

WHAT IS AFRICAN ABOUT AFRICAN ART AND THOUGHT?¹

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Although the problems inherent in the term 'African art' and how our perception of it has been affected by them, are wellknown, there is little consensus on how to resolve these and even less appreciation of the actual consequences they have for contemporary African artists. This is mainly due to misunderstandings and their perpetuation, misdirection and therefore as well perhaps to misdiagnosis.

Being essentially non-functional, its purpose exhausted by the aesthetic contemplation of it, art, it continues to be argued, cannot include traditional African art because this art is primarily functional. It is not surprising therefore that philosophers, concerned about the boundaries of the concept of art and fearing relativism, have interpreted the challenge presented by African art (and other so-called primitive art) to the category of art, to be conceptual. The point is that in spite of their functional origins these artefacts have, over time, come to be seen as a form of art and to be categorised as such, albeit uncomfortably, so presenting philosophers with what appears to be a case of conceptual confusion. Given the practical situation of its partial inclusion, many of the proposed solutions to the problem as perceived have therefore consisted of attempts to adjust the category of art to allow for the inclusion of African art. Enlarged definitions of art formulated for this purpose have, however, tended to be paradigmatic and instead of enabling African art to be properly accommodated within art's logical borders, have had the unfortunate and probably unforeseen effect of increasing marginalisation.² Add to this the fact that one result of this conceptual adjustment has been the overlooking of the

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² These include Kamber 1993.

very features that make this the kind of art that it is, it is not surprising that the issue has now become political and the intrinsic value of this art remains hidden to most foreigners while contemporary artists have to try to reconcile the particularity of their Africanness with the demands of universalism.

It is true that African art is fundamentally different from the art of the West (and elsewhere); its making is guided by specific socio-cultural and often practical functions. But what is seldom realised is that because the particular kind of socio-ethical humanism of its guiding framework excludes individualism, no conceptual engineering will force African art into what will always be an alien concept. Nor should it. Ironically, another oversight which inevitably accompanies the prevailing perceptions of African art has been the acknowledgement that the origins of the very Western art which is taken as paradigmatic and which therefore excludes its African counterpart, also has roots in social and ethical ideas. In this case though, the different intellectual climate has allowed its particular development into art for art's sake. But it must follow that since the origins of even the central examples of Western art are also mainly religious and functional and hence overwhelmingly culture specific, the universality of the present concept which ostensibly overlooks its own regional beginnings, is itself debatable. Derived from Kant and the concomitant notion of rationality which legitimises art for art's sake, perpetuated by Romanticism and the socio-cultural intellectual context which freed art from functional exigencies so making personal expression possible, and as part of a dominating culture, what is most likely just a local hegemony has, over time, become elevated to the status of the metacontextual.³

When Anthony Appiah recently suggests not just asking why African art is art but also why it is African he invites us to shift attention away from the concept to a different aspect of the problem. But because of what Kimmelman (1998) has called the 'eternal debate about African art' does not solve the problem but means facing a different kind of risk:

³ See Gyekye 1997:27-33 where he discusses how particular ideas have achieved the status of universals. The term 'local hegemony' comes from Margolis (1995).

... how much (he asks) do we need to know about these objects to appreciate them? This is the eternal debate about African art. Do we recolonise the art by aestheticising it in Western terms? Or do we demean it - segregate it from other art - by stressing its anthropological side?

It is worth pursuing Appiah's question even though the challenge now is how avoiding one horn of the dilemma will not ensure impalement on the other. The answer, I think, lies in identifying the source of the dilemma. According to Nkrumah (Quaison-Sacke 1975:75) this is that '... for too long in our history, Africa has spoken through the voice of others'. The problem when so specified can be seen to be that previous attempts to show what is African about African art and the thought manifested by it, being either descriptive accounts by foreigners who studied Africa as an object of curiosity, or reactions to these efforts, have indeed anthropologised and so demeaned it. More recently though, African philosophers have, in trying to reconstruct African thought by evaluatively analysing its intellectual foundations, shown how there can be a different and more worthwhile way to identify what is authentically African about African thought and therefore African art. My aim is to assess their efforts and findings within the context of the dilemma of African art with special reference to the contemporary situation.

Two prominent but misleading views about Africa have motivated these philosophers. Deriving from a search for what, it is claimed, does not really exist, these views - also called inventions - have been blamed for the misconceptions about Africa, its traditions, culture, thought and art and for many of its problems. Proposed solutions to them having been inevitably of the wrong kind, have, it is argued, in turn contributed to - if not directly caused - poverty, famine, disease and corruption all of which have led to the present prevailing malaise of Afro-pessimism. One of these inventions, it is argued, depends on the 'voice of others'; the other, ironically, comes from Africans themselves.

In discussing the first of these, Mudimbe (1988) has argued that the Africa of Westerners is a construct of foreigners who, coming with their own

categories and conceptual schemes, interpreted Africa as the dark and mysterious continent inhabited by people whose lives were said to be 'infiltrated' by paganism, mysticism, fetishism and witchcraft. It is little wonder therefore that although artefacts of some aesthetic value were found there, because these were used for the various mystical and other ceremonies making up part of the ritualised life of these people, they were originally accepted only for their curiosity value and for the information they could provide about the strange practices of the equally strange inhabitants who were observed to throw bones, dance themselves into a trance, worship their ancestors as well as a variety of obscure deities, and who believed in spells, evil spirits, sacrifices and magic. Although no recognisable art practices, individual artists or art institutions could be found in Africa, these objects, thanks mainly to Picasso and his contemporaries who marvelled at their force and powerful aesthetic form when they first saw them displayed in Spain and then incorporated features of them into their own work, did eventually find their way, via archaeological and cultural museums, into the art galleries of Europe and America. Here they have been classified accordingly and although they are sought after by collectors, are still usually appreciated more for their decorative value than their original merit. Not surprisingly, fed by over-romanticised views of the Dark Continent and later by a Hollywood inspired safari-type scenario, removed from their authentic habitat and contextualised and reconceptualised according to foreign norms, they have now become the source of an apparent conceptual confusion.

But the problem is more complex and even more pernicious than it first appears because this version of Africa has led to what Appiah (1993) identifies as a different invention of Africa, its thought and its art.

Among the legacies of colonialism there has been a crisis of identity in Africa - both at the personal level of the individual and at the wider continental one. First of all, the imposition of Western religious, political, social and cultural traditions which were forced onto the local population, relocated and in many cases, replaced the local ones so disrupting the conceptual schemes of the indigenous people. Secondly, the dominance of the colonial mentality, which Wiredu (1992:62) says, continues to 'make a

formerly colonised person over-value foreign things coming from his erstwhile colonial master', persists to this day in some places. As a result there has been a shift towards adopting Western norms - in many cases at the expense of the local ones. But even though the colonialists did bring superior science and technology, sophisticated forms of government as well as literacy, by imposing these onto the locals rather than by using a process of education, they did not entirely remove indigenous practices and the two continue to exist side by side in an uneasy alliance. The result has been a curious mix of Western and African ideas which to the outsider is responsible for what is perceived to be the often frustrating inability of Africans to become completely 'civilised'. Not surprisingly there has been a reaction by Africans to this distortion of their African identity which has led to a struggle for authenticity and to the reassertion of cultural identity.

Mainly a movement of African intellectuals, many of whom had experienced post-world war Europe and who had lived and studied in France, Germany and England, the struggle to regain a genuine Africanness eventually became associated if not synonymous with race. Rejecting the previous identification by Europeans who could find no specific common or binding features to give unity to Africa and its peoples and who therefore conveniently came to see Africa merely as a landmass and hence as a geographical entity, this identity now rooted itself in a common descent - which had previously been ignored - by people united in their desire to reclaim what they saw as their true heritage. And so Negritude and Pan Africanism were born. Encouraged by the calls of Africanists like Leopold Senghor who lobbied for 'a Negro style of sculpture, a Negro style of painting and even a Negro style of philosophy' (El Hadji 1996:84), and the consequent search - especially in America by African Americans who yearned for what they took to be their true homeland - for a black aesthetic, artists in Africa were pressurised into reasserting the Africanness of Africa. This was taken to imply the resuscitation of the traditional forms as found in the masks, shields, vessels, headdresses and other appurtenances of tribal life. But driven mainly by anger and the need to reject foreign interpretations and because colonial intervention had disrupted allegiance to and belief in the underlying metaphysical, social and cultural framework within which the originals were made, most of these modern works, having

lost this guiding force, have become at best derived and, at worst, obviously inauthentic and lifeless.

Appiah claims that this version of Africa and hence of Africanness, arguably still harboured by those who are seeking for their roots in a continent from which their forefathers were driven by slavery, has been just as much a construction as that of the colonialists. He argues that the basic premise of a homeogenic Africa is mistaken because, on the contrary, he says, it is a well known fact that Africa is divided and disunited. It is indeed true that Africa is composed of over three thousand ethnic groups in over fifty five nation states. And the fact that these nation states are not natural groupings of people with like interests and heritage, but were artificial creations of the colonial powers further fueled the urge to find a cultural unifying force.⁴ Like its colonial predecessor, this Africa has therefore tended to ignore the cultural plurality of the people and the - marked - differences in the art of the various regions. The results have been that instead of turning their attention to the real problems of diversity, pluralism and multiculturalism and in this way redressing the devastating consequences of colonialism which still plague the continent (which is now even further divided by political nation building) and the resultant many costly and continuing wars, Africans, encouraged by mainly alienated and disenchanting African Americans in search of a cultural homeland, have been pursuing what is arguably nothing more than the red herring of essentialism. And as a result of the search for a common heritage, this African essence became identified with the one obvious commonality, namely, a black skin.

The consequences of these inventions have led to a reassessment of Africa mainly by African philosophers through a systematic investigation into African thought and rationality but with the aim of revitalisation rather

⁴ The much publicised African Renaissance as envisioned by the South African President, Thabo Mbeki, which aims for the rebirth of Africa within a modern global economy, will need to find a balance between these differences and commonalities if it is to succeed.

than revival.⁵ As these ideas have gradually begun to infiltrate all thought, so leading to the rejection of previous interpretations of the African identity, there has also been the beginnings of a similar reconstruction of African art both with respect to its Africanness and its status as art. The depth and strength of its African roots are evident in the fact that in spite of the influence of Western ideas and the contact with Western art and artists, because this art is an authentic attempt to be truly African, in being African it cannot also be art for art's sake.

If Africanness is neither identification with a landmass nor with a black skin, then it makes sense to ask what it is and what it is about it that makes it uniquely African. Ki-Zerbo (1975:61) in approaching this question asks what Africa is if not the African people because, as he says, 'What is a country if not above all, the humans who live in it and are part of it?' If he is right then reconstructing African art and African thought would mean analysing how the people of Africa live and the thought systems shaping that lived experience. But if the old problems are to be avoided the aim of such an endeavour must not be essentialism and should rather be to look for some binding practices or beliefs that can distinguish them from the rest of humanity. There is a way to do this because inherent in Ki-Zerbo's claim is the further one that what it means to be African implies that being African is intimately connected with what it means to be an African person. And since social and other institutions are constructed around and for human beings, they in turn will embody a perspective of human nature and personhood, it therefore also makes sense to turn to these institutions as they function within Africa - broadly construed - to examine the belief systems on which they are built and the world view or views they encompass. This is precisely what many African philosophers are now doing. This phenomenon, however, not being unique to Africa means that the practice should be (and generally is) common to any attempt at understanding a culture. Ironically, though, while accepted as legitimate in the civilised world the same exercise in Africa is suspected of being nothing more than anthropologising. Such a perception, however, indicates a lack

⁵ These include Kwasi Wiredu, Kwame Gyekye, Godwin Sogolo, Didier Kaphagawani and Anthony Appiah.

of understanding of what is involved in this kind of process of analysis, re-evaluation and revitalisation.

