

Chapter 2. Inspiring data and transcontinental comparative method: Case study I. The pre- and protohistory of mankala board-games and geomantic divination

2.1. In search of inspiring data and a transcontinental comparative method

While this book is being published in the philosophical context of *Quest: An African Journal of Philosophy / Revue Africaine de Philosophie*, it explores and presents historical and transcontinental-comparative *prolegomena* to an ontological philosophical argument on cosmology and the structure of reality, rather than offering such an argument in its own right. For centuries, Western philosophers have assumed that the history of their discipline started with the emergence of the Presocratic philosophers in the then Greek-speaking regions of West Anatolia (Ionia) and Southern Italy (Graecia Magna) in the 6th century BCE. Comparative historians of human thought perceived, over half a century ago, that this emergence of systematic detached thought in the European periphery of West Asia more or less coincided with similar major mutations of regional thought systems by such Asian thinkers and religious innovators as Gautama Buddha (North India near or – Allen 2002 – on the Nepalese border), Zarathustra (Iran; Bidez & Cumont 1938; Boyce 1975), 老子 Lao Tze and 孔夫子 Kōng Fūzǐ / Confucius, in China (Fung Yu-lan 1952) – bringing to completion a process of innovation that, at least typologically, had been foreshadowed. in North-eastern Africa and Syro-Palestine many centuries earlier, by ʕn-itn / Achnaton and Mosis / מֹשֶׁה Moshe / Moses, and foreshadowing, in their turn, the spiritual innovations by Jesus of Nazareth and Muḥammad, many centuries later again. For this seething of

innovation, the German philosopher Karl Jaspers (1993 / 1949) proposed the notion of *Achsenzeit* / *Axial Age* (mid-1st mill. BCE). Despite the reproach of implicit Eurocentrism (Bernal 1987; cf. my argument in the present book) this concept has exerted great influence on historical sociology in the last few decades.³¹ The authors in question have further developed Jaspers's approach and reflected on its theoretical significance as a crucial step in the unfolding of human thought faculties (notably the concept of transcendence) and their social, economic and political implications. But even so we need to be cautious of the concept of the Axial Age. It draws attention to the maturation, in the course of the first millennium BCE, of virtualising transcendent thought (van Binsbergen 2012a) in a context shaped, already during a few millennia then, by the converging forces of writing, the state, organised religion, emergent science, and an emergent money economy. Such maturation was, in hindsight, predictable rather than miraculous. The wide spatial distribution of its manifestations, from the Aegean via Iran and Northern India to China, loses all of its apparently miraculous nature once we realise that that context is not one of total regional isolation but, on the contrary, one of proto-globalisation, much facilitated by the spread of horse-riding, chariot, and nautical technology from the third and second millennium BCE, all across Asia and along the navigable waters surrounding that continent. Numerous examples of this proto-globalisation could be cited, and some actually feature in our present argument, e.g. the demonstrable spread of shamanism from Northern and Central Asia into Mesopotamia and Egypt in the mid-2nd millennium BCE;³² the spread of specialised astronomical and astrological notions; the spread of basic forms of divination including geomancy; the emergence of triads as advanced forms of logical and

³¹ Cf. Schwartz 1975a, Eisenstadt 1982, 1986, 1987-1992, 2011; Silber 2011; Michalowski 2005 and other contributions in Arnason *et al.* 2005; Bellah & Joas 2012. Also relevant in this connection is Weber 1922: 185 *f.* on '*innerweltliche Askese*'. Jaspers's approach hinges on a specific conception of 'transcendence', which is critically discussed in Kunz 1957 (cf. van Binsbergen 2012a).

³² There is a long-standing claim (Karst 1931a; Eliade 1968 / 1951) that the term *shaman* generally used in connection to Uralic- and Altaic-speaking peoples of Northern Eurasia (a standard description being Harva 1938), in fact derives from the Buddhist religious term *sramana*, and thus could hardly be older than the foundation of that world religion in the 1st mill. BCE. In Chapter 8 we shall return to this question and provisionally situate the emergence of shamanism as an institution in the Upper Palaeolithic.

symbolic thought, etc.

Our itinerary in the present argument will start with the Axial Age in the Western periphery of Asia, but will explore far greater stretches of space and time than the analysts of the Axial Age have braved, and thus constitutes an attempt to chart intellectual *terra incognita*, especially when coming, like in the present case, from an Africanist scholar whose main formal training was in the analysis of regional cultural domains through ethnographic and ethnohistorical fieldwork. But more important, the very attempt to study apparently regional intellectual achievements as part of broad cultural processes that span entire continents and even extend between continents, is counter-paradigmatic (*cf.* van Binsbergen 2003: especially Ch. 15): even with the spate of globalisation studies in the last few decades, the accepted units of cultural history are still *individual cultures*, not continents, let alone the global space as a whole. This reflects the way academic knowledge production and transmission is organised through university departments, specialist journals, publishing houses, funding agencies etc.; and specialist standards of research and reference are so high that very few scholars could pretend to make meaningful contributions to the study of more than just one culture, let alone more than just one continent. The present study seeks to trace the extent, globally as far as the spatial dimension is concerned, and all the way from the Upper Palaeolithic as far as the time dimension is concerned, of a particular intellectual cultural complex characterised by such features as cyclicity, transformation and element cosmology. So what we need at the beginning of such a project is to re-assure the reader that such extreme continuity through space and time, counter-paradigmatic as it may be, yet has a very tangible grounding in solid data and intersubjective methodology and theory.

As compared with the highly presentist and localist perspectives prevailing in social anthropology ever since the *classic*, fieldwork-centred tradition in that field was established in the 1930s-1940s (on the ruins of the diffusionism and evolutionism that preceded it), my own early work in such fields as the anthropology of North African popular religion and South Central African religious structures and processes with special emphasis on cults of affliction *i.e.* spirit possession and their cultic healing (van Binsbergen 1971, 1980a, 1980b, 1981, 1985a, 1985b), was

already relatively comparative and historical. However, my approach remained within the established framework of regional and *intra*-continental specialisation, until my new fieldwork in Francistown (Botswana, from 1988 on) brought me in intensive contact (van Binsbergen 1995b, 1996a, 2003, 2005c) with a local divination system whose formal structure and symbolic content, with very little manifest grounding in *local* historic cultures, clearly derived from an Islamic astrologically-based divination system that was established in Iraq around 1000 CE, and that in the meantime spread not only to Southern Africa but also to the entire Indian Ocean region, West Africa, and even Medieval and Renaissance Europe, where it subsequently survived as a peasant self-help divination system until modern times. Thus I was introduced, in a periphery of the Old World, to *geomancy*: a widespread family of divination systems, based on the systematic generation (by locally standardised stochastic methods involving man-made random generators) of formal configurations (usually consisting of a number of superimposed lines, where each line can take either of two values, *e.g.* broken or unbroken, one dot or two dots; see Table 2.3 and Fig. 2.14 below); the nature and combination of such configurations is then interpreted in divinatory terms by reference to a conventionalised catalogue of meanings (*cf.* van Binsbergen 2005b, with extensive references cited there).

Contrary to the assumptions of classic fieldwork-based anthropology and the structural-functionalism that constituted its main theory, and rather in line with the approaches of diffusionism especially its more recent branches such as Frobenius's Cultural Morphology and with deep-seated parallels in archaeology, apparently there exists a class of formal cultural systems that are not very closely associated with the specific local and regional cultures in which these formal systems find themselves, – formal systems that cannot meaningfully be considered products of that narrow environment in space and time, but that on the contrary ramify across cultural and temporal boundaries, in such a way as to more or less preserve and transmit their original structure and orientation even though they are at the same time, inevitably, involved in processes of localising transformation. In addition to geomantic divination systems and other such diagnostic and therapeutic systems, this class of formal systems includes other rituals, games, folklore, stories, myths, religious beliefs, cosmologies, language forms, writing systems, and other forms of sym-

bolism. Having devoted the first quarter of a century of my academic life to an analytical paradigm where (in accordance with classic social anthropology) people's *socio-politico-economic strategies within a local horizon* were considered to be the source of all cultural meaning, by the end of the 1980s I became alive to a much less reductionist perspective that affirms the vital capability of symbols to persist in space and time and to endow the human life world with meaning whose source is not local but lost in distances of space and time. Over the years, I have continued to study African divination systems in their transcontinental backgrounds and ramifications, but gradually I have added several others of the formal systems enumerated above: animal symbolism especially in relation to the leopard and its spotted skin; myths; and games, of which the *mankala* family has captivated my attention from the mid-1990s on. Mankala is the academic name for a widespread board-game, played on two or more rows of holes, over which the players distribute and redistribute tokens (stones, nuts, etc.) according to intricate rules.

In the meantime the decolonisation of the global political space, and of scholarly production, gave rise to a critical re-assessment of anthropological positions in the global politics of knowledge, to the emergence of cultural relativism as anthropology's main gift to World Culture, and also to a fundamental reconsideration of the cultural indebtedness between continents. These orientations surfaced in the African and North American Afrocentrist movement,³³ the South Asian Postcolonial Theory (*cf.* Spivak 1990; Bhabha 1992; Rattansi 1994), and (in the narrower field of Mediterranean Bronze Age studies and Egyptology) the *Black Athena* debate as initiated by the British / American Sinologist and political

³³ On Afrocentrism, *cf.*: Asante 1990; Diop 1959, 1962/1989; Dubois 1976; Obenga 1973. Highly critical of Afrocentrism yet a leading figure in the *Présence Africaine movement* which formed a bedding for Afrocentrism, and starting out from a kindred global politics of knowledge: Mudimbe, especially 1988. Reasonable but by and large dismissive introductions to Afrocentrism include: Fauvelle-Aymar *et al.* 2000; Howe 1999, the latter critically discussed in van Binsbergen 2011c. Ever since I traded, a quarter of a century ago, my specialist Africanist blinkers for critical self-reflection as a producer of global knowledge, I have had – as detailed in Chapter 0 – , and vocally expressed, great sympathy for Afrocentrism, even though over the past decade I have become convinced that, as a perspective on global cultural history from the Bronze Age on, the Political Correctness it tends to entail obscures our view of the actual, complex, intercontinental interplay of cultural exchanges towards the shaping of the Modern world.

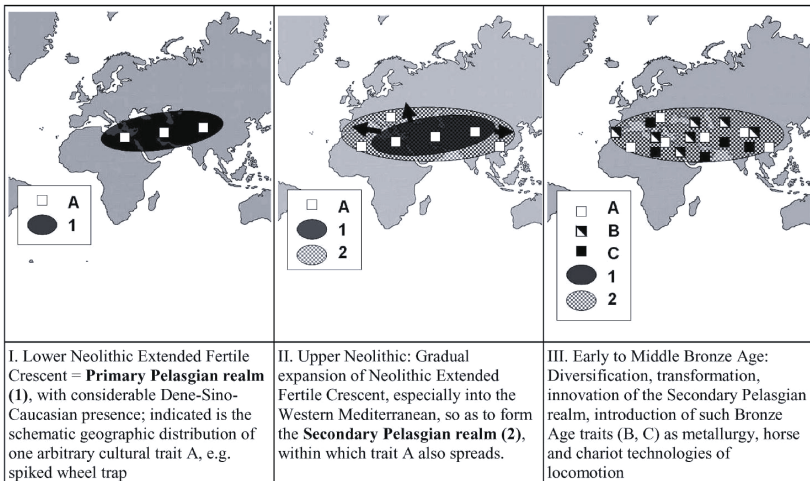
scientist Martin Bernal in the 1980s. When in 1997 I published my collection *Black Athena Ten Years Later* (a critical but constructive reassessment of Martin Bernal's *Black Athena* thesis) as a special issue of the archaeological journal *TAAANTA* (van Binsbergen 1997a), my principal *empirical* contribution to that volume consisted of a long article entitled 'Rethinking Africa's contribution to global cultural history: Lessons from a comparative historical analysis of mankala board-games and geomantic divination' (van Binsbergen 1997b).

