



Photo: Bertus Haverkort

Compas is a platform for intercultural dialogue on the importance of cosmovisions in agriculture, health and natural resource management. There is also room to reflect on the role and contribution of western thought, in which rational reasoning and analysis are important tools. In this article, the author shares his experiences when meeting non-western cultures, the results of a literature study and how a Buddhist priest helped him to gain more insight in the diversity of powers. We hope it will trigger readers to react so as to stimulate the dialogue.

## Towards appreciation of different powers

Bertus Haverkort

In the case studies presented by the Compas partners in this Newsletter, different powers are mentioned through which people relate to the natural and spiritual world. Initially these powers looked a bit strange to me because I was ignorant of most of them. My education and my life in a western environment have shown me the power of gravity, electricity, nuclear power, horsepower and purchasing power. Knowledge of these powers has been gained through sciences of chemistry, physics, biology, mechanics and economics. The application of these sciences in engineering and agriculture has led to innovations in the domains of production and consumption that have resulted in considerable changes. In many cases these changes can be seen as progress, but they have also contributed to problems particularly in relation to the environment, equity and well being (Reijntjes et al 1992). These problems are now receiving considerable attention from scientists and efforts are being made to redress the negative aspects of the materialistic path to development. These problems provide a reason for seriously considering knowledge from non-western traditions.

Many of the practices in non-western traditions cannot be explained by conventional concepts. Generally the understanding and appreciation of spiritual practices is lacking and there is little theory related to spiritual phenomena. The experiences of the Compas partners, how-

ever, have invited me to reflect on the diversity of forces and powers in the complex realities of cultures in the South.

### Spiritual practices in agriculture

In South America people ask permission from Mother Earth before they start ploughing or pay tribute to crops and animals during seasonal rituals. If there is drought or disease people may reflect on their sins and fast or dance. Fiestas are considered important: they please the spirits and strengthen the vital forces.

In Africa the blessings of the ancestral spirits are considered a necessary condition for health and good harvests; nature is considered sacred, just like certain crops and animals. Certain animals can convey messages from the spiritual world. The spiritual world can be pleased by sacrifices, drumming and dancing which should take place after the harvest and before the growing season. Certain objects possess spiritual powers and can be used for good or evil.

In West Timor the *dukuns* or spiritual leaders have the power to influence spirits in a positive way and influence the health of crops, animals and people. In Sri Lanka and parts of India it is considered evil to kill any form of life. The use of chemical pesticides is not acceptable as it kills insects and other living organisms.

Traditional knowledge in Asia, has led to a range of spiritual practices to relate to the spirits of the different living organ-

isms, like *mantra* (repeated sounds) and *yantra* (symbols).

### Learning from health

In trying to understand the different spiritual practices in agriculture, it was helpful for me to study traditional health practices. Many aspects of the African, Chinese, Ayurvedic, Andean and Mayan health systems have been documented and their value is increasingly recognised. Traditional health treatment is common and widespread in Africa, Asia and South America and local healers are consulted by illiterate rural dwellers as well as intellectuals. They make extensive use of herbs and often give considerable attention to the spiritual and psychological aspects of health.

There is complementarity to be found with western biomedicine (Garcia et al., 1997). In India and Sri Lanka a large number of hospitals and universities practice, teach and research the Ayurvedic tradition. Ayurvedic hospitals have incorporated certain western products such as X-rays in their own treatment.

To appreciate indigenous non-western health systems such as Ayurveda in India, we must learn to understand its knowledge base. Ayurveda defines health as a state in which the body, mind, tissues, metabolism, awareness and senses are in equilibrium. The Indian scientist Darshan Shankar states that in Ayurveda, understanding nature involves becoming one

with it, using the five senses and the mind. Sight, hearing, touch, taste and smell make it possible for us to decipher the world around us. The mind should be free of six prejudices: lust, anger, greed, intoxication, delusion and jealousy. Complete awareness will only be achieved when the mind reaches out and looks within. In doing so, a subjective flow is established between the observer and the observed. This perfect oneness with nature is called the 'mental state of Brahma'.

