to admit that, given the racial dimensions of the production of science in the contemporary world (the exclusion of certain paradigms and other certain people, and the privileging of others, on the actor's subjective grounds of racialism), the pretended universalism of science is not a reality. But this apparently also comes as a great disappointment to him, which makes *Racial Economy of Science* 'one of the most distressing books I have ever read' (Mudimbe 1997: 197). Little wonder: it explodes the universalist utopia in which he has retreated, as a post-clerical post-African global intellectual – as a Black person he is reminded that even here he represents 'the paradoxical absolute and relative sign of difference' (ibid.: 191).

Foucaultian micropolitics of his own missionary education in Bourdieuan terms; situating ‘difference’ in a Lévi-Straussian rather than a Derridean context, and hence ignoring the post-structuralist, postmodern critique of identity as a desperate reconstruction of an essentially discredited concept of the subject, instead as a Sartrean and Heideggerian celebration of the subject.

Neither is *Tales of Faith* an obvious contribution to the history or sociology of ideas, or to African religious studies, predictably following the standards of those disciplines. Mudimbe appears to be doing intellectual history, but merely on the basis of a selection of authors’ published books, without wasting time over the empirically grounded construction of the sociological and historical background, context, major historiographic debates, and points of method. The discovery of oral sources for African history, which he erroneously attributes solely to Vansina,¹⁴ is applauded by him as a form of retrodiction (see section 3.1 below); but the subsequent debate on the limitations and the potential of oral history, which has raged on until today, appears to have been lost on him – his intellectual historiography has to do without interviews and without personal recollections other than the author’s own. In Mudimbe’s hands, intellectual history can certainly do without archival study, not only of documents produced by the colonial and postcolonial state and the former motherlands, but also of documents produced within the formal organisations (the Roman Catholic church and its missionary and educational institutions; the university and publishing houses) within which the intellectual struggles took place which Mudimbe’s book seeks to capture and explain. The essay requires no rigorous empirical backing – nor does it receive any, in this case, even though Mudimbe asserts that such a backing might have been given. As he admits, *Tales of Faith* is ‘a representation interrogating already highly worked and styled representations’ (Mudimbe 1997: xii), a book largely based on other books.

Neither is *Tales of Faith* an obvious contribution to the sociology of knowledge. It is striking that Mudimbe does not have a sociological frame of interpretation to speak of. This was already the reproach of Willame in his 1976 review of *L’Autre face du royaume*:¹⁵ ‘Nulle part, on ne trouve dans l’ouvrage une analyse de cette formation sociale qu’est le Zaïre.’ Significantly, Mudimbe answered not by offering the sociological analysis that was requested, but by summarising his critique of colonial science, ‘which deprives young Zaïrois of a possible revolution’ (Mudimbe 1982: 199).

¹⁴ Vansina 1961. In the same year that Vansina’s highly seminal book was published, the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute at Lusaka, Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland, started a series of Central Bantu Historical Texts (Apthorpe 1961; Cunnison 1968). When in 1966 Vansina’s *Kingdoms of the Savanna* was published, which for many years would remain the bible of precolonial historiography in Central Africa (Vansina 1966), he could base his synthesis on a large amount of oral historical work already conducted in previous decades, mainly by others than himself.

¹⁵ Willame 1976. Mudimbe replies at length to Willame’s criticism in *L’Odeur du père* (Mudimbe 1982), in a concluding chapter entitled ‘Quel meurtre du père’ [Which parricide?], (pp. 197–203).

Mudimbe's main tools to interpret empirical social situations, their contradictions, and their evolvment over time, are literary and philological analysis, and psychoanalysis, to which he was introduced in the time that Parisian intellectual life was under the spell of Jacques Lacan's famous seminar. Hence Mudimbe tends to reduce religion to 'tales', fables', etc., and to reduce social conflict and transformation to an individual scenario of desire, death wish and suppression, so that collectivities, group processes, and their sociological determinants (status, reference group behaviour, class, legitimation, power, mobilisation) remain invisible. Also in this respect he shows himself the man of letters, the literature scholar, propounding a conception of man which, despite all the trappings of a contemporary philosophical idiom to which Foucault, Heidegger and Husserl made major contributions, largely repeats the individual-centredness of nineteenth-century CE intellectual and literary thought. It is a scenario of heroes, not of social structures, their contradictions, and their dynamics.

Thus, when Mudimbe quotes Mveng,

The West agrees with us today that the way to truth passes by numerous paths, other than Aristotelian, Thomistic logic or Hegelian dialectics. But social and human sciences themselves must be decolonized (Mudimbe 1997: 172).¹⁶

This is interpreted as the expression of a violence whose roots can only be explained, Mudimbe suggests, by a Freudian theory of anxiety, and not by the politics and the sociology of mobilisation and contestation. Mudimbe situates Mveng unique within a scenario where clerical intellectualism is developing an order of succession to replace the Colonial Library. And implicitly this is an Oedipal situation, with real or phantasised parricide as the most effective means of succession. It is the central scenario of the *Golden Bough* (succession by killing the previous high-priest; Frazer 1911–1915) reduced to a personal drama.

Provisionally, before even examining what *Tales of Faith* is about according to its author (Central African clerical intellectualism), and what my close reading suggests that it is really about (Mudimbe's homelessness in the face of death), the above discussion of his method and his making light with any disciplinary canon and method allows us to define what I would call the poetics of Mudimbe's writing in this book. The book is composed of many heterogeneous small parts, which collage-fashion are only loosely connected, and many of which in their internal structure and conception are not manifestly consistent with any disciplinary canon of scholarship. These parts could be considered modules, most of which appear in the trappings of philosophical or empirical historical argument (others are autobiographical or hagiographical). What integrates them is not a sustained academic argument on African philosophy or the history of ideas, but a highly personal narrative of defining the author's personal identity and itinerary. The modules are like the paragraphs in an experimental novel and especially like the lines and stanzas in a poem. *Tales of Faith* is primarily a literary product to be judged by literary standards; its artistic originality consist in the fact that it rather effectively,

¹⁶ The Mveng quote is not adequately referenced in the book.

and deceptively, manages to conceal its literary building bricks as pieces of consistent scholarly argument. This also explains the moving and revelatory effect which the text of *Tales of Faith* has on the reader, at an existential level, prodding the reader to examine her or his own identity and life at the same earnest level of historical self-definition, loss, and hope – as I will do for myself towards the end of my argument. The book testifies to a great creative and scholarly mind who can afford to play with the canons of scholarship, first of all because his qualifications in this field are incontestable, secondly and more importantly because to him these canons are merely effective stepping-stones (the Wittgensteinian ladder he may cast away after climbing up), leading towards something even more valuable: the articulation of identity and personal struggle in the face of death and homelessness – expressing the culturally transmuted person that he is, that many African today are, that all human beings are, and thus expressing the human condition in a unique yet recognizable and identifiable way.

3. *What Tales of Faith is really about*

3.1. *The narrative of clerical intellectualism in Central Africa*

Mudimbe situates himself in a multi-generation process of conversion which begins, two or three generations before his, with adherents to African historic religious forms dwelling in some Central African village or royal court environment, and which concludes with him and his fellow clerical or post-clerical intellectuals. In the latter's experience African historic religion has become completely eradicated. Instead they have gone through Roman Catholicism or other Christian denominations, either remaining there or proceeding to agnostic, atheistic, materialist etc. positions. In the process of affirming their difference in the political context of missionary Christianity, they have ended up in full command of globally circulating universalising skills and qualifications: fluent in several Indo-European languages as well as in several African ones; writing poetry, novels, and philosophical and historical treatises; operating libraries, computers, Internet, academic committees, and publishing resources. Thus they have reached a vantage point from which, as intellectual producers, they both serve, and critique at the same time, the power-knowledge structure of North Atlantic hegemony, using Africa as an exemplary reference point in the process.

Here *retro-diction* appears as a major technique:

In both moments of negation, as illustrated by Kagame and Mulago, as well as by most ethnotheological disciples of Placide Tempels, retro-diction seems to be the main technique that establishes both the new right to speech (and the power of spatializing indigenous localities) and the intellectual efficiency of its interpretation. Retro-diction – from Latin *retro* (on the back side, behind, in time back) and *dicere* (to speak) – denotes the idea of speaking (and thus synthesizing) from an illusory, invented moment back in time. In the process, the present invests its values in the past with its questions and hypotheses, and rediscovers in the invented, reorganized spaces, laws, paradigms, or the truth of its suppositions. Indeed, the new creation is often in contradiction with the colonial adapted Enlightenment paradigms and its library (Mudimbe 1997: 95).

[. . .] by the 1950s retrodiction was already a paradigm [. . .] Africans can read, interpret and reorganize traces of their own past in order to sum up the spirit of their own history or constitute the signs and modes of a religious revelation (Mudimbe 1997: 119).

Mudimbe describes the situation of the exemplary African clerical intellectuals of an earlier generation, such as Mveng (1965), Kagame (1955/1956), Mulago (1965), and Ki-Zerbo (1972), in terms of cultural *métissage*, let us say 'the condition of being of mixed cultural descent'.

Mudimbe uses strong words indeed to characterise the process that brought about 'mixed cultural descent', and its results. Kagame is, for Mudimbe, a saint; he relates

how, in the name of Catholicity, the missionaries had imposed a foreign name, *Mungu*, as the appellation of God who, in Rwanda, was known for centuries by the name of *Imana*. As a priest, he had to accept this sacrilege that, from his knowledge of the Rwandan tradition, he knew was an extreme affront to the divinity and to his kin. But out of fidelity to his vocation and to Rome, he did submit. God alone knows [this is a self-proclaimed agnostic scholar writing —WvB] how he suffered until the day when the Church of his country reinstated the name of *Imana*, after rejecting the *Mungu* of the missionaries. With his death, Africa has lost not only a learned man but perhaps, and even more, a servant of *Imana*, and if *Imana* has a meaning, Alexis Kagame was, I presume, its luminous sign among us. May he remain so! (Mudimbe 1997: 144f).

Here, suddenly, there is no longer question of the representation of African historic culture as inherently problematic:

his extreme kindness [. . .] was a gift of the heart and understanding which, in certain circumstances, particularly when one attacked the milieu that he thought was the authentic expression of African culture, could be transformed into dreadfully violent fits of anger. When this happened, Alexis Kagame would abandon the art of parenthesis and detour to express his keen indignation, for example, to those young Westerners working abroad, in lieu of military service, whose brief stay in Africa succeeds in transfiguring into Africanists and in confirming their intellectual certainties (Mudimbe 1997: 142f).

Mudimbe's extensive treatment of Kagame is cast in superlative terms, it is a down-right hagiography, and Mudimbe's use of that genre is deliberate. The same genre reappears in his extensive description, borrowed from Lamar Williamson (1992), of the Protestant minister Jean Ishaku: killed by Mulelists i.e. Simbas in 1964 because during a raid on their mission station he could not be forced to verbally betray – like Peter was to betray Jesus thrice before the cock crew¹⁷ – his American fellow-missionary and former teacher.

It is remarkable that in one and the same book Mudimbe should discuss the spread of Christianity in Africa, and the rise of a science of, for, and by Africa. The implication is simply that the clerical intellectualism produced both Christian religious expressions, and African philosophy, and African social science, often by

¹⁷ Cf. Bible, Matt. 26: 34: 'Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, That this night, before the cock crow, thou shalt deny me thrice.'

the same persons. He addresses this question explicitly (Mudimbe 1997: 174f) and once again his explanation is psychoanalytical and death-related. Perhaps in this case we are closest to the essentially utopian solution which Mudimbe has taken for his own predicament, his relation to Africa and to the global domain of academia:

In the invocation of Africanization policies, by insisting on its dream of self-sufficiency, I wanted somehow to interrogate indirectly a subjective project and its almost suicidal terms, by playing silently on a simple Lacanian tension that is represented in the difference between death-drive and being-towards-death. I mean, on the one hand, the apparent epistemological eccentricity of the African subject, such as a Mveng, Kagame, Mulago or Kizerbo who, in their projects, are divided between their ego and ‘something’ else – the real, symbolic and imaginary spaces of conflicting fields of sciences opposing their own articulation as historical subjects in an intellectual configuration. On the other hand, in their consciousness, the personal experience of a possible fragmentation in an *espace métisse*, as magnificently illustrated by Eboussi-Boulaga in *Christianity without Fetishes* (1981), might indicate signs and dangers for a complete collapse of individuation. Under such an interrogation, the best resoluteness leads to a rivalry of value systems or, at best, as witnessed by Mveng and Eboussi-Boulaga, to a desire projected in an unnameable future. One could thus refer to Lacan’s *Écrits*: ‘Who, then, is the other to whom I am more attached than to myself, since at the heart of my assent to my own identity it is still he who agitates me’ (Lacan 1977: 172; Mudimbe 1997: 175).

