

*Rethinking Africa's transcontinental continuities in pre- and protohistory*¹

Wim M.J. van Binsbergen

African Studies Centre, Leiden

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1. Introduction²

African Studies (and in general, regional studies in the humanities and social sciences) are in the midst of a paradigm shift: instead of continuing to take the continent-centred definition of their subject matter for granted, there is increasing emphasis on transcontinental continuities. This at long last allows us to liberate ourselves from a long tradition in which especially the North Atlantic region has defined itself culturally, intellectually and somatically in contradistinction from Africa.³ We are increasingly realising that the concept of Africa is an *allophilic*⁴ construct, whose geographical delineation and symbolic meaning has gone through tremendous transformations since Graeco-Roman Antiquity (when the names Aethiopia or Libya were used

¹ An earlier version of this argument was presented as 'keynote' at the International Conference 'Rethinking Africa's transcontinental continuities in pre- and protohistory', African Studies Centre, Leiden University, Leiden, the Netherlands, 12-13 April 2012. I am indebted to my long-standing friend Professor Li Anshan of the Centre for Asian and African Studies, Peking University, Beijing, for encouraging my research on African-Asian continuities ever since we first met in 2002, and for personally contributing to the conference. I am moreover indebted to the following persons and institutions: Henny E. van Rijn and Patricia van Binsbergen, who serially, as spouse, shared part of the fieldwork and the intellectual struggle resulting in the present argument; the Nkoya people of Zambia, the inhabitants of Francistown (Botswana), and the participants and assistants in these and other field locations who without whose hospitality and generosity the sustained research trajectory reflected in this argument could not have been traversed; the African Studies Centre, Leiden, for funding and stimulating my research over the decades, and specifically for funding the Leiden 2012 conference on the occasion of my retirement; my colleagues and students for stimulating discussions and criticism; and, at the end of my formal scientific career, my teachers, for starting me on what has been a thrilling saga of discovery.

² I will concentrate here on African-Asian continuities, occasionally touching on African-Oceanian ones, and largely ignoring the possibility of African-American ones. Yet the latter are unmistakable continuities in the fields of language (the convergence between the African macrophyla, Austric, and Amerind as 'peripheral cluster' within the so-called *Borean Upper-Palaeolithic linguistic construct; see below, footnote 76); divination and games (where American and African artefacts look very similar and may go back to common Eurasian prototypes from the Upper Palaeolithic – cf. Table 1, below, and van Binsbergen, in press (a)), comparative mythology (Berezkin 2012; van Binsbergen 2010a)); technologies of hunting, fishing, and basketry; and female puberty rites. Apparently these continuities are largely due to *demic diffusion* (i.e. culture traits being displaced by populations on the move; the alternative is cultural borrowing between populations) since Upper Palaeolithic times. The field of comparative mythology however also shows transcontinental continuities relating to more recent, Neolithic conditions of food production: both in Meso and North America (whence many of present-day Africa's food crops derive), and in sub-Saharan Africa (Chihamba and Bituma in Zambia, Mbona in Malawi), the Ancient Mediterranean (Dumuzi, Attis, Dionysus), as well as in Japan (Ukemochi) and South East Asia (Sri), we find the myth of the dying junior god or goddess whose body turns into food crops. This global distribution pattern is suggestive of the global maritime network to be proposed below (Fig. 1).

³ Cf. Mudimbe 1988; Eze 1996; van Binsbergen 2011d / 1997. Bernal 1987 and the South Asian Postcolonial Studies school (Bhabha, Spivak, Chatterjee) may be cited in support of the claim that the othering of Africa is part of a more general process of the West's hegemonic construction since the 18th c. CE.

⁴ Karst (1931; cf. van Binsbergen & Woudhuizen 2011: 42 f.) coined the term 'allophylic' to denote an ethnic / geographical label imposed by historical actors not themselves identifying as resorting under that label.

instead): from a section of today's Tunisia (with cognate place names in Ancient Media and elsewhere; de Gobineau 1869: I, 187 f.), it came to mean an entire continental land-mass, one of the three main divisions of the Old World, and as such associated with a major ethnico-somatic cluster once confined to the sub-Saharan region but today also found in other continents, especially in the Americas and Europe. As historical actors' *emic* (cf. Headland *et al.* 1990) construct, hence contradictory, charged with ethnic, political and ideological overtones, manipulable, and subject to change, it is unlikely that 'Africa' would ever make a meaningful analytical scientific concept. Yet its application to a major continental landmass – as from Early Modern times when European mercantile subsequently colonial expansion had turned an objectifying, appropriating gaze to that part of the world – persuaded even the world of science to reify the concept of Africa and to attribute substantial and immutable meaning to it. African Studies have owed their existence to that reification, but at a heavy price: to be imprisoned, until quite recently, in a continentalist, regionalist paradigm that underplayed, or even denied, transcontinental factors in African societies, cultures and histories.

