



## The Bombardier Marabout of Dakar – An African Shaman?

Towards a Nominalist Anthropology

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**Abstract.** – Academic interpretations of shamanism in the West have oscillated between the sociological and the cultural. Anchored in an anecdotal case study of a Senegalese marabout, a less equivocally ethnocentric approach is here proposed in terms of cultures as Projects (or Wholes) which, on account of their irreducibly particular projects (or peculiar parts), appear sometimes marginally convergent but (on the whole) are often radically divergent. A nominalist onto-epistemology could thus suit the anthropological cause more than any other. [*Senegal, marabout, shaman, Projects/projects, generalization, nominalism*]

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### Ba, the Bombardier Marabout, *carne y hueso*

In May 1983, a friend and colleague, working like myself in Dakar for the Belgian universities' development programme in Senegal, asked me to accompany him on a visit to a marabout – not a scavenging stork nor, as in North Africa, the tomb shrine of a saintly Muslim but a prominent if somewhat unorthodox and peripheral figure on the sub-Saharan Islamic scene. My compatriot, a science teacher, belonged to a team of six Belgians seconded to Senegal's foremost teachers training college. Like others working in West Africa they had just been subject to a fact-finding mission headed by the new minister for cooperation and development. A lady lawyer and member of the Liberal Party, she had divided the number of *coopérants* by the number of commercial contracts won for Belgium. Senegal

having given back less than it had received, “Madame la ministre” had decided to cut back on the gratuitous window dressing which cooperation in the field of higher education represented in her eyes. The financial rewards of aid (“les retombées économiques”; *Le Soir* 03.02.1982) being paramount, she informed the six-member-team to which my friend belonged, that their unrewarding project was to be terminated forthwith. Apprised of the situation, their Senegalese students, appreciative of their Belgian mentors, suggested that a typically African solution to the problem could be arranged. They knew of a marabout, Monsieur Ba (a pseudonym), partly specialised in solving such matters. Had he not just rescued from the threat of imminent closure, a development project between Brazil and Senegal? Favourably impressed by the students taking the initiative on behalf of their *toubab* teachers, Ba had fixed an appointment for 2:00 P.M. May 26.

On the appointed day, we left the campus of the Teacher Training College at 1:00 P.M. in my friend's VW minibus accompanied by a student from Mali and a neighbour of the marabout. The Dakar address of a villa, fax and phone numbers, together with his name figured on the visiting card the marabout distributed after shaking hands. We met with Monsieur Ba, however, in a second floor apartment of a pleasantly tree-shaded row of a two-storey housing belonging to the middle class in the suburban residential area of Dieuppeul. Though populous and “typically African,” the quarter, relatively chic,

was far from the madding crowd of the Medina. A painter at work on the façade, taking our presence for granted, greeted us quite naturally, complaining of stiff if not disloyal competition: “I put in an offer of 100.000 CFA for the job but others are prepared to do it for less than half that price.” The front door opened directly onto a small living room, furnished with a locally made sideboard, a sofa in imitation leather and four armchairs, arranged around a low coffee table. On the pale green wall was a calendar, illustrated with scenes of Paris. The whole was simple and sober as befits an African bourgeoisie more intent on keeping up human appearances than on cluttering up its domestic decor. Four matronly women, dressed up to the nines, were talking decorously amongst themselves while awaiting their turn to go upstairs and consult with the marabout. Friends and neighbours came in and out but not, as is often the case in the bush, to wonder at the presence of *toubabs* (white men). Our being there seemed to surprise no one, no doubt because we were not Ba’s first European clients. And in fact, at the university, I knew personally of one or two French colleagues but who had made their lives in Senegal, having recourse to the services of marabouts.

Our companion from Mali went straight up the stairs facing the front door in the right hand corner of the room but returned immediately saying we would have to wait a moment or two as the marabout was still dealing with a client. Some 5 minutes later, a woman in her thirties, smartly attired, came down the stairs and left the house without further ado. We were then invited to go upstairs. The other women waiting made no objection – perhaps because we had an appointment or more likely because they were programmed to give way to males in a hurry, *toubabs* to boot!

Half way up the stairwell (unusually wall papered) hung a portrait painted on glass of Ahmadou Bamba, the founder of Senegal’s largest and most conspicuous Muslim brotherhood, the Murids. A small landing opened onto a long, rectangular upper room, papered turquoise and fitted with a dark brown, wall-to-wall carpet. We took seat in the three armchairs along the nearest wall. Behind us, above our heads, was a framed photo of Sheik Jakubu of Boutlimi and a small white, glass windowed medical cabinet, containing the usual kind of pills and potions. On our right, were three large windows, and, on the left a long wooden dresser bearing a portable TV together with an electric fan. At the far end of the room, the marabout was seated on a large but single bed, his feet resting on a small, colourful (prayer)mat. Bearing a neatly trimmed beard on his

more Sudanic than negroid features, Ba in his forties was of medium height and slender appearance. He was soberly dressed in a lengthy smock and baggy trousers, tailored in dark blue, heavy cotton. While animated and articulate, he was neither flamboyant nor strident. Ba had nothing of the exalted charismatic charlatan and everything of the reserved, genteel middle class, professional Senegalese.

After the customary salutations and as no one seemed ready to broach the motif for our visit, I asked him whether he was a Murid. He replied somewhat tartly “No!” even expressing a certain disdain not only for the Murids but also the Tijjannes and Layennes (the other main Senegalese confraternities), declaring himself a member of the Qadiriyya, the oldest, the most worthy, and the most widespread of the Islamic brotherhoods. He went on to imply that in one way or another all the country’s authentic marabouts depended on the five spiritual leaders of Pakao, the region from which he himself originated. I mentioned casually that I had not only come across the Qadiriyya in Tanzania in the late 1960s but had visited the mausoleum of its founder, Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani in Harar, at the height of Mengistu’s revolution in 1976. Visibly moved, he rose from his bed, crossed the room to warmly shake my hands (as did, following suit, our friend from Mali). The ice being broken (not a particularly apposite metaphor!) and contact more than convivially established, Ba willingly explained how he had become a marabout.

A Mandingo, born in Sehdiou (though he also alluded to childhood spent in Touba, Casamance), he first spoke of his grandfather, Kabadumba, of whose aid the Mandingos had availed themselves at the time their chief, Fodé, was waging holy war (*jihad*) on the pagan Bainouks. Kabadumba would shut himself up in a hut to pray for the holy warriors’ invulnerability during combat. He had even been invited as far afield as Timbuktu to render the same services. Ba’s own father had been capable of lying down and then setting fire to the branches and leaves with which he had been covered but of coming out of the ordeal unscathed. A hunter of dugongs, he had acquired a huge swathe of land thanks to his cunning: the chief, whom he had pestered for a plot, replied dissuasively “you can have what you can cover with the hide of a cow”. Having cut the skin into thin strips, our marabout’s father was able to stake out a more than sizeable claim ... thus repeating 2900 years later the ruse by which Princess Elissa, better known as Queen Dido, fleeing Tyr and Pygmalion, her murderous brother, had carved out for her followers the vast territory of Carthage!

Ba told us he himself could also work wonders such as burying a cock alive then resurrecting it after a whole week thanks to the gris-gris attached to its neck. And yet, far from it, he had not always aspired to becoming a marabout-magician. *Primus perpetuus* of the fifty or more students at the colonial school he attended (*école française*), he had first thought of a brilliant career in the secular sphere. While not preposterously pretentious, Ba was clearly convinced of his worth. His grandfather, however, had selected him as his successor. Ba resisted initially but finally succumbed. Burning all his school-books, he informed his teacher that he no longer sought to become a boss (*patron*). The pattern is familiar: more than one of those I now call “remedial clairvoyants” I met with in Africa, as was often the case with biblical and other “religious” prophets and, indeed, “primitive” office holders in general, far from putting themselves on a short list for divine selection or human election, had at first fled unsolicited and unwanted proposals emanating from the powers that be.

Unable, however, to come up with the 500,000 CFA needed to complete his initiation, Ba decided to go it alone. Shutting himself up in an upstairs flat in Ziguinchor, the capital of Casamance, he undertook an ascetico-mystical retreat (*khaloua*) aimed at provoking a revelatory encounter with spiritual forces.<sup>1</sup> Alone day and night for a week in that dark room, Ba fasted rigorously, concentrating on spiritual reading, on the repetition of prayerful litanies and on the rapid, rhythmic recitation of a huge, 2,000 bead rosary. Physically extenuated but nervously straining in the desired direction, Ba suddenly saw a huge black snake arise from nowhere and lean its head on the beads.