In the fifteen years that have passed since the *TAAANTA* collection was published, I have continued to grapple with mankala, geomancy, the *Black Athena* debate, and transcontinental continuities – in fact, these themes have come to dominate my research. When an expanded and updated version of the *TAAANTA* collection was published (van Binsbergen 2011a), my 1997 analysis was reprinted there in its original form and, for technical reasons, could not be updated. After a critical assessment of the notion of Africa, and after presenting a typology of varieties of mankala and of geomancy, I presented the most important data on the global distribution of these formal cultural systems, and proceeded to interpret these distributions in the light of a tentative historical reconstruction. At the time I was (like Bernal himself) much enamoured with Strong Afrocentrism as a theory that considers Africa the origin of crucial phenomena of cultural history, not only in the very remote past when humankind originated in that continent several million years ago, and in the slightly less remote past of the Upper to Middle Palaeolithic when Anatomically Modern Humans (the subspecies to which all humans alive today belong) emerged in Africa c. 200 ka BP and from c. 80 ka BP began to spread to other continents, but even in the relatively recent past of the Neolithic and the Bronze Age, only a handful of millennia ago.

Meanwhile, it has become time for a thorough update of my 1997 argument, in line with my overall criticism of Bernal's *Black Athena* thesis, and with the alternative model ('the Pelasgian Hypothesis') which I have meanwhile developed.

In terms of data and method I cannot think of a better way to introduce the argument, types of data, and methods of analysis of this book as a whole. However, it will hardly be a pleasure for the reader to have to

plod through the unfamiliar and philosophically barren distributional data that will be among our principal analytical tools for developing and underpinning an argument, however exciting ultimately, that presents a most comprehensive view of cultural history, advocating the possibility of methodical retrieval of modes of thought from the distant past, stressing the transcontinental dimension and the important role of Africa in that connection, and exploding the Eurocentric and hegemonic myth that philosophy started in Europe in historical times. The history of philosophy is an empirical field of study, and without understanding our data and methods, our intended contribution will remain suspended in the air, and will eventually be futile. I must therefore ask the reader to bear with me – soon, via the unexpected complexity of an African clan system, even the philosophical reader will reach the more comfortable and familiar shores of comparative philosophical analysis, will ponder over Greek texts from the flower of Ancient thought, and after that, the unfolding worldwide vistas on pre- and protohistoric modes of thought will simply be breath-taking, vertiginous precisely because they have enough of an empirical and comparative basis to convince.



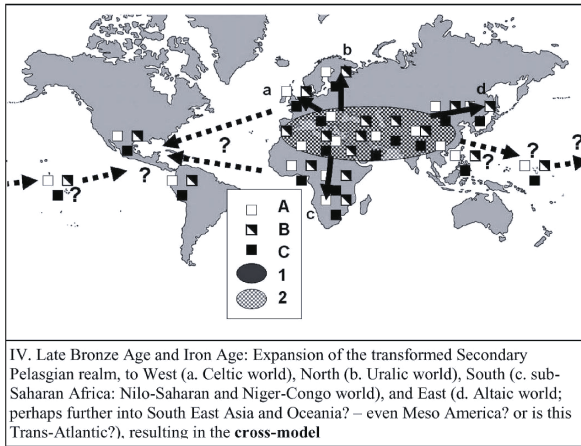


Fig. 2.1. Diagrammatic representation of the Pelasgian Hypothesis.

I have already referred to my Pelasgian Hypothesis; an overview is offered in Fig. 2.1. In the present Chapter, I will limit myself to presenting and interpreting from a historical point of view the distributional world maps for the two formal systems of mankala and geomancy. The bibliographic references for the specific attestations / data points, and for the wider analytical and theoretical context may be found in the 1997 article; here I only give those references that specifically inform the update. The present analysis makes reference to several concepts from my Diachronic Aggregative Model of Global Mythology (van Binsbergen 2006a, 2006b, 2010a), which seeks to trace and explain the unfolding of world mythology since the emergence of Anatomically Modern Humans in Africa c. 200 ka BP; a short summary of that model therefore also features in this Chapter. There are substantial indications (notably in the existence of a long list of present-day cultural universals; *cf.* Brown 1991) that when leaving Africa, Anatomically Modern Humans had at their disposal a package, not only of common genes (by which geneticists could trace their emergence in Africa and their subsequent global dispersal), but also of common socio-cultural traits, developed inside Africa and subsequently, as a result of the ‘Out-of-Africa’ Exodus, spread all over the world: universals such as marriage, the idea of a kinship system, divina-

tion, etc. This socio-cultural package I have called ‘*Pandora’s Box*’. However, it is far from being immediately conspicuous as a package. As expressions of humans’ freedom of association and invention, unhindered by the limitations of space, time and logic to which more practical endeavours are subjected, myths, like other literary, artistic and religious products of the imagination, exist in a dazzling, ever proliferating variety. Therefore, in order to create the conditions for comparability in the field of comparative mythology, we need to distinguish a quite limited number of types and themes, and domesticate our data accordingly.

In my approach I have drastically reduced (hence ‘*Aggregative*’) the variety of myths to a few dozen ‘*Narrative Complexes*’ or *NarComs*, each of which covers, inevitably, a vast and rather heterogeneous domain of implications and associations. This enabled me to identify, for instance, twenty different *NarComs* in an extensive corpus of African cosmogonic myths (‘*creation myths*’) on the basis of which I formulated my Model in the first place. Out of these initial twenty *NarComs* (to whose number I have had to make some additions when I applied the Model of other research questions and corpora of data, e.g. Flood myths; cf. van Binsbergen with Isaak 2008), through a complex though explicit analytical strategy of triangulation, distribution analysis, close reading, etc., I isolated a handful which, I argue, already made part of ‘*Pandora’s Box*’. Moreover, I have maintained that the post-Out-of-Africa transformation and innovation of mythical themes originally contained in ‘*Pandora’s Box*’, took place, not continually and at random, but in concentrated settings in space and time, which I have called *CITI*: ‘*Contexts of Intensified Transformation and Innovation*’. These settings may be identified, more or less, not so much by looking for prehistoric mythologies (which outside rock art and mobile art left few direct traces), but by tracing the emergence and ramifications of new modes of production (both within and beyond hunting and gathering), and of new linguistic macrophyla, which under the *Borean and *Nostratic Hypotheses (Starostin, Fleming, Illich-Svitych, etc.) constitute the largest language groups – for whose emergence and ramification we now have sophisticated methods at our disposal: qualitative historical-comparative linguistic methods, and multivariate analysis.

1 Separation of Heaven and Earth	11 Primal waters and the Flood
2 Reconnection of Heaven and Earth	12 From the tree
3 What is in heaven ³⁴	13 Cosmic rainbow snake
4 Lightning bird and World Egg	14 Duality Two children Twins
5 Mantis	15 Spider and feminine arts
6 Rescue from ogre	16 Shamanism / bones
7 From the mouth	17 Speckledness / granulated surface texture / leopard
8 The stones	18 Honey bees, (honey-)beer
9 The Moon	19 Cosmogonic virgin and her lover-son
10 The Earth	20 Contradictory messengers bring death

Source: van Binsbergen 2010a: Table 9.1

Table 2.1. Narrative Complexes identified in sub-Saharan African cosmogonies as collected in historical times.

CITI		proposed Narrative Complex (no. and description)	mtDNA type	remarks	linguistic context
in time	in space				
I. Pre-Out-of-Africa Middle Palaeolithic 80 ka BP and earlier	Sub-Saharan Africa	‘Pandora’s Box’: the original mythical package, perhaps containing: 4. The Lightning Bird (and the World or Cosmic Egg) 8. The stones (as earth; under CITI VI revised as the stones as connection between heaven and earth) 9. The Moon 10. The Earth as primary (10 was subsequently revised towards cattle, in the Neolithic) 12. From the Tree (in subsequent CITIs diversified into 12a ‘The world and humanity from the tree’, and 12c ‘the leg-child’) 13. The Cosmic / Rainbow Snake 15. The Spider (subse-	L (L1, L2, L3)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The emergence of Anatomically Modern Humans as a biological mutation? • Africa’s soil carrying capacity, even for hunting and collecting, is the lowest in the world, mainly due to geological conditions that predate the appearance of humans by hundreds of millions of years, so it is possible that there was a push out of Africa • The emergence of myth as constitutive of a new type of human community: self-reflective, coherent, communicating, engaging in hunting and collecting, and creating coherence, through the narrative and ritual management of symbols, 	Proto-Human

³⁴ Further analysis suggests this NarCom – an analytical construct, like all other NarComs – to be an unfortunate contamination of nos. 4 (*cf.* Rain), 13, and 19.

		quent transformed into 'the feminine arts' in CITI VI)		leading to articulate language. If this last point is plausible, then the earliest phase in the overall process is in itself myth-driven	
II. Middle Palaeolithic, c. 80 ka BP	West Asia, and from there to Australia and New Guinea	5. The Mantis	N and / or M	Leaving Africa and venturing into West Asia is likely to have produced new challenges and to have given access to new opportunities; possibly Neanderthaloid influence	
III. Middle Palaeolithic, c. 35 ka BP	West Asia	6. Rescue from the Ogre	A and B (out of N)	Neanderthaloid influence?	
IV. Upper Palaeolithic, c. 20 ka BP	Central Asia	11. The Primal Waters and the Flood	B (out of N)	Installation of the cosmogony of the Mother / Mistress of the Primal Waters, and the Land	*Borean
V. Upper Palaeolithic, c. 15 ka BP	Central Asia	1. The separation of Heaven and Earth 16. Shamanism, bones	N (H, A, B)	The separation of Heaven and Earth as central cosmogonic theme; shamanism associated with naked-eye astronomy (for hunters, later agriculturalists). The shaman's (belief of) travelling along the celestial axis to underworld and upper world, created (the idea of) a politico-religious social hierarchy on which more effective forms of socio-political organisation could be based.	Peripheral and Central branches of *Borean have separated

VI. proto-Neolithic c. 12 ka BP	Extended Fertile Crescent	2. The Re-Connection of Heaven and Earth (after separation) 19. The Cosmogonic Virgin and her Son / lover 14. Twins	R and M1	Neolithic food production through agriculture and animal husbandry; Neolithic arts and crafts such as pottery, spinning, weaving; male ascendance; complex society, the emergence of writing, the state, organised religion, and science; incipient metallurgy	Eur-asiatic and Afro-asiatic separate
VII. Neolithic or Bronze Age c. 5 ka BP	Extended Fertile Crescent	7. From the Mouth	too recent and too limited in scope to be interpreted in terms of mtDNA type	Masculinisation and mythical 'hysterical displacement' of procreative functions, from groin to mouth and head – transcendentalism as triggered by writing, the state, organised priesthood, and science	
VIII. Neolithic to Iron Age c. 3 ka BP	Extended Fertile Crescent	14a. Twins, Two Children, Duality		further reflection needed	

Source: van Binsbergen 2010a: Table 9.2

Table 2.2. 'Contexts of Intensified Transformation and Innovation' (CITIs) in the global history of Anatomically Modern Humans' mythology.