Why should we study Africa's transcontinental continuities, and how could this be a surprising and counter-paradigmatic topic, more than a century after the professionalisation of African Studies? Let me explain how I myself came to study Africa's transcontinental continuities. My purpose here is not autobiographical self-indulgence, but to help lay bare the structures and preconceptions of Africanist research to the extent to which they determine our view of these transcontinental continuities. I will show in detail how my own vision of Africa's transcontinental continuities resulted from my familiarity, as an ethnohistorical and ethnographic fieldworker, with two concrete African settings: (a) the sangoma cult of North-eastern Botswana (one of several African contexts featuring the globally distributed institution of geomantic divination, see below), and (b) Nkoya society of Western Zambia. I will thus highlight general paradigmatic trends as they manifest themselves biographically and anecdotally in one concrete research practice over time (cf. Toulmin 1985: 94 f.; Koestler 1959, 1975 / 1964). This will allow us to identify a few major factors paradigmatically obscuring transcontinental continuities:

1. Underestimation of the scope and antiquity of nautical technology
2. 'Africa for the Africans': The insistence, in African Studies, on explaining African phenomena by exclusive reference to Africa
3. Localisation and presentism as central to the paradigm of classic anthropology
4. Contempt, also built into the paradigm of classic anthropology, for material cultural and physical anthropology

In the process we shall also address the important issue of why transcontinental continuities were obscured, not only from the (potentially hegemonic) view of Western scholars but also from the consciousness of historical actors in Africa and Asia. We will end with the question of what a fuller awareness of transcontinental continuities brings to Africa, and what it risks to take away from Africa.

2. The paradigmatic orientation of African Studies in the second half of the 20th century

I read social anthropology and development studies at Amsterdam University in the 1960s, specialising on popular Islam (notably in North Africa) and the anthropology of religion, and with a fair portion of South, East and South East Asian studies thrown in – offered by Wim Wertheim *c.s.*, in reflection of the once prominent part which Dutch mercantile and colonial