In the sunlit apartment of Dieuppeul, Ba vividly mimed the scene. He took the selfsame rosary from a suitcase and threw it onto the floor in the middle of the room before us. Reliving intensely his initiatory experience, he backed circumspectly towards the bed, fixing all the while his eyes on the monstrous ophidian but also raising his hand to cast in its direction: “*A Ya Sin!*” I interjected, blithely transgressing the threshold, which should, in theory, separate

objective observation from subjective participation! Completely taken aback by a *toubab* manifestly in the know of the prophylactic purposes to which this surah of the Koran can be put, Ba must have felt encouraged to tell us all he had lived through without fear of snide misunderstanding on our part. The snake thus mastered, it was followed by a whole series of mysterious animals and sundry other mystical entities. In a corner of the room, a toad swelled itself to enormous size, angels (*malaika*) put in an apparition, till finally Abd el-Jilani himself came to confirm the marabout in his calling. I was minded of the hallucinatory visions induced by the ascetically athletic exploits of an earlier generation of Christian saints such as St Anthony.

Proud of himself, proud to have overcome the test imposed by transcendent interlocutors, Ba concluded by insisting that no one should undertake a *khaloua* lightly: “Amongst the innumerable beggars who haunt the sidewalks of Dakar and the countless blind who harass car drivers when they stop at traffic lights, figure many novices who, afraid to carry on till the bitter but bright end of the solitary, self-imposed trial, become mentally handicapped and materially impoverished.” Not everyone, far from it, can embark on ecstatic experiences or manoeuvre the numinous with impunity. But it was without pity, indeed with disdain, that Ba spoke of the apprentice sorcerers who had burnt their fingers and gone under. Not that those who succeeded connived to regroup in a convivial, collegial confraternity as some “tradipracticitioners” now do in Africa. Even when the master was a human being, relations with his disciple(s) were traditionally not only hierarchical but often harsh – the somewhat smoother case of the French Jesuit, Eric de Rosny (1988), who became a Cameroonian *mganga* being the exception rather than the rule. Indeed, Ba spoke passionately of the long nights he had been forced to spend seeking to counter the malevolent machinations of rival marabouts.

But we would completely misread Ba if we were to situate him on the right side of our manichean, moralising dichotomy between white and black magic. When the typical African High God is beyond good and evil, there is little reason to be surprised at the axiological ambivalence of human dealers in and with the invisible. One normal African’s “tradipracticitioner” can be his noisome neighbour’s witch! Since everyday existence is largely ambiguous, why should the bulk of Africa’s remedial clairvoyants see themselves or be seen by others as unequivocally good or bad? Ba went on to speak in a matter-of-fact manner, and in no way with an accent of cynical confidentiality, of the power he

1 The Burkinabe “healers” frequented by Fidaali (1987: 107, 122), not only promised to save his threatened job as a French aid worker but also suggested he undergo just such a retreat so as to *see* (underlined in the original) his spiritual guides face to face: “to that end you must shut yourself up in your place for a fortnight non-stop without seeing anyone. During this cloistering, you should repeat 15,000 times the phrase I will confide to you – then two male and one female spirit will meet with you.” This latter *génie* appeared to him as a *mami wata* – the jealous mermaid spirit of good fortune known throughout Africa.

possessed to arrange for road accidents. He took from a hook behind the door a tatty, bootlace-sized knotted leather strip saying that it could just as well produce as prevent a crash. Called *senghor* in wolof, such amulets are clearly in evidence close to the driving seat of most public and private transport in the region. Ba then detailed one of his latest exploits. If we had been lucky to find him in Dakar, he said, it was thanks to a client who had paid his business class fare from Paris to do a job for him. The man had a stall in the African arts and crafts centre, located, for the convenience of tourists, at Soumbédioune adjoining the fishermen's beach not far from the centre of town. Having fallen out with a rival vendor he sought to teach him a lesson. Interrupting our interlocutor again, I said that I had read a couple of days previously in the national daily, *Le Soleil*, of a sudden fire at Soumbédioune which had mysteriously burnt a stall to the ground while leaving others adjacent in the same row intact. The police suspected a criminal origin but had no proof. "It was me" interjected Ba with a triumphant smile. "Without leaving my room, I gathered clouds of fire together above the stalls in question; my client had warned the owners that it would be in their interest to call on me if they did not want to end up victims." Whether they had or not, I did not learn.

Mindful of another "accident" a couple of years before – a plane had crashed into the sea prior to landing at Dakar Airport, killing all the Mauritanian ministers on board – I mentioned it to Ba. The official explanation had invoked a sandstorm but he without any hesitation (or scruples) attributed it to his master in the Qadirriya, Sheikh Jakubu. This was the reason, he added, why the Sheikh had sought refuge in Podor on the Senegalese bank of the river Senegal. Ba had also been struck by the fact that, on entering, I had recognised the photo on the wall of this renowned Mauritanian marabout. He was pleased to learn that a friend of mine, a high-ranking officer in the Senegalese army, had made the pilgrimage to Podor, there to have a foot wound which Western medicine had been unable to heal, cured by Ba's spiritual mentor merely imposing his hands on the sore.

When I remarked on his frequent use of the verb *bombarder* (to bombard – the marabout spoke perfect French and without an accent), Ba replied "it's true, to the extent that a French friend dubbed me 'the bombardier'". He went on to remark, that nothing of note could be done or achieved in Senegal unless marabouts were involved. During the recent elections which had consecrated Senghor's dauphin, Abdou Diouf, as President, "the marabouts had 'bombarded' millions of voters to vote Diouf."

His own bombarding sorties usually took place at night when he had time to concentrate his forces on a rapid, radical solution to the problems presented to him by his clients. Ba then took from the dresser a packet of thirty or more letters sent to solicit his intervention. Most had been posted in France but I remarked to him about one bearing the postmark of the United Nations in New York. "It was sent by a Beninese woman working there, requesting I pray most strongly for her." But our marabout does not merely put his mind to matters, he also leans on *materia medica*. Ba showed us some sample powders (taken from the above mentioned cupboard) which included a remedy for cancer, adding that in the light of his success in the field, the government was thinking of giving him an official position (*le fonctionnaliser*). This tempting dream of official recognition has also led many a *mganga* to act as if he were a mere herbalist, wittingly or unwittingly playing down not only his far more wider role (rainmaker, court counsellor, exorcist, etc.; Singleton 1991) but also the symbolic efficacy of his remedies – as was the case with "Dr." Ngamila, a Tanzanian *mganga* and friend of mine (Singleton 1975).

From a drawer in the dresser, Ba also took out two air tickets: at the behest of another client, a Frenchman, he would soon be back in Paris. Ba clearly wanted us to know that he dealt not only with Africans, at home or abroad, but with Europeans too – amongst them the "Director for Immigration" in France. In an aside, he told us of one of his friends, the boss of the Kaolack branch of the SONES, the Senegalese national electricity company, who had come across a *toubab* breaking eggs in his office – the insinuation being that Westerners were not above indulging in "maraboutage."

I could not take note of all the documentary material Ba put before our eyes but I do remember seeing the photocopy of a blood test. Like some of our diviners, a marabout works on photos and other iconic traces so as to focus his forces or, as Ba himself would have put it, to concentrate his fire power! Not that he works alone. Ba spoke of the djinns who enlighten his mind and even execute, on occasion, his designs. The type of problems with which he deals and to which he spontaneously alluded were: the animosity of a boss, the gaining of someone's love, the saving of one's job, the obtaining of a bank loan. These are exactly the same kind of issues which, judging from hand-outs in the metro or adverts in the popular press, marabouts in Europe claim to be able to solve for Europeans. Our student guide afterwards told us that Ba was especially renowned for his gynaecological (not to say "djinn-ecological"! ) powers in favour of the sterile or the

impotent. He had indeed shown us a powder able to counteract problems of erection (*xala*). Before imagining it to have been the African equivalent of Viagra, it must be remembered that “native medicines” do not work in the eyes of those most concerned on account of their possessing a biochemically active ingredient but only when activated by the *bismillah* of a marabout or when given the ancestral green light (Singleton 2005).