Even if empirical evidence overwhelmingly supports culture specific philosophy in Africa, and one of the problems of the past has been the result of overlooking the diversity of Africa and so to lapse into generalisations, it does not follow that there are no detectable common trends at all in African communities. Sometimes it is just that the overwhelmingness of the numbers of different groups and peoples has buried any repetitive manifestations under the impact of this diversity.

There is general agreement that what has been found in this process of analytic re-evaluation is that traditional African life, originally organised around clans, is still structured around the community and even though colonialism (and in South Africa the harsh separatist policies of the apartheid system) has disrupted families and communities while the lure of the cities, personal wealth and the sophistication of Western life-styles has attracted large numbers away from traditional communities, communalism remains the source of accepted values. But, of course, communalism is not unique to Africa. What makes this communalism, the underlying thought and, by implication, the art specifically *African*, Gyekye (1997) argues, is the particular form of its socio-ethical humanism where actions are motivated by concern for others rather than the recognition of individual rights.⁶ If this is the case then it follows that understanding the nature, the place and the role of art and artists in this communalism requires knowledge of the system of beliefs on which it is based. This includes socially and culturally embedded personhood, the sociology of knowledge, communitarian ethics, consensual and participatory forms of democracy, a holistic and idealist metaphysics (which embraces both primary and secondary causes) and an inclusive ontology. What emerges from this is indeed a uniquely African conception of what it is to be a person and an artist - and no conception of *l'art pour l'art*.

⁶ The new South African constitution, a rights based doctrine, is, interestingly, often interpreted according to communitalist principles.

Underpinning all African thought, it is claimed, is a closed metaphysical system in which everything hangs together in a hierarchy from the Supreme Being who although variously conceived within different societies, is usually described as the source of life, and who is followed by lesser deities, the ancestors, humans, animals, plants and matter in that order, all forming a universe containing interacting forces. Being conceived as a closed vertical system there is no radical distinction between the natural and the supernatural and no complete break between mortal and immortal life. Since the basis for differentiation lies in the place and the order of things within the hierarchy rather than in different forms of being, the dead as well as the living (and the Supreme Being and other spirits) must therefore all share in the same life force which in turn cannot be replenished or depleted from without. And since these animating life forces are merely passed on in an interactive process, it follows that the dead are not seen as inanimate but, having moved on and up in the hierarchy, just occupy a different and superior position from that of the living hence, unlike, as in Western customs where the dead are accorded no such status - often interpreted as lack of respect by Africans - reverence for the dead is an important part of African life. And it follows that if all beings interact then the living dead can and do play a role in the lives of the actual living and may be called upon to intervene or for counsel, or may themselves choose to interact and communicate with the living. Since the deceased and the deities are part of ordinary life they can be appealed to for guidance and are consulted when required. Veneration, appeasement and communion with the ancestors which can have both practical and spiritual benefits - misconstrued and condemned as ancestor worship by Westerners - is therefore not unusual and may require sacrifices or special rituals because these and other spirits have the power to cause both harm and good. However, since such communication needs special gifts and practices those chosen for it are considered to be endowed with unique attributes (which in turn need to be developed) and, as a result, are highly regarded by the community.

Included in this holistic metaphysics is a dual notion of cause. Together with an acceptance of natural causes of events there is also a more important causal explanation for why a particular event should happen to a particular person at a particular time and hence an explanation especially

for unusual circumstances or for what in Western thought systems is known as luck or co-incidence and which answers questions of Why me? Why this? Why now? So, for example, although the bite of the mosquito is known to cause malaria and both preventative and curative measures can be taken which succeed in many cases, an answer to questions neglected by Western medicine is why *this* particular child is bitten and why *it* does not respond but dies. Floods, drought, famine, and epidemics are all attributed to both types of cause and since they are deviant events, are at least partially explained as the displeasure of the ancestors, the spell of an evil spirit or witchcraft. Because such events are not the result of natural causation only and require non-natural as well as natural treatment, the relevant ancestor or spirit must be appeased or the spell lifted by the appropriate means. It is the specialised domain of Seers and Sangomas to identify these causes and their cures, perhaps by throwing bones and by appealing to the responsible spirits and/or ancestors. And, since the methods are learned through and passed on by the ancestors, only those who can communicate with them possess the relevant knowledge and skills.⁷

Thus a more complete explanation especially of unusual events is sought and provided, and technology finds its place as only part of a wider scope of cause and effect. This is why knowledge performs a practical, social function and why there has been little interest in the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake or for investigating the theories underlying the technologies developed or adopted to cope with everyday contingencies.

Given the overall picture, the notion of personhood must be relational rather than individual although the degree of this cultural and communal embeddedness is a matter of dispute - Wiredu arguing that it is complete, Gyekye more moderately that it is partial. Either way the implication is that the person is, therefore, not seen as separate or separable from the

⁷ Lack of appreciation of this notion of dual causes has often been at the base of many puzzling medical phenomena in Africa such as inexplicable deaths after spells having been cast on patients who until then had been making rapid recovery. Only recently in South Africa have so-called 'traditional healers' been accorded official status.

community. As expressed according to the Southern African notion of Ubuntu which can permeate all life, for example, a person is a person because of other persons.⁸ Thus collective action, mutual aid, interdependence and consensus politics are all necessary conditions for a person's welfare and for the collective good. And, as Gyekye says, since the welfare of each is dependent on the welfare of all and individual worth is measured and determined through a person's contribution to the general welfare, the highest good is to be found in relationships with others and in working for the common good. The role of the individual within this system is to work for the common welfare and through his or her own deeds promote the general good. This communitarian ethic therefore subverts the importance of rights by the importance of duty to others and the recognition of individual rights means the recognition of obligations to others. Although Gyekye (1987:156) acknowledges that communitarianism is

... the recognition of the limited character of the possibilities of the individual, which limited possibilities whittle away the individual's self-sufficiency

he denies that it stifles the individual. On the contrary, the implied co-operation not only promotes the individual good but allows for individuality provided this aims at the common good, for, as he says (1987:157),

... the communal order is worthwhile. Its intricate web of social relationships tends to ensure the individual's social worth, thus making it almost impossible for an individual to feel socially insignificant ... the individual feels socially worthy and important because his or her role and activity in the community are appreciated. The system affords the individual the opportunity to make a meaningful life through his or her contribution to the general welfare. It is thus part of the doctrine of communalism that the individual can find the highest good - materially, morally

⁸ Ubuntu is a particular form of Southern African socio-ethical humanism permeating all aspects of life among many Southern and South African people.

and spiritually (psychologically) - in relationships with others and in working for the common good.

The good of the community therefore, rather than denying individual endeavour, requires the 'moral worth, capacities, talents, and the general conditions of self-development of the individual human being' (Gyekye 1997:288) but within and as part of the activities of the community and not just as the pursuit of lone goals. Thus the African socio-humanism of Ubuntu already mentioned finds its more Northern African counterpart in the anti-Cartesian Akan concept that 'I am because you are and since you are therefore I am' (Gyekye 1997:37).

Within this system, aesthetic practices as part of a holistic and relational worldview, have followed different forms from their Western parallels where persons are conceived primarily as the individual bearers of rights and therefore where personal creativity, honour and expression have become hallmarks of excellence and endeavour. So while Western aesthetic activities, finding their apotheosis in Kant and the Romantic tradition and the accompanying notion of individuality have become and are valued for a function wholly internal to them and exhausted by it, within African communalism, aesthetic activities and their products serve the practical and spiritual needs of the community as these have developed as part of an extended social system which includes the holistically conceived order of things, the individual as person-in-community and the living dead. With survival often dependent on the harsh and unpredictable forces of nature and the supernatural who have to be venerated and appeased, there is no requirement or even possibility for isolated aesthetic contemplation for its own sake. Instead the celebrated but misunderstood artefacts collectively known as African art were made to serve the purpose of communicating with the living dead and the deities in special celebrations and rituals. Even apparently decorative objects like jewellery were functional since they were meant to proclaim the power of the chief or king.

The makers of these artefacts, in order to be well versed in the practices and the beliefs guiding them if their relevant purposes are to be successfully achieved, undergo long apprenticeships to study the various ceremonies,

rituals and festivals and their underlying metaphysics, as well as to perfect their own techniques. Since the general purpose of these various rituals is to maintain harmony, defeat chaos and recreate order by making the supernatural accessible to human will, the relevant spirits must be perceptible to all those who partake in them. And so the entire community participates in the many and varied occasions on which it is necessary to call upon these beings either for blessing or for absolution.

Hence the artefacts are ontologically different from Western art objects: not being just representations of the spirits but, given the holistic metaphysics, they are taken to be the actual embodiment of them and hence are conceived as animate. Animation, part of the process of creation, itself requires contact with the relevant spirit or being and revelation to the general populace and so in turn is highly ritualised and usually intensely emotive. Richards (1993:66) in describing the mask as '... the quintessential statement of the unity of spirit and matter' gives some insight to the radically different way in which Africans conceive of what is now called their art. Unlike its Western counterpart, she explains that

... the African mask is in essence not a representation. It is not lifeless matter. It is not a work of art to be admired on a wall ... It is a force. It has being and as such can be/should be powerful. Its power lies in its ability to transform. Masks are used to transform young boys into men... Masks are used to assure the presence of the ancestors at ceremonial occasions and judicial procedures. They are used to heal, to frighten, to make fertile, to initiate, to bind in oath, to appease and to atone.

They are certainly not just to be admired for their aesthetic appeal.

Of its creation and creator, also very different from the creative process and the artist as conceived in the West, she says,

The mask is created by the artists and as such must be given life, since it is to have being and force ... The artist puts part of his being into the mask. All African artists (creators) must sacrifice

in order to create; for that which they create is animate, the artist is therefore giving birth.

Hence we can now understand why there are no equivalent terms in African languages for who in the West is called an artist or, for that matter, for art as it has come to be conceived. In their place are appropriate terms for appropriate people and practices. In the Cameroun, for example, the closest to 'artist' is 'saar' where a saar is anyone who creates and, since doctors are seen as creating healing and teachers wisdom, they too are saars as are all members of society who 'create' in this wider sense. It follows that not all saars are required to or can create and animate masks and other artefacts. But it is also interesting that the closest Xhosa word to art seems to be 'skill' so clearly suggesting an alliance with Plato's notion of *techne* and demonstrating that the origins of art in Africa and that in the West might, therefore, after all, not have been that different. Therefore it must have been their subsequent development, depending as it has on the relevant and differing socio-cultural factors rather than on universal logical conditions, which has diversified so leading to the different current practices and conceptions.

It is not surprising therefore that the exaggeration of the physical features of most traditional African aesthetic artefacts, which enthralled Picasso and which has so often been described as their grotesqueness, is not coincidental or even attributable to mere aesthetic preference, but has a particular purpose. This is to ensure effective arousal of the emotions without which the spirit or spirits can not be invoked. Many and various ceremonies have been devised for all the occasions on which it is necessary for the population to have contact with the spirits and for which masks and other relevant artefacts are required. These include the harvest, rites of passage (which in turn are marked by various initiation ceremonies each with its own regalia), marriages, burials, and so on as well as special events like wars, floods, famine, and epidemics. As a result the originality of works of African art, unlike the conception of originality in Western art, does not imply the uniqueness of an object or its creator but rather its use in these actual ceremonies. And when artefacts become damaged or weathered and are no longer suitable for the purposes for which they were

made they are discarded and replaced by new ones. It follows that museums and galleries or their counterparts are unknown in traditional Africa since it would be inconceivable for an infrastructure to protect and preserve these artefacts in isolation from their use to be developed because their value lies in their effectiveness as prescribed by their specific function and their originality in their use in actual ceremonies which is not confined to individuals but extends to all members of the society who in turn use their combined creative energies co-operatively for the ongoing purpose of ensuring the common good. Even today curators find it difficult in Africa to persuade local populations to view and appreciate artefacts in what is to them a foreign and meaningless environment. Strange as these conceptions are to foreigners who have tried to make sense of them in their own terms, so the Western desire to preserve art is contrary to the continuous African need to ensure the general welfare. In comparing the to him odd desire to preserve works of art in isolation rather than to see them as part of the practice of ensuring the ongoing common good, Motlhabane Mashiangwako, a contemporary South African artist has commented: 'You want to create a forever, but we want to forever create' (in conversation: Pretoria 1998).