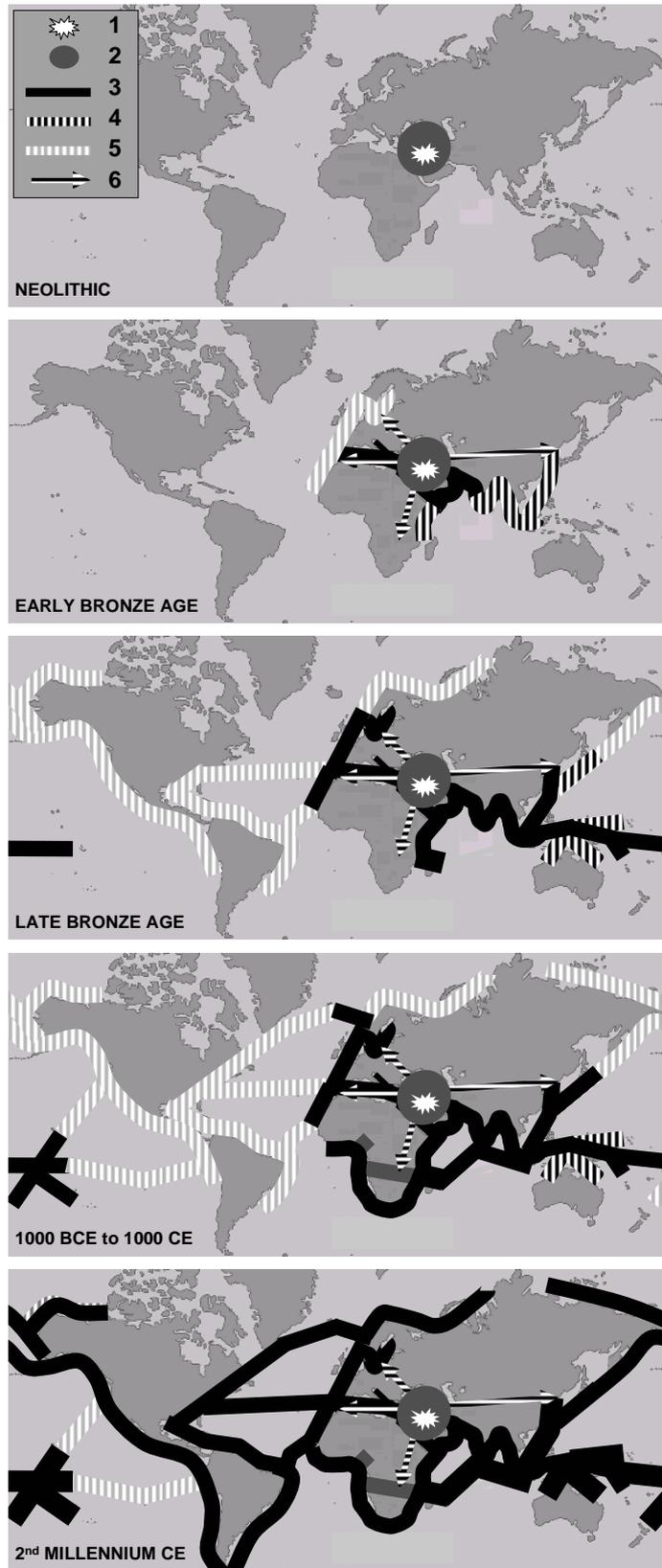
presences had played in Asia. At the end of my studies, I was groomed to either do a PhD on my North African MA fieldwork, or to start fresh fieldwork on the retail trade in Bombay (now Mumbai), India – but instead, following up on an earlier African experience of my first wife, I was offered, and accepted, appointment with the University of Zambia, on the strength of the network ties of another one of my principal teachers, the Africanist André Köbben (*1925-). Thus I became an Africanist myself, for the next four decades of my career entrenched in the production and supervision of religious, ethnic, political and finally philosophical research all over the African continent. Here my personal fieldwork concentrated, for decades, on the Nkoya people of Western Zambia, and on the urban community of Francistown, Botswana, with its local versions of the *sangoma* ecstatic healing cult that is widespread throughout Southern Africa – also engaging, for a shorter time but no less passionately, in the study of indigenous psychiatry in Guinea Bissau (West Africa). However, from the very start my Africanist research was comparative, both inside Africa, and beyond that continent's boundaries; and from the very start it was (in deviation from the presentist classic anthropological paradigm at the time) historical, seeking to apply such methods of proto-history as I had explored in my North African research, to regional comparisons reaching into the middle of the second millennium CE, just before the onset of European mercantile, subsequently colonial, involvement in South Central and Southern Africa.

Despite my substantial background in Islamic and Asian studies, it took a surprisingly long time before I got so much as an inkling of the transcontinental resonances surfacing in my various African fieldwork sites. This had a number of reasons.

2.1. The sheer unimaginable extension of the global maritime network from the Neolithic onwards

In the first place, with most of my colleagues in African Studies, anthropology and history I tended to assume that seafaring was something that started in the Bronze Age, and that was the privilege of Mediterranean peoples in the first place. This proved an untenable position. There is ample archaeological and genetic evidence that Australia was populated by Anatomically Modern Humans 60 ka BP,⁵ and at no moment in Humans' 4 million years of (pre-)history was there less than 70 km open sea between the Old World, and Australia – which even at that early stage must have been navigated, by whatever rudimentary and haphazard method (Bednarik 1997a, 1997b, 1997c, 1999a, 1999b, 2003). My first radical suggestion therefore is (Fig. 1) to propose a *global maritime network* which started to emerge in the Neolithic, and which soon (in addition to overland contacts across the Sahara and the Suez isthmus) became the principal condition for any transcontinental continuities – apart from such continuities as stemmed from Anatomically Modern Humans' shared common heritage dating back to before the Out-of-Africa Exodus, c. 80 to 60 ka BP. Interestingly, at the same conference where I presented, in the keynote, this unfolding of a global maritime network since the Neolithic as a mere hypothesis, the archaeologist Michael Rowlands (2012) immediately obliged by presenting the empirical evidence that goes a considerable way towards substantiating this hypothesis.

⁵ ka = kiloyears, 1000 years; BP = Before Present.



LEGEND. 1. Proposed origin; 2. Initial expansion of 1; 3. Extent of (semi-)maritime network; 4. idem, putative; 5. idem, highly conjectural; 6. The 'cross-model': expansion of Pelasgian traits (largely overland; cf. van Binsbergen, 2011b and in press (d); van Binsbergen & Woudhuizen 2011).

Fig. 1. Proposed emergence of a global maritime network since the Neolithic.