When we at last came to the motive of our visit, Ba, having been already informed of our intentions, assured us he would “bombard” as forcefully as he could so as to make sure the Belgians remained in the country. To do this, however, he would need their names together with that of the minister responsible for their angry apprehensions. My friend gave him the list of his colleagues. For my part, the minister in question being a woman at the service of the Kingdom, I suggested he aim directly at the top and bombard Baudouin, King of the Belgians. Though expressing our deepest gratitude for his warm and informative welcome, we declined to conclude the deal on the spot, promising to keep in touch.

Ba insisted on accompanying us back to the minibus. We had been with him for over an hour. On leaving, I noticed that the room below was full. The student said that sometimes a queue forms in the street so famed was the marabout. Ba wished us farewell and expressed the hopes to see us again soon, given the urgency of the matter to hand. Having already done all that which was in my power as an anthropologist to accomplish, I never met with him again nor am I sure my friend took the necessary steps (which would have included, at some stage or other, a well filled envelope). What I do know is that unfortunately for some the project was not renewed, but fortunately for others neither was the minister’s mandate. To my relief, the King survived until mid-1993!

## Projects and their projects

Thus far these are the data but not the facts. What anthropological meaning can or should, in the most literal sense of the term, be *made (facere)* of the ethnographic material just given (*dare*)? Or, as Aristotle would have put it, to what actuality does the “potential” in question plausibly lend itself? As a matter of fact, epistemologically speaking, there is no such thing as the facts of the matter. The actual sense Ba made of himself and that others made of him act as a potential given to anthropologists for their thoughtful (f)actualisation. De facto, in Western anthropology (but is there any other?), the exegetical

explanation of ethnographic (con)texts has oscillated between the sociological and the cultural. Durkheim (and Marx) *versus* Weber (and Castoriadis): the anthropologists of my generation (I was Evans-Pritchard’s assistant in 1968) strove, often unsuccessfully, to steer clear between and beyond the Charybdis of underpinning structures and the Scylla of the imaginary’s trickling down.

The distinction made in an early contribution to the topic (1975) between three types of Tanzanian *waganga* was basically sociological. In the light of the theoretical association between milieu, language, and logic, I described three settings the rural, the urban and the international giving rise to three distinct “remedial clairvoyants” – a translation of the Bantu *waganga* I now prefer not only to “witch-doctors” or “medicine-men” but also to “healers” or “tradipractitioners.” To legitimise his practice, the village *mganga* simply invoked lineage ancestors familiar to his neighbours; dealing with patients *ex omni tribu et lingua*, the supra-“tribal” *mganga* needed to put himself under an overarching, divine patronage (*mungu*); functioning in between the local and the global, the urban *mganga* goes either up or down. On the one hand, he can descend into herbalism and heal with plants clients as little known to him as the average customer to our chemists. On the other, he can ascend towards the prophetically inspired launching of a therapeutically new religious movement.

The peculiar features of the towns emerging in Africa has led me (2010) and others (Hilgers 2009) to speak of relatively new forms of urban actors rather than of the reediting of a supposedly universal law: urbanism = individualism. It is true that Ba and his clients are not without their counterparts throughout the modern Western world. Laplantine and others studied a fascinating seer in Lyons (1985). I myself have spent some time interviewing diviners in Wallonia. However, when all is said and done, the temptation for the committed sociologist will be to interpret worldwide cultural data bearing on the offer of marginal magicians to the demands of their disorientated clientele, in terms of the anomie and anaemic anonymity induced by globalisation.

This sociological slant has inclined some anthropologists to consistently reject the distinction made by others between shamanism and spirit possession on “purely cultural grounds” (Lewis 1971: 50). In a letter to *Man*, Lewis (1993: 361) continues to protest against the reduction of shamanism to mystical flight upwards or downwards. To my mind, the debate between the cultural and the sociological is too ethnocentric for conceptual comfort. They are parts of a “Whole” elaborated in the West and as

such cannot be exported to the explanation of other “Wholes” who neither think nor speak of culture as one rather superficial element amongst others of more weighty import such as politics or economics. A debate can sometimes be solved by refusing to accept its terms. Rather than decide whether cultural differences belie sociological similarities – whether Ba is an African shaman and African shamans are basically the same as Asiatic or American shamans (Inuit included – Laugrand and Oosten 2010) – I prefer to redefine culture as a “Whole” and to identify “Wholes” with “Projects” (cf. Singleton 2004 for a more detailed account). This identification not only means that there is nothing beyond Projects but that if Projects are intrinsically irreducible the ones to the others, it is because they are made up of particular parts or specific projects which sometimes appear cross-culturally similar when as a rule they are quite dissimilar. Take, for instance, the Project the West is and that part of it which we call “religion.” The Islamic world ignoring the distinction between Church and State, its religious Project is already significantly different from ours. When the Bantu Project is reached the absence of most of what makes religion meaningful for us (an essentially good God *versus* the Devil as Evil incarnate, the existence of two opposed worlds, Heaven and Earth, the opposition between belief and knowledge, etc.) could plausibly mean the presence of a non-religious Project.

This plausibility hinges on what culture amounts to. However, before summarily detailing an answer to the question “What is culture?” it is important to realise that far more crucial than the divide between those who see culture as a part from those who envisage it as a whole, are the replies given to the question “What is ‘what’ itself?” Since Parmenides and Heraclites solutions have varied between seeing “being” (*esse*) as more primordial than “becoming” (*fieri*) and vice versa. In (great) part due to the asymmetrical dichotomy induced by Indo-European languages between first and foremost *being* something essential before eventually *becoming* slightly or radically other, Western(ised) anthropologists tend to treat culture as an already realised reality, enjoying stabilised significance. This substantial phenomenon is then subsequently and on occasion subject to accidental changes of varying degrees brought about by such factors as acculturation or deculturation. Thus, the ancestral cultures of the Nuer and the Dogon are seen as containers whose contents were deleteriously impacted by the onslaught of Islamic society and Western civilisation.

To avoid the ambiguities attendant on analysing phenomena in philosophical terms implying a

pre-existing product liable to accessory processing, I prefer, on onto-epistemological as much as on ethnological grounds, to speak of cultures as Projects (Singleton 2004). The word enables us to think in terms of ongoing dynamics ever intent on producing their respective worlds. Upstream, this preference is inspired by phenomenology (Merleau-Ponty), process philosophy (Whitehead), and the primordial character of “doing” with respect to “being” (Ricoeur). Downstream, it involves taking periods and peoples as synchronically irreducible and diachronically irreversible wholes. Whether Whorf’s Hopi were a figment or not of his imagination, it remains, from a purely phenomenological point of view, that talk of “pluviation” as a process is far more plausible than that of a product or substance called “rain” waiting in the sky for an opportunity to fall. Teilhard de Chardin preferred to speak of hominisation rather than of Man. If there is no such thing as human nature, then looking for a missing link between the last humanoid primate and the first human being is just as chimerical as dreaming that the evolution of our species will come to an end when its members emerge as essentially and definitively human (Singleton 2012). Whenever we read then of “culture,” “culturation” should be understood. If only because the hidden costs of reducing the cultural to being merely a (fixed) part of a (stable) system are too heavy to bear, it is preferable to understand culture as an ever ongoing whole.

For if culture is construed as an element of but not the ensemble as such, then the really real, the univocally and universally relevant, lie beyond culture in the realm of the natural and the supernatural. If this were the case, then the institutions and ideologies associated with Christian revelation and scientific reason would not be the particular Projects peculiar to that Project identifiable as a Westernisation of the world (Latouche 1989) but the objective be all and ultimate end all of each and every contemporary culture. When what is crucial to the future of mankind is believed to be intrinsically independent of sociohistorical situations, then the claim, for instance, of Roman Catholicism to represent the one and only religion supernaturally revealed as superior to all natural (i.e., purely culturally constructed) religions would be just as absolutely justifiable as the pretention of modern reason to have revealed those naturally reasonable realities (the law of gravity, the theory of relativity, scientific medicine, parliamentary democracy, and human rights) which all cultures must respect if they want to enjoy any chance of surviving.