As we have seen, in addition to the 'Out-of-Africa' Hypothesis, recent genetic research has also formulated the '*Back-to-Africa*' Hypothesis, according to which there has been a substantial population influx from Asia (both West and East Asia) into Africa in the last 15 ka. It stands to reason that such a population movement also meant, to a considerable extent, demic diffusion of culture traits owned by these Asian populations trickling back into Africa. Basically there would be two main routes or mechanisms for from such an Asian feed-back influx into sub-Saharan Africa:

1. via North Africa, across the Sahara: along the time-honoured caravan routes and the Nile Valley
2. via the Indian Ocean, either crossing into Africa from the Arabian peninsula, or further South via the Swahili coast, Madagascar, or around Cape of Good Hope, to the Atlantic West coast, even all the

way to the Bight of Benin and West Africa.



for sources of the data points: see van Binsbergen 2010b; Lindblom 1935
inset (obscuring a part of the world map where there are no attestations): modern
spiked wheel trap from the Acholi people, Southern Sudan (Sparks 2006).

Fig. 2.2. Global distribution of the spiked wheel trap (as typical of Pelasgian distributions).

A conspicuous example of mechanism (1) is the distribution of the spiked wheel trap (Fig. 2.2), which I am arguing elsewhere to constitute an ‘index fossil’ of ‘Pelasgian’ transcontinental cultural influx into the Mediterranean, the rest of Europe, Africa, East and South East Asia, and ultimately Oceania. Mechanism (2) would be brought out by the many instances³⁵ of South, South East and East Asian influences on present-day African socio-cultural traits, *e.g.* in the kingship, ecstatic cults, divination, language (notably the Austric affinities in Bantu) etc. on which my research has been concentrating over the last decade, and which will play an increasingly important role as this book’s argument develops. Stephen Oppenheimer’s (1998) term ‘Sunda’ would be an acceptable, overall term for the effects of mechanism (2), as long as we realise that in the context of transcontinental interaction this is merely an umbrella term,

³⁵ Cf. Dick-Read 2005; van Binsbergen 2003: Ch. 8, 2005c, and my work in the context of the 2012 Leiden conference. The analytical groundwork for the transcontinental, multicentred and multidirectional maritime network is to be found particularly in my recent paper exploring the protohistoric links between Africa and China (van Binsbergen 2012f).

denoting not only (as the term suggests) specifically Indonesian / South East Asian influence, but also East and South Asian influence, notably upon Africa. That is not necessarily a one-way process; rather than speaking of ‘Sunda’ influence it would be appropriate to recognise, even from as early as the Neolithic and Early Bronze Age, a transcontinental maritime network that is both multicentred and multidirectional, in the sense that persons, goods and ideas may travel in any direction between any two points on the network.

While the distribution maps presented in this Chapter are directly dictated by empirical data, the tentative historical reconstructions based on these maps are *not*, of course – such historical reconstructions involve a complex act of interpretation, where different analysts have the inherent freedom to come to different conclusions (Quine 1981; Harding 1976). The interpretations I arrive at reflect the experience gained in the handling of many such prehistoric distribution maps over the past decade, in many consecutive attempts to formulate and improve my Aggregative Diachronic Model – applying that model to specific analytical situations at hand, *e.g.* the Bronze Age Mediterranean, the continuity between African and Eurasian mythologies, and the formulation, in that connection, of my Pelasgian Hypothesis.

The aim of our exercise in this chapter is to develop a method of long-range analysis based on empirical distributions; and to prepare the ground for the analysis of geomancy, that is to play a major role throughout this book. While I flatter myself that in the process I have developed a certain feeling for the patterns and theoretical implications as suggested by the distribution maps, the historical reconstructions presented here are merely provisional, and widely open to debate. Meanwhile, regrettably, it would take us too far to discuss, here, every data point and every step made in the tentative historical reconstruction – the reader is only presented with the result.

2.2. Mankala

The *mankala* family of board games (Murray 1952) comes in a handful of major types, defined by the number of rows (two, three or four) along which the game’s vital redistribution holes are being arranged. The oldest archaeological attestations of (what is commonly regarded as) *mankala*

boards hail from the West Asian Neolithic,³⁶ and are of the simplest two-row type. The world distribution is mapped in the following Figure:

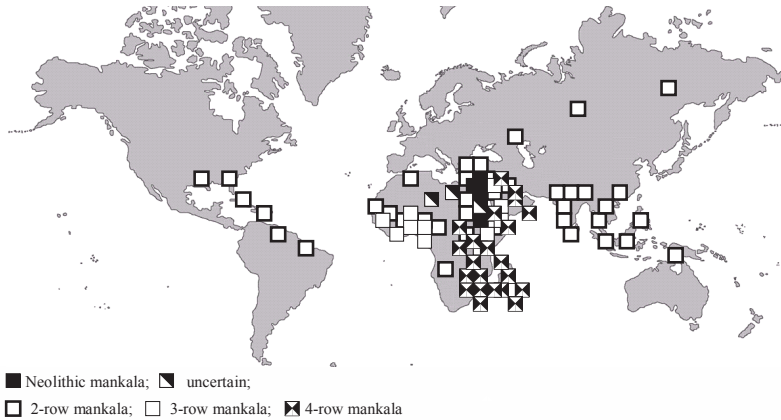


Fig. 2.3. Mankala: Distribution of the various types.

Considering the world distribution of mankala, we come to the following suggestions:

- The New World attestations are clearly associated with recent forced demic diffusion (Atlantic slave trade) in Early Modern times; this indicates that mankala as a trait is not in Pandora's Box (a conclusion also suggested by the absence of attestations in New Guinea³⁷ and Australia), and not even in the later CITIs whose traits have made it to the New World.
- The few Neolithic attestations of mankala (and there are no older

³⁶ Rollefson 1992; Kirkbride 1966; *cf.* Fig. 2.12, below. More controversial attestations of considerable antiquity – but unplayable because they are vertical or suspended high in the air – are from Ethiopia and Ancient Egypt: Parker 1981 / 1909: 587 *f.*; Jensen 1936: 207.

³⁷ However, Raabe n.d. reports a mankala board from Arduni Island, Sepik New Guinea, no doubt under Indonesian influence. She stresses that the mankala board is mainly known in Islamic Indonesia, as well as in Africa. This corroborates the general opinion in the literature that Islam, and forced migration of Africans as slaves, have been largely responsible for the spread of this board-game.

ones) that were known to me in the 1990s are all in West Asia and adjacent Northeast Africa. Research in the last 10 years has further explored Chinese forms of *mankala*, but has not adduced (to my knowledge) new archaeological evidence from East Asia that would challenge the primacy of the West Asia / Northeast African attestations.

- For a good view of the distribution of the 2-, 3- and 4-row varieties of *mankala* as attested in historical times, it is best to consider the distributions separately, as in the following Figures. For proper time perspective, the Neolithic attestations are included in each Figure.

The global distribution specifically of two-row *mankala* is presented in the following diagram:

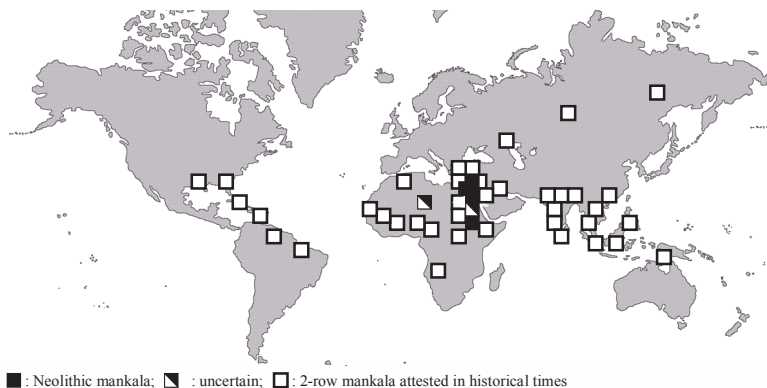
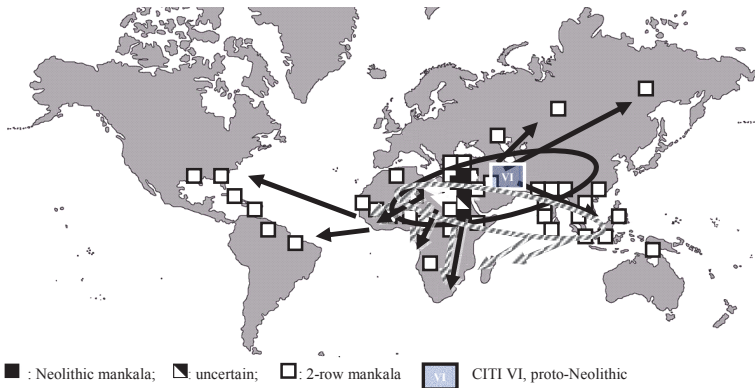


Fig. 2.4. Two-row mankala: Distribution.

The global distribution of two-row *mankala* is provisionally interpreted in historical terms in Fig. 2.5. Here, the tilted oval marks what I propose to call the Neolithic Extended Fertile Crescent – the narrow but long belt of Neolithic innovation all across the Old World, from the still fertile Sahara (only later to turn into a desert) to China, corresponding with CITI VI in Table 2.2. The hatched oval with hatched arrows emanating from it, indicates the extent of the Back-to-Africa movement. Transatlantic black arrows indicate the effect of forced migration in the recent centuries of the slave trade.



The tilted oval marks the Neolithic Extended Fertile Crescent; The hatched oval with hatched arrows emanating from it marks approximately the extent of the Back-to-Africa movement.

Fig. 2.5. Two-row mankala: Tentative historical reconstruction.

For a discursive discussion of this reconstruction, see p. 60 *f.*, below.

The fairly restricted global distribution of three-row mankala is presented in the following diagram (Fig. 2.6):

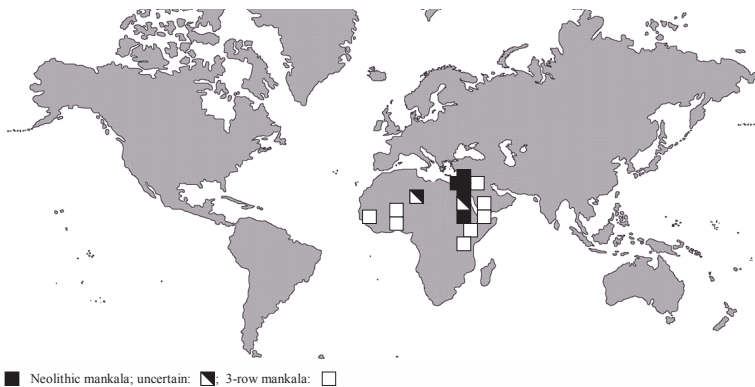


Fig. 2.6. Three-row mankala: Distribution.

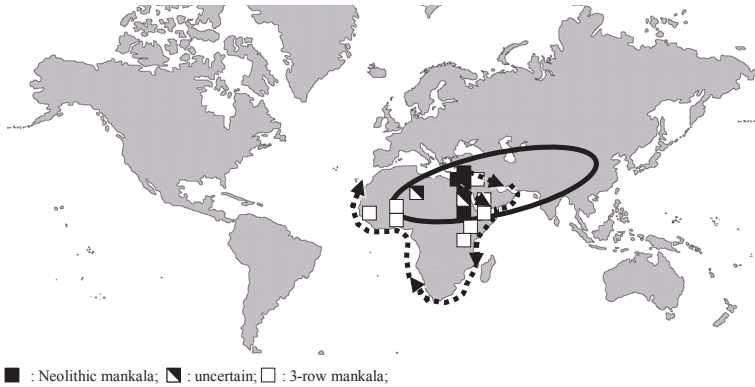


Fig. 2.7. Three-row mankala: Tentative historical reconstruction.