The prophets of the recent African cultural maturity – such as Kagame, Kizerbo, Mulago or Mveng – stand as mediators between this level and that of confusing and confused disciplines of African studies, which attend to the adaptation and indigenization of supposedly universal paradigms of sciences and those of revealed religions of the letter. The truth that gives them the right to question the pertinence of such an immense claim is, paradoxically the same that define [*sic*] them as particular subject [*sic*] able to produce value and true or false statements, and to make himself or herself understood because of his or her submission to a normative and paradigmatic epistemological order and its intellectual and ethical procedures (Mudimbe 1997: 181f).¹⁸

3.2. *Homelessness as Mudimbe’s central predicament*

3.2.1. *Beyond the dream of an African home*

Fascinated by the intellectual appropriations and contestations of Africa such as have constituted the topic of Mudimbe’s writings (1988, 1994), there are significant topics which scarcely enter into Mudimbe’s discourse, and if they do it is as things entirely remote from him, external to him, things which appear as chimerical, illusory, irrelevant, and without legitimate appeal: ‘The African people’, the formal political institutions which inform their lives and which are to some extent shaped and challenged by these people, the religious forms in which these people have expressed themselves in precolonial times and which have in part persisted since the advent of Christianity in the region. It is almost as if in *Tales of Faith* the politics of performance are reduced to the essayistic performance of

¹⁸ There follows a long quotation from Foucault, predictably 1971: 35f.

autobiography concealed under the trappings of a chain of objectifying literature reports, philosophical intermezzi and other detached modules of scholarly production, following the autobiographical poetics which I identified above.

In *Tales of Faith* there is a tension, familiar from every (auto-)biography, between the subject's unique itinerary in time and space, and the extent to which these idiosyncratic details are yet representative for a much larger category of people, and for an entire period. Sometimes Mudimbe situates his predicament in the context of a structured collectivity and its shared representations, a culture:

My sense of belonging to a group reflects a degree of my insertion into its culture, and what my death might signify when I am gone would be my ways of witnessing to the arbitrariness of my culture (Mudimbe 1997: 199).

This is a surprising passage. For what Mudimbe claims as a culture is not at all one of the reified 'African ethnic or tribal cultures', freeze-dried and packaged within the Colonial Library. His only sense of belonging resides with what in the formative period of his life was only in the process of emerging as a minority expression of cultural contestation: Central African clerical intellectualism. Yet he has a point precisely because the type of conversion at hand here can be argued to have become, ultimately, a major cultural expression in African life by the end of the twentieth century. However, Mudimbe himself does not present such an argument; sharing with the African masses is not his predilection, in *Tales of Faith* – although such a motivation may have inspired his earlier works written in the 1970s.

On the contrary, in *Tales of Faith* Mudimbe chooses, for the description of his itinerary, a terminology that is so individual-centred that it primarily conveys a sense of uniqueness:

Tales of Faith is about the strange constructed place I chose to inhabit so that I could think about the unthinkable: how well the predicament of Sartre's pessimism in 'Hell is other people' meets the supreme beauty of 'I am an Other'. The two positions are inseparable in this space, in which identities are always mixtures facing each other as competitive projects aimed as, to use Schlegel's language, an impossible *ars combinatoria*¹⁹ – I mean a universal and definitive 'logical chemistry' (Mudimbe 1997: 202).

This is the only real home he may claim as his own. He certainly does not perceive Africa as such a home, and he perceives his Africanness as problematic:

In the beginning of these lectures, I intended to suggest a phenomenological description of religion as a political performance in theoretical and anthropological spaces, using Levy-Bruhl's highly spatialized representations of effects from everyday life, as well as my own presentations of transcultural enterprises of conversion, adaptation and inculturation of Christianity. Now, this reflection is ending as a personal meditation on the being of a specific *métissage* between religious forms of experiences. Moreover, I should note that my meditation is grounded not only in my subjectivity but in a special locality of my experience in the world – in a Roman Catholic culture with its sensibility, which could account for my relative disinterest in African Islam. *If my 'Africanness' [sic] designates a legacy and a project, indeed it*

¹⁹ Cf. Platzek 1971; a famous author of an *Ars combinatoria* was Leibniz, published in Frankfurt am Main 1666.

also includes the Tales of Faith in all the possibilities of my becoming. Looking a last time at what Christianity and Islam signify, it is from the solidity of this *métissage* that I can marvel about what they still represent as intercultural challenges' (Mudimbe 1997: 203).

Only once in *Tales of Faith* have I spotted a phrase in which Africa, contrary to Mudimbe's own and also Kwame Appiah's injunctions, was simply taken for granted: characteristically, in that passage, taken for granted not in relation to Mudimbe's own positioning, but when it is said of Alexis Kagame that he 'made his devotion to Africa into a reality' (Mudimbe 1997: 135f).

Although as much as anyone else aware of the unique complexities and potentialities of Africa as a situation,²⁰ Mudimbe is extremely concerned not to fall into the Afrocentrist trap which Stephen Howe caustically characterised as the construction of 'mythical pasts and imagined homes' (Howe 1999). As a literature scholar Mudimbe is expertly at home in the realm of textual imagination (hence titles such as *Parables and Fables*, and *Tales of Faith*, for books in which he analyses crucial aspects of the twentieth-century experience in Central Africa), but he considers it his task to deconstruct such products of imagination, not to believe in them.

Afrocentricity or Afrocentrism only features positively in Mudimbe's work (Mudimbe 1997: 160) in the attenuated, unemotional, domesticated version of Richard Sklar, who (true to the politics of knowledge of the culture wars of the U.S.A. in the late twentieth century)²¹ obliges by spontaneously identifying as Jewish-American, not African American.²² In the last decade, hundreds of Afrocentrist publications have been written by Black scholars, many of whom would claim that being Black is more or less a condition for credible Afrocentrism. Identifying such a movement secondarily by quoting a White scholar quoting someone else on Afrocentrism, indicates that Mudimbe's interests especially sensitivities lie elsewhere. Likewise, when Mudimbe notes that the philosopher Masolo

chooses to interrogate the very reason that makes his discourse possible, qualifying his own reading as 'a reconstructivist term which symbolizes many aspects of the struggle of the people of African origin to control their own identity' (Mudimbe 1997: 29),

²⁰ Cf. Mudimbe (1997: 198): 'the stories I have chosen to share in these lectures on conversion are, indeed, not only unthinkable outside of a space circumscribed by African elements but also well determined by anthropology and the colonial saga, as well as the practices and missionizing of Islam and Christianity'.

²¹ Cf. Berlinerblau 1999, which also includes rich bibliographical materials on the recent American culture wars.

²² Sklar 1993: 98f. Sklar follows the definition of C.S. Whitaker: 'Properly invoked (...) Afrocentricity[']s] (...) importance derives from fundamental issues of comprehension in the wake of powerful intellectual legacies that tend to discount the capacity of African cultures and societies to act rationally and constructively in the face of historic realities. It suggests, importantly, that these realities, not Africans, are the course of problematic conditions.' Whitaker 1991: 359.

all Mudimbe has to say is that Masolo here “plays dangerously on an ‘afrocentricity’ perspective” (ibid.).²³ Why ‘dangerously’? There follows Mudimbe’s diatribe against Afrocentrism which he calls an attempt to

essentialize African cultures, reducing the complexity of histories to some metaphors and their variations. In this transposition that is an *Übertragung* [*sic*; read *Übertragung* —WvB] in a Freudian operation, the real self is lost in a magnificent negation. The contradictory, negotiated, and perpetually recommenced enunciation about oneself – and whose truth is always and already in the apprehension of oneself as a being-for-other – ceases to indicate the intricacy of an existence (of any existence), of a culture (of any culture) as project (Mudimbe 1997: 30).

In a book which discusses the cultural and religious dimension of the colonial conquest, the devastating effects of Christianity upon African culture and spirituality, the Colonial Library as an objectifying ordered caricature of African socio-cultural realities, etc., Mudimbe finds mildness and patience for most of what came to Africa from the North Atlantic, but he is very dismissive of the Afrocentrists who, after all, seek to explode the heroic epic of cultural transmutation which Mudimbe sings in this book: the sage of clerical intellectualism. Afrocentrism is reduced by Mudimbe to a mere act of banal Freudian transference, i.e. distorted self-projection out of touch with reality. Elsewhere in the book the young African critics of Kagame (Mudimbe 1997: 143), or of the European missionising of Africa,²⁴ are dismissed by Mudimbe in similarly distancing terms. Here he finds himself in the company of Kwame Appiah, another cosmopolitan African philosopher who has endeared himself to a North Atlantic audience by rejecting the essentialism of Africanness and by mediating, instead, a sensible, middle-of-the-road image of Africa that no longer posits a radical defiance of universalising North Atlantic categories and procedures of thought.²⁵

In the same vein, Mudimbe strongly objects both to the substance and to the tone of voice of Diagne’s attempt to find a local African grounding for African philosophy:

Sarcastic, Diagne rejects both the neocentrist Euro-philosophy, as represented by Franz Crahay [1965], and the critical Marxist Euro-philosophy symbolized by Paulin Hountondji [1976] and other African disciples of Althusser. They are wrong, states Diagne, in the same way Tempels and his disciples were wrong, because they ‘deportent la problematique du fait africain ou négro-africain aussi loin sinon encore plus loin de ses axes que l’ethnophilosophie elle-même’ (1981: 83). [...] ‘they are wrong for transferring the problematic of the African or the Negro-African factum as far away, and even further than the practitioners of ethnophilosophy.’] They are also wrong, adds Diagne, because in their linking of the

²³ The lower-case initial of ‘afrocentricity’ here is original.

²⁴ ‘For people familiar with African Christianity, the conversion model [i.e. the approach to Central African Christian intellectual history as propounded in *Tales of Faith* —WvB] in both its intention and realization would describe the African critique as generally violent and often, alas, excessive, not only in its evaluation of conversion policies but also of the missionary’ (Mudimbe 1997: 56).

²⁵ Appiah 1992; cf. Mudimbe 1997: 63f for a most sympathetic reading; and on Afrocentrism: Appiah 1993: 24–25.

genesis of African philosophy to alphabetic revolution in Africa, they are presenting a political thesis: African philosophy is conceived as the consequence of colonization that brought about alphabetic writing and thus let us celebrate colonialism, thanks to which African philosophizing has become possible.

One does not understand why Diagne uses disguised or direct insults in order to make his points. On the other hand, it seems to me that his apparently well-evidenced generalizations are not philosophically obvious. The concepts of Africa, Negro-African, for example, are not transparent, particularly when the author claims to extend them as far back as the pharaonic periods. In the same vein, to postulate – from the pharaonic Egypt to Edward Blyden, Ogotemmeli, Anta Diop, Chinua Achebe, Senghor, etc. – the continuous epistemological history of a Negro-African cultural context is surely a nice hypothesis, but it is untested and probably untestable.

Diagne is more serious in his propositions for an African philosophical praxis. With a few neat strokes, he indicates the theoretical conditions for philosophizing: a *dëgg* (argumentation) in which a *texxale* (critical reflection) should be promoted distinguishing valid and non-valid propositions (*woor ag sanxal*) in order to construct a *xelaat* (epistemology).

So far there has been nothing quite like this in the confrontation between philosophy and African *Weltanschauungen*. The very fact that in his innovative ‘book two’ – strangely entitled *Epistemology and Neo-pharaonic Problematics* (1981: 129–219) – Diagne’s constant use of Wolof categories is a tour de force, may make the translation of texts by Plato, Althusser, Tempels, Crahay, Kagame, Mulago, Diop, Césaire, Senghor, Ndaw, Towa and Hountondji seem a simple curiosity. This takes on a radical meaning when, in his conclusion (1981: 213–19), Diagne puts aside French as mediation and synthesizes his philosophical theses directly in Wolof (Mudimbe 1997: 104f; Diagne 1981).

How can a person like Mudimbe *not* understand the anger informing Diagne’s style of writing? Yet, to show his good will Mudimbe later on (*ibid.*: 110) adopts Diagne’s Wolof philosophical concepts and weaves them into his own cosmopolitan philosophical discourse. But it is Hountondji, despite the geographical and denominational divides that separate him from Mudimbe (Benin versus Congo, Roman Catholicism versus Presbyterianism) who is considered worthy of Mudimbe’s praise and who even receives the exceptional honour of being recognised by him as a fellow-*métis* – a concept to which I shall return at length (*ibid.*: 107f).