### Towards appreciating forces and powers

During a visit to Sri Lanka, I was invited to attend a number of agriculture-related rituals. In some way, I could experience awe for what was happening, but with my Western background I also felt a need to understand it with my mind. As agronomists could not provide me with answers, Rukman Wagachchi, a Kompas partner, brought me to a spiritual centre in Kataragama. Here I met Sri Mabima, a Buddhist priest. He stated that in western thinking the most important forces or powers are those related to matter and energy. Other traditions, however, recognise at least seven other types of powers. Sri Mabima explained these to me from the perspective of Buddhism. Below I have described them, drawing on other literature to deepen my understanding of his ideas. First, 'The power of sound'. Sounds have an effect on life processes like health, growth and vitality. Sounds can influence peoples' mood; music can make people happy, sad or excited. It can also influence animals and plants. Music by Mozart and Bach has a positive effect on the growth of animals and plants (Tompkins, 1994). Music can be used to heal people (Inayat Khan, 1962). Sounds that cannot be picked up by human or animal ears, also have effects (Berendt, 1987). Mantras used in Ayurvedic and Buddhist traditions are sounds with a specific quality and cause specific vibrations. The drumming and dancing of African and American peoples have similar effects. Rhythms are important. They can cause people to slip into a trance and make it possible for to communicate with the spirits (Henning and Oberlaender, 1995). There are mantras that ask rats to leave the field, mantras to enhance the health of a crop and mantras to help reduce the damage inflicted by paddy bugs (Tops, 1996; Sivananda Radha, 1994).

Second, there is the 'Power of Symbols' or the repetitive use of certain images to create a particular effect. Examples are *gondas* used by Konda Reddies in India (page 35 in this Newsletter) and *yantras* (Tops, 1996). Yantras are symbols that have been given powers, like drawings, idols or abstract geometrical figures. Yantras are used to secure protection from

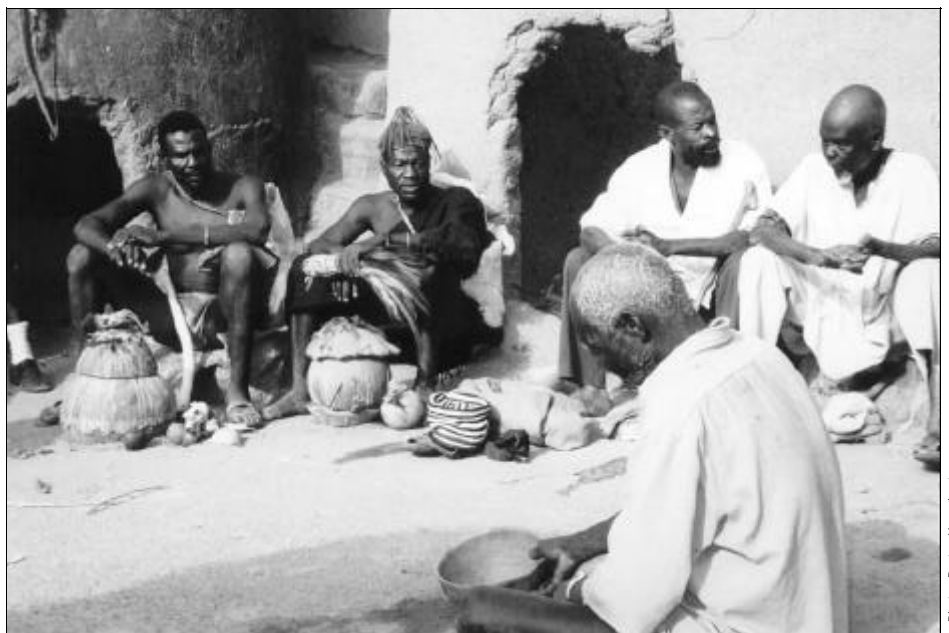
enemies, deflect the anger of the gods or evil spirits, soften ill effects of planets, natural forces, envy and the evil eye. They also help to ensure good crops and good health. Also objects that possess magic powers in African cultures as well as national and religious symbols such as colours, crosses, stars, sickles, mandalas and the images of gods and goddesses. Possibly these symbols are related to what Sheldrake has called 'morphic fields' or memories associated with certain experiences (Sheldrake, 1992).