For a discursive discussion of this reconstruction, see p. 60 *f.*, below.

Although the Neolithic Extended Fertile Crescent again appears in Fig. 2.7, the remarkable distribution with its two centres of concentration, one in Northeast Africa and the other in West Africa, seems to indicate a dilemma which we will encounter, further down in this Chapter, in relation to other formal cultural systems (e.g. Flood myths and Tower myths; geomantic divination) and transcontinental influences:

- was the connection maritime, around the Cape of Good Hope, on the wings of the transcontinental ocean trade – thus part of the postulated ‘Sunda’ network (indicated in dotted lines in Fig. 2.7, and – despite the more fundamental awareness that such a maritime network would have been multidirectional and multicentred – provisionally postulated to have run from West Asia (Persian Gulf / Red Sea – famous, well-documented haunts of the ancient mariners in Phoenician and Graeco-Roman times) around the Cape, to West Africa but the opposite movement is also to be considered (and has been, in the work of the Afrocentrist writer Clyde Winters – although not in specific relation to mankala)?
- or was it overland, across the Sahara, and on the wings of the Arab caravan trade – after all it was in an Arabian context that the first written mention of mankala has been attested?

The data on this point are sufficient to raise the question, but not to answer it. Let us therefore proceed to a consideration of the global distribu-

tion of four-row mankala, which is presented in the following diagram (Fig. 2.8).

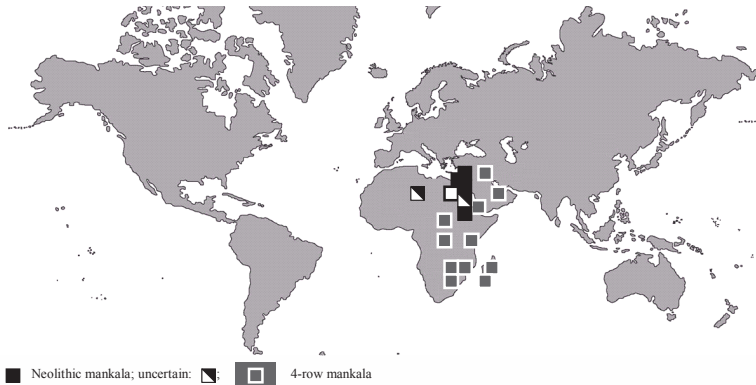


Fig. 2.8. Four-row mankala: Distribution.

Here again the distribution is geographically limited, and virtually confined to the eastern half of the African continent, the Arabian peninsula, and Madagascar. In fact, four-row mankala is the standard type associated with the African Indian Ocean seaboard. For the historical reconstruction of the connections involved this leaves us little room for manoeuvring (Fig. 2.9).

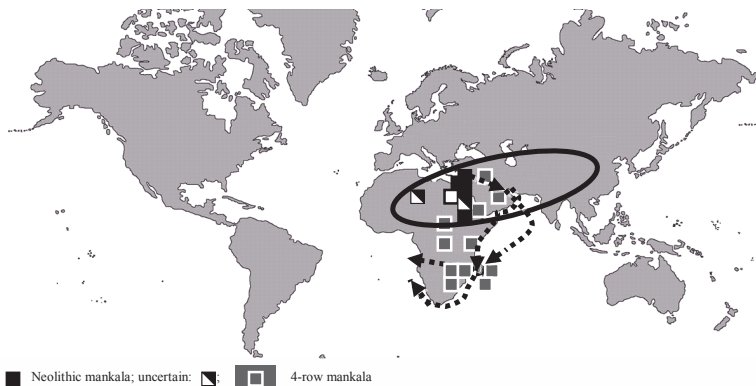


Fig. 2.9. Four-row mankala: Tentative historical reconstruction.

It would theoretically be possible to postulate an original epicentre for four-row *mankala* somewhere in the East African interior, and see the coastal forms as secondary – but against the comparative background of the other forms, especially the three-row variety, and of the Neolithic West Asian attestations, our best bet would be to postulate, once more, a ‘Sunda’ mechanism bringing the four-row variety from the Persian Gulf or the Red Sea all the way along the African Indian Ocean coast, and from there into the East African interior.

The distribution maps and the associated tentative historical reconstructions suggest the following:

- The two-row variant is the standard. It is the minimum required number of rows to make sense of the rules of the game. This is also the form of the Neolithic *mankala* boards. These may be taken to constitute prototypes from which two-row forms in Africa, Asia and the New World are derived. Developed in West Asia, *mankala* may then be supposed to have entered sub-Saharan Africa as if the latter then constituted an open cultural niche, with no rival mathematical games resisting its local introduction – another example of Pelasgian transmission Southward in accordance with the cross-model.
- Three-row and four-row forms of *mankala* are relatively recent regional variants.
- The patchy distribution of three-row *mankala* includes West Africa, Northeast Africa, and the Arabian peninsula. All these locations are near seashores. An overland diffusion is unlikely for it would have resulted in a less patchy and localised pattern and more interior attestations. I take it 3-row *mankala* was developed in Northeast Africa or the Arabian peninsula (near the oldest Neolithic attestations of 2-row *mankala*) and from there spread by seaborne trade, *i.e.* the ‘Sunda’ intercontinental maritime network – although in this case there is no suggestion of any direct Southeast or South or East Asian involvement. The parallel with geomancy, and the reasons discussed there, weakly suggest a spread from East to West around Cape of Good Hope, rather than the other way around, but as we shall see, the argument is as yet inconclusive. We can only guess as to the time frame involved, but I suggest that

this variant is less than three millennia old; in fact, its spread to West Africa may have occurred in the second millennium CE.



left: courtesy Parrinder 1967; right: author's collection
(a) carving representing King Shamba of the Bushong Kuba holding a mankala board; (b) king with fly switch and neck ring – note the conical headdress, the facial expression and the body posture – all reminiscent of South East Asian Buddhist sculpture of the 2nd mill CE.

Fig. 2.10. Kuba carving styles, Congo, 17-19 c. CE.

- The distribution of four-row mankala is quite similar to that of the three-row variant. However, for four row-mankala there are no West African attestations, whereas the East African attestations are far more numerous and over a far more extended area including the African interior. The presence of the four-row variant on Madagascar (where it is the dominant form of mankala) suggests a Sunda link in the narrower sense of the word, but the interior African attestations could only be explained in Sunda terms *if we accept extensive Sunda inroads into the interior*. For this, there are both genetic and comparative-ethnographic indications for the Mozambican-Angolan corridor (which is one of the areas where four-row

mankala reaches deep into the interior). Similar corridors into the interior may be postulated for West Africa (the Cameroonian Western Grassfields), and for Central Africa, *e.g.* the well-known Bushong-Kuba sculpture of King Shamba holding a mankala board (Fig. 2.10a) does show signs of a ‘Sunda’-related, ultimately Buddhist-influenced sculptural style, especially if compared to another such sculpture (2.10b). The genetic distributional data indicative of such inroads are brought together by Cavalli-Sforza *et al.* 1994 and discussed, in their specific application to sub-Saharan Africa, in some of my recent work.³⁸ Again the distribution brings us to propose an epicentre of origin in Southwest Asia (Arabian peninsula, Persian Gulf) or Northeast Africa, and a time frame not extending further back than the beginning of the Common Era.

The distribution of two-row mankala is more extended and more complex than that of the three- and four-row variants. This suggests greater antiquity for two-row mankala. Taking the oldest, Neolithic attestations in Southwest Asia and Northeast Africa as rough indications of the epicentre of origin (although this is, admittedly, a risky procedure), we may discern the following phases in our historical reconstruction:

1. Extended proto-Neolithic Fertile Crescent (Sahara-China), CITI VI. As I have argued extensively in the specific context of board games (van Binsbergen 1995a, 1996b, 1997b), the Neolithic management of game and crops is mirrored in the players’ manipulations during the mankala game; there also appears to be a link with the management of fluids, for which an irrigation context comes to mind.
2. The ‘Back-to-Africa’ movement from 15 ka BP onward, carrying something of the genetic and cultural context as under (1) into West Asia and Africa. This effect may be conspicuous in the case of the Namibian *||hūis* game (Townshend 1976-1977), the remote ancestors of whose Khoisan-speaking players may well have brought the game from Central or West Asia, where (at least, so claim Cavalli-Sforza *et al.* 1994) some of their ancestors apparently still lived 10 ka BP.

³⁸ In the context of the 2012 Leiden conference.

3. From the eastern end of (1), *mankala* appears to be diffused into Southeast Asia. Since this is a relatively late development (< 2 ka BP) into regions already fully populated by Anatomically Modern Humans, this appears to be cultural rather than demic diffusion. Contrary to, for instance, certain other NarComs (for instance *e.g.* the oldest Flood myths, which I have suggested to be subject to demic diffusion into Southeast Asia and Oceania in association with the owners of mtDNA type B), there is no indication that the spread of *mankala* into Southeast Asia is specifically associated with any genetic type. If it were associated with mtDNA Type B, *mankala* would be far more widespread in Southeast Asia, and would not be virtually absent (with only one New Guinea attestation) in Oceania and Australia. On the other hand, *mankala* in South East India and on Ceylon appears to be only a few centuries old, and associated with the advent of African slaves and soldiers (de Voogt 2000; an impression confirmed by my own fieldnotes, Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka).
4. From the northern end of (1), *mankala* is sporadically diffused into Central and North Asia, again probably not through demic diffusion but on the wings of other relatively recent cultural currents, such as the spread of Buddhism and of Islam – world religions which have been known to be instrumental in the spread of other cultural traits, *e.g.* musical instruments, musical styles, styles of dress and ornamentation, ecstatic cults, etc. Let us not forget that our oldest documentary source on *mankala* is the Arabic *Kitāb al-Aḡāni* by Abu'l Faraj (897-967 CE).³⁹
5. Even though *mankala* has been known for more than a century as 'the national game of Africa' (Culin 1896), and even though many authors have followed Culin in considering the game as primordially African, the presence of *mankala* in sub-Saharan Africa may be mainly due to the same 'Pelasgian' mechanism (see above) as that which seems to have brought the spiked wheel trap to Africa, overland via Northeast Africa and across the Sahara, from a West Asian source. Probably, however, there was also the Indian-Ocean-based, 'Sunda', cultural influence from West, South, South East

³⁹ Murray 1952: 165; another relatively early mention of *mankala* is: de Flacourt 1661: 108 *f.*

and East Asia: possibly along the Mozambican-Angolan corridor, and even more probably in West Africa, where ‘Sunda’ traits abound (specific food crops, xylophones, ecstatic cults, kingship, etc.). My recent research into Africa’s transcontinental continuities suggests that Sunda-associated, Buddhist-orientated states were established in Southern and South Central Africa around the turn of the second millennium (Mapungubwe and Great Zimbabwe are cases in point, *cf.* the Venda with Hakata tablets and divination bowls – but it looks as if there were also extensions to the north, the Zambezi and Lualaba regions), and the distribution pattern of four-row *mankala* in these parts of Africa is suggestive of Sunda influence.