Not the least of the paradoxes of culture being taken as a part, is that Western culture would be the

first to be essentially natural and, therefore, fundamentally noncultural! Less dramatically but no less disastrously, culture treated as a dimension means, that

1. it is the first subsidised sector to go under during budgetary duress;
2. it can be indicted, ignored, or instrumentalised in the interests of development – as paganism was by revelation;
3. giving rise to the invidious discrimination between authentic and popular culture, it allows the elitist snob to “distinguish” himself, as Bourdieu would have said (1979), from the *vulgus plebs* or incites the cultivated philanthropist to put culture at the disposition of the working man by publishing the classics in paperback or producing cut-price CDs of Bach and Beethoven.

I do not suggest that treating cultures as incompressible, distinct wholes will solve all our anthropological problems. As a paradigmatic postulate it is of little help in determining the synchronic and diachronic limits of a Project for two simple and sound reasons. On the one hand, Projects being projections they can only be substantially stilled in the same artificial way as the photos of a Polaroid. On the other, since “being real” results *ab ovo ontologico* from “being in relation to” (Marion 1997), any one thing can only be identified with respect to something else. If everybody were white, there would be no word for white or black! Likewise, Belgium as a Project exists because of neighbouring Projects such as France and Germany. In Belgium, no one says he is Belgian but projects himself as Walloon or Flemish. Amongst Walloons, there is little point in declaring oneself as a Walloon rather than as being from Liège or belonging to Namur. In Namur, one either lives in the upper-class district of the Citadelle or in the lower-class quarter near the station. When an individual, embodied in his own “flesh and blood” and embedded in his sociohistoric situation (Castoriadis 1975), declares his identity, it is always to someone from somewhere for something. Should he imagine that his successive, situated declarations stem from an indivisible, substantial Self, then he must convince Pirandello, Freud, and Kaufman (2004) that they were wrong in insinuating its inexistence.

More important for analytical purposes than this intrinsic instability of Projects is the fact that the particular projects produced by and productive of a given cultural whole are not to be found automatically and essentially identical in all overarching or underlying Choices of Society (to give Projects another name). Projects (together with the projects that make them what they are) which are close in

time and space, while retaining their irreducible, idiosyncratic identity, can overlap peripherally. The macro-Projects, which the nations of the European Union presently constitute, are all more or less articulated around such meso-projects as ecology, economy, education, and health. It is especially where micro-projects are concerned that insurmountable differences appear. Schooling in Belgium is not only different from its French “equivalent,” but is split into denominational *versus* non-denominational networks and even within the former, parents can choose to send their children to schools whose projects can be identified as Jesuit, Benedictine, or Salesian. Such differences exist in other fields such as politics and health. Being relatively slight, these discrepancies can be catalogued as intra-cultural. Abstracting from concrete realisations it is possible to speak of schooling, of medical care, or of politicking. It is crucial, however, to recognise that this generalised description of projects peculiar to the Western society is of little or no intercultural validity. Even less does it answer to the transculturally identical needs of a supposedly common human nature. If it were the case that the more one eliminated superficial appearances the closer one attained to quintessential meaning, then talk of the basic need to socialise the upcoming generation would be fundamentally more significant than the generic schooling, and this latter far more crucial than choosing between a Jesuit rather than a Salesian school. But this is only the case if one subscribes to the excessively ethnocentric and extremely equivocal dichotomy between accidental differences and substantial identity. Whatever onto-epistemologically might be the case, the anthropologist knows by experience that general notions, such as material production and moral reproduction, structured socialisation and institutionalised caring, though applicable at this common denominator level to any Project, provide, at their best, mere heuristic, initial guidelines. When it comes to the inventory and understanding of grassroot projects, the empirical evidence obliges him to conclude that there have been and are Projects without the projects he understands as ecology (Descola 2004), as economics (Sahlins 1972), as politics (Clastres 1980), as marriage (Godelier 2004), as medicine (Rémon 2013), as religion (Veyne 1996), and even as man (Singleton 2015) or God (Debray 2001). Words belong primarily to the worlds (or Projects) in which they originated. Projected into no-man’s-land, a never-never land if ever there was one, they either retain their ethnocentrically limited meaning or end up by having little or no sense whatsoever. When all is said and done, if “Other Cultures” (Beattie 1964)

were not “essentially” Other but mere accidental variations of substantially the Same, the hard-won material of anthropology would amount to no more than incidental illustrations of metaphysically guaranteed universal realities and univocal truths.

This is not a plea for leaving things exactly as empirically they were found. At this level, each case of possession or of witchcraft is as irreducibly non-identical to another as one IKEA chair is materially to others of the same series. Some categorical re-grouping of data in keeping with their family likeness and their common denominator (f)actualisation as particularised phenomena of possession or witchcraft is required. What I am pleading for is a decisive and definitive recourse to low-level interpretative frameworks which strongly rather than ever more weakly echo manifestly specific identities. Radical respect for otherness and not its reduction to substantially and significantly the same has been the *raison d'être* of the anthropology I have practised for over half a century.

Back now to Ba – back but also beyond the dichotomy between the sociological and the cultural. As a particular person, he articulates a project peculiar to a Global Project whose *sui generis* hard core is irreducible to any other. Our marabout is obviously as much if not more an individual as you or I. Basically, he is in a class of his own and it would be equivocal to determine what percentage of his traits (25, 50, 70 %?) are unique and what he has in common with his fellow urban colleagues as distinct from past Senegalese marabouts or their present rural counterparts. Though I could compare and have compared these figures of Islam in West Africa with the *waganga* I met in Tanzania and the Congo, with the *babalawo* I knew of amongst the Yoruba of Nigeria, or the Coptic “healers” I came across in Ethiopia, I remain more aware of what distinguished them *de facto* than of what I deduced theoretically they had in common. In the light of these encounters but by making light of their specific difference, I eventually elaborated an ideal-type distinct from other categories of specialists who can be classified generically as “allological” (from the Greek *allos* or other) in that they have to do with the Other in some form or other. To eschew ethnocentric equivocation, it is better to speak of this Other not as representing a spirit or deity but basically as an interlocutor embodying more than what is understood locally by being human (Singleton 2009). Despite its African origins, our abstract model could be seen as enjoying broader analytical scope. The key issue is not to confuse it essentially with shamanism, as this would do as little justice to the Africans I have in mind as to the Asiatic specialists who first gave rise to the term.

The question as to whether Ba and consorts can be meaningfully catalogued as shamans is but the tip of an immense onto-epistemological iceberg with important methodological implications. Fundamentally at stake in the understanding of “things anthropological” is the threshold which separates the taxonomical and heuristic relevance of general concepts from increasingly irrelevant and useless generalisations. All too often, scaling up not leads to the essential but to the evanescent. I do not know whether Pacha Mama is a supreme symbol substantially and significantly known to most Latin American peasant cultures. What I do know is that the “pachamamisation” of the world projected by the proponents of a globalised *buen vivir* would ring little bells in cultures such as those of Africa where the ancestors and not Mother Earth are for real. Since the more critically aware of contemporary theologians have ceased to suppose that the God and the Devil, as conceived by the onto-theology once traditional in Christianity, lie at the root of the deities and demons of pagan religions, hopefully no anthropologist imagines that transcultural, metaphysical entities underpin the more than human interlocutory agents he has inventoried in a given period or people. While an anthropologically credible case could be made for associating the benevolent nature of Jok – the supreme symbol of the Nuer – with their relatively manageable environment and contrasting it with the somewhat capricious character of the Dinka’s Jok, due to their less predictable milieu, there would be little sense in studying the peoples classed as Nilotic so as to conclude to their common belief in one and the same Jok. And there would be not much sense, anthropologically speaking, to affirm after an encyclopaedic examination of African religions that most Africans believe in the same God as Christians; and there would be no sense at all to assert as a result of a worldwide survey, that disbelief in spirits is the exception and not the rule. By associating language, logic, and (mi)lieu, the anthropologist seeks to understand why though they might in the abstract have the same name, the supreme symbol of the BongoBongo is particularly regardful of whereas his homonym of the CongoCongo looks especially on theft. He might proceed to contrast such deities who see all with others who hear all, he might even be tempted to do so by having recourse to Pettazzoni’s jargon (1955): the “*onnivisiva*” versus the “*onnauditiva*.” But it would never enter his mind to treat these two types as still too imaginative and not yet sufficiently intellectual to be worthy of an archetypically omniscient Being – if only because theologians themselves find that “omniscience” has little or no meaning (Pohier 1977). There



comes a point where there is no point in further classificatory disquisition. And this bridge too far is often far closer than even the average anthropologist tends to think. All that is theoretically possible is not always phenomenologically plausible. This leads to my reticence to put Africans in the same shamanistic sack as their supposedly Asiatic or Amerindian counterparts. At the most, his Culture or Project made Ba a marabout and not a shaman.