Mudimbe even concedes (with the placating tones used towards a rebellious child?) that Diagne’s Diop-derived Egyptocentrism is ‘surely a nice hypothesis’, but this again is clearly not Mudimbe’s cup of tea. He has no time for Egyptocentrism, and has kept considerable distance from the *Black Athena* debate, to which he would have been eminently qualified to make significant contributions given his unique combination of being an African classicist working in the United States who, moreover, is the most applauded critic of North Atlantic and African constructions of Africa. Apart from a passing reference to Bernal’s contribution on *Black Athena* in Harding’s *Racial Economics of Science* (Bernal 1993; cf. Mudimbe 1997: 187f), Mudimbe devoted one short article to the *Black Athena* debate, subsequently incorporated without major changes in *The Idea of Africa* (Mudimbe 1992b: 114–123; 1994: 93–104). Here he notes the following minor disagreements with Bernal as a classicist and a historian of ideas. Bernal is

reproached by Mudimbe for overlooking Herodotus' statement that the *Pelasgoi* were a 'non-Greek speaking populace' (1992b: 116); to overlook Plutarch's accusation against Herodotus (*De Herodoti malignitate*) that he magnified the barbarians (ibid.: 118, cf Plutarch [1989]); that Herodotus naively reports on fabulous monsters therefore cannot be credible on other issues;²⁶ that Herodotus deliberately constructed his account in *Historiae* so as to humour his audience's nationalism and anti-barbarian feelings (ibid.: 118); that also in Herodotus a specific philosophy of history informs the actual narratives, manipulating the facts so as to render their narrative less than totally credible (ibid.: 119); most importantly, he rightly criticises Bernal's unique focus on eighteenth-century Germany for the emergence of race thinking whereas the true place where that ideology arose was France (ibid.: 121). Mudimbe is thus far from hostile, and even very helpful. He points out that unidentified "Black 'Afrocentrist' scholars" (ibid.: 122) have reproached Bernal for playing down the contribution by Cheik²⁷ Anta Diop; Mudimbe suggests that this may have been because Bernal is concerned with diffusion from Egypt towards the north, east and west, whereas Diop was mainly concerned with interactions between the south and the north (ibid.: 122f). He adduces other potential allies of the *Black Athena* thesis which Bernal has overlooked: Frazer, Wallis Budge, Seligman, Frankfort, and more recently and most importantly from the Africanist point of view: Mveng (1972) and Bourgeois (1973). By and large Mudimbe has sympathy for Bernal's *Black Athena* project, but

[...] although I understand the political significance of his project and its usefulness, I am worried by the fact that it might, and very probably will, be manipulated by both the most sophisticated and the least critical of his constituencies for reasons that have nothing to do with science and the search of truth (Mudimbe 1992b: 123).²⁸

Beware of enthusiasm and of demagogic rhetorics, is what Mudimbe seems to be saying here! Not the debunking of North Atlantic hegemonic views of global cultural history, nor the elevation of a parochial, partisan Africa to a position where it can be the cradle of 'Black' [i.e. Egyptian] *Athena*, is what really interests him, but detached more or less universal categories such as science and truth.²⁹

We would do injustice to Mudimbe if we did not realise that his reservations vis-à-vis Afrocentrism and the *Black Athena* debate, and his ignoring African historic religion, is *not* simply an idiosyncratic expression of his cultural and geographical homelessness and nothing more. At the back is a profound methodological

²⁶ Mudimbe 1992b: 118 (in defence of Herodotus, meanwhile cf. Pritchett 1993; Spiegelberg 1927; however, cf. also Moles 1993).

²⁷ NB: in Mudimbe 1997 (e.g. 30, 102, 119, 171, and index), the name is repeatedly spelled as Sheik, as if name were a religious title, not a given name, as it is usually considered to be. Cf. Amadiume 1997: 468–469; van Sertima 1986; Gray 1989; Fauvelle 1996.

²⁸ No doubt, my forthcoming book *Global bee flight* will represent Mudimbe's worst fears come true on this point.

²⁹ Meanwhile the fact that science is less than universal and e.g. is capable of endorsing racial prejudice and enforcing inequalities along racialist lines, is recognized by Mudimbe in his discussion of Sandra Harding (mentioned elsewhere in my argument); cf. Mudimbe 1997: 184ff.

dilemma, which attends the entire empirical study of African religion through participant observation or through African believers' introspection, and which comes out clearly in Mudimbe's discussion of Mulago's project:

Theoretically, Mulago's project, as in *Un Visage africain du Christianisme* (1965), *La Religion traditionnelle des Bantu et leur vision du monde* (1973), or *Simbolismo religioso africano* (1979), can be summed up as follows: in the name of the truths of a locality or place, it questions the pertinence of colonial 'scientific' and 'religious' dominant discourses; insists on their shortcomings by reminding their practitioners that there is always a radical deviation between a lived experience (e.g. succession of seasons) or an experienced fact (e.g. death), and its possible multiple levels of interpretation presented as history, epic or simply narrative. Yet the project itself has recourse to the same controversial logical empiricism it wants to relativize. In fact, the invocation of the truths of the place against those of the interpretive space implies that there is somehow (almost necessarily) better reflections of the locality in the insider's discourse; and this hypothesis then becomes an ideological framework and a means for negotiating a right to the authentic speech in the field of discourses about the native place (Mudimbe 1997: 89).

If the insider's discourse cannot be trusted to produce a better truth, and if the ethnotheological³⁰ discourse is in itself external to Africa, then African historic religion may be essentially unknowable and irrelevant.

But by posing the question, and by contesting the validity of the local perspective by reproaching it for its claim of superiority, Mudimbe in fact claims for himself and his North Atlantic academic universalist science a similarly privileged, superior outside position – which apart from being hegemonic would be very un-Foucaultian. African historic culture and religion have a right to affirm themselves for their own sake – which is why eleven years ago, as an accomplished North Atlantic anthropologist of religion, I opted to become a diviner-priest-therapist in the Southern African *sangoma* tradition. Moreover, there is another reason, one to be found within universalising science, why Mudimbe should be far less dismissive of Afrocentrism. Let me elaborate.³¹

3.2.2. *In vindication of Afrocentrism*

One cannot help agreeing with Howe's (1999) and Lefkowitz's (1996) identification of the deficiencies endemic to the Afrocentric genre, which must play a role in Mudimbe's rejection: the poor scholarship; the amateurish, autodidactic approach to grand historical and comparative themes without systematic use of obvious sources and obvious methods; the Afrocentrist authors' manifest and

³⁰ Mudimbe defines ethnotheology 'as a subfield uncomfortably situated between theology and anthropology, opposed to reductionism and claiming to speak in the name of the vitality of local cultures', pointing out that it faces a major paradox: as anthropology ethnotheology affirms local cultures, as theology it denies them for the sake of the hegemony of the imported Christian doctrine (Mudimbe 1997: 88f).

³¹ Van Binsbergen, 2000a: 175–180 – the next passages of the present argument are an English rendering of part of my French article, of my *Global Bee Flight* (forthcoming), and of van Binsbergen 1997.

deliberate isolation from current debates and current advances in the fields of scholarship they touch on; and the occasional lapses into Black racism.

However, where I fundamentally disagree with these critics of Afrocentrism is with regard to the extent of dismissal that Afrocentrism calls for. For Mudimbe, Afrocentrism is sheer transference of an inferiority complex among today's African Americans. For Lefkowitz, it is the celebration of racialist myth disguised as engaged history. For Howe, Afrocentrism is largely what in our Marxist days we used to call *false consciousness*: a view of reality which is systematically distorted and which can be explained from the historical trajectory traversed, in recent centuries, by the collectivity holding these views. Where Howe finds Afrocentrism by and large intolerable it is because, in the context of the politics of identity on which the postmodern world revolves, it is no longer politically correct, yea it is more and more even politically impossible, to publicly ignore or dismiss the Afrocentrist claims; hence their increasing influence in the U.S.A. educational system. For Howe (1999: 6), as for me, the central issue here is explicitly the truth value of Afrocentrism. For Howe the truth value of Afrocentrism is zero, in other words Afrocentrism is entirely mythical. For me, very much to the contrary, Afrocentrism (despite its endemic defects) does contain a kernel of truth, in the form of testable hypotheses about the possible contributions which Africans may have made towards the world-wide development of human culture (van Binsbergen 1997; 2000b; forthcoming). Such a position has important political and critical implications. For if there is even the remotest possibility that some of the Afrocentrist tenets (however unscholarly in their present elaboration and substantiation) might yet be confirmed when restated in a scholarly manner and investigated with state-of-the-art scientific methods, then the wholesale dismissal of Afrocentrism cannot simply be the positive, enlightened gesture Howe, Lefkowitz and even Mudimbe claim it to be. Such dismissal risks being a confirmation of the status quo, a continuation of the processes of exclusion to which Black people, inside and outside Africa, have been subjected for centuries – an issue which in principle appeals to Mudimbe. Here there is a political role to be played by the odd person out: the scholar and polemicist who for lack of Black or African antecedents cannot be suspected of being on a mere consciousness-raising trip, and who yet, for respectable scholarly reasons, defends views similar to or identical with those of the Afrocentrists. Martin Bernal's has been such a case, inevitably denounced by Howe and Lefkowitz, but treated with far more sympathy by Mudimbe.

Historiographic usage offers a number of ready answers to the fundamental question: *By what method and with what validity and reliability do we construct images of the past?* For Howe, and for many historians like him who situate themselves in the empiricist tradition while being suspicious of an over-reliance on systematic theory, a central methodological approach is that of 'common sense', an appeal to the self-validating effect of simple everyday logic and common (i.e. North Atlantic, Western) everyday concepts. Inevitably (since everyday common perspectives are by definition intersubjective, shared with others and recognised to be so shared) a common sense appeal would favour the paradigms as taken for granted in a given discipline at a given moment of time.

It has been Bernal's merit (1987; 1991)³² to make us aware of the immense historical and political significance of one such historiographic paradigm, whose demolition has been the purpose of his *Black Athena* project:

(a) Greek classical culture was essentially independent from any inputs from the Ancient Near East (Anatolia, Phoenicia, Egypt, Palestine, Syria, Mesopotamia).

As far as Afrocentrism is concerned, three other such historical paradigms have been dominant throughout the second half of the twentieth century:

(b) Ancient Egypt, although situated on the edge of the African continent, was essentially a non-African civilisation whose major achievements in the fields of religion, social, political and military organisation, architecture and other crafts, the sciences etc., were largely original and whose historical cultural indebtedness lay, if anything, with West Asia rather than with sub-Saharan Africa.

(c) Ancient Egypt did *not* have a profound, lasting, and therefore traceable impact on the African continent, particularly not on sub-Saharan Africa.

(d) Contemporary Africa is a patchwork quilt of numerous distinct local cultures, each supported by a distinct language and each giving rise to a distinct ethnic identity, in the light of which broad perspectives on continental cultural continuity going back to the remoter past much be relegated to the realm of ideology and illusion.

Phrased in this way, these paradigms, although largely taken for granted by the scholars working in their context, are in principle testable hypotheses. Although they are not intrinsically ideological, unmistakably they are well attuned to a hegemonic North Atlantic perspective on the world. They postulate a world which is neatly compartmentalised; incomparably more so than would be suggested not only by the globalising experience of our own time, but also by the demonstrable spread of agricultural techniques, weaponry, musical instruments, languages, belief systems including world religions, formal systems such as board games, divination methods, myths and symbolism, across the African continent and in considerable (though painfully understudied) continuity with the rest of the Old World, and even the New World. Under such compartmentalisation, a whole mythical geopolitics comes into being: the mystery and mystique of Europe – more recently: of the North Atlantic in general – can be maintained as a solid ideological power base for colonialism and postcolonial hegemony; Egypt, Africa, African cultures, remain the ultimate other, to the North Atlantic, but also to one another; a conceptual and geopolitical 'divide and rule' keeps them in their subordinate place vis-à-vis the North Atlantic; and the basic flow of achievement is defined as going from north to south, while the hegemonically undesirable idea of counter-flows in a northerly direction is ruled out. These may be testable hypothesis, but they are very close to geopolitical myths.

³² Cf also his contributions in van Binsbergen 1997.

If our four paradigms (*a*) through (*d*) can be demonstrated to have considerable hegemonic ideological potential (not to say that they are downright Eurocentric and racist), their inverses are likely to have a similar but opposite ideological charge. These inverses would stress historical cultural continuity:

- (*a-inverse*) between Greece and the ancient Near East including Ancient Egypt;
- (*b-inverse*) between prehistoric cultures situated on the Africa continent south of the Tropic of Cancer (23°27' North), and Ancient Egypt;
- (*c-inverse*) between Ancient Egypt and latter-day African cultures;
- (*d-inverse*) between latter-day African cultures even regardless of the influence of Ancient Egypt.

It is my contention that the paradigms (*a-inverse*) through (*d-inverse*) contain a healthy and serious critique of hegemonic misconceptions, and therefore in themselves should at least be granted some plausibility. *It now so happens that these inverse paradigms are among the central tenets of Afrocentrism, tenets which therefore can no longer be relegated to mere false consciousness and Black consciousness-raising, but deserve to be admitted to the central halls of scholarship.* To dismiss these inverse views as 'myths' (Howe, Lefkowitz) or 'transference' (Mudimbe) is not only doing them injustice, but also means myopia: the potentially mythical nature of the dominant paradigms itself is insufficiently brought to the fore.