6. We have already dealt with the isolated New Guinea case.
7. Finally, from West Africa 2-row *mankala* spread to the New World in the context of the forced demic diffusion of the trans-Atlantic slave trade.

Similar to the *mankala* game, and sometimes discussed in that context, is the *dara* game, whose attestations in historical times are given in Fig. 2.11. There has been a tendency to consider the game associated with Arabs or Bedouins, and to see the Sahara as its original home. However, the fact that its attestations are predominantly coastal, and all over Africa, suggests that *dara*, too, may reflect Sunda maritime influence.

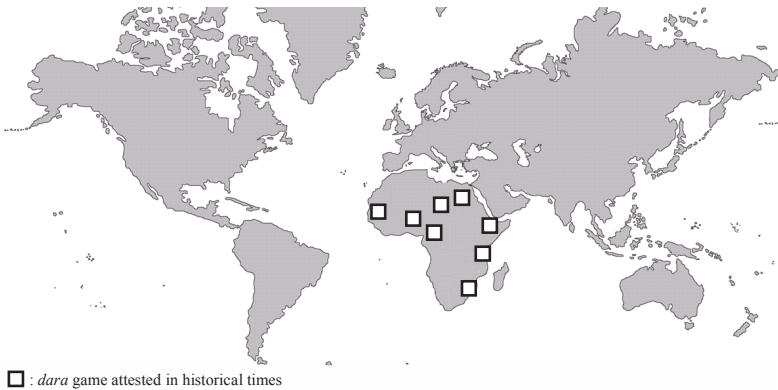
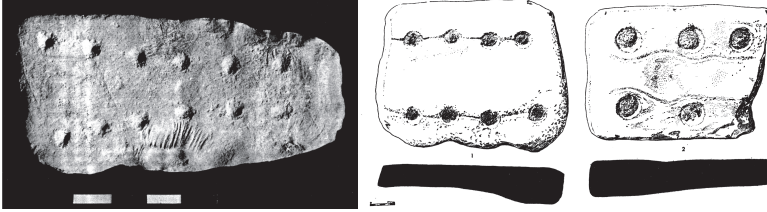


Fig. 2.11. Distribution of the *dara* game.



Left: from Rollefson 1992; right: from Kirkbride 1966

Fig. 2.12. Neolithic mankala boards from West Asia

2.3. Geomancy

2.3.1. Geomancy: Distribution

To a considerable extent, the history of geomancy is the history of its random generators and notational systems. The following Table 2.3 gives an impression of the various random generators used in the extensive distribution area of geomancy.

<p>درب لرامل <i>darb al-raml</i> 'hitting the sand' with a stick (Islamic <i>ilm al-raml</i>)⁴⁰</p>	<p>throwing of sticks 筊chim (East Asia)⁴¹</p>	<p>throwing of coins (East Asia)⁴²</p>	<p>throwing of wooden temple-blocks 筊杯 <i>chiao pai</i> (East Asia) (author's collection)</p>

⁴⁰ el Tounisi 1845.

⁴¹ Michael 1999-2008.

⁴² Laurel 2001-2009.

			
<p>geomantic dice (India, Africa)⁴³</p>	<p>clockwork emulation of the geomantic process: an Islamic divinatory machine of the early 2nd millennium (Hosken n.d.)</p>	<p>throwing of cowries (West Africa) (author's collection)</p>	<p>throwing of a <i>kpelle</i> divining chain (West Africa) (author's collection)</p>
		<p>throwing of half-shells of <i>mungongo</i> (<i>Schinziophyton rautanenii</i>) or other nuts (West Africa, Southern Africa)⁴⁴</p> <p>four ivory or wooden tablets (Southern Africa) (author's collection); note the circle-dots on the ivory items</p>	

Table 2.3. *Alternative random generators in geomancy.*

⁴³ Cf. Pirzada 2011.

⁴⁴ Robbins & Campbell 1990; Rodrigues de Areia 1985; with kola nuts: Nassau 1904: 207f; Bosman 1967 [1704] : 152 f.; Dennett 1968 [1910]: 149. The coin is included for size comparison only – although often random generators, including coins, are mixed in divinatory usage.

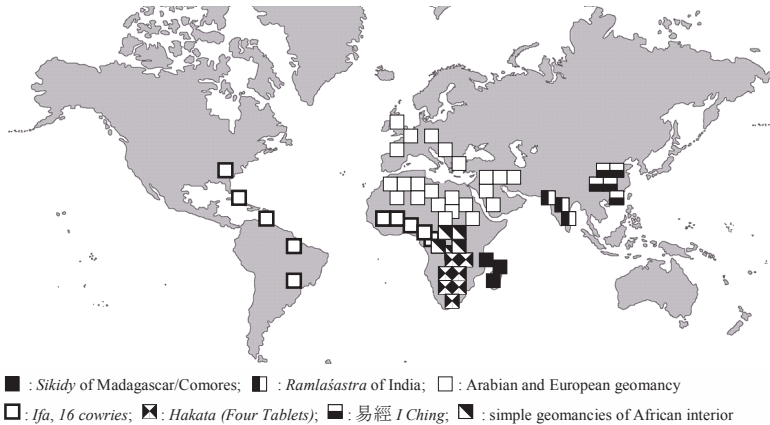


Fig. 2.13. Geomancy: Distribution.

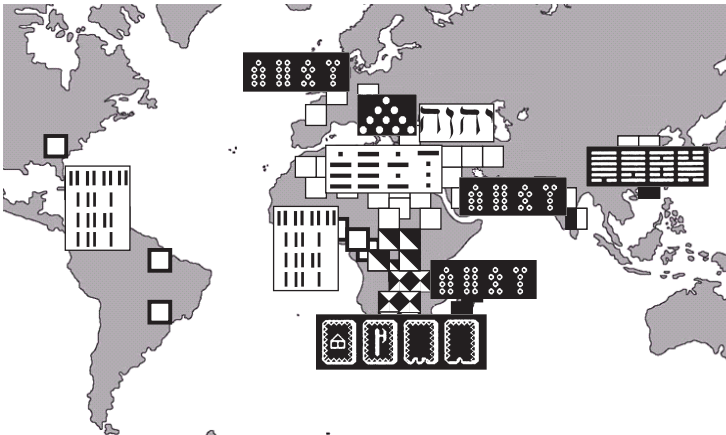
2.3.2. Distribution of geomancy: Discussion

As compared with the mythical themes that have an antiquity of several, often tens of millennia (some even go back to Pandora's Box), and even with mankala for which we have Neolithic archaeological attestations, geomancies as highly specific formal systems have a much shallower time depth, and their high degree of formal specificity makes us reluctant to consider the worldwide variants as mere parallel inventions – much more likely, they are scions of the same tree.

- The oldest textual and iconographic attestations of the Chinese geomantic representational apparatus (the 8 trigrams ☰, ☷, ☱, ☴, ☵, ☲, ☳, ☶, and the 64 hexagrams of *Yi Jīng* e.g. ☰☰ ☷☷ ☱☱ ☴☴ ☵☵ ☲☲ ☳☳ ☶☶ etc.), go back to the late 1st millennium BCE at the very earliest.⁴⁵
- The oldest Arabian geomantic attestations, under the name of *ilm*

⁴⁵ Frobenius (1923: 114) reminds us that the symbolism of broken and unbroken lines, as in *Yi Jīng* (which he mentions explicitly there), also has a South Asian counterpart: in India three parallel horizontal lines, unbroken, are said to denote the North / male, while the same pattern with broken lines would denote the South / female. To this I may add that in Hindu ritual contexts, the pattern of three horizontal lines (North / male?) particularly evokes the god Shiva; in Balinese villages, Shiva is associated with the West, the cemetery, and death (fieldnotes). A guiding thought of Frobenius' book is the pendulum sling movement between East and West, which, in the light of the present book's argument, is particularly appropriate as an icon of the global history of geomancy, and of element cosmologies.

al-raml or *ḥaṭṭ al-raml*, date from the late 1st millennium CE; considering the semantic, symbolic and representational correspondences, these appear to share a common cultural environment, perhaps a common origin, with *Yi Jing*. Given the extensive Chinese presence in the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf, and throughout the Central Asian interior, under the 唐朝 T'ang dynasty (end of 1st millennium CE) (also and especially in philosophical and medical life), one might suppose that *ilm al-raml*, which emerged in Islamic Iraq, same period, was directly derivative from Taoist Chinese prototypes, notably *Yi Jing*. However, while such influence cannot be excluded and is also detectable in other intellectual domains of Iraqi and Iranian culture around 1000 CE, there are indications that West Asian Muslims were all the more ready to adopt and transform a Chinese geomancy, because they were already familiar with an older proto-geomantic Old-World divinatory substratum that did not exclusively or predominantly derive from China, and that may have had ramifications into Africa (hence the North African connotations (*cf.* Steinschneider 1864, 1877) of the classic geomancy, that of *ṣayḥ* Muḥammad al-Zanāṭī محمد أزناتي (c. 1200 CE; *cf.* al-Zanāṭī 1923, 1995).



Pythagoras' *tetractys* ⋯⋯⋯ (see below, Chapter 5) and the Ancient Israelite *tetragrammaton* יהוה are shown as early expressions of a four-element system foreshadowing proto-geomancies in Mediterranean Late Antiquity

Fig. 2.14. Comparing geomantic notational systems worldwide.

- Rather than Sino-Tibetan cultural affinities of the *Yi Jing* symbolism, some Sinologists (as we shall see in Chapter 7) have, rightly, stressed *Yi Jing*'s Indo-European affinities – which turn out to be specifically Luwian-Hittite, *i.e.* West Asian.
- Hebrew, Greek (Byzantine) and Latin attestations of geomancy are several centuries younger than the Arabic versions, and are evidently derived from pre-existing Arabian prototypes; this entire ensemble constitutes (as Ibn Ḥaldūn already argued, 1377 / 1980) an adulteration of astronomically based astrology.
- Indian *ramlaśāstra*, up to its very name (contrary to *śāstra*, 'knowledge', *ramla* has no Indo-Aryan etymology, but *cf.* the Arabic terms for geomancy cited above), is clearly derived, in the course of the second mill. CE, from an Arabian prototype.
- Pre-Modern African attestations are both recent and very rare – the oldest I know of date from the 16th century (documentary) and the 17th century (archaeological).⁴⁶
- The attestations in the New World very clearly have a trans-Atlantic origin and spring from forced demic diffusion at the time of the slave trade (second half of the second millennium CE).

2.3.3. Geomancy in Africa

The African attestations are puzzling in their complexity:

- Early students of African geomancies⁴⁷ readily spotted the continuity between Malagasy *sikidy*, West African *Ifa*, and the Arabian *ilm al-raml*.
- I have meanwhile demonstrated that the Southern African family of geomantic divination belongs to the same field of continuity (van Binsbergen 1996a).
- The influence of the Arabian geomantic system on the Indian Ocean coast has been widely accepted by scholars.
- Some scholars, especially African ones, and among them espe-

⁴⁶ This is the Latin report of the execution of the first Christian martyr in Zimbabwe (Father Gonçalo de Silveira, †1561) after having been found guilty by the consultation of a four-tablet oracle (dos Santos 1901 / 1609: VII, 190), written half a century after the event; and divining tablets from the Khami ruins, *cf.* Robinson 1959: Plate V.