Though sociologically similar the world over as marginal or marginalized mutants, those obsessed with and possessed by the Other, can be worlds apart in terms of their respective imaginaries. Despite their *manifest* differences, such as the divinatory rattle versus the scientific stethoscope, the African “witchdoctor” was, latently, as much a respected and responsible member of the local community as the European village doctor. Such cross-cultural, functional convergence, however, is often belied by intercultural, philosophical divergence. The explicit mind-set and the less conscious imaginary of Ba warrant as much attention as the fact that his social function is partially parallel to that, say, of Western-style psychotherapists.

Until recently, Ba’s thought and discourse would have been dismissed as irrational. According to the epistemology once prevalent in the West, given that pure ideas emerge from imperfect images, the role of scholarly and especially scientific language games was supposedly to clarify and correct what was confused and inexact in popular speech or poetic parlance. Of late, however, the imagination has come again into its own, autonomous right. It is now seen not as a subservient step towards conceptual speculation, but, on a par with the language peculiar to the body, as articulating a definitive discourse. As if this revalidation of the imagination and its products were not enough (Durand 1969), there has also emerged a notion of the “imaginary” as a magma-like matrix (Castoriadis 1975) providing the members of a given sociohistorical setting with the ways and means of making fundamentally metaphorical meanings of matters experienced therein (Ricoeur 1975). Finally, the oft invoked distinction between etic and emic messages has led anthropologist to pay far more hermeneutic attention than previously to what people explicitly declare their intentions to be. Dosse (1997) has mapped this global shift towards interpretation and the actor while Olivier de Sardan (1994) has illustrated it with regards to Ba-like instances in particular. Unless a clear proof to the contrary is forthcoming, the anthropologist, indeed any open-minded observer, does well to assume with Lévi-Strauss (1958) that specialists dealing with the invisible not only believe but know full

well what they are doing, even though the language game they play is defined as “common sense” by linguistic philosophers and “le sens pratique” by Bourdieu (1980).

A former generation of anthropologists saw themselves as delving behind the local scene to put their fingers on the underlying structures or the deep processes at work, more or less unbeknown to the native actors (“sorcerers are superficial symptoms of social stress”, “belief in spirits provide symbols whereby women negotiate structural change for the better”). Their successors see themselves as recoding for export to other climes (and in particular for the rarefied atmosphere of their own academic arenas), the philosophies and practices which enable “natives” elsewhere to fully understand themselves and undertake successfully their worlds. Gone are the underlying universals explicitly known only to the outside observer; “in” are the speculative and structural singularities not only specific to but specified by particular persons at certain times in given places. Participation of the observed in the end product (publications, documentaries, reports) and not only participant observation of a specialist is at present high on the anthropological agenda. Nonetheless, it would be scholarly suicidal to give the natives the final, decisive word. My Tanzanian friend “Dr.” Ngamila was not the only *mganga* who, in aspiring to be taken as a biomedical practitioner, could be seen, from a less involved point of view, as being in flagrant contradiction with the far wider services, such as rainmaking, finding a job or a wife, preventing theft, or eliminating an adversary, which they offer and which their clients require of them. It is not otiose, however, to wonder whether Ba would have taken kindly to the title of shaman or whether the Tungus, from whom the term originates, would have readily accepted him as one of theirs.

If I doubt, that neither he nor they would agree, it is because of a cross-cultural divide in spatial imagery. Ba did not undertake a journey upwards to the seventh heavenly sphere and his initiatory interlocutors embodied as animals came straight at him from out of a corner. The Holy Spirit did not descend upon Ba in the shape of a celestial dove but swelled out towards him as a terrestrial toad. If his recourse to horizontal rather than vertical images is typical of modern marabouts, then, whatever they might think separates them as Muslims from pagans, they are far closer to such ancestral African figures as the *waganga* than to today’s or yesterday’s shaman elsewhere. In Africa, ancestors tend to come up out of the ground rather than fall down from above. My more than fifty years in and around

Africa have left me with an overwhelming impression of the “down to earthiness” of African philosophies and practices of the one and only world to which they address themselves. Unlike other decidedly two worldly *Weltanschauungen*, be they religious (Christian, Islamic) or not (Buddhism), popular as well as professional, the parahuman in Africa (be it supra, extra, or infra) takes place in basically one and the same time-space whole. New religious movements on the continent, whether of Christian or Islamic inspiration, seem bent on inducing the gods to deliver the goods in this world rather than in some compensatory after life.

Rather than indulge in an ethnographic encyclopaedic excursus, let me simply echo what I learnt from my first and foremost field experiences in Tanzania. Though their dense woodland environment was far from being an impenetrable jungle, the slash-and-burn, collective mode of production of the WaKonongo meant that they were little inclined to be ever-gazing upwards as the *Kulturkreislehre* would have it for “true” though transhumant nomads, overseeing individually their herds in the barren immensity of the wide open Eurasian steppes. Far more authentically nomadic, going nowhere in particular and living to all intents and purposes in the present, the WaKonongo were not given to thinking and even less to speaking about “First Beginnings” and “Last Ends.” Harassed by my insistence, Jakobo Kasalama, my host and elderly informant, once came up with the tale (I hesitate to call it a “myth”) of “God” *in illo tempore* having gone off skywards for good and in a huff since a woman, pounding corn, had inadvertently poked him the belly (not to say the genitals!). He concluded with another story about the futility of trying to reach Him in the sky – as had a pretentious chief of yester yore whose wooden scaffold tower of Babel kept collapsing. Far from aiming at communion between the above and the below, African sacrifices (de Heusch 1986) are fundamentally apotropaic. Should the Heavens, though uncalled for, fall back to Earth, then the best thing for all concerned, both “God” and Man, is to get things back to where they should belong and rightfully stay put: definitively Up and decidedly Down. Though the WaKonongo had become Catholics en masse in the 1930s, I could still catch snatches of their former convictions which spoke neither of the Sky God and Earth Goddess (dear to historians of religion) but of the ancestors (identifiable, as I have said, as “interlocutors” and not ethnocentrically as “spirits”), of their habitual abode, and occasional appearances. The odd departed who proved just as unmanageable as when he was alive, could be brought back home

and enshrined there so as to be ready at hand for placatory measures. The dead who were resigned to their condition, said Jakobo, had lived not far away in the hills on the horizon. In no way had they made it as immaterial, immortal spirits to Heaven there to kneel eternally in perpetual adoration of the Divine. On occasion, it was said (for no one I knew had ever experienced the fact) that a departed shade could appear in the shape of nocturnal, burrowing animals or as the kind of rampant snake such as the spitting cobra (*swila*), given to haunting homesteads. One morning, getting out of bed, I almost trod on the *swila* curled upon underneath it. I rushed gingerly to my neighbour saying that my grandfather uninvited had paid visit, but as I could hardly unceremoniously eject my unwelcome visitor, could he kindly oblige ... which he did with his lance! Of creatures of the air, it was little or no question: kings, for instance, had been identified as lions and pythons but not with eagles. The guinea fowl, often ritually and symbolically significant in Africa, is not given to flying! If the spirits possessing the women of Mapili (the hamlet where I lived) could come from as far afield as Mecca, no one bothered to wonder how they managed it. I have never come across in Africa anything resembling the incredibly complex topographical and theological speculations of, let us say, Judaism on the heavenly spheres and their diverse denizens (cf. Russel 1964: chap. 9). It was enough to know that spirits could seize you. No one in his right mind, however, not even the local adorist, would go out of his way (and especially out of his body) to meet and deal with them on high. It is true that a mysterious character once visited me and suddenly disappeared into thin air when my back was turned. Called Kafunko, he had been spirited away for years, but in the forest no one thought he had been removed to the heavens above. More relevantly, the African specialists once assimilated to shamans on sociological grounds, neither in their initiatory experience nor daily practice take to the air according to a pre- and well established flight plan, ascending from one heavenly sphere to the next. Ba was the last such figure I met *carne y hueso*, the first being Rashidi Nyumbani, an internationally known *mganga* working from the village “hospital” he had founded in the bush some twenty miles east of Tabora (Singleton 1975). As is (or at least was) the case with his counterparts throughout the bantu-speaking world (Heintze 1967), Rashidi had been forcibly transferred from his earthy hearth to an aquatic abode where an ancestral spirit had taught him, once and for all, every trick of the healer’s trade before returning him home for the common good of all concerned.