In Lefkowitz's case this myopia is manifest, and it was convincingly exposed in Bernal's review of her book *Not out of Africa* (Bernal 1996; 1997). In Mudimbe, a similar myopia risks going unnoticed, because of his acclaimed status as an African intellectual of great cosmopolitan scholarly accomplishment. Neither is the myopia of Howe's book readily recognised since the execution of its design is largely impeccable. Not being an Africanist himself, he can only be praised for the meticulous way in which he has digested the vast relevant bibliography, offering a middle-of-the-road synthesis in line with the dominant paradigms (*a*) through (*d*). He finds little, in the enormous literature he has plodded through, to falsify the dominant common-sense paradigms (*a*) through (*d*); but did he search closely enough? To Howe, 'the actual evidence of ideas about kingship paralleling Egypt's either in Sub-Saharan Africa or in the Aegean is extremely thin' (1999: 130). On the basis of what kind of authority is such a statement made? My own recent discovery of very extensive Egyptian parallels in the material on Zambian kingship (van Binsbergen, forthcoming) came only after studying Nkoya kingship and myths for twenty years, from the inside, and after far more extensive exposure to Ancient Near Eastern studies than anthropologists and Africanists normally get;³³ this suggests some of the methodological and paradigmatic problems involved: usually the more one specialises in one spatio-temporally specific domain of human culture, the less likely one is to gain similarly detailed and up-to-date information on other domains, and the more likely one is to retreat into

³³ I was a full-time member of the Workgroup on Religion and Magic in the Ancient Near East, Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study, Wassenaar, The Netherlands, 1994–95.

myopic paradigmatic self-evidences. Contrary to what Howe claims, the evidence on parallels between Ancient Egypt and sub-Saharan Africa is massive, though uneven (Shinnie 1971: 447f).

In the light of my discussion of Mudimbe's position above and below in the present argument, these four hypotheses and their radical, Afrocentrist inverses enable us to articulate Mudimbe's contradictory positioning within the globalising politics of knowledge on Africa. As is clear from his discussion of Bernal, he is inclined to accept the first inverse hypothesis, but considers it dangerous and scholarly vulnerable. He does not pronounce himself on the second inverse hypothesis.³⁴ He considers the third inverse hypothesis 'nice', but untested and probably untestable. And he rejects the fourth inverse hypothesis. By and large he shows himself to be rather on the side of established, potentially hegemonic 'common sense' models of African history in line with dominant universalising science, and considerably less sensitive to the present-day politics of knowledge on Africa than one would expect considering the fact that he is the most famous critique of North Atlantic constructions of Africa.

Scholarly reputations are readily sacrificed on the altar of Howe's indignation vis-à-vis Afrocentrism, and the more readily, the less Howe knows of their specialist field: Clyde Ahmad Winters, Herodotus, Henry Frankfort, Frobenius, Sergi. These ancient and modern scholars have one thing in common which makes them unwelcome in the common-sense, main-stream paradigmatic world to whose authority Howe appeals. They all had the ability to think across established cultural and geopolitical boundaries, whether this meant explaining the origin of the Persian wars in a complex context encompassing the entire Ancient World (Herodotus), or lumping Egypt and Mesopotamia in one grand argument (Frankfort's *Kingship and the Gods*), or stressing the essential continuity between West Africa, North Africa, Europe, and Asia, when it comes to kinship somatic traits, kinship patterns, languages, and symbolism. Not surprisingly, Howe's villains appear as intellectual heroes in one of my own books in progress. I am pleased to add that, as a sign of Mudimbe's ambivalent positioning in this problematic, at least two of Howe's villains appear as potential allies, if not heroes, also with him (Frobenius and Frankfort).

4. *The prominence of death in Mudimbe's work*

Because of Mudimbe's relentless insistence on originality, there is an essential unpredictability about Mudimbe's work, which makes it incomparably more difficult to read and to grasp than the average Africanist academic text production along disciplinary lines (African anthropology, history, religious studies, philosophy, theology etc.), and renders this oeuvre one of the most impressive, moving and original bodies of texts to have risen from the modern (post-eighteenth century CE) encounter between Africa and the North Atlantic. *Like all true poets,*

³⁴ At least not in Mudimbe 1997, and in the selection of his other publications on which my present argument is based.

Mudimbe's writing is essentially a writing in the face of death. It took a while before this insight dawned upon me. I was at first puzzled by the uncanny prominence of references to parricide (often solemnly and in Freudian fashion called 'the murder of the father') in his approaches to African literature, ethnotheology and philosophy (Mudimbe 1991b: 71ff; 1992a). Thus when Paul-Michel Foucault in early adult life drops the 'Paul' which was the given name of his father and grandfather, and lives on with only the 'Michel' which his mother gave him, Mudimbe interprets this in the line of Lacan and Freud as parricide, even though by the same time Mudimbe claims to have proceeded to a Jungian perspective (Mudimbe 1991: xi) which would lay less stress on the sexual scheme but instead would favour an interpretation in terms of a heroic mother-son myth (Jung 1987). Likewise it is Kasavubu's rejection of Lumumba's parricidal challenge to the former colonising power at the moment of Congo's Independence, which, in Mudimbe's off-hand analysis, led to Lumumba's isolation and murder (Mudimbe 1997: 131). Parricidal is the revolt of younger African philosophers against their African predecessors,³⁵ while Kagame himself seems to have incited yet another form of parricide:

Within a few weeks, I saw him convert entire annual classes of students to a 'nationalistic' view of African history and philology. I told him that I feared that such a perspective, by generously glossing over the epistemological preconditions of the murder of the Father, ran the risk of further perverting the discipline of the social sciences in Africa, already so encumbered by a priori ideological assumptions of 'colonial science'. His response was surprising to me in its simplicity: 'obsession is also a path to the truth' (Mudimbe 1997: 140).

From his own itinerary, this form of parricide appears to be what Mudimbe fears most. For when in the middle of the twentieth century Central African Roman Catholic clerical intellectuals can be seen to struggle with how much of global Christianity and North Atlantic philosophy and science they can retain while asserting their rightful difference vis-à-vis that imported foreign body of ideas and vis-à-vis the hegemonic power of the Europeans who persuaded or forced them to accept that body and built it into their very lives, that retention is suggested as a refusal on their part to proceed to parricide. In the concluding chapter of *L'Odeur du père* (1982), Mudimbe defends himself against Willame's (1976) critique of *L'Autre face du royaume*: the suggestion of an incitement of revolutionary parricide with which that earlier book had ended, has been misunderstood by Willame and has only a very precise, coded, psychoanalytical symbolic meaning which however escapes me:

À présent, j'aimerais savoir ce que l'on entend exactement quand on me parle de 'meurtre du père'. J'ai accepté cette expression imagée (*Recherche, Pédagogie et Culture*, no 20) pour dire une infirmité et non pour la vivre en une utopie faite d'harmonie. Je n'ai point plaidé pour une immobilité heureuse qu'accomplirait simplement un cri, mais invoque cette manière de mouvement très violent dont parle Freud en conclusion de son analyse de *l'Homme aux loups*. Et bien entendu,

³⁵ Cf. Mudimbe 1997: 104 (for Diagne) and 143 (for Kagame).

qu'on le sache, ce dernier appel n'a rien à voir avec l'*aphanisis*. Vraiment ? (Mudimbe 1982: 203, responding to Willame 1976).

The point escapes me, partly because I cannot clearly identify whose desire is disappearing here and why. But there is an echo here of passages in *Tales of Faith* (Mudimbe 1997: 112f, 175) where Mudimbe repeatedly speaks of the new desire among young converts that emerged as a result of missionising, and whose transformed and transgressive fulfilment was the project of clerical intellectualism; partly because Freud's *Wolf-man* (Gardiner 1972; cf Freud 1953–1974) ends with an evocation not of parricide, but of a strikingly different form of violence: the fantasised homosexual rape of the son by the father.

The fact that, in the face of overwhelming evidence concerning the eradication of African historic religion, Mudimbe refuses to make a definitive statement against Christianity and its negative effects on Africa, means that (as *Tales of Faith* makes very clear) even though he has become an agnostic, he cannot bring himself to commit parricide vis-à-vis the Roman Catholic Church.

It is not clear what all these insistences on symbolic or vicarious parricide mean in relation to Mudimbe's biological father, about whom I could only pick up from his texts that he was of Songye extraction, while his mother was Luba-Lulua. Death appears not only as the murder of the father contemplated as possible but, after all, undesirable, or as the others' parricide to be condemned, but particularly as Mudimbe's own death:

Is there any individual, reflecting on his or her finitude, who does not experience the sense of being or, at any rate, of belonging to an endangered species? Death, as a closure of existence in the world, sanctions the absurdity or – if one prefers – the mystery of life and forces the observer to evaluate existence from the background of a culture and its a prioris. My sense of belonging to a group reflects a degree of my insertion into its culture, and what my death might signify when I am gone would be my ways of witnessing to the arbitrariness of my culture. The plurality of cultural a prioris is an empirical fact (Mudimbe 1997: 199).

4.1. *An excursion into the plurality of African cultures*

In the preceding quotation, what could Mudimbe's expressions 'my sense of belonging to a group' and 'my culture' possibly mean coming from a person whose life's itinerary has been the celebration of homelessness? And why should he join in the now obsolescent reification of culture? – We are facing the paradox that Mudimbe in his method of philosophy and intellectual history, and in the face of many African intellectuals' affirmations of the local, retreats to the implied, if qualified (Mudimbe 1997: 187f), universalism of the current North Atlantic dominant academic discourse, yet affirms the *sui generis* plurality of African cultures as an empirically demonstrated fact and as one of the achievements of the paradigmatic shift occurring in anthropology with the transition from pre-classic (diffusionism, evolutionism, organicism) to classic (structural-functional) versions of that discipline in the middle of the twentieth century:

Concrete examples of methodological procedures that managed to recognize the proper historic and cultural specificities of each human group were studies in

anthropology of African religions published or signed by M. Fortes (1959, 1965), John Middleton (1960), Marcel Griaule (1948) and Luc de Heusch [*sic*] (1958, 1971, 1972). They taught us that an account of, and attention to, each group's cultural arbitrariness and specific history enabled us to understand that the less visible aspect of cultural transformations might perhaps be the most important from a historical perspective (Mudimbe 1997: 161).³⁶

There is room for amazement here. Few African scholars today, and a diminishing number of non-African Africanists, could be tempted to sing the praises of these works which, although great achievements in their time, are now unmistakably dated. These books rely on structural-functionalist and structuralist models which have since been severely criticised, precisely because – exactly opposite to what Mudimbe suggests – *they are inherently a-historical*. They depict these distinct 'cultures' as timeless givens waiting to be intellectually appropriated in the present through the presentist anthropological technique participant observation – with the sole exception of de Heusch's work, whose attempt to reconstruct the conjectural 'archaeology of Bantu thought' has since been dismissed by the Nestor of African history, Vansina, for being merely elegant (i.e. system-driven, structuralist) instead of genuinely historical (Vansina 1983; cf. van Binsbergen 1992a: 239ff). Moreover these famous anthropological works reflect the 'divide and rule' fragmentation of the African socio-cultural-political space which is a direct product of colonial conquest and colonial administration. They reinforce the image of Africa as a patchwork quilt of bounded, self-contained, mutually unrelated and internally highly integrated and structured distinct 'cultures', each to be neatly identified by its ethnic name. In other words, they perpetuate the Colonial Library and its epistemological and methodological shortcomings, which Mudimbe himself has greatly helped us to spot but, with his usual mildness of judgement, adamantly refusing to throw away the child with the bath-water: however defective and distorting, the Colonial Library is for him also the basis of valid African scholarship by Africans (Mudimbe 1997: 180).

The distinctiveness of African cultures is almost a dogma of cosmopolitan African philosophy, which thus denies what Afrocentrist scholars, and their European allies and predecessors have insisted on: the considerable historical cultural unity of Africa, certainly on a regional level comprising entire sets of previously distinguished 'ethnic cultures', and in certain respects perhaps even on a continental scale (van Binsbergen 1999; also *Global Bee Flight* (forthcoming); 1997a). Mudimbe is not alone in his affirmation of African cultural fragmentation. It is remarkable that outside Afrocentrist circles, the argument of convergence has met with so little acceptance among African philosophers today. Instead they virtually unanimously support the argument of cultural diversity. In Appiah's words:

If we could have traveled through Africa's many cultures in (...) [precolonial times] from the small groups of Bushman hunter-gatherers, with their stone-age materials, to the Hausa kingdoms, rich in worked metal – we should have felt in every place

³⁶ A list of the titles referred to: Fortes 1959; Fortes & Dieterlen 1965; Middleton 1960; Griaule 1966; de Heusch 1958, 1971, 1972.

profoundly different impulses, ideas, and forms of life. To speak of an African identity in the nineteenth century – if an identity is a coalescence of mutually responsive (if sometimes conflicting) modes of conduct, habits of thought, and patterns of evaluation; in short, a coherent kind of human social psychology – would have been ‘to give to nothing a local habitation and a name.’ (Appiah 1992: 174, cited in approval by Bell 1997: 218f n.29).

In line with this stress on precolonial fragmentation lies the African philosopher’s Kaphagawani’s thesis on ‘C4’, which is a scientific formula meant to express ‘the Contemporary Confluence of Cultures on the Continent of Africa. This is a post-colonial phenomenon where different cultures meet and mingle to form new, hybrid forms’ (Kaphagawani & Malherbe 1998: 209). In this formulation the emphasis on a plurality of mutually distinct and bounded cultures does give way to a recognition of greater unity, but extreme multiplicity and fragmentation is still held to be the hallmark of the African past, the point of departure. Such unity between African cultures as is being recognised is taken to be the result of the postcolonial phenomenon of globalisation, which allows this view to salvage the concept of a pristine distinctness of a great number of precolonial cultures in Africa.