Finding no museums or their equivalent and no conception of preservation in isolation, Westerners were also unable to recognise individual artists in Africa. Instead what they saw were groups of artesans working together in collaboration. What they failed to realise, however, was that the works they made *could* not be the products of mere personal expression since they were meant for communal use which included use by the natural as well as the supernatural. In keeping with the communal system's inhospitability to lone endeavours and individuality, and being counter to these communal interests, in some cases where such an individual contribution was seen not to be aimed at the general good but rather at selfish enrichment or fulfilment, it was even considered an aberration and punishable. Secondly since it served particular ritual purposes, each work had to conform to certain forms and of course since each one was the embodiment of a particular supernatural being, these were strictly prescribed. But even though artists did not work alone and a work was usually the product of several artisans all working together, given the importance of an

individual's contribution to and within the community, the assumption that therefore there could be no recognisable individual artists has been challenged. Biebuyck and Fagg among others have used empirical evidence to point this out, arguing that the lack of appreciation of individual artists was due rather to the inability of the foreigners to recognise individual styles than the fact that there were none, for if we know what to look for we shall be able to identify personal differences. Although Fagg (*African sculpture*; quoted from flyer for the *Master Hand* exhibition, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1998) refutes what he sees as only colonial (mis)perceptions when he says, '... every artist has his own personal style, which we can identify, and is as much of an artistic individualist as his Western counterpart', and each artist could develop his or her own style, the equivalent of the creative genius starving alone in a garret was indeed unknown because even these recognisably individual endeavours were not just for personal expression but ultimately aimed at the communal good. And although the notion of an equivalent to the lone creator working in isolation was out of the question, the makers of these creations (as well as the artefacts themselves which were used in the many rituals and ceremonies) were highly regarded since, unlike other members of the society, they had the knowledge and the skill to make and animate the objects to invoke deities and the spirits of the ancestors and hence to fulfil a communal role. Then, since each object served particular ritualistic purposes and embodied a particular supernatural being, a work had to meet aesthetic as well as formal criteria if the relevant being was to be properly honoured. So it does not follow that the look of the thing was unimportant since it would have been considered to be insubordination (and probably the work itself would have been ineffectual) to make technically inferior or aesthetically poor pieces and the works were therefore indeed appreciated for their aesthetic appeal although not just for its own sake but because of this appeal's contribution to their overall effectiveness and function.

The legacy of misconceptions has placed a heavy burden on contemporary African artists who have their roots in the traditions but who have also been open to what Gyekye (1997:219ff) calls cultural borrowing (as opposed to cultural imposition). They are expected on one hand to combine the conflicting demands of being African and at the same time, as artists, to

work within Western norms and conceptions of what this means, on the other. Hence they are caught within the wider dilemma of the relativism of their own particularity and the perceived requirements of universalism.

Although many Africans have become Westernised through cultural contact and through contact with other societies, just as it would be a mistake to underestimate the importance of the influence of their own inherited belief systems, so it would be wrong to underestimate the role of Westernisation in the creation of much contemporary African art. Some artists in Africa, removed from their original traditions, indifferent to the old metaphysical visions and pressurised to revive a pan-African perception of African art, not surprisingly often produce work lacking the force of the originals they are expected to emulate. In many cases these artists, under Western influences and a changing society and encouraged to be 'African' merely use African forms for their own expressive purposes. But these works although recognisably African remain caught in the unfortunate space between opposing conceptions.

But even though many of these works are indeed of merit, it is the work of other artists, who, resisting the call to traditionalise, have absorbed Western aesthetic ideas and yet who create within African communalism, and who are trying to reconcile the fact of their Africanness with what appear to be the conflicting demands of the artworld into which they are being synthesised, which is of special relevance, interest and value. The objects produced, even if superficially indistinguishable in type from those of their Western counterparts, although some may look like traditional wooden masks and other paraphernalia actually used on ceremonial occasions, still serve a socially functional and instrumental purpose. Mothlabane, for example, explains the images in his paintings which are framed in the usual way and hang, like most paintings, on gallery walls, by saying that they come to him in dreams and therefore from the ancestors and other spirits and that his role as an artist is to communicate the ideas of the ancestors through his works. But because he produces works in a genre recognisably artistic, and ostensibly falling within the concept of art, he is unproblematically categorised as an artist - even though he conceives of his role differently. However, if the viewer is to understand the work

properly and to perceive it as *African* in the way that *Africans* perceive it, then he or she does need to be aware of the wider metaphysical framework informing it. Approaching African works, either traditional or contemporary, exclusively from within a non-African worldview belittles them because even those presented in what appears to be a personal and hence Western idiom are also part of the wider African communal worldview deriving their real value from their socio-ethical humanist purpose.

The story of African art shows that there is little to be gained from trying to fit a foreign concept of art onto aesthetic activities and products alien to it and then trying conceptual engineering when none can be made. On the contrary the value of this art is in recognising and appreciating the works as the manifestation of the African aesthetic experience when that experience is articulated within the underlying belief systems. Although contextualisation is now the practice in understanding all art, African art, ironically through its tangled history of misunderstanding, has been singled out for its deviance or judged for what it was not meant to be precisely because proper understanding and contextualisation has been denied it. So rather than lamenting its shortcomings because its purpose is never exhausted by mere contemplation, African art can and should instead be assessed according to its function of serving the needs and concerns of the whole community - even when works look as if they are the creation of a single individual articulating what on the surface seems merely to be his or her personal idiom.

It does not follow though that even traditional African art cannot justifiably be appreciated and enjoyed as if it were art in the accepted sense even if this does mean viewing it for no purpose other than aesthetic contemplation. As Appiah (1995:24-26) has argued, when invited, we can take these works as art for art's sake because: '... what is important is not whether or not they are art or were art for their makers: what matters is that we are invited to treat them as art'. But as Mothlabane cautions us, we should also be aware that Western artists are not put in the same dilemma as he and his colleagues: Africans and African artists do not view Western art as if it were meant for functional and instrumental purposes. In a parallel situation when seen by Africans as if it were African art and hence

art for life's sake, this art, being art for art's sake, and hence both purposeless and individualistic, and serving no social humanist function, would at best be trivial.⁹ Why, he asks, can the trouble not be taken to extend the same courtesy to them?

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⁹ The phrase 'art for life's sake' comes from the title of Jegede's 1993 article.

MODERNITEIT, HISTORIESE BEWUSSYN EN KULTUURBEWARING

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Dit wil voorkom of daar nog nooit 'n tyd was waarin die hede so betrokke was op die verlede soos juis nou nie. Die verlede *as* verlede was nog nooit tevore kultureel so sterk teenwoordig in die hede nie. Historisme het 'n permanente bestanddeel van ons kultuur geword. Dit blyk onder meer uit die volgende: die hoogbloeï van die museumwese; die tallose historiese uitstallings, gekoppel aan herdenkingsfeeste, wat wêreldwyd groot aftrek kry en ongetwyfeld reeds 'n permanente faset van die steeds groeiende toerismebedryf geword het; ongekende belangstelling in (en prestasies op) die gebied van histories-kritiese uitgawes van oorgelewerde tekste; die gewildheid van populêr-historiese werke by die breë lesende publiek; die skouspelagtige toename in die bewaring, restourasie en versorging van historiese gedenkwaardighede, veral sedert die begin van die jare 70; die merkbare toename in periodestukke op die gebied van die teater en die rolprentbedryf; ensovoort.¹

Wat is die gronde vir hierdie manifeste interesse in die verlede? Wat is die oorsprong van hierdie historisme en die verskerpte bewaringsbesef wat daarmee saamhang, en watter kulturele funksie kan daaraan toegeskryf word? Myns insiens kan die historisme in laaste instansie herlei word tot die belewing van 'n ongeëwenaarde versnelling in die veranderingstempo van ons moderne beskawing.² Die opvallende historisme van ons tyd en die gepaardgaande bewaringsaktiwiteite is *die poging tot kulturele*

¹ Vgl. M.J. Schoeman, *Moderniteit en kulturbewaring. 'n Filosofiese perspektief*, in *Kulturbewaring: Veranderende konteks en uitdagings*. Verrigtinge van die Suid-Afrikaanse Konferensie oor Kulturbewaring, Kaapstad, 6-10 Junie 1988, Pretoria; H.Lübbe, *Geschiedsbegriff und Geschichtsinteresse. Analytik und Pragmatik der Historie*. Basel: Schwabe, 1977:306, 320.

² Vgl. M.J. Schoeman, *Die museum as kompensasierverskynsel in die moderne wêreld*. *Suid-Afrikaanse Tydskrif vir Kultuur- en Kunsgeiedenis*, 1(1), 1987:36-42, en hierin die literatuur van Ritter, Koselleck, Lübbe en Marquard waarna verwys word.

kompensasie vir die vertrouheidsverlies waaraan ons toenemend uitgelewer word in ons moderne samelewing. Hierdie verlies aan vertroutheid (en die gevoel van vervreemding wat daarmee gepaard gaan) openbaar homself daarin dat ons terugblik, selfs net oor ons eie lewensloop, toenemend 'n blik in die vergangenheid word, dit wil sê 'n blik in 'n tydvak waarin ons huidige self hom nie meer herken nie en wat oënskyklik skaars nog enige verband hou met die hede.

Voorbeelde van die ongekende tempoversnelling in ons beskawingsdinamiek kan uit verskeie lewensterreine geneem word. So kan daarop gewys word dat dit 'n al korter tyd neem vir wetenskaplike kennis om sigself uit te brei en te rewolusioneer, of, aan die ander kant, te verouder. Tegniese innovasies volg al hoe sneller op mekaar, terwyl die druk tot groter produktiwiteit steeds vinniger aanpassings en verstellings afdwing op die arbeid- en vervaardigingsektor. Onderwys en opleiding is lank reeds nie meer iets wat slegs tot 'n beperkte stadium van die moderne mens se lewensloop gereken kan word nie – veel eerder het dit 'n permanente deel geword van ons bestaan wat ons amper ons hele lewe deur begelei. Daarby vind ingrypende strukturele veranderings (transformasie) teen 'n stygende tempo plaas in openbare instellings, van die onderwys tot by gesondheidsdienste. Die stortvloed van nuwe wette en regulasies (en wysigings van bestaande wette en regulasies) is hiervan 'n sprekende bewys. Die toonaangewende morele en politieke oriënteringstelsels ondergaan 'n dinamiseringsproses op 'n ongekende skaal, en hulle verloor toenemend hulle tradisionele bindingskrag.