One cannot but be impressed by the overwhelming horizontality of the numinous imaginary in Africa. Seated still on a stone in the middle of a sacred grove, strong personalities amongst the Sereer of Senegal provoked nocturnal encounters with a series of terrifying animal-like apparitions, culminating in a monstrous, black snake, so as to obtain, thanks to the sacrifice of a loved one, supernatural favours (Gavrand 1990: 309). Ba, understandably, made no allusion to the price he had paid to complete his initiatory trial. Zulu rainmakers, also seated by night on a stone, confronted the python spirit in a heroic frame of mind which had little to do with trance-induced possession and even less with that “self-affirmation” Frobenius (1950: 285 and 387 ff.) saw as the shamanistic core of an incoming religion which had pushed ancestor worship to the West and Southwest of the continent. Despite its Islamic and mystical overtones, the whole imagery of Ba and the experience it articulates is on a par with this sub-Saharan paradigm: predominantly earthbound and only very occasionally vertical.

I have no firsthand experience of shamanism outside of Africa and what I know of it is scanty to say the least. A colleague, Anne-Marie Vuilleminot, who did fieldwork with a Kazakh shaman (2009) and is something of a shaman herself, insists that horizontality was not absent from the Eurasian data. It could be that, on the one hand, that earlier ethnographers in the area overstressed the ascensional aspect of the phenomena in keeping with the nineteenth century’s overriding preoccupation with religion in general and the High God in particular. What Marco Polo (1908: 251) said of the spirit possession and therapeutic trances of the shamans he encountered, could still be at least partly said of their contemporary African counterparts. However, if by “shaman” one should mean a person who having mastered his or her spirits can instrumentalise them for therapeutic and other purposes, then Africa, indeed the whole world, is full of shamans. The desire for taxonomical tidiness which leads to putting West African marabouts and Central African *waganga* in the same terminological basket as Asiatic and other shamans risks short-changing theoretical niceties as well as the empirical thicknesses at stake.

The eventual generic use of initially specific terms is probably inevitable. It becomes equivocal, however, when it is grounded on the presupposed existence of transcultural traits, assumed to be substantially and significantly identical in most if not all human societies. The fact that no Project can be without some form of the paradigmatically primordial or its ultimate, symbolically configured horizon is often identified in the West by recourse to the

Greek term *mythos* (myth) and even with, at least, an implicit belief in God. Specialists have been quick to point out that this use does not reflect the meanings of myth in classical times and that when science is said to be the modern equivalent of ancient myths the term becomes somewhat meaningless. This could be why native words such as *mana* or totem which once created quite a stir in anthropological circles in that they seemingly fingered universal beliefs and behaviour end up tabooed (if the Tongans will forgive me for diluting one of their key concepts). The problem is that when words are cut adrift from their empirical anchorage, their sizeable and seizable significance tends to diminish until it disappears over the hermeneutical horizon. Even anthropologists tend either to forget that the terms of their jargon initially had specifically situated significance or to assume that though now abstracted they have retained or enjoy substantial meaning. And yet though the divine and the religious, the political and the medical relate etymologically and “essentially” to similar, low-level sociohistorical realities (the shine of daylight *\*dei*, being obliged to *ligare*, urban issues *polis*, measurement *\*med*), we have no hesitation in declaring that when the WaKonongo speak of having met with smallpox as with a person, *mtu* (Singleton 1975), of Shambwe a *mtemi* (“chief”) who was also a *mlozi* (“sorcerer”), of WaKagama, as a *mganga* able make or stop it rain (Singleton 2010), in actual fact it is a question of a divinity typical of primitive religion as such, of protean politics and of a native medic (Singleton 2004). It seems to me that though particular terms are not exactly proper names when they are used generically not only forfeit much of their meaning but also get the better of other specific generalizations. I can see why the fact that WaKamando, who helped the possessed of Mapili to cope with their *majini* and *mashetani*, made her an (African) ador-cist (to use the neologism de Heusch’s coined to fit his fieldwork data) rather than a (Christian) exorcist but cataloguing her transculturally as a typical spirit specialist adds little if nothing either to what she was or to what I understood her to be. Though Ngamila, a *mganga* I knew, liked to present himself as a “Doctor,” what he did made him at once far more and far less than anything the Western world deems medical. Likewise, if Ba made some sense to me as a Senegalese or even West African marabout, to my mind he made far less as a *mganga* or a shaman.

Without being able to answer it (though the ivory tower of academia could be partly responsible), the sociologist of knowledge wonders why it is that some scholars seem bent on acquiring substantial

sameness at the expense of manifest otherness? When the generic gets the better of the specific, this latter inevitably forfeits something of its uniquely irreducible contribution to the richly plural and even contradictory character of anthropogenesis. If the voice of Africa (along with that of Buddha, Confucius, and others), rather than articulating the possibility of an authentic human existence without what Europe understood by religion and monotheism, was simply but imperfectly saying basically the same thing as nineteenth-century missionaries, there would be little point in listening to what the continent's sons and daughters had to say. Likewise, the transformation of "shaman," a term common in Tungus households, into the "shamanism" of anthropological theory risks reducing the singularly significant Tungus shamans to the status of accidental variations on a substantial theme. When shamanism is postulated as a transcultural phenomenon, the danger is even greater of any person who deliberately deals with spirits becoming a mere empirically residual avatar of a resplendent Platonic archetype.

On the other hand, it could also be the case that Africanists failed to remark on sub-Saharan equivalents to shamanism. It has been said that their focussing on the extended family blinded them to the important role played by para-kinship networks (dance associations, for instance, or hunters guilds) and supra-"tribal" factors (such as territorial spirits). The fact that specific traits can be absent *de facto* at one end of the cultural spectrum and present at the other (and not only for reason of ideal-type coherence) should not prevent us from admitting that in the vast in between their absence and presence is a question of degree. Durkheim and Mauss had early commented on the neurophysiological origins of axiologically asymmetrical cultural classifications. As Orwell would have put it: while all are equal, some symbols tend to be more equal than others! It is not possible to value symmetrically the left and the right, the up and the down. This could be partly why the first scholars to broach the problem professionally in the early 1960s remarked upon the *relative* absence of shamanism strictly so called from the African scene. De Heusch (1971: 228) had already noted in 1962 the horizontal rather than vertical streak in African spirit possession. Only one of the contributors, Lewis, to "Spirit Mediumship and Society in Africa" (Beattie and Middleton 1969) refers to shamanism and even then to minimise its relevance to the understanding of African phenomena. In his subsequent synthesis of the issue, Lewis (1971: 47) notes that "soul-loss," with dismemberment, another characteristic trait of shamanism as classically conceived (Hamayon 1990; Comba

2012), is rarely to be met within Africa. Classical Greece (influenced by Asia?) seems to have known at once shamanism and spirit possession. In certain marginal, mystical circles respiratory techniques were practised so to allow the soul to leave the body and travel heavenwards (Vernant et Vidal-Naquet 1991: 32, 172; 1992: 261). In activating ascetical, yoga-like tactics to provoke the numinous, Ba could be said to have proved himself to be more of a shaman than a prophet – this latter tending to be seized against his will by the transcendent Other. His provocations, however, were not designed to permanently free his mind from matter. There was nothing monastic in Ba's life style. The spirit of "négritude" is more playful than platonic! The many possessed whose paths I crossed in Tanzania, Senegal, and Ethiopia (on occasion as an exorcist myself – Singleton 1977), grunted and heaved under the impact of spirits who had sometimes come from afar (from Mecca, for instance). In no way, however, did the victims see themselves as taking a therapeutic trip. "Where to and what for?" they would have asked. Pragmatic, the possessed of Mapili together with their adorist, WaKamando, clearly thought that when they could make ends meet by negotiating with spirits on the spot there was little or no point in trying to meet them elsewhere in some remote empyreal stratosphere.