Third, 'the power of plants and animals'. Plants are generally seen as supplying commodities such as food, energy, clothing, alcoholic drinks and medicines. In many traditional cultures plants are ascribed qualities that extend beyond nutrition and pharmacology. Plants either individually or collectively have their own personalities and are regarded as spiritual entities. Trees in particular are seen as having their own awareness. Some species, such as the *Ficus religiosa* in India, the baobab in Ghana and the oak in ancient Europe are considered sacred. Plants have a specific influence on the psyche and the spiritual life of people. (Lewis, 1995, Roads, 1990). This also applies to animals. Animals are generally seen as providing meat, milk, fibres and energy. In traditional cultures animal species are often considered to have individual or collective qualities. There may be taboos against slaughtering or eating animals; other cultures may forbid the use of certain species for food. Examples are the cow in India and the pig in the Jewish and Arab cultures. Sometimes animals are used in rituals and others may convey messages from the ancestors in the spiritual world. (Gonese and Millar, this Newsletter).

Fourth, 'the power of places'. Not all places on earth are regarded as possessing

the same quality. Some places have strong positive or negative energy. Sacred places are frequently used to site a temple, church or place for holding ceremonies. Mountains, rivers and springs are often considered sacred. In the lowlands of Europe leycenters are identified with the presence of spiritual powers. Until the mid fourteenth century these places were used for ceremonies and as burial site (Vleer, 1992). The power of a location can also be influenced by events. The birth of a person, a miracle, a religious event, but also an accident, war, pollution or a traumatic meeting can influence a place in either a positive or negative sense. Negative energy can be corrected by healing activities (see de Jonge, this Newsletter)

Fifth, 'the power of moments'. In South America, India, Sri Lanka and in European bio-dynamic agriculture, practices can be found to select the most auspicious time for planting or harvesting, the choice of a crop and important decisions like the choice of a marriage partner. The right time to make a journey is also often indicated by astrologers. They base their knowledge on ancient scripts and teachings. In Africa too, spiritual leaders are responsible for indicating the right moment for planting or harvesting. In conventional thinking time is a linear concept. But for others every moment has its own quality. In an effort to understand classical Chinese knowledge the psychologist Carl Jung introduced the term synchronicity (Jung, 1995). Certain things do not happen just by chance. The interplay of cosmic forces causes certain phenomena to coincide and certain activities can best be carried out at auspicious moments. Astrology is a body of knowledge that describes the influence of cosmic forces (Riotte, 1977).



**Pouring libation: The powers of the ancestors are addressed by spiritual leaders during harvest festival in Ghana.**

Photo: Bertus Haverkort

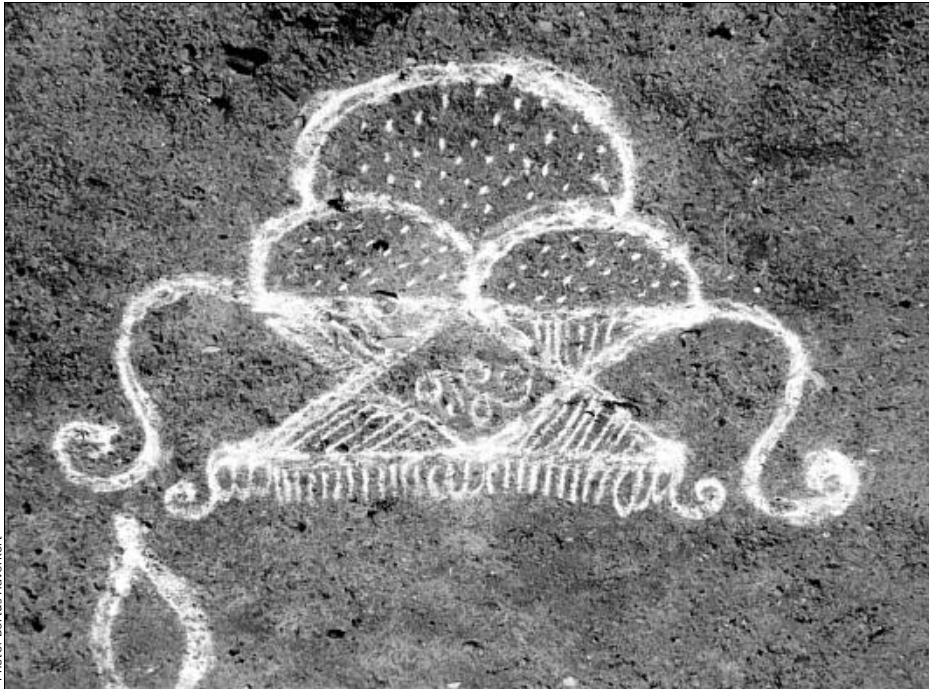


Photo: Bertus Haverkort

*Gondas are symbolic presentations with spiritual powers.*

Sixth, 'mental powers'. Individuals may have special mental powers; amongst them are intellectuals, artists, charismatic leaders, priests, shamans, spirit mediums and healers. They have been born with these powers or have acquired them through training. These powers are often only effective if the person has been through a process of initiation and follows a lifestyle that involves rules of morality and pureness. Understanding spiritual practices requires more than an analytical mind that tries to explain or falsify traditional technologies. To understand these spiritual practices openness and commitment are needed. (Van Eijk, this Newsletter)