Hoe dit ook al sy, daar was veral sedert die aanbreek van die moderne tydvak (meer spesifiek die begin van die 17de eeu) 'n aansienlike toename in die tempo van sosiale veranderinge. Dit is dan ook begryplik in 'n tyd wat 'moderniteit' tot 'n parool en tot 'n absolute waarde verhef het. Die merkwaardige van hierdie tydvak was dat dit homself, anders as enige tydvak voor hom, uitsluitlik deur sy moderniteit wou definieer. Die begrip *modern* was voorheen 'n relatiewe en formele begrip wat as sinoniem vir *hedendaags* of *eietyds* gebruik is. Dit is hoofsaaklik neweskikkend gebruik om telkens die eie tyd te onderskei van dit wat daaraan voorafgegaan het. In die moderne era verkry hierdie woord egter 'n absolute en inhoudelike

betekenis. Dit word uitsluitlik gebruik om die nuwe era wat aangebreek het, aan te dui – dié era waarvoor niks wesentliker is as sy eie moderniteit nie, en wat homself basies verstaan in radikale teenstelling tot alle geskiedenis wat voor hom gemaak is.³

Nou is dit opvallend en besonder interessant dat die historisme as kultuurverskynsel vir die eerste keer na vore tree juis in die moderne era, en spesifiek in die agtiende eeu as die eeu waarin die moderne era finaal sy beslag gekry het.⁴ Die historiese bewussyn is spesifiek eie aan die moderne tyd. Die basiese voorwaarde vir sy ontstaan is daarin geleë dat die tempo waarteen die beskawingsproses veranderinge teweeg bring sò buitensporig versnel dat diskontinuiteite binne 'n enkele leeftyd, ja selfs binne 'n enkele generasie, voelbaar word. Daar ontstaan 'n kloof tussen herkoms en toekomst (Joachim Ritter), tussen ervaringsmilieu en verwagtingshorison (Reinhart Koselleck). Die tydsverloop werk vervreemding in die hand. Dit word steeds moeiliker om die tradisie nog te sien as 'n ensemble van waardevolle lewensorientasies en 'n ewigdurende bron van wysheid. Die hoeveelheid elemente van 'n kultuur wat as blote relikte (reste of oorblyfsels van 'n vergange tyd) ervaar word, neem vinnig toe. Wat dit beteken, kan gesien word aan die rol van die museum as 'n spesifiek moderne, historistiese instelling. Die historiese bewussyn hou op 'n museale wyse dié dinge teenwoordig wat funksioneel oorbodig en plekloos geword het. Die wapenarsenaal word byvoorbeeld omgeskep tot 'n museum waarin uitgediende krygstuig bewaar en uitgestal word.

Machiavelli het nog in sy Livius-kommentaar uit voorbeelde van Romeinse krygsgeskiedenis taktiese en strategiese reëls afgelei wat hy steeds, na meer as 1 500 jaar, as geldig beskou het. *Historia docet* is die tradisieryke motto vir dié soort benadering tot die geskiedenis. Hierteenoor skryf Hegel, na die opkoms van die historiese bewussyn aan die begin van die 19de eeu: Die enigste wat 'n mens uit die geskiedenis kan leer, is dat jy uit die geskiedenis

³ R. Spaemann, Ende der Modernität? in P. Koslowski, *et al.*, *Moderne oder Postmoderne?* Weinheim: VCH, 1986:20.

⁴ Vgl. R. Koselleck, *Geschichte*, in *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, Bd.2. Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1975:702 e.v.

niks kan leer nie. Vandag is daar dan ook nie meer 'n enkele militêre akademie waar geskiedenisonderrig vir doeleindes van taktiese opleiding aangewend word nie.

Uit alles wat sover gesê is, kan ons saamvat dat kultuurbewaring basies saamhang met die opkoms van die historiese bewussyn. By alle ander motiewe (die estetiese, die pedagogies-ideologiese, ens.) wat hier moontlik 'n rol mag speel, is kultuurbewaring in die moderne wêreld (en veral in ons eie tyd) primêr 'n uitvloeisel van die historisme. Daarby moet in gedagte gehou word dat die historiese bewussyn en die gepaardgaande bewaringsaktiwiteite nie 'n kulturele oorblyfsel is wat dreig om uitgewis te word deur die moderniseringsprosesse van die beskawing nie. Juis die teendeel is waar: *Die historiese bewussyn is self die produk van die moderniseringsproses.* Dit verklaar dan ook die huidige hoogbloeit van die historiese bewussyn.

Soos reeds aangedui, is die historisme 'n spesifiek moderne verskynsel. Voor-moderne samelewings, waar veranderinge teen 'n stadige tempo plaasvind en waar kompak-werksame tradisies steeds onbetwisbare geldigheid besit, is geensins aangewese op 'n historiese bewussyn nie. Waar die historiese bewussyn daarenteen 'n magtige faktor is in kultuur, soos wat dit juis in die hoogs ontwikkelde samelewings van ons tyd die geval is, is dit 'n onmiskenbare aanduiding van tradisieveral. In die grootskaalse verbrokkeling van tradisies en die gepaardgaande verlies van vanselfsprekend geldige lewensoriëntasies vind die historiese bewussyn die gronde vir sy bestaan.

Die historiese bewussyn het, soos wat nou reeds herhaaldelik gestel is, sy oorsprong in die moderniseringsproses en die gepaardgaande kloof wat geskep word tussen herkoms en toekoms. Die historiese bewussyn val saam met die besef van 'n onagterhaalbare verbrokkeling van tradisies wat eenmaal gegeld het. Dit lê dus voor die hand om die historiese bewussyn aan te dui as 'n kompensasië vir die ervaring van tradisieveral. Maar presies wat behels hierdie kompensasië-aktiwiteit? Gaan dit werklik hier om die *behoud* van tradisies wat dreig om hulle oriënteringskrag te verloor? Dat daar inderdaad sprake is van 'n behoudende inslag in ons

kultuurhistoriese aktiwiteit, spreek vanself. Dit is veral opvallend in bewarings- en restourasieprojekte. Maar wat so deur allerlei bewaringsaktiwiteite behoue bly, is nog geensins *die tradisie self* nie. Die voortgesette institusionele gelding van tradisies is (vir sover dit hoegenaamd 'n saak vir beslissing is) iets wat in laaste instansie op die politieke terrein uitgemaak word. En waar die belangstelling in die tradisiegoedere *prakties-polities* gemotiveer is, daar het ons, streng gesproke, nie met 'n historiese interesse te make nie. Betrokkenheid by tradisiegoedere is in die eintlike sin van die woord eers historiese wanneer die polities-institusionele gelding van die tradisies slegs nog in brokstukke oorleef; in gestaltes wat hulle *slegs nog histories* laat verklaar omdat hulle losgeruk is van die normatiewe konteks waarin hulle oorspronklik gefunksioneer het, en gevolglik vir ons moeilik verstaanbaar geword het. Die vraag bly egter nog steeds wat nou eintlik die sin of betekenis is van al die bewaringsaktiwiteite wat voortspruit uit die historiese bewussyn van die moderne mens. Wat word hierdeur moontlik gemaak en bewerkstellig? Op hierdie vraag moet ten slotte 'n positiewe antwoord geformuleer word.

Dit lyk vir my 'n uitgemaakte saak dat die historiese bewussyn (en die hele kultuur wat daarmee saamhang) gemotiveer word deur die steeds toenemende verval van tradisionele vanselfsprekendhede en dat dit op 'n bepaalde wyse wil kompenseer vir die verlies wat hierdeur geskep word. Wat die aard van hierdie kompenseringsaktiwiteit is, hang saam met die aard van die verlies waarvan hier sprake is. En nou wil ek die stelling waag dat dit hier primêr gaan om 'n *identiteitsverlies* waarvoor daar op een of ander manier vergoed moet word. Die moderne mens verkeer naamlik in 'n voortdurende staat van transisie. Die moderniseringsproses plaas ons permanent onder die druk *om aan te pas by veranderde omstandighede*. Die wêreld waarin ons leef verkeer onder 'n moratorium: dit kan te eniger tyd afgeskaf word, en dan word die lewenservaring wat daarin opgedoen is, ontoepaslik. Die moderne era is dan ook die era van universele en lewenslange skoolplig, waarin ons ons toenemend moet verlaat op die *kundigheid* van sogenaamde vakspecialiste of deskundiges, en waarin die

reikwydte van die eie lewenservaring en van gewone 'common sense' tot 'n minimum beperk word.⁵

In so 'n situasie van stroomversnelling is geen mens meer vandag die mens wat hy gister was of nog sou kon wees nie. Gevolglik kan sy identiteit slegs nog *histories* vasgestel word. Wie en wat ons as mense is, kan slegs via 'n rekonstruering van ons onderskeie geskiedenis bepaal word. Ons identiteit laat hom nie sinkronies beskryf nie. Dit moet diakronies oftewel histories benader word, en dit is waarom die historiese bewussyn en die bewaringsaktiwiteite wat daaruit voortvloei 'n onontbeerlike funksie het in die moderne wêreld. Dit hou die verlede steeds teenwoordig in die hede, en daarmee hou dit dié dinge wat aan elkeen van ons 'n onderskeibare identiteit gee,ikbaar en toe-eieningsvatbaar. Die historiese bewussyn *skep* dus nie self ons identiteit nie, en tog het dit 'n onderskragende funksie deurdat dit ons in die geleentheid stel om te verwyd by die dinge waardeur ons kan kom tot onderskeidende selfidentifisering. En hoe kragtiger die moderniseringsproses met sy nivellerende uitwerking homself aan ons opdring, des te dringender word ons hunkering na geleenthede om ons te kan identifiseer met unieke en onvervangbare dinge. Dit verklaar dan ook waarom die inkrumping van sulke geleenthede deur allerlei histories-ongevoelige, modernistiese bouprojekte toenemend die skyf word van protesaksies wat gelei word deur invloedryke burgerkomitees.

In 'n wêreld wat oorwoeker word deur homogene strukture met tegniese en ekonomiese oorwegings as uitgangspunt, is daar die groeiende behoefte aan geleenthede tot onderskeidende selfidentifikasie. En hierdie behoefte word reeds lankal nie meer bevredig deur 'n historiserende fassadekultuur nie. In die restourasie van geboue word deesdae klem gelê op die kombinasie van bewaring en die hernude benutting (funksionaliteit) van wat vir bewaring uitgesonder is.

Historisering om te kompenseer vir die ervaring van 'n toenemende konformeringsdruk deur homogene strukture wat hulle oor die hele wêreld

⁵ Vgl. H. Lübke & W. Hennis, *Rationalismus und Erfahrungsverlust in der Arbeitswelt*. Köln: Bachem, 1981:12-16.

uitbrei, is aan die orde van die dag. Wanneer die konformeringsdruk wat inherent is aan die ewolusionêre beskawingsdinamiek nog boonop verpolitiseer word en daar van mense verwag word om dit sonder meer toe te juig as progressief en bevrydend, dan voel die mense hulle uitgedaag tot betuiging van hulle eiesoortigheid. Eie en afsonderlike identiteite word die tema van kulturele en politieke bedrywighede sodra die strukture wat ons onderling verbind (en aan mekaar gelyk maak), begin oorheers.

In laaste instansie berus kultuurbewaringsaktiwiteite op die eis om erkenning van natuurlike en historiese verskille tussen mense. Ons het hier in 'n sekere sin te make met die paradoks van 'n *universaliseerbare* eis om die erkenning van *nie-universaliseerbare*, kontingent-historiese gegewenhede. Waarop berus die *legitimiteit* van die eis om die erkenning van nie-universaliseerbare eiesoortighede? Ons kan hierdie vraag alleen beantwoord wanneer ons die aanspraak op eiesoortigheid opweeg teen die legitimiteit van die beskawingsdinamiek en die eise wat dit aan ons stel om te verander en aan te pas by homogene strukture.