⁴⁷ Burton 1893 / 1864: I, 330 *f.*, and 1987 / 1856, 55n-56n; Steinschneider 1877, 1956 / 1904; Ferrand 1891-1902: I, 73-101; Trautmann 1939-1940; Maupoil 1943a, 1943b.

cially those of an Afrocentrist persuasion, have denied the indebtedness of the West African systems to the Arabian systems. When a few years ago I presented the compelling evidence on geomancy's origin outside Africa, to the members of the Afrocentrist discussion group *Ta Seti*, I was rewarded with general scorn, and accusations of betrayal and ignorance. Although nomenclature and symbolism are similar, the pattern of overland trade routes (Levtzion & Hopkins 1981, from which my Fig. 2.15 derives; I owe this point to Dick-Read 2005) suggests that a direct influence from the Arab world onto the Bight of Benin may not be the most plausible explanation for the massive occurrence of geomancies in that region – we are perhaps persuaded to consider the detour from the Indian Ocean along Cape of Good Hope (the same detour which musical instruments (notably the xylophone and the royal orchestra), other ritual and organisational traits of the institution of kingship, cowries, ecstatic cults, bananas, taro, other food crops, and even one Roman coin found near Buea, Cameroon (Dick-Read 2005; Bovill 1958: 41n), appear to have taken on their way to West Africa, and from there into the Congo Basin, South Central Africa and possibly Southern Africa.

However, the case is not so clear-cut as suggested by Dick-Read. In the first place there is considerable evidence of an Arab / Muslim undercurrent in West African geomancy, more specifically in Ifa. Haillot (1936) describes a West African form of geomancy where the configurations have the names of Islamic prophets: Issa / °Aīssa, Noé / °Nūḥ, etc. The most obvious explanation would be that in this case Islam was in fact the vehicle of trans-Saharan transmission, and that there is no need to invoke transmission from the Indian Ocean across the Cape of Good Hope. Also Maupoil, author of one of the most comprehensive studies of African geomancy (Maupoil 1943), and more recently Peel (1990), insist on an Islamic transmission, suggested to be trans-Saharan. African academic authors such as Traoré (1979) and Kassibo (1992) passionately and as a matter of course present geomancy as inherently and originally African, although Kassibo is not blind to the wider transcontinental ramifications:

‘Hadj Kamballah (1976 [*cf.* 1947 – WvB] : 22) établit, dans un parallèle saisissant, la parenté entre les idéogrammes géomantiques et les trigrammes chinois appelés *pakoua* et certaines écritures uniques scandinaves [= runes – WvB], comme les *tifinars*, qui sont les caractères de la langue tamachèque [= Touareg – WvB]. Il conclut à leur origine antique et souligne leur caractère

haument métaphysique.’ (Kassibo 1992: 542).

We cannot use the parallels noted by Kassibo and Kamballah as ground for the assumption of a circum-Saharan origin of geomancy, even though there is convergence with cultural practices in the same region as described by Pâques (1964) and Faḥd (1966). Although raised on an esoteric pedestal by (Post-)Modern occultism, North European runes and Touareg sign systems are simply parallel borrowings from the Phoenician alphabet,⁴⁸ and reinforce the West Asian and trans-Saharan connection that is at stake here.



Fig. 2.15. Trade routes in West Africa, second half of second millennium CE.

Source: Dick-Read 2005: 166 after Levtzion & Hopkins 1981. The point is that trade

⁴⁸ I am indebted for this point to the Assyriologist / Semitist Frans Wiggermann; cf. Diringier 1996 / 1968.

may not have brought North African Islamic influence all the way to the Bight of Benin, so Ifá may have an Indian Ocean, circum-Cape background.

Recapitulating: Dick-Read suggests, for several transcontinental African borrowings so by implication also for geomancies, a detour around Cape of Good Hope and maritime transmission from an ultimate origin in the Indian Ocean region. The relative weakness of this position also becomes apparent when we consider the distribution of Flood and Tower myths in Africa (Fig. 2.14a). The *locus classicus* for such myth is *Genesis 6-11*, and close parallels were brought out by early Assyriology, but these myths have a much wider distribution than the Ancient Near East, and particularly abound in South East Asia. The occurrence of Flood myths in Africa has long been denied on the authority of Frazer (1919) but my insistence on this point has brought even the *doyen* of comparative mythology, Michael Witzel (2010), to re-examine the facts.

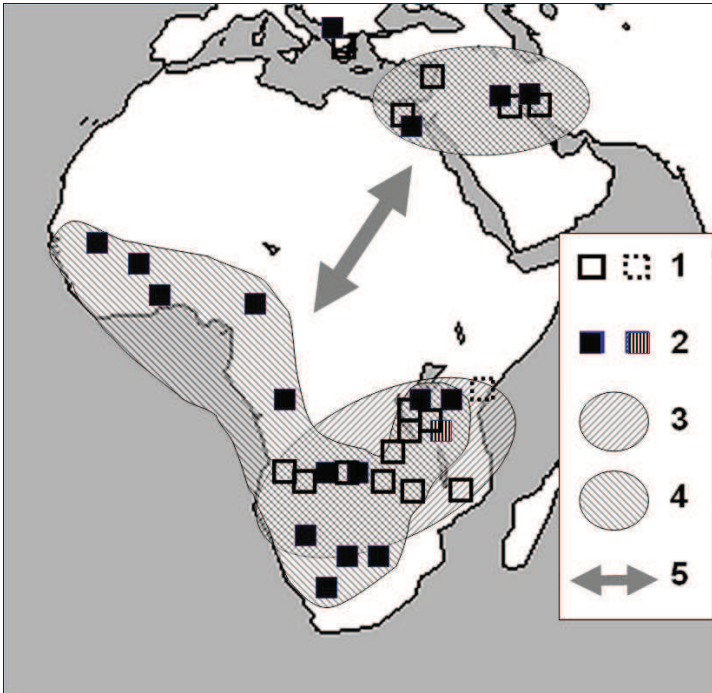


Fig. 2.16. The distribution of Flood and Tower myths in Africa.

1. Tower myths (broken outline = uncertain); 2. Flood myths (hatched symbol =

uncertain); 3 and 4, extent of distribution of 1 and 2, respectively; 5. apparent distributional gap between sub-Saharan African and Ancient Near Eastern / Ancient Egyptian distribution. After van Binsbergen 2006a, with new data added. Sources of data points: Abrahams 1983; Budge 1989; Courlander 1996; Eliot 1976; Faulkner 1994; Feldmann 1963; Frazer 1919; Gaster 1969; Isaak 2006; Kahler-Meyer 1988 / 1971; Kelsen / 1943; Parrinder 1982 / 1967; van der Sluijs n.d. [2004]; van Binsbergen 2010a; Vitaliano 1973.

What puzzled me for a long time when examining the distribution of such myths in Africa, was the apparent large gap between the Ancient Near East / Ancient Egypt on the one hand, and sub-Saharan Africa on the other. I took this as an indication that, as stressed by Dick-Read, there has been no direct influence from the Middle East onto sub-Saharan Africa. The increasing unpopularity of the 'Hamitic Thesis' in the second half of the 20th c. CE added plausibility to this view. (According to the Hamitic Thesis, launched in the early 20th century by Seligman – e.g. 1913, 1934 – and his contemporaries, sub-Saharan Africa owed much of its advances in culture to the 'civilising' influence of medium-pigmented pastoralist from West Asia, bringers also of the Afroasiatic or Hamitic linguistic macrophylum. The implied colonial racialism of this position has meanwhile been amply exposed. There is an apparent *approchement* between the Hamitic Thesis and my Pelasgian Hypothesis; I discuss and refute this appearance in van Binsbergen 2011d.)

The universal distribution of Flood myths world-wide, and their apparent African concentration near the Atlantic coast, are compatible with the hypothesis of South or South East Asian, in other words Sunda, seaborne provenance of these myths in Africa. On the other hand, the Flood myths among the East African Masai and neighbouring peoples are remarkably close to those attested from the Ancient Near East including the Bible. Moreover, the massive and undeniable Ancient Egyptian traces, not only (as we have seen) among the Nkoya but throughout West and East Africa,⁴⁹ and the very successful inroads of Islam in West and East Africa, convey a message of trans-Saharan continuity. The case is clinched, in my opinion, by the recent research of Dierk Lange (2004, 2009, 2012), who established beyond any

⁴⁹ Meyerowitz 1960; Wainwright 1940, 1949, 1951; overview: van Binsbergen 2011c.

doubt (e.g. by parallel king lists) direct Assyrian influence upon West Africa by the end of the Assyrian empire (c. 600 BCE) – and passing through Egypt which at the time was under Assyrian rule. However, this Assyrian influence was one and a half millennia *before* the invention of *‘ilm al-raml* in Iraq. I suggest that the gap of Fig. 2.15 reflects not so much paucity of trans-Saharan contacts and influence, but simply the open vastness of the Sahara. A combination of mainly Indian Ocean / Sunda influence around the Cape of Good Hope, with a measure of Arab influence directly across the Sahara, seems to best account for the details of geomancy in West and Southern Africa.

- Intermediate or simple geomancies have been attested all over the African interior, but the formal correspondences between the Arabian, West African, Malagasy and Southern African systems are too numerous and too specific than that these various elaborate African geomancies might conceivably derive from the simpler African forms; much more likely, the latter are adulterations of the more elaborate, originally literate forms, for which an ultimate origin *outside* Africa is the most likely.
- It is therefore even extremely unlikely (*pace* the Afrocentrist claims of many African writers on geomancy) that these simpler African geomancies, rather than being mere local adulterations, are the ultimate primal source of geomancies worldwide.

Even if we could see these simpler forms as survivals from a substrate proto-geomantic system extending over much of Africa and possibly all over the Old World, and thus as the basis of the Yi Jīng symbolism and of ‘ilm al-raml, what we find now in the form of simpler geomancies exists clearly in the periphery of the more elaborate forms from (Early) Modern times

Meanwhile we are struck by the extensive continuities that appear to exist between Chinese, Southern African and West African divinatory apparatus employed for the application of geomancy.

- Divination bowls from the Venda and from West Africa are very similar to,

- and even claimed to be continuous with, those of Mesopotamia and Ancient Greece (Davis 1955);
- Meanwhile the Venda and West African divination bowls appear to be local appropriations, either of Chinese divinatory bowls with a 36-item zodiacal rim, or of Chinese nautical instruments (van Binsbergen 2012c, 2012d, with extensive literature).

Also the influence of Chinese geomantic landscape symbolism upon Malagasy *sikidy* is obvious from the accounts available in the literature (e.g. Vérin & Rajaonarimanana 1991).

Attestations of geomancies are concentrated in only part of the Old World, and absent in New Guinea, Australia, Oceania and (with the exception of clearly Africa-derived borrowings in the latest centuries) in the New World. Also the European attestations (geomancy was a major divination form in Medieval and Renaissance occult sciences, and from there adulterated into a popular and peasant divinatory art) are manifestly borrowings from West Asian forms in Islamic trappings; Arabic texts on Islamic occult sciences, including geomancies and other forms of divination, were among the first to be translated into (Byzantine) Greek and especially Latin in the course of the European translation frenzy of the 11th and 12th centuries (Steinschneider 1956 / 1904; Carmody 1956; d'Alverny 1982; Thorndike 1923-1958). All this makes it crystal-clear that in the case of geomancy we have to do with a relatively recent and local development that can make no claim to inclusion in Pandora's Box (CITI I), and that can neither have belonged to the early post-Out-of-Africa CITIs whose products made it all the way to the New World.