With regards to the Americas, I prefer to tell an anecdote rather than dwell on why Delvaux's painting of a naked man climbing a tree which graces the cover of Lévi-Strauss's "L'homme nu" (1971) is not only so iconic but also so illustrative of a theme as continent wide as it is cosmologically central. In the late 1990s, I had occasion to direct the thesis of a belgo-italian cineaste, Basilio Sallustio, based on a documentary he had made of an Amazonian "tribe's" efforts to beat a band of flying protestant missionaries at their own game. The expatriate evangelists had declared themselves ready to take the sick to hospital in their plane provided the Bible be read during the trip. Not prepared to sign away their souls, the "natives" asked an NGO help them acquire their own means of airborne transport. The "experts in development" of the European funding agency contacted, proposed, with paternalistic plausibility, to provide the people at first with bicycles, then motorcycles, before moving on to four-wheel drive vehicles and only then eventually to a small plane. But the Indians held out for the immediate delivery of a plane and within months a couple of young pilots, clad only in penis sheaths, were successfully taking to the air and flying their ailing brethren to hospital, partly, if not principally, because, as Basilio and myself surmised, their imagi-

nary had preprogrammed them to take vertical voyaging in their stride. Their shamans in common with their peers throughout Latin America are wont to ascend heavenwards quite regularly. Whether they do so effectively or whether only thanks to drug-induced dreams is neither here nor there for peoples who do not telescope the really real as we do, with what can be effectively photographed.

In complete contrast to the cheerful insouciance of Basilio's friends whom he filmed on the points of taking off for the first time, was the fear and trembling which marked the first flight of my good friend Mamadou Samb, the chauffeur and factotum of the Institute of Environmental Sciences in Dakar University I directed in the early 1980s. To reward him for services rendered far beyond the call of duty, my Belgian colleagues and I had clubbed together to pay his fare to Europe and back. He had clambered gingerly aboard the plane with much misgiving and many fond farewells to his native soil. Once seated stiffly by my side, he began spelling out his beads with eyes shut, only opening them on landing with a great sigh of relief in Brussels. A confirmation, if any was needed, of the chthonic character of the African imaginary.

### Hopefully, a Not Too Philosophical Postscript

It is time to conclude, not by proposing yet another definition of shamanism and one which would fit the transcultural bill, but by posing the whole question of what defining as such involves. It is not possible to decide what concretely anything is without having, at least implicitly, determined what "what" itself can possibly be. Replying to the question "what is shamanism" supposes you have decided what "whatness" implies between the singular and the substantial. The philosophically inclined tend to reason top down from the essential, the anthropologist starts from the bottom up, from the existential. Wishful thinkers imagine that the floor to which the philosopher eventually falls and the ceiling finally touched by the anthropologist represent the topside and the underside, the recto and the verso of one and the same thing. Unfortunately, this is rarely if ever the case. Leaving aside the blind faith in innate ideas, most of those who have thought about the issue admit that man can have nothing in mind which was not first somehow or other in matter. The problem then becomes on what can your finger be put, once you proceed beyond the singularities sensed and the particulars perceived. For those who take axiomatically for granted the paradigmatic opposition between accidental appearances and underlying

substances, then, by abstracting from the former, the mind ends up with something essential – something which some philosophers call reality itself, something which most scientists identify with the very nature of things and not a few anthropologists with transculturally constant phenomena (religion and politics, marriage and the family, medicine and shamanism). For this breed of anthropologists, the individuals encountered during fieldwork and their initial classification under such local headings as *waganga* or marabouts are but stepping-stones towards the far more crucial considerations of global theory. In the same way that notwithstanding differences of age, sex, or socioeconomic conditions, all men and women share essentially the same nature, so too, abstracting not only from their individual names but also from their sociohistorical specificities, African *waganga* and marabouts, Latin American *curanderos*, and North American medicine men are all essentially shaman.

It is precisely here, however, that anthropology could add a decisive contribution to the never-ending philosophical debate about how individuals relate to universals – men to mankind, Ba and his Senegalese consorts to shamanism. As is often the case with philosophers who feel that the more general a reply be, the better it is, Wittgenstein, when he talked of a "family likeness" justifying the grouping of individuals, probably though he had said not only enough but everything that could be said by way of solving the problem in question. With all due respect to intellectual genius, the anthropologist would point out that *de facto* the putting of singularities into conventional categories depends on the kind of family one belongs to. Put less metaphorically, deciding who or what should be grouped together depends on a cause, which is familiar in that it articulates a project of the Project a given actor has made his own. What is considered plausible and defensible in one Project might not be deemed so by others. What counts as "family likeness" is not the same from monogamous to polygamous peoples, between periods where brothers and sisters formed households and periods where married husbands and wives did so. What is familiar to some can, quite literally, be unfamiliar to others. Consequently, categories such as ecology and economics, politics and religion, the medical and the shamanistic are not cross-cultural containers filled with essentially the same contents but the boxes peculiar to some cultures and, as such, often ignored by others.

For some anthropologists, including the present author, who have lived in concrete instances of the nuclear and the extended, these most generalised ideal types have but the word "family" in com-

mon. Unfortunately, however, these anthropologists are obliged to admit that some of their colleagues rather than associate the projecting of family resemblances (or the regrouping of particular phenomena) with given and irreducible Projects, speak as if Humanity itself formed one happy, globally identical Family, each branch of which had or has its prophet and priest, its politician and shaman. The problem is that once you have metamorphosed the most general (gods, men, shamans) into something if not exactly naturally substantial, at least, transculturally identical (God, Human Nature, Shamanism), then you will never again be in a position to recognise the extent to which particulars are intrinsically irreducible the ones to the others and that, consequently, their being regrouped in ever-widening conceptual circles results not from objective factors but from the causes a given culture considers credible.

The anthropologist is not alone in finding it difficult to steer clear of an analytical Charybdis and a synthetic Scylla. Parts can never be cobbled back convincingly into the concrete whole from which they were artificially cut out. Thus, when Bourdieu claims to have discovered that all relations are based on egocentric exchange mechanisms he fails to do justice to the feeling actors have of often doing things for free. But parts also forfeit their existential thickness when they are related essentially to a fictitious whole – as would happen were Ba to be seen as an instance of shamanism as such.

To avoid mistaking parts for the really real or of taking one part as a transcultural yardstick, Occam's razor comes in handy. On the one hand, it must be acknowledged that some speculative sense of the specific entities and singular events which an individual has integrally experienced, body and soul, in all their idiosyncratic, empirical thickness can only be made by relating them to something of slightly more general import. Ba can be compared to his fellow marabouts in Dakar with some of whom he has more in common than with others. On the other hand, the nominalistically inclined anthropologist will call a definitive halt to his pursuit of pertinent meaning once, as far as he cares to see, a satisfactory sense of his data has been sufficiently made. Knowing when to stop, he will not end up in no-man's land. His goal being to understand why things are fundamentally different and not essentially identical, he will not be tempted to sacrifice the promotion of a positive, permanent pluralism on the altar of a supposedly ever-increasing convergence on the Same. Otherness being at the heart of anthropological endeavour (Beattie 1964), an anthropologist cannot indignantly protest against the globalisation of an economic system which is essen-

tially Western in scope and structure if, at the same time, he holds that God, Man, and Shamanism are essentially the same across sociocultural space and historic, indeed prehistoric times (Clottes et Lewis-William 2007; Le Quellec 2006).

Ba was Ba. How did he happen to see himself and be seen by others? No doubt as a marabout, in formally the same way that some social actors consider themselves and are taken by others to be professors or policemen. In the public eye everyone is a public figure. Since he was already at pains to distinguish himself from fellow travellers, especially from those who had fallen by the wayside, in all probability Ba would neither have understood nor taken kindly to being classified as a specimen of an African species of a more generic shamanism. Those who sought out his services surely did so because they believed him to be a cut above even the more respectable kind of marabout. Others who knew of him, either in Senegal or France, most probably distinguished him from the marabouts who advertise in junk mail and even more so from pagan witchdoctors not to say witches themselves. But it would take more than an afternoon's data to add a scholarly touch to these surmises.