Die legitimiteit van die beskawingsproses (met as basiese dryfveer die Westerse wetenskap en tegnologie) was eintlik nog nooit as sodanig in gedrang nie. Tot betreklik onlangs is die beskawingsproses sonder meer gelyk gestel met *voortuitgang*. Dit is begryplik vanweë die evidente voordele wat die beskawing vir die mensdom gebring het. Ondertussen (veral vanaf die middel van die jare 70) het daar twyfel ontstaan oor die voortgangskarakter van die beskawingsproses. Die aard van hierdie twyfel moet egter reg verstaan word. Dit het niks in gemeen met die radikale protes wat veral vanuit die gelede van (die meestal Marxisties-geïnspireerde) rewolusionêre utopiste opklink teen die basiese gang van die beskawing nie.⁶ Die krisis in voortuitgang wat ons tans ervaar, het myns insiens geen afbreuk gedoen aan die geldigheid van humane beskawingsdoelwitte soos welvaart, vryheid en geregtigheid nie. Die

⁶ Vir 'n ontleding van die rewolusionêre utopisme en sy anti-moderne inslag, vgl. M.J. Schoeman, *Geskiedsfilosofie in 'n krisis. Die noodwendigheid en aktualiteit van die nasionale staatsidee. Hervormde Teologiese Studies*, 41(4), 1985:594-615. Vgl. ook die belangrike bydraes van o.m. Koselleck, Marquard en Blumenberg waarna in die betrokke artikel verwys word.

huidige vooruitgangskrisis is dan ook geen krisis van doelwitte nie. Veel eerder dui dit op 'n bestuurskrisis - 'n krisis vanweë *steeds groeiende laste* wat as onvoorsiene, skadelike newegevolge van die vooruitgang op ons gelê word. Hierdie las het byna onhanteerbaar geword en daar is die gevaar van ooreising. Die vraag ontstaan of ons beskawing nie 'n grens bereik het met betrekking tot die eise wat dit aan ons stel nie. Dit geld veral vir die eis van emansipasie wat 'n wesentlike deel uitmaak van die beskawingproses: die eis dat ons onself moet losmaak van ons herkoms, sodat ons onbelemmerd kan deelneem aan die beskawingsproses en spontaan kan beantwoord aan universele norme. Is daar nie 'n perk aan hierdie emansiperingseis wat, as dit oorskrei word, hierdie eis onmenslik, ja selfs terroristies laat word nie?

Die vraag na die legitimiteit van die historisme (en sy aanspraak op die erkenning van eiesoortige identiteite) is in laaste instansie die vraag na die grense van die eis om emansipasie. Dat daar sulke grense moet wees, is vanselfsprekend, want die ontkenning daarvan sou neerkom op die onsinnige gedagte dat ons identiteit geheel en al tot die beskikking staan van ons vrye wil, en met name die wil om opgeneem te word in 'n kleurlose mensheids-homogeniteit. Dit sou dan die utopie wees van 'n mengelmoes van mense wat bloot nog mense is, en hulle onderskeie identiteite as Christene of Jode, as Europeërs of Asiate, as Franse of Duitsers finaal agtergelaat het. So 'n opvatting van identiteit sou totaal absurd wees omdat dit ooglopend op 'n feitlike onmoontlikheid berus.

Maar waar lê die grense van die beskawing se eis om emansipasie? Waar en wanneer sou die aanspraak op selfhandhawing 'n groter reg op erkenning kon verkry as die beskawing se universele eise van emansipasie en aanpassing by homogene standaarde? Dit is duidelik dat daar geen eenvoudige kitsformule is waarvolgens hierdie botsende aansprake spanningsvry met mekaar versoen kan word nie. Oor die gespanne verhouding tussen herkoms en toekoms word in laaste instansie op die politieke terrein uitsluitel gegee. 'n Verstandige benadering in die politiek is myns insiens een wat albei die uiterstes van tradisionalisme (die vlug na die verlede) én utopisme (die vlug in die toekoms) sou vermy. Solank as wat ons basiese probleem nie die gebrek aan vooruitgang is nie maar eerder

die vooruitgang wat wél plaasvind, behoort ons die volgende oriënteringsgrondslag vir ons kulturele en politieke bedrywighede te neem:

1. *Soveel gemeenskaplikheid* uit erkenning van universeel-geldige aansprake *as wat nodig is*, en
2. *Soveel verskeidenheid* kragtens die pluraliteit van kontingente herkomsgeskiedenis *as wat moontlik is*.

Dit is veral by die tweede element van die pas geformuleerde oriënteringsgrondslag waar kultuurbewaring sy belang het. Hierdie belang is ten diepste 'n belang by menslike vryheid: nie die vryheid wat ons tot mekaar se gelykes maak nie, maar die vryheid waarin ons kragtens ons onderskeie herkomste van mekaar mag verskil. Die aanspraak op hierdie vryheid is geregverdig want dit impliseer die vryheid van ons bestaan in ooreenstemming met ons kontingent-historiese identiteit. En dit is streng gesproke iets wat ons nie kan of hoef te regverdig nie. Vir ons dade moet ons wel by geleentheid verantwoording doen, maar nie vir die feit dat ons is (en steeds nog is) wat ons is nie.⁷ Die historiese bewussyn is dié instansie wat hierdie elementêre waarheid universeel wil laat geld.

⁷ Vgl. H. Lübke, *Identität und Kontingenz*, in O. Marquard & K. Stierle (Hrsg.), *Identität*. München: Fink, 1979:655-659.

SANGOMAS, WITCHES, THE PROBLEM OF BELIEF AND AFRICAN JUSTICE¹

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Even if some people do try to be witches, the witchcraft power itself is surely imaginary (Mayer 1970:49).

White people are not as sensitive to things of the soul as we are (Credo Mutwa 1996:21).

SANGOMAS AND WITCHES

In drawing parallels between what he calls 'witch-doctors' in African politics and publicity experts in American politics Geschiere (1998) uses the word *nganga* to subsume the concepts of 'witch' and 'witch-doctor'.² He lists what he thinks are characteristic features of the *nganga*. He or she must 'in the very first stage of initiation into the realm of witchcraft' learn to 'see' (1998:7). The *nganga* learns to 'see' witches and is at the same time, by this power, made 'visible' to witches 'as one who sees'. Secondly, the *nganga* in healing a person must 'reconstitute' the latter by extracting a 'confession' which 'deconstructs' the client's personality in order to take away misfortune. Thirdly, the *nganga* will require a sacrifice from the client which, he thinks, in today's Africa will usually consist of money since the occult has become so commodified and monetarised. As part of the *nganga's* own initiation a sacrifice will have to be made by taking a life. Thus, he thinks, the *nganga* is a kind of 'super-witch'. 'A *nganga* is a witch' who can only heal 'because he or she has killed' (1998:9). Geschiere sees this as a basic circularity in the discourse about witchcraft - 'protection against witchcraft is to be found in the *nganga* who is, however, a super-

¹ This paper is dedicated to Professor E.D. Prinsloo, friend, colleague and honest seeker of wisdom and truth. The paper was first read at the 19th annual meeting of the Society for Anthropology of Consciousness at the University of California at Berkeley, March 24-28th, 1999.

² *Nganga* is a central African dialectical variation of the more familiar *nyanga* in Southern Africa.

witch, and draws his clients inexorably into the spirals of witchcraft' (1998:11).

Geschiere's account is so misleading and confused as to cry out for clarification. There is one sense, however, in which I think his erroneous conflation of witches and witch-doctors can be made to serve as a clue to the real nature of witches, although not in the way that he might think. I will argue that there is a close relationship, but never an identity, between witches and witch-doctors.

In Zulu culture there are different classes of traditional healers which are loosely characterized by the sometimes pejorative label 'witch-doctor'. A *nyanga* may inherit the profession from family. Such a person may be either a simple herbalist or a diviner. A *sangoma* is a clairvoyant who must receive a 'call' from the ancestral spirits. A *sanusi* is higher than both of them. Such a person is a clairvoyant and lore-master, 'one who causes things to ascend, the uplifter' (Mutwa 1996:xv). Mutwa believes the Zulu word *sanusi* is related through the Indo-European language matrix to the sanscrit *sannyasin*, a holy wandering medicant who, like a yogi, is a conduit for higher spiritual forces. Such a person, he claims, 'is a person who strives ceaselessly to be ethical in everything he does, for the fate of the tribe or nation may depend on his discernment' (1996:xv).³ A *sanusi* is a high *sangoma*.

I will be talking about *sangomas* and witches in this paper. The apprentice *sangoma* is one who has been touched by an illness which cannot be diagnosed by Western medicine, called *thwasa*. During the training period he or she is called *twasa*. The *twasa* must learn how to prepare herbal medicines, interpret dreams, communicate with spirits and diagnose illnesses. In addition the *twasa* must learn tribal history, mythology and sacred ceremonies. Because some of their time is spent countering *tagati* or curses put on people by witches the *sangoma* is sometimes called a

³ Credo Mutwa is the leader of over 500 traditional healers and is regarded as a *sanusi* or high *sangoma*. He is the spiritual leader of millions of South Africans and is recognized world-wide as a wise sage and holy man in the same class as Krishnamurti and Paramahansa Yogananda.

'witch-doctor', a term that many of them accept because it does describe one of their functions. Mutwa thinks that the *sangoma* must harness the 'same occult forces' as does the witch if he or she is to be effective in discerning witches, acts of witchcraft, and curing those who may be afflicted with witchcraft related problems, including, if possible, the witch or the one who dabbles in witchcraft.

Hammond-Tooke regards *sangomas* as diviners, shamans and healers (1998:9-13). He distinguishes *sangomas* from simple herbalists but he concedes that among some groups the roles of diviners and herbalists are not clearly differentiated. Both are called for example among Venda and Tsonga by the name *nyanga*. All *sangomas* are herbalists and diviners, but not all herbalists and diviners (*nyangas*) are *sangomas*. Only the chosen are *sangomas*, and no *sangomas* are witches. To think of a witch as a healer of any sort is a confusion of the most fundamental kind. What then is a witch?

A distinction that has gained currency in anthropological circles is that between witches and sorcerers. Evans-Pritchard (1937) found that amongst the Azande a folk distinction was made between people who have some undefined mystical power inherent in their personalities and people who use magic. He called the former witches and the latter magicians or sorcerers. I find this unsatisfactory as an analytical distinction because of the vagueness inherent in the idea of magic itself. Magic is an essentially contested concept. For one person it is supernaturalism, for another nonsense, and for yet another it is the latest technology. Furthermore, this distinction cannot really help us understand what is supposed to be inherent in the witch's personality, that is, what it is that *makes* a witch a witch. I think a better clue is found in Parson's (1970) discussion of American Pueblo Indian 'medicine-men'. She argues that there is a 'conceptual closeness between witches and medicine-men' (1970:206). In this paper I will argue that witches and *sangomas* though conceptually related, are bipolar opposites. By thinking about *sangomas* or witch-doctors we are given a clue to the nature of witches, because there is something, after all, which I will argue they do have in common, but we must be clear that what they do have in common is used in profoundly different ways and for different

purposes. To understand the witch concept therefore I want to begin by thinking a little more deeply about what a *sangoma* might be. Aside from the few general remarks that have already been made, what exactly is a *sangoma*?

In developing this idea beyond what has already been said I will trace out a few clues given by Hammond-Tooke (1998), but before getting to that it is necessary first to briefly sketch two divergent approaches anthropologists have followed in attempting to understand the witch idea. When it comes to explaining beliefs about witchcraft anthropologists tend to be divided into schools which are primarily psychological and those which are essentially sociological or functional. Social anthropologists have attempted to explain, or explain away, the witch idea by focussing on causes and patterns of witchcraft accusations and beliefs in terms of such things as social strain, rapid modernization, domestic and generational conflict, social dislocations, ways of coping with misfortune, pursuits of vendettas and political agendas, myths which mediate contradictions in society, and so on. These explanations have proven unsatisfactory. They leave unearthed the basic, fundamental question of why the idiom of *witchcraft* is used in the first place. It seems that witchcraft must be related to something real in human experience, because it has recurred again and again in all parts of the world. What could it possibly be? Notwithstanding the surfeit of ideas and explanatory constructs that functionalist anthropologists have invented and developed, the results are inconclusive. No one has yet been able to explain why people believe in witches and witchcraft, and not something else.