This brings me to suggest that, rather like the *mankala* case, the specific forms and interrelations of the African geomancies are best explained by the following accumulative factors:

- while admitting a certain cross-Saharan Arab influence, yet mainly
- a general East-West seaborne movement around the Cape of Good Hope
- formally in line with Oppenheimer's (1998) postulated Sunda westbound cultural and genetic expansion
- but rather, more recently, and more specifically applied to Africa

(about which Oppenheimer remains, understandably, silent).

- The reports of the Phoenician Hanno's circumnavigation of Africa (c. 500 BCE) lend some further credibility to this proposed trajectory (Lacroix 1993; Illing 1899; Schoff 1913; Falconer 1797; Cory 1828).
- So does the history of cowries as an unmistakable trace of Indian Ocean trade (probably not all of it Early Modern and in West European hands) in Atlantic Africa – and, as said, of such food-stuffs as banana, mango and taro

Conceived as specifically related to Indonesia, therefore in the narrower sense, the Sunda model proposes major cultural and genetic inroads, from South East Asia, into

- the Persian Gulf,
- the Red Sea,
- the Mozambican-Angola corridor, and
- the Bight of Benin, whilst producing the highly Austronesian population of
- Madagascar, either directly from Indonesia, or via an intermediate stay at the East African mainland.

With the exception of the Red Sea region, all these regions loom large in the distribution of geomancies, and if we adjust Oppenheimer's very long time scale and reduce 'Sunda' influence upon sub-Saharan Africa to a relatively recent phenomenon (Mediterranean Bronze Age and later – in other words the latest three millennia), the pattern of the distribution of geomancies might fit the Sunda model,

with this proviso that

1. we have to extend 'Sunda' so as to include, beside seaborne influences from insular South East Asia, also such influences from East and South Asia, and
2. that we qualify the suggestion of one coherent, identifiable, ethnically distinct culture which subsequently spreads monodirectionally through seaborne demic diffusion. Instead, what we have is

rather an intercontinental maritime network for trade and cultural exchange (Fig. 2.17), in which *attested* items may primarily be seen to travel from East to West, but traffic (also of ideas and formal systems) in the opposite direction cannot in the least be ruled out (but, being counter-paradigmatic, may be overlooked or suppressed both in Modern scholarship and in ancient Asian sources!).

Black African slaves were so common in T'ang China that the phenomenon gave rise to an entire literary genre featuring a Black trickster hero (Irwin 1977; *cf.* Chang Hsing-Lang 1930; Wilensky 2002). During West European mercantile expansion, *i.e.* in Early Modern times, substantial Black African communities were established in India, Sri Lanka, and Indonesia, and these are likely to have spread African socio-cultural traits in Asia – some authors (*e.g.* Barnes 1975) even attribute the remarkably limited attestations of *mankala* in that region to this factor. The Afrocentrist educationalist and linguist Clyde Winters (1980a, 1980b, 1980c, 1981, 1983a, 1983b, 1984, 1985, 1988) has repeatedly stated the claim of extensive pre- and protohistorical West African influence on South and East Asia, and – not surprisingly, considering both the world politics of knowledge and the obscurity of his publication venues – has attracted less main-stream support than he deserves. (Incidentally, the connections which Winters (1984, 1985) claims to exist between Sumerian, Manding, Elamite and Dravidian remind us of the close links which also the prominent linguists Igor Diakonoff (1997; *pace* Bengtson, and Bomhard), and Paul Rivet (1929), saw between Sumerian and Austric (specifically, Munda), and on which I recently hit (van Binsbergen & Woudhuizen 2011: 372) when looking for a plausible Austric etymology for the name of the Sumerian's paradisiacal island Dilmun; apparently neither Winters' claim of affinities, nor the 'Sunda' trajectory in Figs. 2.17 and 2.18, below, are totally chimerical – Winters's affinities, spanning the huge range from West Africa, West Asia to South Asia, could be explained as traces of Sunda / Austric influence.)

For the Early Modern Asian distribution of geomancy, a similar argument could be made as for *mankala* ('perhaps Africa-derived, but more likely spread from West Asia under Islamic conditions'), especially since the earliest documentary attestations of fully-fledged geomancy (not counting dubious protoforms from Mediterranean Late Antiquity) have all been in the Islamic / Arabic context.

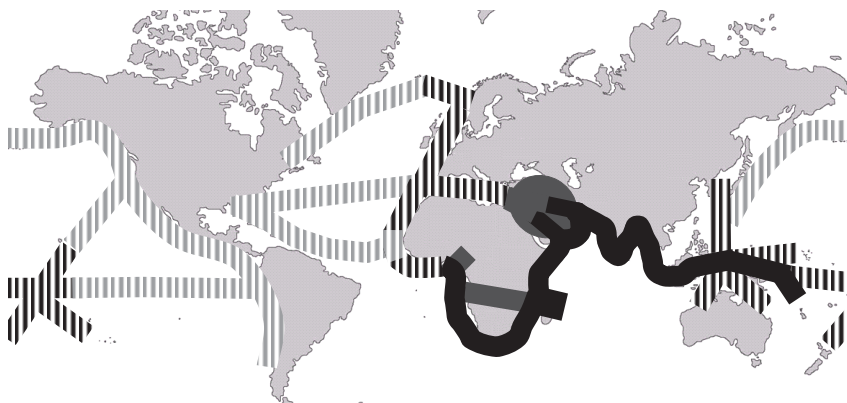
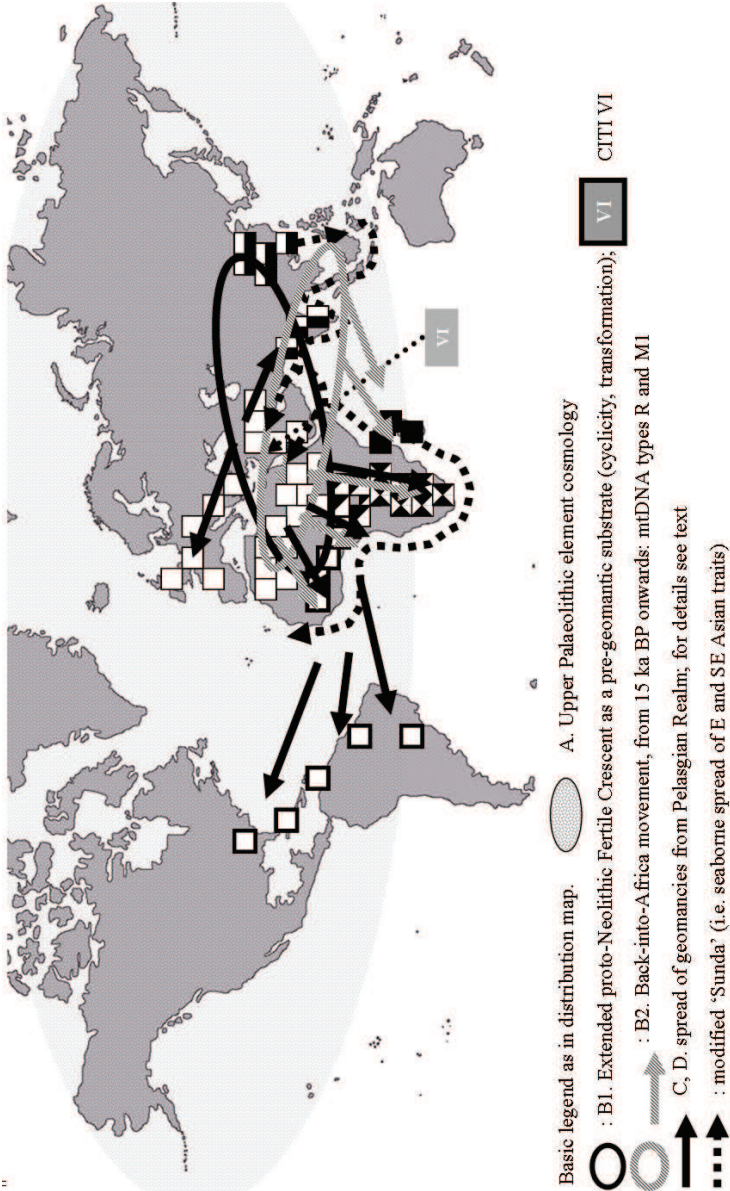


Fig. 2.17. A proposed intercontinental, multicentred, multidirectional maritime network from the Early Bronze Age onward.

Source: van Binsbergen 2012c and in preparation (a), in preparation (d). The solid, thick black lines indicate the proposed outlines of the ‘Sunda’ network; lesser density of hatching indicates lesser certainty. For sections of the proposed network, solid grey is used to indicate interior regions of suspected Sunda influence: the Mozambican / Angolan corridor, the Bight of Benin / Western Grassfields corridor, and the Mediterranean connections with the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf, all of which obviously are not maritime trajectories yet appear to have a marked Sunda association.

Yet it is remarkable that one of the earliest of these Arabic attestations (the use of the word *ḥaṭṭ* in the sense of divination, in al-Djaḥiẓ’s (c. 776-868/9 CE) *Kitāb al Ḥayawān*, IV 369 (1988; cf. Pellat 1969 / 1967) comes from a medieval Islamic writer with established African (‘Ethiopian’) antecedents, whereas al-Zanātī (cf. 1923, 1995), author of what was to become the most influential Islamic geomancy throughout the Indian Ocean and African regions, also derives from a North African Berber milieu (possibly with a fair element of Jewish influence, for which the Zanata tribe is well-known), continuous with the geomancy-orientated Sahara and West Africa.

This allows us to tentatively reconstruct the history of geomancies in the Old World along the following lines (Fig. 2.18):



Reference is made to Fig. 2.13 ('distribution map') and to Figs 9.1 and 9.3, below ('Upper Palaeolithic element cosmology')

Fig. 2.18. Proposed reconstruction of the world history of geomancy.

- A. Admittedly, we cannot confidently reconstruct the transcontinental prehistory of geomancies before the Upper Palaeolithic, yet below, Table 6.1) an attempt in that direction will be made; ultimately the idea of ‘divination by the earth’ (the literal meaning of ‘geomancy’) seems to derive from the NarCom ‘the earth as primary’, which was already in Pandora’s Box in pre-Exodus Africa.
- B. We may postulate an Extended proto-Neolithic Fertile Crescent (from Sahara-to China) as a proto-geomantic substratum, emanating from CITI VI (proto-Neolithic) c. 15 ka BP. This proto-geomantic substratum was gradually carried West and South, into sub-Saharan Africa and Europe, as part of the Back-to-Africa movement, from Central Asia 15 ka BP onwards: mtDNA types R and M1. Hence it is not really contradictory that we may suspect proto-geomancies to have existed both at the eastern (China) and at the western (Sahara) end of the Extended Fertile Crescent. In all probability, an element-based cosmology emerged within this worldview, which moreover was informed by the emergence of shamanism in conjunction with naked-eye astronomy
- C. Probably more important, certainly more tangible, than this Upper Palaeolithic / proto-Neolithic complex, was the crystallisation of themes of *cyclicity* and *transformation* within the already widely established element cosmology. These themes became part of the emergent Pelasgian socio-cultural package, which, emerging in West Asia in Neolithic times, during the Bronze Age spread into the Mediterranean and, while being transformed and innovated, subsequently spread in all four directions (my so-called ‘cross model’), including East to China, South Asia, South East Asia and even to some extent to Oceania – and South to sub-Saharan Africa, either via North Africa or via the Indian Ocean route. Whatever its pre-Bronze Age antecedents, geomancy thus became a prominent Pelasgian trait distributed over many parts of Asia and Africa.
- D. From this common Bronze Age / Pelasgian substrate, we can trace a number of parallel developments to be explored in subsequent Chapters:
- In Western Eurasia, in ways which we will examine in detail in

the next few Chapters, a formal and explicit four-element cosmological system develops at least a millennium before the Presocratics, but it is by explicit reference (notably in Plato and especially Aristotle) to the mid-1st millennium Greek Presocratic philosophers that the four-element system becomes standard in that region, and that proto-geomancies begin to be sporadically and tentatively formulated on its basis – for instance in the neo-Pythagorean and Talmudic contexts.