The dilemma between a universalising method and a fragmenting description, which Mudimbe is facing here, is not a sign of reproachable weakness on his part, but appears as an inevitable consequence of academic knowledge production through written texts. He knows exactly what the dilemma is, as is clear from the following passage, yet in order to produce a meaningful text he chooses one side of the contradiction, and leaves the other side for others to articulate:

In the 1950s, the structuralist wave in anthropology attempted, in terms of a critique that it strived to establish in relation to the West, to be the sign of a respectful gaze on difference and, in this capacity, maintained that it studied societies that were or are different – both for themselves and in themselves. Yet, there again, the fundamental problem remains, namely, in this process, the relationship of Western culture to other cultures. As Anouar Abdel Malek says, one can affirm methodologically that the century-old refinement of the means of analysing still does not change the very nature of the analysis undertaken. In our day, just as in the Age of Enlightenment, such an analysis falls under the jurisdiction of the will to universalism, under the assumption that all social phenomena are immediately reducible to a single grid (Mudimbe 1997: 168f).

To put it in a provocative manner, any Africa researcher should at least pause momentarily on the following small points in order to ponder his or her scientific or religious practice. The West created the ‘pagan’ in order to ‘Christianize’, ‘underdevelopment’ in order to ‘develop’, the ‘primitive’ in order to engage in ‘anthropology’ and ‘civilize’. These banalities overlay crushing models that must either be accepted or re-evaluated (Mudimbe 1997: 169f).

4.2. *Death again*

After this excursion into the contemporary concept of culture, let us return to a more ultimate concern: death. On the one hand Mudimbe affirms, against the tide of the Africanist anthropology of the turn of the twenty-first century CE, the irreducible plurality of African cultures (the same plurality around which the Colonial Library was built and ordered). Mudimbe’s sympathy for the gems of classic

anthropology as produced by Fortes, Middleton, Griaule, and de Heusch, as discussed above, suggests that he sees them as an anthropological opening up to the liberation of African difference. But as he affirms, a greater liberation still lies in the realization that *death* (the central undercurrent in his work) is the hallmark of cultural purity (the kind of cultural purity affirmed by the classic anthropological model of ethnic diversity and boundedness), so that the affirmation of cultural *métissage* is nothing but the only effective strategy of survival:

Then, strictly speaking, who is not a *métis*? How can any culture claim the purity of an absolute and uncontaminated identity, a pure essence, if, by analogically extending the paradox of an impossible stable identity of the I to a We-subject, we accept that a pure culture-island will become a corpse-culture? (Mudimbe 1997: 199f).

Perhaps my expression 'the affirmation of cultural *métissage* as the only effective strategy of survival' applies to Mudimbe's life in the most literal sense. In the frankly autobiographical Preface to *Parables and Fables* (1991a), the idea of writing in the face of death comes back: in the early 1970s,³⁷ Mudimbe then in his early thirties was diagnosed to be dying of bone cancer, and in anticipatory defiance of such a fate he wrote three books in five months: *Entretailles* (poetry, published 1973, and dedicated to the memory of his French informally adopted brother who was also his student, and who *died* in a motor accident together with his intended bride), *Le Bel immonde* (a novel, published 1976, featuring Central African politics), and *L'Autre face du royaume*, his first attempt 'to interrogate the paradoxes of the social and human sciences (...) specifically (...) anthropology' (Mudimbe 1973, 1976, 1974). In these three books the total of Mudimbe's struggle is contained: the Africa he leaves behind him, Europe which is a vehicle in his intellectual and existential reorientation, and placeless universal science which is to become his airy home. The diagnosis of bone cancer proved wrong, and Mudimbe lived on and became a famous cosmopolitan post-African scholar. Below I will suggest how it is possible to interpret this episode of death-fearing creativity along North Atlantic models, as an escape from another, genuine death: that of African historic culture and religion inside him.

4.3. *Métissage*

The reader of *Tales of Faith*, who has increasingly wondered how the author himself would identify, given his geographical, cultural and academic disciplinary homelessness, only gradually begins to realise that Mudimbe, too, identifies as of 'mixed cultural descent', until he declares so explicitly at the end of the book:

The identity of any individual or human community actualizes itself as a process through three main *ektases*:³⁸ temporalization, or a subjective procedure whereby

³⁷ Mudimbe (1991a: x) dates this illness at five years after the submission of his doctoral dissertation at Louvain in 1970, but since *Entretailles* was already published in 1973, we have to question either this dating, or the claim of that book having been written within five months before or after *Le Bel immonde* (published 1976) and *L'Autre face du royaume* (published 1974).

³⁸ *Ekstasis* is a Greek word used by Plato in the sense of 'extension'.

an individual or a collective consciousness negotiates the norms for its duration as being, as well as those of things in the world; reflection, or the incredible assumption of a reflecting consciousness present in, and separated from, a consciousness reflected on; finally, the last *ektasis*, being-for-others, during which the self conflictually apprehends itself outside of itself as an object for others. These experiences of a consciousness, standing out of itself in order to grasp and comprehend its always fluctuating identity, show well the impossibility of reducing anyone, any human culture, to an immobile essence. More importantly, living, acting and believing in a world in which there is always a history – and there are already other people preceding me – whatever I do, as Sartre would have said, I accomplish it in relation to others. I mean precisely that any action is always a consequence of my *original sin*, my upsurge in a world where I am not alone: *métis*, because of my very identity, which can only be a continuous project towards a transcendence; *métis*, also, by being there and evolving in a space – simultaneously real and constructed – already circumscribed and colonized by others' history, even when these predecessors or contemporaries of mine are my people. Finally, I am a *métis* in the very consciousness of conceiving and apprehending my freedom as both lack and need actualizing itself simultaneously as a negative and positive praxis that is, a negative, purposeful activity because it signifies in what it is the negation of a given; positive, since it is an opening in what is coming. [This follows a quote from Sartre, 1943/1956: 31.]

Then, strictly speaking, who is not a *métis*? How can any culture claim the purity of an absolute and uncontaminated identity, a pure essence, if, by analogically extending the paradox of an impossible stable identity of the I to a We-subject, we accept that a pure culture-island will become a corpse-culture?' (Mudimbe 1997: 199f).

Here the reader's hunch which has built up throughout the book is finally confirmed: *Tales of Faith* is an unusual narrative, and not a detached exercise in the history of ideas, not even a philosophical treatise. It is primarily an attempt to articulate in text a personal autobiographical itinerary, and to assess the end station of *métissité* to which it has taken its author. Who am I to question the success of his efforts, and the credibility of his claims? Let us listen once more to Mudimbe's characterisation of *Tales of Faith*:

'*Tales of Faith* is about the strange constructed place I chose in inhabit so that I could think about the unthinkable: how well the predicament of Sartre's pessimism in 'Hell is other people', meets the supreme beauty of 'I am an Other'. The two positions are inseparable in this space, in which identities are always mixtures facing each other as competitive projects aimed as, to use Schlegel's language, an impossible *ars combinatoria* – I mean a universal and definitive 'logical chemistry' (Mudimbe 1997: 202).

Mudimbe basically writes from a position of homelessness. He spiritually inhabits his *métissité* rather than Congo or Africa. Perhaps it was no accident that his 1970 Ph.D. thesis was on the semantics of *air*, not earth, water, or fire: the least committal element, suspended between Heaven and Earth which the Egyptian air-god Shu, their father (one of the first two creatures, whom Atum produced through masturbation) violently separated from their embrace; the Egyptian hieroglyphic sign shows a feather followed by phonetic and semantic determinants.

Mudimbe analyzes other people's Tales, Parables and Fables, Ideas and Inventions, but for his personal needs retreats to the bare and windy rocks of agnosticism.

His Africa is that of other people, it does not exist as a tangible reality for himself, but at best constitutes a context for contestation, a laboratory for the politics of the liberation of difference. I find this a courageous position, which does do justice to the efforts of Africa-based or Africa-derived subjects as well as to the efforts of Africanists. One of the most remarkable characteristics of Mudimbe's recent writing is his earnest wisdom, which never resorts to cheap attacks, never rushes to easy victories, always sees a glimpse of value and redemption in even the most formidable constructions of hegemonic power, including the Colonial Library itself.

But having said this, let me add that it is also a tragic position, which (apparently because Africa can no longer be a home to Mudimbe) in its rejection of all intellectual claims of African localities, risks dissolving whatever capacity Africa has of offering a home, with all the comforts and spiritual technologies of sociability, reconciliation, diagnosis and healing which a real home entails. The full armour furnished by literary science, psychoanalysis and Western philosophy, the impressive capability of correctly invoking in one passage from Thucydides, Plutarch, Heidegger, Sartre, Freud, Foucault, Lévi-Strauss and Lacan as the very household words they clearly are to him, does not quite dispel the stifling air of emptiness. The construction of self through the liberation of difference, on which Central African clerical intellectualism revolves, is a politics of textual performance, not of substance: asserting difference, not contents, seems to be the game. Ancestral African forms are completely ignored in the process, for at first Christianity, and then agnosticism, have rendered them incredible. Identity is an adventure, not an achievement.

The exemplary clerical intellectuals like Kagame, who have combined the intellectual articulation of their difference as African intellectuals with a total relinquishing of African historical religion, are for Mudimbe the real prophets (Mudimbe 1997: 175) of twentieth century Central African religion. By contrast, prophetism as an aspect of historic African religion is omitted from Mudimbe's narrative, and hardly more than an afterthought is spared for the prophets who have manifestly combined a Christian inspiration with a continued reliance on a sizeable selection of historic African religion, such as Simon Kimbangu, Alice Lenshina, the numerous self-styled witchcraft eradicators who, with a selective and often rapidly eroding Christian specifically Watchtower inspiration, flooded the countryside of Central Africa from about 1920 onwards.³⁹

Let us dwell a bit on the notion of cultural *métissage*, which (although used by Mudimbe in an English-language book) I propose to translate as 'the condition of being of cultural mixed descent'. The concept is borrowed, ultimately from the French colonial language of race, and more directly from an important critical reflection upon colonialism and its language, notably Amselle's seminal discussion

³⁹ van Binsbergen 1981; Fields 1985. Elsewhere Mudimbe takes up the issue of prophetism in Central Africa at greater length, but along essentially the same lines (Mudimbe 1991a: 1–31).

of African ethnicity⁴⁰ as a recent invention within colonial society. Schilder and I have tried to distance ourselves from the constructivism and presentism associated with Amselle's view, albeit in terms which probably created misunderstanding and which Amselle declared a caricature of his views.⁴¹ However this may be, the concept of *métissage* has implications which cast a critical light on Mudimbe's analysis. In the first place it is a biological metaphor, evoking the necessity of the blind play of genes, as against the freedom, choice, contingency of cultural strategies. Mudimbe's heroes, the clerical intellectuals, could freely contemplate and reject the idea of parricide on their European clerical superiors and intellectual predecessors while their historic African allegiance had already been killed by others than themselves; this shows that the biological metaphor of blind genetic necessity is misleading. Mudimbe must be aware of this, considering his lucid and state-of-the-art treatment of race as a biologically non-viable political ideology in contemporary science and society (Mudimbe 1997: 184f).

The biological metaphor is also misleading for another reason. In the biological process of genetic mixture, the genotype displays the more or less equitable combination of two sets of identifiable factors (genes, chromosomes), each set making for either of the original two phenotypes involved; depending on how many different genes control the specific traits in the original phenotypes, the features of the resulting mixed phenotype may range somewhere in between both originals, or (if few genes are involved and some of the values these genes take are dominant, others recessive) the mixed phenotype may look rather like one of the two originals. Neither situation obtains in the case of cultural mixed descent as described by Mudimbe. There is no evidence that in the case of these clerical intellectuals African historic religion and Christianity have somehow achieved an equitable mixture, or that at least deep down, in subconscious layers of their personalities, the African cultural elements linger even though these do not directly manifest themselves in their overt behaviour, in their 'performance'. What we see is African clerical intellectuals who have been effectively socialised into a North Atlantic and increasingly global culture, yet successfully asserting a difference vis-à-vis their North Atlantic superiors. And this they manage to do, not by publicly articulating intact and authentic chunks of African traditional religion and incorporating these into their public conscious lives (they are not overtly praying to their ancestors, they are not overtly staging puberty rites, they do not engage in human sacrifice in order to propitiate royal ancestors or luck-bringing familiar spirits). Their difference is asserted simply by claiming the right to define themselves as an irreducibly new form of socio-cultural existence, in which the practically wholesale adoption of the global model of clerical intellectualism goes hand in hand with their writing about a small selection of utterly externalised, objectified, distanced and transformed (in other words, *virtualised*) images of African

⁴⁰ Amselle 1990. For a similar view on anglophone and lusophone Africa, cf. Vail 1989. Cf. Mudimbe 1997: 152.