A more promising anthropological approach uses an essentially psychological idiom to explain witchcraft beliefs in which 'spirit worlds' are thought to originate in the unconscious mind and are expressed through dreams and meditation - and trance-specific altered states of consciousness. An anthropologist attempting to understand the origin of the witch idea from a psychological perspective will be drawn into thinking about supernatural phenomena and will ultimately have to ask 'are *these* real?' The inner, lived dimension of the numinous will have to be taken seriously.

From my own point of view, there is no escaping the inner dimension. Hammond-Tooke is one South African anthropologist who has adopted a Tylorian approach which takes lived, human experience seriously (see for example 1975, 1998). This has led him to come up with some very interesting ideas which, at least to date, he has not yet developed but which might serve as pointers to a fresh look at the witch concept. In discussing *sangomas* (as diviners) he thinks that divination is somehow related to certain 'well developed psychic gifts' which are derived from 'deep seated personality factors' (1988:14). The best diviners, he says, 'were psychics' (1988:12). Hammond-Tooke had previously written that, amongst the Kgaga group of the South African lowveld, diviners sometimes gazed into pools and did other things to 'stimulate their undoubted psychic talents of clairvoyance and telepathy' (1981:103). While thinking about this claim (that diviners are psychics) I came across several passages by anthropologists who had made the same claim about witches. Evans-Pritchard claims that 'an act of witchcraft is a psychic act' (1923:21). Closer to home, Crawford in his work on witchcraft in Rhodesia (as it then was) claims that 'witchcraft is essentially a psychic act' (1967:40) while adding that such acts are 'objectively impossible'. Even more interesting (from my point of view) is Mutwa's claim that if the *sangoma* is to be effective in curing people from *tagati* or witchcraft-related misfortune, he or she 'must understand and to some extent control the same occult forces as does the witch' (1996:xxiv). Could the clue to understanding the witchcraft idea be that, like *sangomas*, witches are psychics?

SHAMANS AND PSYCHICS

If we can make some sense of this notion it might be worth pursuing. If witches and *sangomas* are psychics, drawing on the same occult sources of power or influence but using them for entirely different purposes, what might we learn about witches (and *sangomas*) by exploring this idea? *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* (5th Edition, 1964) is not of much help in understanding the idea, but it does give us a few pointers. 'Psychical' is defined as being 'of the soul or the mind', psychical phenomena are said to be 'outside of the domain of physical law'. The word 'medium' is also mentioned in the definition, and 'psychical research' is referred to. Since

some research has been done on people claiming to have psychic powers, this might be worth considering briefly.

'Extra-sensory perception' is a phrase that was coined by J.B. Rhine in the 1930's to explain some of the results of his experiments at the parapsychology laboratory at Duke University. In the wake of his pioneering research parapsychology and experimental research on paranormal and psychic phenomena have taken root, even though they have never become a mainstream staple in the curricula of most university psychology departments. Pioneers in Western philosophy who have thought seriously about psychical research have included W.T. Stace, Henry Sidgwick, William James, Henri Bergson and H.H. Price. Price was a distinguished Oxford philosopher who specialized in epistemology. He refused to treat ordinary sense perception in the waking state of consciousness as 'normal'. Price cited Leibniz as one whose ideas are most suggestive for psychical research. In his metaphysics, Price wrote, 'paranormal cognition is no longer paranormal, it is something normal' (1997:441). Leibniz (according to Price) thought that material objects have only a phenomenal existence, and that 'what appears to us as a material object is really (in his view) a collection of spirits' (1997:442). Price went on to note that 'Leibniz was the first modern philosopher to think that there are mental processes below or beyond the threshold of consciousness' (1997:442). He puts Leibniz's doctrine like this: 'it is the idea that each of us, below the level of consciousness, is all the time in touch with a very much wider range of facts and happenings than he is consciously aware of' (1997:443). What puzzled Price is why paranormal cognitions 'emerge into consciousness so seldom' (1997:443). One answer given by Andrews (1997:19) is that extra-sensory perception and paranormal cognition is something Westerners seem to have lost with the development of bureaucracy, formal rationality and sequential thinking. Extra-sensory capacities have atrophied in modern man. Price thought that 'in the ordinary "non-psychic" person there is some kind of barrier or censorship which tends to prevent paranormal cognitions from getting into consciousness' (1997:447-448). This is especially true, he thought, with the educated or over-educated person. Price thought that psychic powers were much more widely used in the primitive stages of society, and in these stages of society the cultivation and use of psychic

abilities were primarily, but not exclusively, in the hands of shamans or priests.

Another clue to the nature of the *sangoma* given by Hammond-Tooke is that *sangomas* are shamans. But what exactly is a shaman? Stephen Larson, a recognized authority on shamanism and the editor of Credo Mutwa's *The Song of the Stars: the Lore of a Zulu Shaman*, writes in his Editor's Introduction (Mutwa 1996:xxiv) that he had sent his book *The Shaman's Doorway* to Mutwa in 1989, asking him if he had found anything from the worldwide pattern of the shamanic experience in his own experience. Mutwa replied in due course that he was sure it was the same thing.

Within the last few decades shamanism has been undergoing a resurgence of interest in the West. This revival of interest owes much to the efforts of Carlos Casteneda (1973) who in his writings has recounted the personal struggle undergone in shedding his standard Western view of reality and his professional anthropologist's assumptions in order finally to accept the teachings of his Yaqui shaman informant. A similar openness on the part of philosophy and psychology may be a requirement for understanding the shaman's 'journey of the soul'.

Shamanism is a visionary tradition and a world-wide practice occurring not only in Africa but in most parts of the world. It is an ancient practice of using altered states of consciousness to contact the gods and spirits of other dimensions. Once we think of the shaman in Africa the image of the diviner or the *sangoma* comes to mind - someone who, through entering a condition of trance is able to undertake a vision quest of the soul, journey to sacred places, harness spirits as allies, and communicate with the ancestors and gods to obtain sacred knowledge for health and good fortune.

Tylor believed that the origins of the view that we live in a world of spirits lay in the experience of dreams and trances which seem to show that a person can exist independently of the physical body and can travel to other places and make contact with other beings in the out-of-body state. Drury (1989:14) thinks that shamanism is really 'applied animism' or 'animism in

practice'. Because nature is alive and filled with conscious spirits, and because all aspects of the cosmos are perceived as being interconnected (the idea being that the universe is a network of living energies) the shaman is needed as an intermediary between different dimensions of reality and is a vital link in the great chain of Being.

Shamans seek initiation from one already established in this role. The only writer that I am aware of who seems to think differently is Bourdillon who claims that in Shona society 'it is rare for a traditional healer to admit to having been taught by another healer' (1989:30). Bourdillon claims that Shona traditional healers attribute their knowledge of indigenous medicines to the influence of their spirits, but he seems to mean simple herbalists and not *sangomas*, so this exception is more apparent than real. In any case, as already mentioned, in the case of shamans it always seems that the spirits of ancestors have chosen him or her rather than the other way around. The budding *sangoma* often wanders off and spends long periods of time alone. He or she is frequently seized by mysterious illnesses that cannot be diagnosed by Western medicine. Mutwa gives a penetrating insight into this process in the first chapter of his *Song of the Stars* in sections titled 'the illness', 'beginning the cure' and 'the *sangoma's* apprentice' (1996:1-17). Mircea Eliade says that 'the medicine man or shaman is not only a sick man: he is, above all, a sick man who has been cured, or has succeeded in curing himself' (1964:77). Often when the shaman's vocation is revealed through an illness the initiation of the candidate is tantamount to a cure. Eliade claims that 'the shamans and mystics of primitive societies are considered - and rightly - to be superior beings; their powers ... also find expression in an extension of their mental capacities (1964:77). By using techniques that alter states of consciousness the shaman is 'a technician of the sacred' (Drury 1989:8). These altered states are brought about in different ways. Sometimes by the use of sacred plants which contain psychotropic substances, at other times following periods of fasting, austerities, sensory deprivation, meditative focussing, chanting, through the beating of drums or playing of flutes, or through a particular openness and response to a dream (usually a lucid dream) or a vision (see, in general, Drury 1989).

MANY MANSIONS OF CONSCIOUSNESS

Most parapsychologists and students of psychic phenomena seem to agree that psychics operate in 'altered states of consciousness'. Altered states of consciousness are thought to transcend normal conditions of immediate sensory awareness and cognition. They subsume, among other things, states induced by hypnosis, meditation, trance, lucid dreaming and religious and mystical experiences. As the systematic investigation of states of consciousness comes to fruition in the West through new disciplines of Transpersonal Psychology and the Anthropology of Consciousness differences in traditional sources of descriptions of altered or higher states of consciousness may prove to be due to individual idiosyncrasies of those who have experienced and told of them, rather than to the essential nature of these experiences themselves. Belief systems in terms of which the experiences of altered states of consciousness are interpreted must be seen as accounting for some of the variance. Saint Paul, for example, identified his moment of realization on the road to Damascus, when he returned to his normal waking state, in terms of Christ and the Christians because he was at that time preoccupied with the thought of them. The dreams, visions and paranormal experiences of *sangomas* are often interpreted in terms of African cosmologies, with their worlds of spirits and ancestors. Standard psychologies of the West, based on fundamental assumptions about the will to power, psychopathology and sexual dynamics are less than adequate tools for understanding these realms of the mind.

Harvard psychologist Daniel Goleman thinks that the most thorough maps of consciousness that exist today are found in the teachings of the religious systems of the East. The Tibetan *bardo* or the *loca*⁴ of the Vedas and Buddhism are in their esoteric sense metaphors for states of consciousness not yet widely acknowledged in the West. Beyond the more familiar states of consciousness known to Western psychology the Eastern systems describe realms of mind that have only recently begun to be recognized and investigated by Westerners. What has, for ages, constituted a fundamental

⁴'Regions' of consciousness.

transcendental religious experience, and so been characterized in the terminology of religious belief systems, is according to Goleman on the verge of being translated into the framework of modern psychology as 'altered' or 'higher states of consciousness'. 'We have reached a point in history', he says, 'at which the exploration of 'internal states' has become not only a legitimate but also a high-priority business of science' (1972:3).

One of the first lessons that modern students of consciousness have absorbed is how rudimentary our Western conceptions of consciousness really are. Western psychology has as its major technical vocabulary for describing inner states a highly specialized taxonomy of psychopathology, while Asian cultures such as India have equally intricate vocabularies for altered states of consciousness, stages of self-realization and spiritual attainment. In the East there are highly specialized vocabularies for describing and delimiting distinct degrees, levels and types of meditation- and trance-specific altered states which our own language can only vaguely and clumsily begin to approximate. Tart (1975:3) claims that in Sanscrit there are eighteen terms used to differentiate different states of consciousness. In English we are accustomed to make a single distinction between the conscious and the unconscious.

The call for a more adequate map of consciousness is a relatively new one in the West. Excommunicated Harvard psychologist Timothy Leary, better known as both a proponent and a victim of the psychedelic revolution than a theorist of consciousness, presented some very suggestive, if speculative, maps of consciousness based on his reading of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, and Stanislav Grof has been furthering the development of Transpersonal Psychology with detailed maps of consciousness based on his interpretations of teachings of Eastern psychology. Such maps may eventually help us understand the *sangoma's* vision of reality.