Our underestimation of transcontinental continuities is not only the effect of localising and subordinative geopolitical ideologies, but also of the sheer unimaginable extension of the postulated global maritime network since the Bronze Age. Thus a map on display in the Colombo National Museum, Sri Lanka, does admit African transcontinental connections. It claims that *dhow* nautical technology reached from East Africa to Indonesia, but by a surprising myopia strikingly restricts the area of outrigger technology to the North-western Indian Ocean. Recent commonly supported views are that outriggers were invented in an Austronesian-speaking South East Asian / Western Pacific context c. 3000 BCE, and were decisive in the recent peopling of the Pacific Ocean. The outrigger canoe in itself is treated as an indication of Sunda influence, *e.g.* by Dick-Read 2005.

Partly as a result of the localising paradigm of classic (i.e. mid-20th c. CE) anthropology (see below), and partly because of the popular Modernist tendency to totally underestimate technological advances made outside the North Atlantic Early Modern period, our common-sense perception of transcontinental continuities in pre- and protohistory tends to be obsessed with a pre-scientific, or rather unscientific, prejudice of geographical immutability. However, the truth of the matter – as brought out by abundant empirical data – is that animal species, including the various varieties of humans that have walked the earth during the last three or four million years, have always been mobile. There is no reason to assume that Anatomically Modern Humans were stationary during the more than 100 ka that they were apparently confined to the African continent, and from 80 ka BP on they have peopled the other continents by being on the move. Since continents are largely defined by maritime boundaries (the broad interface between Asia and Europe – the latter being a hegemonic geopolitical concept rather than a convincing geographical and historical one for most of humankind's history – and the narrow but overland connection between the Americas being the main exception in modern times) this immobile misconception of humankind has much to do with the belief that navigation is an invention of the last few millennia. Thus the remnants of a Mesolithic or Neolithic risk to be cherished as an unexpected boon from the past. However, the Exodus out of Africa across a few kilometres of open sea across the Bab al-Mandab (where the Red Sea joins the Indian Ocean), into Asia, and especially the peopling of Australia c. 60 ka BP, make it abundantly clear that some degree of navigation was done already in the Middle Palaeolithic. This is an essential corrective to our presentist⁶ view of transcontinental continuities in pre- and protohistory, and adds plausibility to the idea of a global multidirectional maritime network in the Late Bronze Age (Fig. 1).

2.2. 'Africa for the Africans'

In the second place, those seeking to affirm transcontinental continuities are up against a dominant, institutionally highly powerful scientific paradigm (*cf.* Kuhn 1962, 1974). Culture is a machine to produce self-evidences in the experiences that humans share as members of their society; and scholarly paradigms are part of a disciplinary sub-culture, in the sense that they dictate what, in a scientific discipline at a given moment, may be considered self-evident, and what, by contrast, is considered to be self-evidently untrue or incredible – regardless of the supporting data to the contrary.

I had internalised, like most of my Africanist colleagues, the localising wisdom of regional studies at the time – and had not yet taking my distance from these accepted ideas. *According to*

⁶ 'Presentist. presentism': a viewpoint that lays emphasis on present-day conditions and unjustifiably projects these back into the past.

this unspoken paradigm, things African were to be explained by exclusive reference to Africa, or else one would be found guilty of the political incorrectness of depriving Africans (allegedly already in a pitiable position as victims of recent global history) from, allegedly, what little they had left to be proud of... In this light, a true and trustworthy scientist – i.e. one readily submitting to the dominant paradigms of his discipline at the time – could only have *contempt* for the transcontinental approaches of an early vintage, such as Frobenius' *Kulturmorphologie* (linking South Central Africa to Mesopotamia, West Africa to Ancient Italy, etc. on the basis of underlying patterns transcending the habitual demarcation of continents); Seligmann's 'Hamitic hypothesis' (attributing decisive cultural initiatives in sub-Saharan Africa to the the immigration of lightly-pigmented cattle keepers from West Asia); and the arch-diffusionist global Egyptocentrism of Smith, Perry, and Jackson;⁷ or the early-twentieth-century (CE) suggestions, from Trombetti (1905), van Oordt (1907), Johnston (1907) etc., on the transcontinental, outside-Africa affinities of the Bantu (< Niger-Congo) linguistic phylum (cf. below, note 76).