⁴¹ Amselle, intervention at a 1995 seminar at Leiden; Schilder & van Binsbergen 1993; van Binsbergen 1997b; van Binsbergen 1992b/1994.

traditional religion. They may re-invoke, through retrodiction, the African spiritual past provided that they emphatically do not live it anymore, and in that respect their transformative appropriation of that past is both a departure from and a simple extension of the so-called Colonial Library which is central to Mudimbe's arguments on knowledge production under conditions of military and spiritual conquest in Central Africa. In short, these clerical intellectuals are not of cultural mixed descent, *but they are in fact mutations within the global clerical intellectual order* – mutation here being defined in the original Hugo de Vries sense of a radical and unsystematic change (in genotype) leading to a radically new and unpredictable manifestation (in phenotype). These clerical intellectuals represent a *new* cultural form, whose Africanness perhaps consists in the somatic and geographical features of their bearers, and in the geographical provenance of the cultural material they distantly and selectively appropriate and transform in intellectual text products. Their Africanness scarcely consists in any sort of lived and professed continuity with the African historic religion. What Mudimbe describes in *Tales of Faith* is the emergence of a new local variant of global culture which has become dominant among the religious, educational and political elite of Central Africa, with similar forms elsewhere in Africa and in the Third World in general.

The Library is thus not only the absolute shining power in terms of classification of beings and things but the locus in which all knowledge transmutes itself into science. (...) From this perspective, colonial sciences (...) assure both the universality and absolute validity of the Western historical experience, and hence the imperativeness of African conversion to its solidity and logic (Mudimbe 1997: 179f).

This is very different, and far more penetrating and convincing, than Horton's 'African conversion' argument which was launched in the early 1970s and greatly influenced the Ranger school of African religious history: the idea that African conversion to world religions in the late precolonial period simply fitted in with the widening up of political, social and economic horizons in the African countryside, since only a monotheistic High God was commensurate to those new secular realities (Horton 1971, 1975). But again, Mudimbe seems to do himself to African historic religion what he exposes as a colonial hegemonic strategy: does he not himself, vis-à-vis African historic religion, assert, like the very Colonial Library he is critiquing in the above quotation, 'both the universality and absolute validity of the Western historical experience, and hence the imperativeness of African conversion to its solidity and logic?' (Mudimbe 1997: 179f).

The point is not that Mudimbe's understanding of the conversion process is to be faulted. Most illuminatingly he argues that this process consists of a triple negation: of otherness, of the plurality of histories, and of any rationality to be found outside the respectable Judaeo-Greek philosophical canon (Mudimbe 1997: 147). He demonstrates how in a nineteenth century North Atlantic thought spell-bound by Hegel, which does not allow for a plurality of histories, Africa does not and cannot exist. The point is that Mudimbe does not seem to realise that his very critique of this conversion process, which produced him and hence has taken on a personal reality from which he can as little detach himself as from his body or

from the air (!) he breathes, overdetermines him to take such deconstructive, dismissive views of Africa and of African historic religion as he does take: ‘Consequently, conversion is an imperative, a *sine qua non* condition for inscribing oneself into a history’ (Mudimbe 1997: 59).

Of course Mudimbe means this statement as a rendering of the hegemonic pre-conceptions of missionary Christianity. But that does not take away the fact that, in banning African historic religion from the substance of his argument, denying it rationality, repeatedly dismissing it as incredible as if it can be totally assessed by epistemological criteria, and in glorifying the project of clerical and post-clerical intellectualism from which his own career and mutant identity have sprung, he takes the personal fact and necessity of such conversion for granted.

5. *Mudimbe and historic African religion*

Remarkably, I have not yet spotted any passage in Mudimbe’s oeuvre (but I may easily have missed it considering its size and bilingual nature) where the concept of parricide is equally applied to the unmistakable lack of demonstrable retention of any historic Central African religion on the part of these clerics and post-clerics (like Mudimbe himself). They tended to be second or third generation Christians, and hence one might surmise that others had done the killing of local historic religion for them: their own parents, and the missionaries who had somehow managed to substitute themselves as father figures in the place of the paternal kin of these African clerical intellectuals. The message, so implicit as to be entirely taken for granted, of Mudimbe’s kaleidoscopic and multi-genre narrative of the itinerary of these African clerical intellectuals in his book *Tales of Faith*, is that by the middle of the twentieth century none of them was in direct personal contact any more, as a practitioner, with Central African historic religion. Kagame’s search as a student at the major seminary, after *La philosophie bantu-rwandaise de l’Être* (Kagame 1955), was a retrieval, a reconstruction on the basis of deliberate research. Mudimbe had to base his own highly recommendable close readings of Congolese myth of genesis and other historic religious texts on an experience testifying to his cultural homelessness:

My experience would define itself somewhere between the practice of philosophy with its possible intercultural applications⁴² and the sociocultural and intersubjective space which made me possible: my Luba-Lulua mother, my Songye father, the Swahili cultural context of my primary education in Katanga (Shaba), the Sanga milieu of my secondary education from 1952 to 1959 in Kakanda, near Jadotville (Likasi), and, later on, at the Catholic seminary of Mwera, near what was then Elisabethville, and my brief sojourn in a Benedictine monastery in Rwanda (Mudimbe 1991: 124f).⁴³

⁴² Elsewhere in the same book Mudimbe is to declare his ‘indebtedness to Willy Bal. Thirty years ago, he taught me how to read a text with a philologist’s eye, and later on, at Louvain, he patiently introduced me to the art of reading as a demanding under-taking’ (Mudimbe 1991a: xxii). Cf. Bal 1963.

⁴³ Part of the same quotation was used in a footnote above when Mudimbe’s claim to ethnographic authority was presented.

Beyond what is implied and hidden in such local languages as one learns to speak as a child and a teenager, one can hope to inherit but very little of historic African religion in such an itinerary from the age of five or six on. It is therefore unlikely that, instead of the previous killing of this paternal culture by others, a different mythical scheme should be invoked here: African historic religion, Africa in general as a myth and a concept, does not consciously appear here as the mother however prominent that image is in the construction of that continent by writers as diverse as Basil Davidson (1961) and the Afrocentrist ben-Jochanan (1988). There appears to be no deliberate maternal imagery of Africa in Mudimbe's work, no attempt to direct a filial mystique of love and identification upon the idea of that continent. Only by gross imposition might one interpret Mudimbe's consistent, repeated, and relentless deconstruction of the idea of Africa in his two best known books (*The Invention of Africa*, 1988; and *The Idea of Africa*, 1994) as an attempt at matricide. Meanwhile his consistent refusal to celebrate Africa as the self-evident focus of Black identity and even – in terms of strong Afrocentrism – as the source of all human civilisation might be interpreted as fratricide by the many African American, and African, Afrocentrists holding such views.⁴⁴ I am inclined to read Mudimbe's relation to historic African religion, and to Africa in general, in terms of a still different myth: one which derives from the domain of African male puberty rites, and which amounts to the fact that the son dies vis-à-vis the mother, and the mother and her world vis-à-vis the son, at the moment that the son sets out to be initiated in the sacred forest, access to which is forbidden to women. His clerical education and subsequent clerical (albeit briefly) and Western intellectual career have constituted for Mudimbe an initiation by virtue of which historic African religion has died on him. It is as the familiar case of the priestly son from a humble rural family in the Roman Catholic, Southern regions of the Netherlands or in Belgium: he visits the house of his mother, and by virtue of his now incomparably elevated status – considered to have left an indelible mark on his soul at ordination – has become an exalted and condescending stranger there, rendered taboo by the almost untenable sacredness which his direct link with Rome and heaven bestow upon him.

In itself, the Colonial Library is not so much about preserving past or present narratives, customs and knowledge as constituting a body or bodies having in their own right a particular quality inscribed in a given history, but about bringing together these things and collapsing them in a 'primitive background' that a new universe (the colonial) and a new cosmology (conversion) can translate and transform into an advanced modernity. (...) It seems clear that both the Western *savoirs des simples* as well as the African invented primitive backgrounds could be understood as refused knowledges – that is, as the tragic necessity of an ill-known desire whose origin comes from elsewhere (Mudimbe 1997: 176).

⁴⁴ Berlinerblau 1999; Fauvelle-Aymar et al. 2000; Howe 1999. My review article around the first book is forthcoming in *Journal of African History*, I have a contribution on the Black Athena debate in the second book, and defended Afrocentrism against the third book in van Binsbergen 2000a.

That is magnificently formulated, but it is also precisely what Mudimbe does to African historic religion: reduce it to the status of ‘refused knowledge’.

Spending many pages to arrive at an original definition of religion which should be capable of capturing a finely tuned and critically purified ‘primitive’ religion characterised by the ‘midnight zero qualities of ipse-ity’ (Mudimbe 1997: 25), Mudimbe never comes round to applying such a definition to Central Africa in order to identify and discuss forms of African historic religion there, but only describes the conversionist and unavoidably distorting appropriations of these forms in the hands of anthropologists, missionaries, and (in a process of creative retrodiction, by which they liberate and assert their difference) by African clerical and post-clerical intellectuals.

Admittedly, the fact that Mudimbe concentrates on varieties of Christianity and scarcely touches on African historic religion, is to some extent a consequence of a theoretical position which includes Christianity and historic African religion alike:

The reconversion – which is actually a rupture – from a psychological to a sociological model and then to Lévy-Bruhl’s anthropological paradigm, exerts an influence upon the way we read the reality of African religions today. The traditional readings are not rendered as part of a cultural order *sui generis* but, indeed, as signs and proofs of something else, namely, epistemological categories unfolding from an intellectual configuration completely alien to the cultural spaces they claim to reflect (Mudimbe 1997: 16).⁴⁵

African historic religion does however enter the argument of *Tales of Faith* to the extent to which it was appropriated, by certain missionary authors, into Christianity, as a *preparatio Evangelii*, a stepping-stone towards the Gospel (ibid.: 76f). Such liberation of the oppressed as the learned Cameroonian pastor Ela envisages through his missionary work among his fellow Cameroonians, takes local religious practices seriously and leads to a ‘sometimes iconoclastic ambition’ (ibid.: 80) directed as the empty fetishes of missionary Christianity – but what goes unnoticed is the far greater iconoclasm that all but eclipsed African historic religion from visibility in Central Africa. The oppressed poor scarcely manage to summon Mudimbe’s passion: distantly or even callously, he calls Ela’s commitment to their cause ‘fascinating’ (ibid.: 82)!

When Mudimbe speaks of ‘an incredible miracle’ and identifies as an agnostic, he evokes the epistemological impossibility of religious belief as a rational position. St Augustine’s *credo quia absurdum*, in Latin, would be a typical phrase for the post-clerical classicist Mudimbe, to embellish his French or English prose. Yet at least two points can be made in defence of African historic religion, so that it does not have to be crushed under the impact of allegedly universal epistemologies from the North Atlantic. The first point I shall explain by reference to common anthropological ethnocentrism in the study of African religion; the second point is made by Mudimbe himself, relying on de Certeau.

⁴⁵ The same point is taken up again in detail (ibid.: 159f). What this really says is that European text on African religion will always be alien and alienating.

My first point is that Mudimbe's insistence on the incredible nature of both Christianity and African historic religion reiterates a position which is basically ethnocentric and hegemonic. Regrettably, that position coincides with that habitually taken in the anthropological study of African religion.

In cultural anthropology statements of certain types are eligible to be assessed as true or false:

- the ethnographer's statement to the effect that her ethnographic description of concrete emic details is valid;
- the ethnographer's statement to the effect that her theoretical, etic analysis is valid;
- the individual informants' statements that they render fact, representations and rules validly.

There is however a fourth type of statement which cultural anthropologist absolutely exclude from the question concerning truth:

- the participants' statement that their collective representations are a valid description of reality (both in its sensory and in its meta-sensory aspect, visible and invisible etc.).

Following the later Wittgenstein Winch has show us that the truth of the latter type of statement cannot be established in general and universally, but depends on the language-specific, meaning-defining form of life which is at hand. Whether in a certain society witches do or do not exist, cannot be answered with the universal statement that witches do exist, or do not exist, but can only be answered by reference to the specific life-forms at hand in that society – and of such life forms there are always more than one at the same time and place (Winch 1970: 100f; Sogolo, 1993; Jarvie 1972). Now, cultural relativism as a central profession point of departure of classic anthropology may perhaps mean, theoretically, that the exclusion of this fourth category depends on respect for whatever is true in the other life form or cultural orientation; but in practice it nearly always comes down to the following. However much the ethnographer has invested in the acquisition of linguistic and cultural knowledge so that local collective representations can be unsealed for her, and however much she gradually internalises these collective representations as a private person – in her professional formal utterances (in the forms of academic writing-up) she does not allow the collective representations she has studied, the benefit of the doubt, nor the respect she pretends to be due to the collectively other.

The tacit point of departure of the cultural anthropological professional practice (and in this respect it does not distance itself from North Atlantic society as a whole) is: Collective representations of other societies under study cannot be true, unless they coincide one hundred percent with the collective representations of the researcher's own society of origin. Of course, both the researcher's society of origin and the cultural orientation under study construct a truth-creating life world – which is a situation suggestive of a relativist approach. But according to the conventions of ethnography such a life world may be one-sidedly broken

down if it is the other's life world, and left intact when it is the researcher's own. Just try to realise what this means for the confrontation, throughout the modern world, in institutional, political and media settings, between such major and powerful North Atlantic institutional complexes as democracy, medicine, education, Christianity, and pre-existing local alternatives in the respective fields. Anthropologists may pay lip service to the latter from a humanitarian and aesthetic point of view but – they for their own sanity and professional survival they have to abide by the adage that they cannot be true. Let us have a look at myself as an example.