Grof's seminal work of the early 1970's is only now being rediscovered. Grof distinguished the following states of consciousness (this is a simplified sketch). First there is the ordinary state of waking consciousness that we are so familiar with. The so-called 'normal state' is in terms of the Western work ethic the most functional state of consciousness and is identified with

the EEG Beta brain-wave state. This is the state of mind we want to be in while operating machinery or filling out income tax returns. Secondly there is the preconscious or prereflective state. The term preconscious is found in Freudian theory where it refers to contents of the mind which momentarily lie outside of the field of awareness, but which could become conscious at any time. A metaphor Freud uses is that of a searchlight (representing awareness) which, probing the darkness of the preconscious, can illuminate something that is temporarily out of sight. Thirdly there is the unconscious. This is the region of the mind which has become linked to explorations of orthodox psychoanalysis led by Freud's own pioneering investigations. The vastness of this region has been amply demonstrated in the West by psychoanalytic inquiry and we now take for granted that this region is the source of important, emotionally charged and often repressed memories, impulses and wishes. Fourthly there is what Grof calls the 'ontogenetic' consciousness. When we reach this region of consciousness we begin to encounter phenomena that cannot be handled within the Freudian framework. Grof used psychotropic agents in his psychiatric practice to illuminate experiences which emanate from the region of the unconscious which relates to existential crises of death and dying, biological birth, disease and decrepitude - all problems which most Westerners shun as morbid and unmentionable. According to Grof one of the reasons why these experiences are so overpowering is that they are based on 'psychic residues' of the intrauterine state and the birth process. In some experiential accounts I have read of *thwasa* reference is made to the budding *sangoma*'s need to 'die to this world'. I think this can be taken to refer to the need to experience, and pass through, Grof's 'ontogenetic' level of consciousness. Grof believes that psychedelic agents and regression hypnotherapy (often used as part of the *twasa*'s training) can enable a person to re-experience these events, access to which is usually thought to be beyond one's capacity. Because these experiences are so discontinuous with normal functioning and because the emotions associated with them are so primitive and raw, the person in whom they are aroused is likely to be completely overwhelmed by them. That is why they must be experienced by *twasas* under the supervision of an accomplished *sangoma*. Grof claims that many subjects who have experienced these states regard them as absolutely authentic and not just hypothetical or imaginal possibilities. Last of all in

Grof's system there are the deep unconscious levels of 'trans-individual' and 'phylogenetic' states. This is the field in which we encounter phenomena which transcend individual ego boundaries and from which, if they exist at all, 'psychical' capacities are thought to emanate.

Jung had already applied the 'field principle' of modern physics to consciousness when he claimed that each person's *deep* unconscious is *continuous* with a universal or 'collective unconscious'. This level of awareness is, as Price thought, normally blocked out during the waking state. This is the realm in which *sangomas* are thought to work their 'magic'. The 'deep pools' that diviners sometimes describe being called into (Hammond-Tooke 1975:21-22) can, without much stretch of the imagination, be seen as a metaphor for the deep unconscious. It is in the deep collective unconscious, according to Jung, that ancestral and other 'archetypes' are encountered.

Jung (1963:385) maintained, that 'in so far as the archetypes act on me they are real and actual to me, even though I do not know what their real nature is' (1993:385). The most he was able to venture safely is that 'behind this veil' there is an incomprehensible, noumenal something which 'affects and influences us'. The archetypes are not inactive forms but a 'real force' charged with a 'specific energy' (1963:385). Thus when the African philosopher Odoniboye (1973:84) writes that 'when Africans talk of spirits ... they are not speaking metaphorically nor are they propounding a myth, *spirits are as real as tables and chairs, people and places*' (emphasis in original) he is talking, basically, about what Jung calls archetypes. At this deep level one encounters spiritual entities, guides, ancestors, is able to experience out-of-body experiences, flying, astral travel, extra-sensory perception and spirit communication. All of these experiences are described in the literature of Western psychology and anthropology, but they are usually dismissed as symptoms of madness or superstition.

IS THIS ALL MADNESS AND SUPERSTITION?

Perhaps we need to be reminded of John Mbiti's observation that the metaphysical assumptions of Western and traditional African societies are

radically different (Mbiti 1970). The metaphysical assumption that only physical matter exists has been a basic premise of Western common sense thinking and the rise of scientific rationalism. I think the enthronement of this premise is an intellectual catastrophe. Quite apart from what has already been said, everything revealed to us by special and general relativity and quantum physics has shown that behind our moment-to-moment experience of the everyday world of waking consciousness the world teems with realities that common sense is unaware of. That every physical object and all physical substances are a vortex of sub-atomic particles in random motion at speeds approaching that of light, that all of this is transmutable into energy of the most explosive force, and that every physical object is a space filled with fields of force is not at all the way that commonsense looks at things (see in general Capra 1976). That our own bodies are swirling masses of invisible energy is astounding beyond belief.

As far as scientific rationalism goes there are more than a few thoughtful and intelligent people who have grown impatient with the metaphysics of those who think that there is no reality outside of the one presented in the sensorium of waking experience. Some such view has been one of the characteristic outlooks of the Western world since the Enlightenment. It is this prevailing philosophical outlook amongst formally educated people that lacks all sense of wonder and mystery that surrounds us and presses so hard on our lives. Such an outlook lacks any real understanding that the limitations of the waking state are drastic and inevitably set very narrow bounds to all that can ever be experienced. It takes what can be experienced in the waking state as all that can ever be real. Altogether it seems to me a hopelessly inadequate worldview, yet it is the one that tends to identify itself with rationality, and to congratulate itself on its own superiority and sophistication. I have found that most of its adherents take it for granted that anyone who adopts a different view from theirs does so from a viewpoint of inadequate, or inadequately rational, reflection or experience, blinkered maybe by convention, religion, superstition, wishful thinking or irrationalist beliefs of some modern kind.

Because of fear that altered states of consciousness might subvert Western social structures, induce insanity, or undermine the work ethic of capitalism

they have often been repressed or treated with contempt in the West. Most traditional societies have, on the other hand, either explicitly or implicitly socialized some or all of their members, often through initiation schools and sacred ceremonies, into 'experiencing' streams of consciousness that are discontinuous with the waking state. Some societies have developed 'technologies' for this purpose, like the San of the Kalahari who are trained to enter trances through 'trance dancing' (Katz 1982) or Yaqui Indian warriors who retrain their perceptual habits in order to experience non-ordinary states that are thought to produce great wisdom (Casteneda 1973:87-94, 196-214). In understanding African cultures I have found it useful to think of them as visionary traditions. Through training and socialization, often through initiation schools, most African people have been taught and learned to see that some people have the power of tapping and harnessing psychic forces - for good and also for evil. When Nietzsche's madman rampaged the marketplace proclaiming that 'God is dead' he was, I believe, announcing the end of a visionary tradition in the West. Max Weber's 'iron cage of rationality' and 'disenchantment of the world' also herald the end of a visionary and the beginning of a new soulless era. To the surprise of many Westerners, Africa has steadfastly resisted this transition.

For over a dozen years now, I have been conducting attitudinal surveys of beliefs about witchcraft and spirits amongst students I have taught at universities in Southern Africa. These universities have included the Universities of Bophuthatswana (as it then was), the Witwatersrand, Namibia and the North. Most of these students have been African students but a small minority have been of European extraction. They have included entering and final-year students in the fields of law, sociology and anthropology. Although these polls are by no means methodologically exacting or sophisticated I have found that, amongst the African students, belief in the reality of witches and spirit ancestors almost always hovers at around the 80% mark irrespective of imbalances in variables such as sex, age, ethnicity (which seems surprizing), and level of formal education (even more surprizing). Elliot (1984) obtained results very close to mine in polls he conducted in the early 1980's amongst African medical students at the Medical University of South Africa. What does this prove? It would be

foolish to think it proves anything about the existence of witches, spirits and deceased ancestors, but it does indicate just how deep-seated these beliefs are amongst Africans and casts grave doubts on the view that Western education will eventually demonstrate their irrationality and eliminate them. The permanence of these belief systems means that they should, in my opinion, be taken seriously (but not uncritically) and respected by anthropologists, even if they cannot bring themselves to accept the possibility that these systems of belief may represent an actual reality inaccessible in the waking state, but no less real for that.

The idea that witches (like *sangomas*) can exercise 'psychical' powers is rejected by most social anthropologists on the ground that it is empirically or physically impossible. Mayer, in an influential article which may be taken as representative of the views of most social anthropologists in South Africa, writes that 'even if some individuals do try to be witches, the witchcraft power itself is surely imaginary' (1970:49). He claims that the witch does not exist in his or her own right or in virtue of any mystical powers he or she may claim to have or be thought to possess. Instead of this, 'it is the judgement of society that creates him; society creates the image of the witch, and pins this image down onto particular individuals' (1970:54). Instead of attempting to look at witchcraft beliefs 'from the inside' Mayer adopts an outsider's perspective on witchcraft and uses labelling theory as a basis for explaining the existence of witches.⁵ He thinks that witchcraft is manufactured, not discovered. For him, the existence of witches is assured only by virtue of a community's orientation to them. There is no witchcraft apart from the community's response. Witchcraft is the gloss for the process through which it is realized as such. Labelling a person as a witch is *constitutive* of being a witch. The problem with this approach is that it is inherently relativistic and does not get at the real problem. I have criticized labelling theory elsewhere (Hund 1995) and will not recite those criticisms other than to say that we need to think about

Social anthropologists have come under fire in the last decade by a faction in the profession dubbed 'experiential anthropology' or 'the anthropology of consciousness'. They are often stereotyped, sometimes quite unfairly in my opinion, as bookish Westerners who have never managed to take the leap and plunge into 'otherness'. For an interesting discussion of 'becoming the phenomenon' see Mehan and Wood (1975:225-238).

the African experience of witchcraft from the inside and not just from the outside. From the viewpoint of most African people, whether a witchcraft accusation sticks to a person or not is independent of whether or not that person really is a witch. From the inside witchcraft is an 'objective' feature of African life which invites an appropriate response from the community. Notice that I say an 'appropriate' response. Mob justice is not an appropriate response. An appropriate response is a judicial response in accordance with accepted customary norms under the auspices of chiefs and *sangomas* in my opinion. That is the way things were done before the South African Suppression of Witchcraft Act No. 3 of 1957 outlawed such participation by tribal authorities.