Finally, 'supernatural powers'. Spirits, ancestors, angels, gods and other supernatural beings may use their powers to influence life in the natural world. Over the centuries people have experienced different expressions of supernatural powers and have given them different names. In Africa great value is attached to the power of ancestral spirits. They are consulted before any significant decision is made and sometimes they appear in dreams, visions or trances to ordinary people or spirit mediums (Lan, 1985). In Latin America *Pacha Mama*, or Mother Earth is perceived as a living being with whom people have a reciprocal relationship. God and spirits present themselves in mountains and water sources. If people do not behave well, these spirits deliver punishments in the form of drought, disease or disasters (Rist et al, 1999). In most, if not all world religions, the supernatural powers are addressed using a multiplicity of rituals.

### The challenge ahead

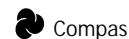
My level of understanding of non-material forces and powers is limited. In western scientific terms, the research base of some of the above mentioned references can be disputed because they are based on personal experiences rather than on repeatable experiments. Many spiritual practices relate to an enigmatic world, which is not mine. I have the option to either reject these other sources of wisdom as irrelevant, superstitious and unscientific or to accept them as part of a reality from which I can learn. The latter opens perspectives for a new relationship between myself, the spiritual and the natural world. Taking indigenous knowledge serious can be a major challenge; a challenge to accept new concepts, new assumptions, new methodologies and new partners in learning about non-material realities. On that basis, a more balanced or holistic relationship with the natural and spiritual world could be built up.

In the coming issues of the COMPAS Newsletter we hope to go deeper into some of the points mentioned here. Readers are invited to share their concepts of reality, the way they relate to it and ideas as to how one can enhance the appreciation of the different forces and powers.

### References:

- Berendt J., 1987 Nada Brahma, The world is sound. Destiny books, East West publications.
- Eijk, T. van, 1998 Farming system research and spirituality; an analysis of the foundations of professionalism in developing sustainable farming systems. Wageningen Agricultural University, the Netherlands.

- Garcia H., A. Sierra and G. Balam, 1997 Medicina Maya Tradicional, Educe Campeche, Mexico.
- Haverkort B. and Hiemstra W. (eds), 1999 Food for Thought, ancient visions and new experiments of rural people, Bangalore, India.
- Henning C. and H. Oberlaender, 1995 Voodoo, Secret power in Africa. UNESCO study. Taschen Verlag Cologne
- Lewis C., 1995 Green Nature, Human Nature; the meaning of plants in our lives.
- Jung C.G., 1995 Preface in I Tjing, the book of changes. Routledge and Keagan Paul, London, England.
- Inayat Khan, 1962 Music and Mystics, Sufi London, England.
- Lan D., 1985 Guns and rains; guerrilla and spirit mediums in Zimbabwe. Zimbabwe Publishing House, Harare, Zimbabwe.
- Reijntjes C., Haverkort B. and Waters-Bayer A., 1992 Farming for the Future, MacMillan, England.
- Rist S. et al., 1999 Andean cosmovision and selfsustained development. In: Food for Thought.
- Riotte L., 1977 Planetary Planting, Simon and Schuster, New York, USA.
- Roads M., 1990 Journey into nature. Tiburon, California, Kramer, USA.
- Sivananda Radha S, 1994 Mantras, words of power. Timeless books, Spokane (WA), USA.
- Sheldrake R., 1991 The Rebirth of Nature. Bantam books, New York, USA.
- Tompkins P. and C. Bird, 1974 The secret life of plants, Avon, Harper and Row, New York, USA.
- Tops J., 1996. The power of symbols and sound. Wageningen Agricultural University, the Netherlands.
- Vleer, W. 1992 Leylijnen en leycentra in de lage landen. Ankh-Hermes, Deventer, the Netherlands



Compas

P.O. Box 64  
3830 AB Leusden, The Netherlands  
Tel: +31 33 4943086  
Fax: +31 33 4940791  
E-mail: compas@etcnl.nl