- In China, under (as we shall see in Chapter 7) arguable West Asian influence during the 1st-2nd millennium BCE, the basic symbolism of trigrams and hexagrams is developed as a general wisdom cosmology which allows for a divinatory application and which, given the regional cultural and political dominance of China, also comes to inform the cosmologies of Korea, Japan, Tibet, and continental South East Asia.
- In ^cAbbāsīd Iraq, by the end of the first millennium CE, and under peripheral Chinese influence (maritime trade, Silk Road, T'ang political expansion), the 'Pelasgian' geomantic substrate develops into ^c*ilm al raml*. From there it spreads, over land and by sea, to India as *ramlaśastra*, and also to Madagascar and the Comoro Islands, engendering the *sikidy* divination system. Subsequently, it follows the 'Sunda' Old-World maritime network, reaches Southern Africa where it surfaces as Hakata divination with divination tablets and Venda divination bowls. Rounding, like the 'Sunda' 'phantom voyagers' (Dick-Read 2005) that are its presumed agents of spread, Cape of Good Hope, and following the Atlantic African coast, this Iraq-derived geomancy reaches West Africa, where it is substantially localised as Ifa and Sixteen Cowries, without however dropping the tell-tale details of its notational system, its 2ⁿ-based interpretational catalogue, and the latter specific lists of meanings and associations. The geomantic dice prevalent in *ramlaśastra* consist of four cubes (preferably ivory), marked on four sides with dotted geomantic configurations, pierced, and strung upon a rigid pin around which they can freely revolve – so as to produce one of the sixteen configurations at every throw; of this system, the geomantic *kpelle* strings (consisting of four tassels ending in coins or other tokens capable to taking two different values) and

the Southern African Hakata divinatory tablets (four detached, marked tablets made of ivory or wood, and thrown so as to produce any of the 16 configurations) may be considered straightforward, systematic transformations (see Table 2.3).

- Meanwhile the Arabian geomancy spread, via Persia, Byzantium, and via Arabian and Jewish intellectuals at Southern European courts (Islamic, Sicilian, Norman, Spanish, Portuguese etc.) and other centres of learning, to European medieval secret sciences, to develop in Renaissance magic of Northwestern Europe, and finally to end up as parlour games and peasant divination (*Punktierkunst*) in West and Central Europe.
- From West Africa, geomancy spread to the New World in the context of trans-Atlantic forced demic diffusion at the time of the slave trade
- And today, both West Africa (foremost Nigeria and Benin) and the New World (Cuba, and the Southern USA) are major centres for the further spread of African geomancy among people of African and European extraction, particularly via the Internet and quasi-touristic apprenticeships.

2.4. Where do we go from here?

Neither for geomancy, nor for mankala, can we maintain a sub-Saharan African origin, now that (aided by search facilities – greatly enhanced in the last two decades – of the Internet and the digitalisation of academic libraries worldwide), we have added fifteen years of focused data collection to our 1997 analysis, having refined the analytical and conceptual tools to approach the distributional analysis of formal cultural systems rather more rigorously and methodically; meanwhile recent developments in genetics, comparative linguistics and comparative mythology have actually provided the models against which to situate the historical interpretation of the distribution maps of specific cultural traits.

What remains is the realisation – so beautifully brought out by the complex histories of mankala and geomancy – that Africa is very much a part of the wider world and has always been just that, culturally, genetically, and linguistically.

What was not yet clear to me in 1997, is that we must combine a number of greatly disparate phases in order to account for the African involvement in the wider world:

1. Out of Africa, 80-60 ka BP; until then Pandora's Box was fully African.
2. Back-to-Africa movement from c. 15 ka BP onwards, and intensified and particularised by the Pelasgian movement from the Late Bronze Age, which brought back into Africa many traits that had meanwhile (ever since the Out-of-Africa migration) percolated, transformed, been innovated, and added to within the Asian continent.
3. The forced demic diffusion from Africa in the context of the trans-Atlantic slave trade.
4. Very recent globalisation of the last hundred years or less, which resulted in a worldwide percolation of cultural traits and initiatives, in which African traits (music, dance, rites, therapies) were particularly successful in intercontinental transmission and reception.

Ironically, none of these four movements tallies with Bernal's *Black Athena* thesis, and in fact, that thesis' secondary, Afrocentrist reformulation (inspired by a combination of (3) and (4)) *grosso modo* goes against (2).

Bernal has been cited, and has sometimes flattered himself, as an amazing case of being right for the wrong reasons. At the 2008 Warwick international conference on his work (Orrells *et al.* 2011), his *Black Athena* thesis was more or less canonised as a part of mainstream cultural history. However, when significant Dutch contributions to the debate including my own were reprinted in 2011 under the carefully chosen title *Black Athena Comes of Age*, this was intended to question such canonisation. The more I think about Bernal's *Black Athena* thesis ('total socio-cultural dependence of Ancient Greece upon Ancient Egypt, and in the later Afrocentrist reformulation, total dependence of Ancient Egypt upon prehistoric sub-Saharan Africa'), and the more I reap the benefits of the magnificent inspiration it has given me and other scholars over the past twenty-five years, the more I yet realise that, when all is said and done,

Bernal is also sometimes a case of simply being wrong for the wrong reasons – amongst which loom large: a passion for ideology and for *ad-hominem* arguments; the reliance on a ‘sociology of knowledge’ of his own invention, from which he subjectively derives the right to claim a superior, privileged insight over anyone disagreeing with him (as if he himself could escape the structural implications of his own intriguing position within the World System); and the determination (in the shadow of the towering intellectual figures that crowded his childhood, including Joseph Needham, Alan H. Gardiner, Meyer Fortes, and his father John Desmond Bernal) to make a lasting imprint on the history of ideas.

However, as an overarching framework for the present book’s argument these details of fact and interpretation are less important than the realisation that, for long-range global cultural history, that which separates the continents is less important than that which unites them. The common insistence on the distinct identity of continents, and their specific geographical definitions, reflects, not immutable facts of humans’ cultural history over the past score millennia, but the vicissitudes of geopolitics of the past few hundred years – with special emphasis on the global history of European expansion, and more regionally on the redefinition of the Mediterranean region from a complex unitary state (that of the Muslim Ottoman empire) straddling vast expanses of both the northern and the southern shore, to a patchwork quilt of northern expansionist Christian states imposing (19th c. CE) their military, administrative and economic power on the southern shore. Given humankind’s incessant drive towards migration and towards interaction and exchange (however unequal and violent at times) between its constituent parts, and given the strong genetic and linguistic indications of Anatomically Modern Humans’ common origin in as recent a period as the Middle Palaeolithic, it is unlikely that the cultural history of crucial advances in human thought could be analysed and understood from a regional or uni-continental perspective alone. Instead, a transcontinental perspective seems far more appropriate. This will be one of our main guiding principles in the next Chapters.

Moreover, the examples of mankala and geomancy have given us important clues as to the methodological strategies that may lead us to greater insight in the emergence and spread of cyclicity, transformation and element cosmology as crucial steps in the intellectual history of human-

kind – ultimately leading, among other things, to the Modern natural science that has fathomed our universe and that has conceptually and technologically reshaped our life world. Like in the case of mankala and geomancy, let us begin with typological and conceptual analysis, then project our typologically re-arranged data onto the world map, then interpret the resulting distributions historically in the light of such additional genetic, linguistic, archaeological, comparative-ethnographic and comparative-mythological evidence as is available. Admittedly, if this investigative process makes us conclude that humankind's cultural history is coherent and continuous across the continents, this can hardly count as an independent research finding since our very method is predicated on the assumption of such coherence and continuity. However, in the humanities and social sciences, however painstaking our research and however rigorous our methodologies, not definitive proof but merely enhanced plausibility is the best result we may hope for in regard of our hypotheses. What we gain in the process is not only greater subjective (therefore potentially deceptive, ideologically distorted!) insight in the pattern of the past, but also greater awareness of the factors of particularist, sectional interest (of geopolitical and class elites within the World System) and of ideology that produced earlier pictures of the past, and that had to be deconstructed before a more convincing picture of the past could emerge as a result of our research endeavours, however imperfect.

Here the original inspiration of Bernal's *Black Athena* thesis remains unabated. As I shall argue below, the Presocratics did not invent the four-element cosmology, but have to be understood as the peripheral receivers, and distorters, of a transcontinental element-based cosmological system that, at the onset of the Axial Age in the first millennium BCE, had had a long and complex history to which the Ancient Greeks had contributed so little that they do not deserve the pride of place granted to them in official accounts of the history of philosophy. The Presocratics and their allegedly unique contribution to the history of human thought constitute another hegemonic myth, intended to deny the massive transcontinental indebtedness of Ancient Greek civilisation (and by implication, their self-appointed heirs, Modern North Atlantic civilisation) to older and more original Asian and African traditions, whose main defect has been that the regions associated happened to be in the clutches of European colonial domination by the nineteenth century CE. *Deconstructing that myth, and replacing it by a better founded, less hegemonic account stressing the*

transcontinental complementarity of the intellectual achievements of us, Anatomically Modern Humans, in the course of millennia, is the purpose of the present book. If we wish to understand the seedbed out of which Western philosophy has grown, we need to look *Before the Presocratics*, and adopt a stance that is both long-range in time, and transcontinental in space.

The specialist philosophical reader, meanwhile, may wonder why, of all possible philosophical themes and topics, *divination* has to be our guideline when tracing the antecedents of the Presocratics back into prehistoric times, and transcontinentally. After all, whereas the Stoics have been known for their sympathy for divination (e.g. Cicero 1975), and also, subsequently, Neoplatonics often dabbled in magic, there is scarcely any evidence of a Presocratic interest in divination – on the contrary, the mainstream interpretation of their intellectual movement has been in terms of a move away from, not towards, magic (e.g., Thales predicted a solar eclipse through astronomy, not divination), and this is among the main reasons why they are held to have initiated (Western) philosophy. After constituting part of the European academic curriculum until well into the 18th c. CE, astrology subsequently was rejected, and despite its *popular* revival from the late 19th-century on in the North Atlantic region, most philosophers today consider, with Popper, what once was the Queen of Sciences, a mere ‘pseudo-science’ (for discussion and references, *cf.* van Binsbergen 2003: Ch. 7, 2005b/2013). However, divination (a recognised universal of Anatomically Modern Humans; Brown 1991) is *the structured interrogation of the supernatural on existential questions, in the light of a coherent, collective world-view* – and thus simply the most widespread repository of elementary / rudimentary philosophical thought imaginable. Let us freely explore this repository, regardless of the importance we attach to the outcomes of divination, wherever and whenever.

Having thus cleared, with our Case Study I, our building site and laid out our principal conceptual and methodological tools, let us now turn to Case Study II, in which the theme of cyclicality, transformation and element cosmology comes back in totally unexpected forms, not in the Ionian and South Italian trappings of the famous Presocratics, but in the unfamiliar and internally contradictory complexities of an African clan system, that of the Nkoya people of Zambia.