WITCHCRAFT ACCUSATIONS, MOB JUSTICE AND VIOLENCE

Rather than a decline in recent years there has been an intensification of witchcraft accusations, killings and violence in South Africa. Evidence indicates that there is a positive correlation between the non-recognition of witchcraft and the advent of witch-killings. Niehaus for example has found that, amongst Tsonga and Sotho-speaking groups of the Transvaal Lowveld few killings occurred when chiefs acted as mediators in witchcraft accusation cases. Both accused and accusers were given their day in court. Niehaus (1997:359) writes that after the implementation of legislation aimed at outlawing tribal participation in these cases 'a perception emerged that chiefs sided with witches'. Chiefs and reputable *sangomas* refused to get involved in such cases. Since South African state courts do not recognize the existence of witchcraft people could not seek redress there either. As a result they resorted to taking the law into their own hands. Mob justice and witchcraft-related violence has escalated. Minnaar (1997:1) writes that the Suppression of Witchcraft Act 'was instrumental in the replacement of expulsion with the execution of those suspected of being witches'. Magagulu's as yet unreported research (1999) shows that before the implementation of the Act systems of social control involving the use of *sangomas* and chiefs were in place in Sekhukhuneland which dampened and controlled witchcraft accusations. Amongst the Lovedu, in the old days, the Kriges tell us that public accusations of witchcraft were rare

(Krige and Krige 1980:259-263). When such disputes did arise they were settled in customary courts. Once participation of tribal authorities in witchcraft cases was outlawed people began taking the law into their own hands. We now have an epidemic which, in 1996, led the Minister of Safety and Security of the Northern Province, Seth Nthai, to declare that witchcraft killings (and related violence) are the number one social problem in the Northern Province. Statistical data provided by Minnaar (1997:26-32) support this claim. I am not aware of any evidence which suggests that before the implementation of the Suppression of Witchcraft Act witch-hunts and killings were regarded as a serious problem anywhere in South Africa. In those few recorded cases where witchcraft accusations did lead to mob justice the exception seems to prove the rule. Prior to the Act people seldom took the law into their own hands. This was regarded as a major offence under traditional law. People were expected to and had an obligation under customary law to approach tribal authorities with their claims so that they could be tested in court. According to Magagulu, accused persons were frequently acquitted and those making false accusations based on insufficient or unreasonable evidence were rebuked and fined. In serious cases *sangomas* were consulted who used their intuitive powers and abilities to make discerning judgements (frequently based on searching questioning and cross-questioning) to settle cases. Prior to the implementation of the Act bewitchment was a worry but was not without its remedies. By criminalizing these judicial remedies on the ground that they were repugnant to the 'civilizing mission' of the white, eurocentric apartheid government the seeds of chaos were sown. In the wake of this confusion unfounded witchcraft accusations have proliferated and are frequently used as pretexts for personal animosity, vendettas, intergenerational and domestic rivalry, agendas for political action, and so on. These trends and cases have been well-documented by social anthropologists and lawyers (see for example, Stadler 1996; Delius 1996; Mikhalik and Cassim 1993). The escalation of witchcraft accusations has generated new forms of popular 'justice' in South Africa and whole communities of outcasts accused of being witches (along with their families) have been established in hopeless situations under the protection of the police. What can be done?

South African state courts are not equipped to convict people of an offence whose material element cannot be presented as hard evidence in a court of law. Anyone brought before the courts for practising witchcraft is set free for lack of concrete evidence. State prosecutors will not touch these cases. In cases of murder, assault and arson the courts recognize belief in witchcraft as a mitigating factor (Van den Heever 1979). One result of this has been the exploitation of this factor by some people accused of violence or murder. They have pretended a belief that they were bewitched in order to secure a more lenient sentence (Minnaar 1997:5). Courts do allow people accused of witchcraft the right to pursue an action of defamation against the accuser. But the defendant may not introduce evidence that the accused *really has* bewitched him in order to defeat a defamation action, because the courts do not recognize the existence of witchcraft. Witchcraft accusations are also treated as a criminal offence. This has not had the intended effect of discouraging accusations of witchcraft. It has only shown the impotence of South African state courts as they are presently constituted to deal with the problem of witchcraft accusations. In the meantime witchcraft accusations and witchcraft-related violence soars out of sight. This is not just a local problem by the way. According to news reports the murders of elderly people accused of witchcraft in Tanzania are threatening to disrupt that country's social stability (Odhiamba 1999).

In Cameroon post-colonial legislators tried to tailor Western colonial court practices and rules of evidence to accommodate African metaphysical beliefs. These legislators sought to eliminate witchcraft by outlawing it, an approach that explicitly acknowledges the existence of witchcraft. The Cameroonian post-colonial elite themselves believed in witchcraft and provided for its criminalization in section 251 of the Cameroonian Penal Code. But how did the courts establish proof-based convictions in witchcraft cases? As recounted by Fisiy (1994:1-14) the courts were easily able to establish guilt by confession. The issue of coerced confessions was hardly ever raised as a defence in these cases. In reading through the court records he notes that alleged witches were often treated as if they had no civil rights at all. Magistrates, who themselves believe in witchcraft and regard it as a crime, accept that manifestations of witchcraft are not empirically provable. Hence the ultimate guide is the judge's conscience. As

a result whether an alleged witch is convicted depends very much on the individual judge (Fisiy 1994:11). Fisiy writes that in the Francophone part of the country, especially the East Province which is stereotyped as being 'full of witches', judges would often 'stretch the limits of the rules of admissibility of evidence to new dimensions in order to secure a conviction' (1994:11). This part of the country pursues an inquisitorial system of criminal justice which opens the door to all sorts of circumstantial evidence in the search for justice. More interesting, however, is that these courts are prepared to convict witches when accusations are initiated and supported by the village, and 'especially when the evidence of a witch-doctor is tendered in support of the allegations' (Fisiy 1994:11). This system allows *sangomas* to appear in the courts as expert witnesses. The Cameroonian model represents a departure from the long established pattern of state courts in Africa to set alleged witches free for lack of concrete evidence and to prosecute and convict *sangomas* for identifying them.

SANGOMAS AS MEDIATORS IN WITCHCRAFT ACCUSATION TRIALS - BACK TO THE OLD ORDER?

Should we follow the Cameroonian model in South Africa? One thing is certain: the present situation is untenable and out of hand. Things seem, however, to be coming to a head. Two major commissions of inquiry have tabled reports (Minnaar 1991; Ralushai 1996). Last year the Commission for Gender Equality held a national conference on witchcraft related violence and the Department of Justice is urgently working on a white paper that contemplates repealing the Suppression of Witchcraft Act No 3 of 1957 and putting new legislation in its place. But what sort of legislation might that be? The influential *Ralushai Commission Report* recommends the repeal of the Act and the replacement of it with a new Act that will 'control' witchcraft rather than attempting to suppress beliefs in witchcraft (see Ralushai 1996, Appendix H). The *Report* explicitly repudiates most of the assumptions on which the 1957 Act is based. It represents an 'African approach' to what is seen as a problem in Africa. The *Report* accepts that witchcraft is a real force and that witches are real. Basically, it breaks free of a Western metaphysic which denies the possibility of psychic capacities and influence and advocates a new approach to

witchcraft in which Africans will be judged according to African understandings of witchcraft. It is an argument to restore the old order. According to the Report beliefs in witchcraft can no longer be stigmatized as unreasonable. Belief in witchcraft is not unreasonable. Some individual accusations may be unreasonable or ill-founded, but that is for chiefs working with legitimate *sangomas* in customary courts to decide. The *Report* acknowledges that the Suppression of Witchcraft Act may have prevented some innocent people from being accused of witchcraft, but this has not solved the problem of witchcraft because it has also prevented guilty parties who actually do bewitch others from being accused, convicted and punished for their crimes. One of the Report's recommendations is that courses in witchcraft be established at African universities and research programmes undertaken in order to separate the myth and confusion from the reality of witchcraft. Another is that traditional healers (including *sangomas*) be bureaucratized and brought under state control. In short, the *Ralushai Commission Report* advocates a return to traditional courts and a restoration to chiefs and legitimate *sangomas* of their former roles as mediators in witchcraft accusation trials.

In cultures oriented toward the recognition and cultivation of psychic abilities control mechanisms must be in place to prevent the misuse of these abilities. The *sangoma* or so-called witch-doctor was traditionally perceived as a doctor meant to alleviate harm caused by witches, frustrated individuals who use psychic abilities vindictively to cause misfortune. On this view, fraud and chicanery are not intrinsic to the practices of *sangomas* but arise from the failure of society to regulate such practices.

In understanding the dynamics of witchcraft affliction the role or meaning of ancestral spirits is pivotal. Bührmann (1982:877) thinks that spirit ancestors are personifications of Jungian archetypes which arise from the deepest layers of the human psyche. The aetiology of bewitchment, according to this experienced psychiatrist, is best explained, not in terms of Western psychosis, but 'from the relationship of the afflicted individual to his ancestors' (Bührmann 1982:877). She says that 'in their positive aspect the ancestors are benevolent, helpful and protective. In their negative aspect they can become angry and hostile and withdraw their protection,

thus exposing the individual to the evil effects of witchcraft' (Bühmann 1982:877). In terms of Western psychopathology 'the treatment of bewitchment is still obscure' (Bühmann 1982:879). In order to cure people 'it is necessary to enter the world of the ancestors' (1980:820). This is done through divining sessions in a family and community setting. Western rationality is often a bar to understanding the intuitive processes involved in such sessions however, and Westerners tend to treat them as lunacy.

Motshekga recounts a case of spirit possession in which the accused was charged with two counts of murder. He writes that the accused, according to African thought, was not insane but possessed by an ancestral spirit which could have been allowed to settle and serve as a guardian spirit (Motshekga 1988:156-157). According to Motshekga the detention of spirit-possessed people in Western mental institutions is incomprehensible, because they cannot cure a spirit-possessed person. It is for the *sangoma* to cure such a person. Through their psychic training and experience of ancestral spirits, and through their own purification, they have learned to 'see' and not just observe. 'Seeing' implies moving beyond ordinary sense perception and understandings that the self has acquired through habituation and socialization in the waking state. *Sangomas* see themselves as engaged in a battle of good against evil forces in nature. In healing illness, they help people by means of various psychical practices *when necessary*. But they also teach that they themselves as healers cannot by themselves cure people of their afflictions. People are taught to take responsibility for their own suffering and to participate in their own cures by acts of propitiation to ancestors and by performing other purifying acts. The *sangoma* looks at the whole person's *psyche*, or soul, and its relationship to ancestral archetypes in the deep unconscious as well as to the family and community environment. The model of the *sangoma* just described requires the occupant of the role to give him- or herself over completely through surrender to higher forces, and to undergo awakening in the training period through the activation of psychic energies. Purification is achieved through meditative practices and results in an extended commitment to and endurance of life's trials and suffering. Ultimately the *sangoma's* art is concerned with the whole of consciousness.

Bourguignon (1999:52) distinguishes between 'possession' and 'visionary' trances and writes that only advanced shamans are able to master the latter. She thinks that the spiritually most developed shamans are ultimately concerned with the psychic unity and harmony of the whole of mankind (Bourguignon 1989:371-384). Witches on the other hand are seen as wayward or rogue (or sometimes just confused) psychics. Mutwa (1996:29) writes that 'the moment a witch doctor harms a person, he is no longer a witch doctor, he becomes a '... doer of evil deeds'. There is a name for such practitioners amongst the Kgaga of the South African Lowveld. They are called *ngakaya moloyi*, a 'doctor of witchcraft' (Hammond-Tooke 1981:103). These people, Mutwa says, 'use their powers and their talents to destroy other people' (1996:28). As long as these practitioners are outside of courts and law, the witchcraft problem will continue. People will always fear the worst. Mob violence will be their response. Does this mean that we should return to the way things were done in the old days? Should chiefs and *sangomas* be restored to their original roles as mediators in witchcraft accusation cases?

It seems to me unlikely that traditional courts can ever be revived to function as witchcraft courts. Traditional structures have all but collapsed. Customary courts no longer have the clout they would need to enforce their decisions. In general customary courts are no longer held in high esteem by most African people. One alternative might be to create special witchcraft courts as appendages to the formal court system. Decisions given through these courts would have the weight of the state behind them and could be appealed through the state court hierarchy. Such courts could give people falsely accused of witchcraft a chance to clear their names. Fines of varying degrees of harshness could be imposed on people making reckless or self-serving witchcraft accusations and on those found guilty of actually practising witchcraft. Some things we would need to understand, if such courts were to work, are how African metaphysics are related to African conceptions of forensics and 'fair trial' and how African conceptions of justice are shaped by African conceptions of reality.⁶ If the current problem

.Mosley (1978:16) also makes this point.

is to be solved people who practise witchcraft must be brought under the jurisdiction of courts and law. *Sangomas* working under authority of the Department of Health must be given a pivotal role in this process in my view. Special witchcraft courts are a possibility, but only if the Departments of Justice and Health can find ways of working together with traditional authorities. We should remember that most African people have deeply held convictions about the reality of witchcraft. State enforcement of a Western world view which denies the reality of witchcraft has not worked and is not the answer.

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