Born in the Netherlands (1947), I was trained at the university of my home town as an anthropologist specialising in religion. From my first fieldwork (1968), when I investigated saint worship and the ecstatic cult in rural North Africa, I have struggled with this problem – which I am inclined to consider as the central problem of interculturality. With gusto I sacrificed to the dead saints in their graves, danced along with the ecstatic dancers, experienced the beginning of mystical ecstasy myself, built an entire network of fictive kinsmen around. Yet in my ethnography I reduced the very same people to numerical values in a quantitative analysis, and I knew of no better way to describe their religious representations than as the denial of North Atlantic or cosmopolitan natural science (van Binsbergen 1985a; 1980; 1985b). It was only twenty years later when, in the form of a novel (*Een Buik Open – Opening a Belly* – 1988) I found the words to testify to my love for and indulgence in the North African life forms which I had had to keep at a distance as an ethnographer; and my two-volume, English-language book manuscript on this research is still lying idly on a shelf. In the course of many years and several African fieldwork locations, always operating in the religious and the therapeutic domain, I gradually began to realise that I loathed the cynical professional attitude of anthropology, and that I had increasingly difficulty sustaining that attitude. Who was I that I could afford to make believe, to pretend, wherever the undivided serious commitment of my research participants was involved? Several among them have played a decisive role in my life, as examples, teachers, spiritual masters, lovers. In Guinea-Bissau, in 1983, I did not remain the observer of the oracular priests but I became their patient – like nearly all the born members of the local society were. In the town of Francistown, Botswana, from 1988, under circumstances which I have discussed at length elsewhere (van Binsbergen 1991; 1998) – the usual advice for fieldwork became so insupportable to me that I had to throw overboard all professional considerations. I became not only the patient of local diviner-priests (*sangomas*), but at the end of a long therapy course ended up as one of them, and thus as a believer in the local collective representations. At the time I primarily justified this as a political deed, for me as a white man in an area which had been disrupted by white monopoly capitalism. Now more than then I realise that it was also and primarily an epistemological position-taking – a revolt against the professional hypocrisy in which the hegemonic perspective of anthropology reveals itself. It was a position-taking which in fact expelled me from cultural anthropology (although I did go by my own choice) and which created the conditions for the step which I finally made when occupying my present chair in intercultural philosophy.

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

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

The ambiguity of theological projects cannot but lead us back to an essential question: how can we comprehend the credibility of Christianity in the Third World? The late Michel de Certeau notes in *The practice of everyday life* (1984) that 'the credibility of a discourse is what first makes believers act in accord with it. It produces practitioners. To make people believe is to make them act ... etc.' (Mudimbe 1997: 82f; de Certeau 1984: 148).

Mudimbe uses this convincing line of thought with relation to missionary Christianity, which is unmistakably incredible for the agnostic that he repeatedly professes to be at this point in his life, and which he claims to have been at least since his 1968 days at Paris-Nanterre.⁴⁶ But why does Mudimbe allow this

⁴⁶ 'At Nanterre (...) I did not hide the fact that I was then a practicing Catholic, although, philosophically, agnostic.' (Mudimbe 1991a: ix). He can hardly have been an agnostic when he stayed at the Catholic seminary of Mwere near Lubumbashi in the early 1960s,

explanation to apply exclusively to Christianity in Africa, and not to African historic religion which is rendered credible in praxis in essentially the same way?

Meanwhile an alternative interpretation presents itself of Mudimbe's presumed bone cancer, its being an illusion based on misdiagnosis, the explosion of creativity in all his genres of text production (poetry, novel, essay in the philosophy of science), and the subsequent disappearance of the symptoms. Described thus, we have an event rendered in the global language of medical rationality (which however misfired, in this case) and academic and literary book production. I would read the case very differently as an African diviner-priest with thirty years of experience in a cultural setting, the Nkoya people of Western Central Zambia, with strong cultural, migratory and linguistic links with the Luba people from Congo (with whom Mudimbe identifies on his mother's side). In the cosmology of Central Africa, bones are constituted of the ancestors' coagulated sperm, which may be symbolised as white beads, or as the diviner's bones on which diagnosis is based. Having converted lock, stock and barrel to an alien world-view, to clerical intellectualism of a global signature and North Atlantic orientation, Mudimbe's ancestral heritage could be said to be dying – culturally in the sense that beyond the Luba and possibly Songye language he allowed hardly anything of the ancestral culture to remain part of his life, and physically in that his very bones were giving signs of literally decaying. However, that conversion was not an illusion but a fact, and it allowed him to tap – through the act of textual creation – such vital spiritual and physical resources for transformation and reconstruction of self, as were residing in another, at least equally powerful world-view, the one to which he had converted. And there the true miracle happened: the bone cancer which at one stage was not an illusion based on misdiagnosis, but a fact, was arrested by the creative transformation which Mudimbe unleashed in these five months, what had been alienation from an ancestral heritage until then had become an authentic source of life, and he survived to become the most successful, famous, profound and heroic representative of the new category of cultural converts which make up a sizeable proportion of today's African intellectuals, a veritable *métis*.

If African historic religion is no longer the dominant cohesive social force in the urban and intellectual context of Kinshasa, Lubumbashi and other Congolese cities, this does not mean that such religion has entirely disappeared from the contemporary Congolese social life in the rural areas; recent ethnographic research by accomplished ethnographers like Devisch and de Boeck has demonstrated its continued vitality and viability (de Boeck 1991a; de Boeck & Devisch 1994; Devisch 1984; 1986; 1991; Devisch & Brodeur 1999).

If African historic religion has succeeded in surviving to some extent in the countryside of Central Africa, why is it far less conspicuous in the big cities? As in Belgium, Roman Catholicism was something of a state religion in Belgian

or when he entered a Rwandan Benedictine convent as a novice, but from the latter he soon resigned (Mudimbe 1997: 137); cf. also Mudimbe 1991a: 125, 'my brief sojourn'.

Congo, Rwanda and Burundi. This does not mean that there is a 100% overlap between the religious and the statal domain; for as Mudimbe acknowledges the Central African colonies, like Belgium, had a certain plurality of European ideological expressions (Protestantism, Freemasonry, and one may add socialism) rival to Roman Catholicism, and some of them with rather disproportionately great power in national politics. However, the effect of the practical coinciding of state and world religion is a particular form of micropolitics, which has a direct bearing on the eclipse of religious alternatives to Roman Catholicism from public and even private life. There is a constant reinforcing between statal and religious sanctioning in the policing of citizen's everyday life. The state, which in its twentieth century form is primarily a democratically legitimated oligarchy, assumes reality partly through the citizen's submission to and veneration of the representations of the church; and the intangible sanctions of the church somehow receive a vicarious backing from the display of physical force (the prison, the police, the army) and the powerful bureaucratic procedures proper to the state. The Enlightenment rationality of the modern state nicely matches the verbose doctrinal rationalisations of Roman Catholic theology. The result of all this is that in the consciousness and practices of the citizens all heterodoxy tends to be shunned as criminal and as an act of national treason, by virtue of strongly internalised modes of assessment, self-control, and domestication. In everyday Belgian life especially outside the big cities, even Protestantism may be seen in this heterodox light, and so are certainly the expressions of 'paganism', be they European, African, or from a different extraction. (For that very same reason they also invite common fascination as expressions of defiance of a paternalistic, unaccountable, and increasingly inefficient state, as e.g. the Dutroux affair, the Nijvel gang, and even the middle- and upper-class appeal of Freemasonry would suggest). Heterodoxy instils the ordinary law-abiding citizen with a sense of horror and especially shame, comparable to the shame adults feel in cases of imperfect public concealment of their own bodily functions (signs of incontinence, of menstruation leaking through, etc.). In a system of evaluation along such axes as child versus adult, animal versus human, stupid versus intelligent, exclusion versus inclusion, punishment versus reward, heterodoxy thus installs itself on the negative end. Mudimbe is as good a guide as any critic of colonialism to identify these social pressures towards compliance with world-religion orthodoxy, but it is important to realise that these pressures are not limited to the colonial situation. They can still be seen to work in post-colonial African societies: among the citizens as a mode of acquiescence; while among the political elite the semi-secret semi-public display of heterodox horrors (for instance in the occasional display of violence, sorcery, and human sacrifice) reinforces such acquiescence, since these horrors are profoundly threatening to the citizens (Toulabor 2000). Therefore, in the public culture of Central Africa from at least the middle of the twentieth century if not earlier, much as in the public culture of Botswana, considerable sections of the population (especially the urbanites and middle classes) are effectively shielded off from African historic religion by an effective screen of internalised shame. In Zambia in the early 1970s I detected (as a younger and less sensitive

observer) nothing similar, but over the past thirty years I have seen the gradual installation of a precisely such a screen. Today this altered state of affairs occasionally makes me appear a social fool in that country, when unthinkingly I publicly mediate a historic African religious identity as someone who has obviously not permanently resided in the country recently, whose main Zambian identity was formed in one of the rural areas of central western Zambia in the early 1970s when African historic religion was still a dominant idiom there, who subsequently became a diviner-priest in Botswana according to a religious idiom which meanwhile has gained considerable public currency in Zambia as well, and therefore as someone who does not always realise that it is no longer socially acceptable to mediate African historic religion in the public space of the town and the open road.

One may wonder why Mudimbe should stop, as he does, at the evocation of the few heroes and saints of the cultural mutant order of clerical intellectualism (Kagame, Kizerbo, Mulago, Mveng), and not trace the installation of that mutant order throughout Central African society in the second half of the twentieth century. With the general spread of formal education (however low its level), and the prominence of clerical intellectuals in the educational system, the main conditions were set for the percolation of (admittedly attenuated, compromised, versions of) this mutant order far outside the seminaries, convents and universities where it was originally engendered, to become, perhaps, a standard cultural orientation among tens, possibly hundreds of thousands of people of the urban middle class in Central Africa. Did this happen? If it did, how did this influence the political and religious itinerary of the societies of Congo, Rwanda and Burundi in the second half of the twentieth century? If it did, how did it help to explain Mobutuism, its politics of authenticity (which, much like clerical intellectualism, amounted to a virtualisation and thus effectively an annihilation of historical African culture and religion), the specific form of proliferation of church organisations which took place in Congo, and the general emergence of a contemporary social order in which Christianity and literacy have become the norm, and African historic religion has been eclipsed or at best has gone underground, mainly to emerge in highly selective and virtualised form in certain practices of African Independent churches. Is perhaps the violence (more specifically the death) which forms the refrain of Mudimbe's spiritual itinerary, and which I am inclined to interpret as the murder of African historic religion, akin to the extreme and extremely massive violence which has swept Congo, Burundi and Rwanda throughout the second half of the twentieth century? Anthropologists like Devisch and de Lame have struggled with the interpretation of the latter form of violence in Central Africa (Devisch 1996; 1995; de Lame 1996), and their sociological interpretations, while adding a social scientific dimension to the psychoanalytical and philosophical hermeneutics of Mudimbe, certainly do ring somewhat naive in the light of Mudimbe's essayistic philosophising, although the latter does lack sociological imagination and manifests the literature scholar's disinclination to think in terms of large-scale social categories and their institutions.

This means that we might yet take seriously Mudimbe's claim that *Tales of Faith* is about any post-colonial individual (Mudimbe 1997: 198), and not just about himself and a handful of fellow clerical and post-clerical intellectuals from Central Africa. Despite his exceptional erudition, cosmopolitan orientation, and success, Mudimbe's predicament is to a considerable extent that of the contemporary Central African middle classes in general. A glimpse of what lies at today's far end of the itinerary that started with Kagame c.s., may be gathered from the following impression, which I owe entirely to the ongoing Ph.D. research of Julie Duran-Ndaya:

In July, 2000, Kinshasa was the scene of a major church conference of the Combat Spirituel (Spiritual Combat) movement. The conference involved close to 20,000 people, many of whom had travelled to Kinshasa from western Europe and other places of the Congolese diaspora. Obviously we are dealing here with a highly significant social phenomenon at a massive scale. The movement caters for upper middle class and professional people, especially women. Women also play leading roles in the movement's organisation. The movement's doctrine and ritual combine an original re-reading of the Bible with techniques of self-discovery and self-realisation under the direction of female leaders. The spiritual battle which members have to engage in, is a struggle for self-realisation in the face of any kind of negations or repressions of personal identity, especially such as are often the fate of ambitious middle-class women in diasporic situations. In order to achieve this desired self-realisation, it is imperative that all existing ties with the past, as embodied in the traditional cultural norms of historic Central African society, and as represented by the ancestors, are literally trampled underfoot. Thus a major part of regular church ritual is to go through the motions of vomiting upon evocations of the ancestors, and of violently and repeatedly stamping on their representations. The catharsis which this is to bring about is supposed to prepare one for the modern, hostile world. Some members experience very great difficulty in thus having to violently exorcise figures and symbols of authority and identity which even in the diffuse, virtualised kinship structure of urban Congolese society today have been held in considerable respect. But while this predicament suggests at least some resilience of historic African religion (otherwise there would be no hesitation at trampling the past and the ancestors), it is practically impossible for diasporic Congolese to tap, for further spiritual guidance, the resources of historic African religion in the form of divination, therapy and protective medicine: not one reliable and qualified Congolese specialist in historic African religion (*nganga*) is to be found in, for instance, The Netherlands or Belgium.⁴⁷

The make-up of this topical situation is reminiscent of that of the clerical intellectual mutation half a century ago: the literate and Christian format appropriated as self-evident yet subjected to personal selective transformation, the rejection of an ancestral past and of African traditional religion, the total inability to derive any spiritual resources from the latter, and the effect of being propelled into a mutant cosmopolitan cultural and spiritual solution which is African by the adherent original geography and biology, but not in substance.