What can Ba credibly be for the anthropologist's cause? There is some anthropological sense in saying that synchronically he can be located within the project "marabout" which along with a plethora of other projects was being carried forward in the mid-1980s by the diachronic Project Senegal was. There is already less such sense in seeing him as the successor of what Senegalese marabouts once were and it becomes increasingly meaningless to align him on ancestral African figures such as the *waganga* or Asiatic shaman. This would only be increasingly meaningful if the Projects of all Projects were identically parallel in nature and if particular sociohistoric Projects were but culturally limited variations of the supposedly Human Project as such.

Technically, if our ethnographic exordium amounts to anything, it is to a case study. What, if anything, comes next theoretically? "Not much," reply those for whom each case stands or falls on its own merits. "Almost everything," reply those for whom particular instances induce overarching theories which subsequent instances then serve to illustrate. Epistemologically speaking, the problem is not whether singulars can make sense independently of their being referred to something more general but where and when that reference from relevant becomes redundant. The author of this article is a "singleton" not primarily because such is his family name but primordially because everything which exists does so singularly. I like to think I can

only be fully understood idiosyncratically – as being born in Lancaster on the 12th of March 1939, as having studied philosophy and theology in Eire, Holland, Tunisia, Italy with the White Fathers and anthropology under Evans-Pritchard in Oxford, as doing field work in many parts of Africa, as married with four children etc., etc. That I live in a native reserve in rural Wallonia, became a Belgian citizen, am an ageing White European and a member of the human race, though true facts, seem to me less and less relevant to what I really am (unless Pirandello is wrong and the more masks one removes the closer one comes to an essential ego). I would even be tempted to say being European, though it amounts to only 5% of what I effectively am, constitutes my last meaningful threshold beyond which being human signifies next to nothing.

Though his being a gentleman and a Jesuit prevented Teilhard de Chardin from giving virulent vent to his philosophical feelings, on more than one occasion he thinly expressed his increasing exasperation at those who failed to see the phenomenon so obvious to his own point of view. Far be it from me to compare myself with this once incredibly famous but now largely forgotten paleoanthropologist! Nonetheless, I find it hard to fathom why certain scholars end up by flying ever further and higher away from their down to earth fields in the direction of ever more purely speculative seventh heavens. Could it be, shamans *redivivi*, they feel that the more ethereal an elucubration becomes the closer it comes to the essential? Like Icarus, the last flap of their wings could prove fatal to their flight of philosophical fancy. Low-level generalisations can be of some analytical use, but when they are mistaken for abstractions and become increasingly so, they retain only the appearances of pertinence.

A “good” example of the increasingly irrelevant removal from the specifically significant is the onto-theological use of ethnographic material. If the onto-theologian is a rapidly disappearing species, it is because his metaphysics failed to do justice to the irreducible diversity revealed by case studies. There is room at the top (or bottom) for the macro but not if it shrivels and shrinks out of existence what is specific to the micro (Ricoeur 2000). At the expense of impressive, encyclopaedic efforts, a former generation of theologically-minded historians of religion concluded that the seeming differences between monographic materials were of secondary importance given that transculturally if not metaphysically speaking, all men had believed not only in divine but also devilish figures answering, respectively, in the last analysis to God and the Devil. The substantialised singulars in the titles of such

works as “Concepts of God in Africa” (Mbiti 1970) or “African Traditional Religion” (Idowu 1973), witness to their African authors having one and the same definitive and decisive reality in mind. In instancing above the case of Jok, I have already questioned the need to postulate the existence of a substantially, supernatural divine being underlying the ethnographic diversity of a relatively limited region of the Sudan. The same could be said when Satan was believed by expatriate ecclesiastics and indigent pastors alike to be behind such ambivalent interlocutors as the Konongo Katabi or the Yoruba Esu. It is only by abstracting from the crucial fact of their being sometimes good and on occasion less so, that such interlocutors can be aligned on that exclusive embodiment of Evil the Devil was declared dogmatically to be by nineteenth-century scholastics – to the letter of whose theories no critical believer today would subscribe.

Such misplaced concreteness, the (mis)taking of a generalised residue (the divine or the diabolic) as constituting the quintessential heart of the particular phenomena from which it was derived, continues to rear its ugly, onto-epistemological head in anthropology. The reader if not the author of “Possession et chamanisme. Les maîtres du désordre” (Hell 1999) can be forgiven for believing as a profoundly significant truth the fact that almost all cultures have known shamans in the shape of “masterly managers of disorder.” In so doing, he will fail to appreciate that:

1. the divergently thick differences of data can be more meaningful than any artificially slimmed down resemblances;
2. the manifest absence of something somewhere can be more significant than its supposed presence everywhere;
3. housewives, policemen, and referees, to name but a few, despite their also being given to getting the better of disorder, does not make them shaman.

At the same time Evans-Pritchard was convincing me the monographic medium was the message, I familiarised myself with the nominalist Franciscans who had founded Greyfriars, my college in Oxford. It seemed to me they had long ago replied to the question “What is the point of case studies such as Ba?” by stating that at some point the necessary evil of conventional generalisations tips over into the unearthly abstractions of causal constants. As Duns Scotus and William of Occam, the philosophical patrons of my well-tempered nominalism would have put it: Ba was singularly what he was (*id quod est, est id quod est*); the label identifying his idiosyncratic intentionality was an irreducible “thisness” (*haecceitas*) and not a generalised “thatness” – not

even *that* of a marabout, let alone *that* of a shaman. They would have gone on to add that *entia non sunt multiplicanda sine necessitate*, to insist that explanatory escalation must be avoided: if one can make do with a relatively lower-level explanation, there is absolutely no need to proceed much further.

Let me immediately add (with Aristotle) that the explanation of the existential is “essential” – there can be no knowing of the singular without reference to some level or other of generalisation. Though Ba, like any other particular, was a “singleton”, he was no solipsistic monad. In no way is a nominalist anthropology a form of that naively extraverted empiricism which imagines the facts of the matter to be already out there now for real, simply awaiting their full and faithful re-presentation in the mind of the observer. My presentation of Ba answers to a “making of meaning” in the most constructive sense of the expression, my personal factualisation of part of the potential the data afford. Even when practised by a nominalist, participant observation is not a provisional expedient for that ideally complete video surveillance some might be tempted to dream of. The encounter with Ba could have been materially recorded from every imaginable point of view, but the data accruing, no matter how complete, would not have *made* him a shaman. I once suggested to the WaKonongo that if we had been able to film Mazombwe, a famous lion-man (*mtu simba*) putting on the skin of a dead fauve and fixing forged iron claws and carved wooden paws to his hands and feet, it would have been possible to convince people that the whole phenomenon was sheer make believe (Singleton 1989). To all intents and purposes, they replied that most people knew this was materially the case, but that having an understanding quite different from mine of what being human and what being animal involved, their man (*mtu*) Mazombwe really became their lion (*simba*).

It will be objected, however, that nominalism having always figured on the side lines of philosophical play, it would be utopian if not suicidal to propose that nominalist anthropology become mainstream. To reason thus is to confuse the politically with the philosophically correct. It is usually presumed that if Alexander had Aristotle for professor, it is because the “substance *versus* accidents” package is objectively truer than any other on the metaphysical market. But it could simply be because it is easier to lord it over others in terms of superficial variations on underlying structures (the City, the Church) and overarching speculative strictures (divine and human nature, possession and shamanism) in keeping with the eternal fixity of Parmenides rather than the permanent flow of Heraclitus. If an-

thropology is as much if not more about activating human energy as about analysing human enterprise, then philosophical rather than political correctness is of the essence. Supposing anthropology to be liberating (Singleton 2011) what frees man most a philosophy which relates particular phenomena to seemingly more significant substances, structures, and systems or a philosophy which reduces theory to taxonomy so as to let singularities speak for themselves?

I once had occasion to make a bookcase with smaller shelves for paperbacks and larger ones for more sizeable volumes. What counted in my eyes was being able to quickly put my finger on Penguin editions of Mary Douglas and Victor Turner or readily chose between Evans-Pritchard’s OUP “The Nuer” rather than Lienhardt’s “Divinity and Experience” in the same larger format. It never occurred to me that some people might prefer shelves to books and not only treat the category “hardback” as something substantial but as essentially greater than that of “paperback.”

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