⁴⁷ This passage based on Duran-Ndaya 1999. I am grateful for the many discussions I had with Mrs Duran-Ndaya on her fascinating ongoing Ph.D. research.

6. *A comparison between Mudimbe's itinerary and my own*

My own intellectual itinerary started out from a different but similar initial position, for a long time ran parallel to Mudimbe's but precisely with regard to African historic religion reached the opposite point, largely because this was not part of my historic cultural heritage as it might have been of his. Let me therefore, in conclusion, seek to illuminate Mudimbe's trajectory by offsetting it against my own.

Mudimbe is a capable, creative and courageous thinker – one who can stand the vertigo of high anxiety, being fundamentally homeless and alone without other illusions than the quest for a placeless science and truth. To him, the rest is 'incredible', is *belles lettres*. Mudimbe's *Tales of Faith* amount to an 'act of faith' in the sense of *auto-da-fé*, the most terrible destructive act to which Roman Catholicism as a regime of control was capable of. The transmutation which produced clerical intellectualism and thus gave us Mudimbe, was also an *auto-da-fé* eradicating historic African religion from visibility and accessibility in Central African life today.

And myself: Like Mudimbe, I started out in life (1947) from a global periphery, in my case an urban slum in Amsterdam, The Netherlands. Like Mudimbe, I owed my excellent secondary education to the Roman Catholic church mission (which was active in the slum by operating a community centre and chapel), was a choir boy, and soon appropriated the primacy of literate text production which is inherent in that situation by writing poetry at a professional, publishable level of accomplishment. Like Mudimbe, I shed whatever ancestral culture I could have inherited. I did so because, like Mudimbe, I was co-opted into a higher social class with a much more open window on globally circulating culture; and in my case there was an additional reason which may or may not have obtained in Mudimbe's case: the terror of physical and sexual violence which my father exercised over the family in which I grew up, and my mother's ambivalent attitude concerning this state of affairs, installed parricide as my central conscious desire ever since I was seven years old – the main topic also of my praying requests to God. A rejection of my father's urban slum culture was the main socially accepted means of carrying out such parricide. Like Mudimbe, I became a student, accomplished member, and philosophical critic of colonial and postcolonial anthropology. Even though, as in Mudimbe's case, the Roman Catholic church provided the main venue of secondary education and globally circulating refined civilised culture (*belles lettres*, classical music, in general the tastes and styles of the polite global public), there was no need for me to pursue the priesthood: not only had I lost my once ardent faith when fifteen year old, but also, as I was nearing graduation from secondary school, a large number of academic and other career opportunities opened up for me in a democratic complex urban North Atlantic society eagerly expanding the ranks of its middle classes by co-optation from among the working classes; however, with a head-start on me of half a generation earlier my half-brother had started on an ecclesiastic career soon abortive, and for others from the rural and Roman Catholic South of the Netherlands

(like my friend and final Ph.D. supervisor Matthew Schoffeleers) this was the obvious road to social and cultural upward mobility – as it was for Mudimbe in colonial and early postcolonial Congo.

Without much noticeable bitterness, deliberately refusing to proceed to parricide vis-à-vis his European superiors and the ideals of culture and scholarship they stood for, Mudimbe was emancipated from an abortive ecclesiastic career (he was a Benedictine novice in Rwanda) in order to become a post-clerical intellectual, first in France, subsequently back in Congo and finally in the United States, increasingly consolidating the post-African global cultural mutation which he and his peers represented.

My own itinerary through academia, though also marked with early successes (acting Professor of African Anthropology, Leiden, 1976; Simon Professor of Anthropology, Manchester, 1980; Academic Co-director of the African Studies Centre, Leiden, 1980), and marked by the same lack of anticlerical resentment combined with agnosticism, was far less than Mudimbe's a successful retreat into a largely self-constructed global home. On the contrary, my academic career was full of insecurities, doubts, conflicts, and ruptures. Although anthropology, and scientific rationality in general (partly under the influence of my first wife, a physicist) unleashed an indefatigable passion in me from the first moment when, as a third year student, I was prompted to combine theoretical analysis with empirical ethnographic research, strangely throughout the 1970s and 1980s my first subjective identity remained that of a poet and a literary prose writer, who approached his academic writing with cynicism as a form of routinised production inherently incapable of redemption or truth; who constantly defied the conventions of polite academic life in frequent attempts at fratricide and parricide, wasting three academic supervisors before finally defending my Ph.D. thesis on *Religious change in Zambia* under the aegis of an ex-missionary who had been part of Mudimbe's Central African intellectual scene himself, Matthew Schoffeleers; and who proved incapable of observing a healthy objectifying distance as an anthropologist in the field. This culminated in the early 1990s, when in the course of fieldwork into the culture of a northeastern Botswana boom town (Francistown) as a meeting place between the African historic culture, and globally mediated culture, I was for the first time given an African spiritual home, in the course of a long and painful therapy in the ecstatic religion that is one of the main spiritual expressions in that part of the world; at the end I came out as a practising *sangoma*.

My emphatic witnessing to this step in professional and public contexts made clear that it was not just another field-work strategy in the pursuit of secret information, but a deliberate denial of the objectifying, implicitly hegemonic rationality of anthropology – a parting parricide. This triggered a series of further intellectual dislocations. My Marxist-inspired structural-functionalism gave way to a highly unpopular search for comprehensive connections in space and time, linking the Southern African divination system I had been trained in as a *sangoma*, to the magic and science of West Africa, Islam, Ancient Greece, the Ancient Near East, and China. I joined the *Black Athena* debate, began to explore its implication

for our image of Africa, and increasingly identified as a supporter and defender of Afrocentrism. All this required me to leave anthropology and Central African religious history, and my patrons in these fields, effectively behind (a further parricide) and to take up or resume philological, historical, and epistemological studies, Assyriology, Egyptology, archaeology, astronomy even, far beyond the paradigmatic and geographical parochialism of my earlier Africanist anthropology. While my becoming a *sangoma* had been an intuitive and highly emotional gesture, I struggled to gradually bring out its epistemological and political implications. From an anthropologist, I became a philosopher, eligible to the Rotterdam chair of intercultural philosophy; needless to say my predecessor gave signs of experiencing my succession as parricidal. The Rotterdam position continues to be combined with empirical Africanist anthropological research at Leiden, poetry and *sangoma*-hood at my new Haarlem home in the Netherlands (where I frequent the *sangoma* shrine in my backyard) and when in Africa. Complex struggles seek to attune these identities to the role expectations and existential predicaments of Dutch–Belgian family life. Meanwhile in the course of the 1990s I was finally granted, but soon lost again, another African home as an adoptive son of King Kahare Kabambi of the Nkoya people of Zambia, a Luba-related group among whom I have done research since the early 1970s.

Both Mudimbe and myself have ended up, from socially very peripheral points of departure, in a secure central North Atlantic position, cherishing the comforting qualified universalism that comes with academia, philosophy, classics, belles lettres. For Mudimbe, the African heritage that was never to be his (because the micropolitics of clerical education denied him access to and accomplishment in African historic religion) continues to intrigue him. He has made it its life's work to pinpoint the intellectual history and philosophical implications of these micropolitics, and to define, critique and increasingly control through his highly influential writings, how the image of Africa has been constructed and should be deconstructed. He has become the most qualified, almost plenipotentiary censor of his own spiritual and cultural loss as a post-African. For him, the Africa of historic local religious forms is a domain of the imaginary, of make-believe: fable, tale, myth, performance etc.

I feel that Mudimbe is stating only one side of the story. He has fallen victim to what we might call the deceptive politics of translocalisation, much as I have fallen victim to the deceptive politics of locality by becoming and remaining a *sangoma* (cf. Appadurai 1995; de Jong 2001; van Binsbergen 1991, 1988). The gods I pray to in a loosely African fashion (some of them as particular as my own or my patients' ancestors, others tending to universality such as Mwali, or the Virgin Mary, or the God whose mother she is) do not need an epistemological validation because the rite turns them from imaginary into real and into social facts which make a difference since they decisively govern the behaviour of sizeable sets of people.

There is one point in *Tales of Faith* where Mudimbe comes close to articulating and analysing a movement similar to my own: when he discusses the French Jesuit missionary de Rosny who after a quarter of a century of work in Cameroon

published a famous book on his initiation there as a diviner-priest (*nganga*) (Rosny 1981; 1992: 31f):

There is more: 'and yourself, he told me one day, what do you think of all that?' The French Jesuit could not but have perceived what this invitation from a friend was possibly echoing and its religious value. Indeed, there is little evidence in calling upon a connection between this invitation and Jesus' question to his disciples about himself: 'and you, he said to them, what do you think about me?'⁴⁸ It is the coincidence of points of view here that constitutes an interesting symbolic challenge: an invitation from outside, a *vox clamans in deserto*, a voice coming from the wilderness of the unknown; and, on the other side, an expectation, a *fides* or faith facing and uncovering the unbelievable rationality of an unknown system, of a revelation. As Jean-Luc Nancy writes apropos such a mysterious call:

'The other is called forth to where there is neither subject nor signification. It is the wilderness of pleasure, or of joy. It is not desolate even if it is arid. It is neither desolate nor consoled. It is beyond either laughter or tears.

'– But still, don't you have to concede – and you seemed to have done so at one point – that voice is first uttered in tears?

'– That's true, that's the birth of tragedy. But what comes before that birth is the delivery of voice and it is not yet tragic. Those are tears and cries which know nothing of tragedy or comedy' (Mudimbe 1997: 32, quoting Nancy 1993: 246).

Mudimbe remains remarkably aloof in his comments here, not prepared to make a substantial statement about the forms of African historic religion to which de Rosny was unmistakably introduced, but instead invoking the *unbelievable rationality of an unknown system* (unknown to whom? not to de Rosny anymore, nor to his Cameroonian interlocutor, but to Mudimbe and the textual genre of North Atlantic philosophical essay that he pursues), 'a voice crying in the wilderness',⁴⁹ and Nietzsche's *Birth of tragedy* (1872/1930). Mudimbe appears to be prepared to take recourse to anything, if only it safely belongs to the North Atlantic intellectual canon, and as such can save us from having to think or act *beyond* the defective epistemological status of African historic religion, beyond its nature as certified to be incredible. And at this point in his text, he rushes on to speak of something else.

Performance is more than the liberation of difference for difference's sake, it is the creation of a world which, while man-made and make-believe, yet takes on a logic and a relevance of its own, reshaping the contingencies of life into a place

⁴⁸ The unreferenced Bible quotation appears to be slightly corrupt, as befits a Roman Catholic, especially a Roman Catholic proclaimed agnostic who is a post-clerical intellectual now proclaiming to be agnostic. Cf. Matt 22: 41–42: 'While the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them, 42 Saying, What think ye of Christ? whose son is he? They say unto him, The son of David.' So the question was not asked from the disciples, but from the Pharisees. Or alternatively Acts 13: 25: 'And as John fulfilled his course, he said, Whom think ye that I am? I am not he. But, behold, there cometh one after me, whose shoes of his feet I am not worthy to loose'.

⁴⁹ Cf. Matt. 3:3: 'For this is he that was spoken of by the prophet Esaias, saying, The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'

to inhabit, to cherish, and to heal. Religion is more than a definitional exercise, more than a defective epistemology believing the incredible: it is the symbolic transformation through which the locality created by performance is kept alive so that it may issue life, even in death and through death. And politics is more than ethnocentric textual comments produced in order to keep North-South hegemony in place (as Mudimbe defines politics); it is also the parochial struggle over meaning and resources which make up the smaller, local universe, turning it into vital locality. African spirituality (cf. van Binsbergen 2003), whether historic or Christian or Islamic or syncretistic, is a social technology of sociability, whose forms create meaning, power and healing regardless of the Western epistemological status of its alleged dogmas and the supernatural entities features therein.

Such conversion moves as de Rosny's and my own go against the course of hegemonic history, and form a genuine challenge for the self-congratulatory mildness with which Mudimbe depicts the project of clerical and post-clerical intellectualism in Central Africa, taking for granted the very impasse in which he ended up and from which he appears to be incapable of escaping: North Atlantic academic rationality, and the death of African historic religion.

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