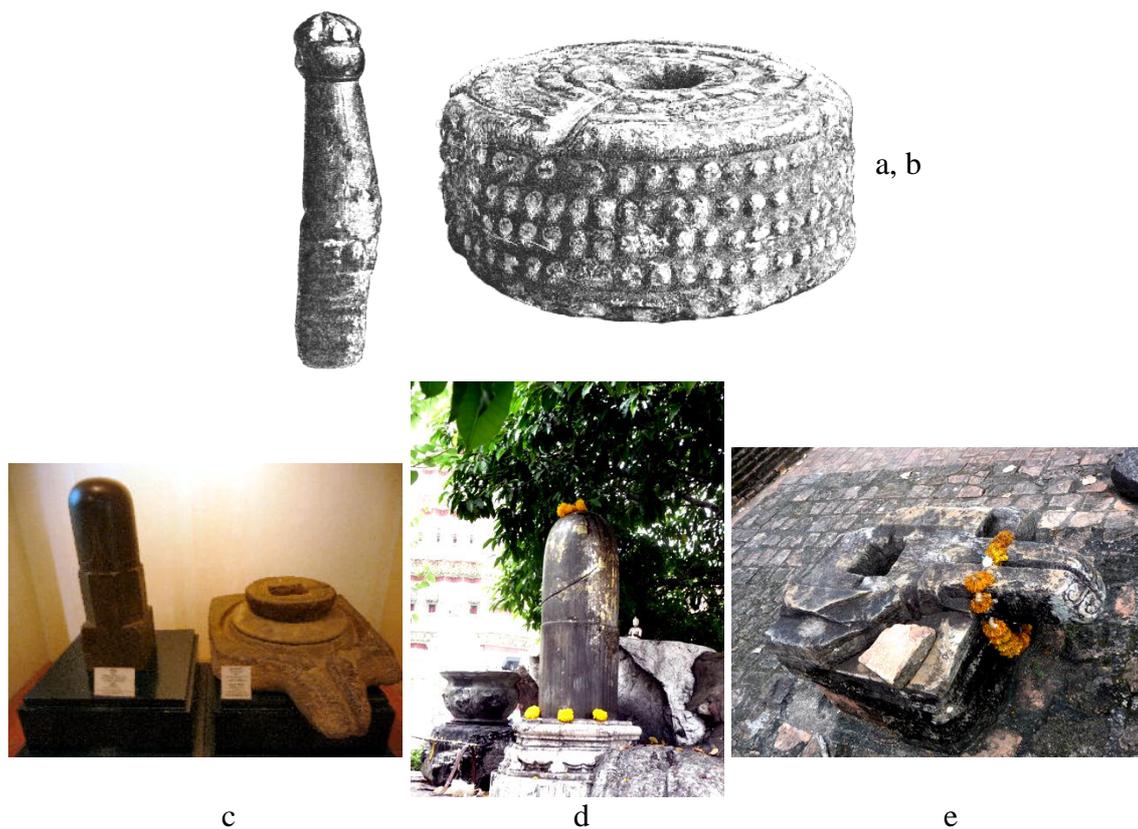
The same dogged response followed, in regard of South Central and Southern Africa, more recent attempts to trace transcontinental connections, *e.g.* that of the comparitivist of religion Harold von Sicard (who in his mid-20th century writings claims parallels between African and general Old World beliefs in an unilateral mythical being, or between such *palladia* as African royal drums and the Biblical Ark of the Covenant, and whose work is replete with suggested parallels between the Bantu languages of South Central Africa, and Indo-European; von Sicard 1952, 1968-1969).⁸

Although, in the 1930s, Schwartz (1938) claimed truly massive Chinese presence in sub-Saharan Africa in the late 1st-early 2nd mill. CE, and sought to situate Great Zimbabwe in an Asian Buddhist context, he was not taken seriously by Chittick (1975) – after the work of Caton-Thompson (1931), and despite the excavation, at Great Zimbabwe, and careful publication, of numerous traces of trans-Indian-Ocean mercantile contacts, the orthodoxy of exclusively African antecedents of Great Zimbabwe became a cornerstone of the 'Africa for the Africans' paradigm, after decades of transcontinental interpretations by Bent, MacIver, and others.⁹ For me, personally, this issue was clinched when I came across, in Bent's early account, archaeological finds unmistakably representing the standard *lingam* and *yoni* representations (depictions of the male and female genitals, respectively) which can be encountered in numerous Hinduist and Buddhist temples in South and South East Asia (van Binsbergen 2012a).

⁷ Cf. Jackson 1917; Smith 1911, 1916, 1970; Perry 1923, 1935, 1937.

⁸ In a somewhat similar vein, the Czech historian Cyril Hromník (1981) suggested, at the height of South African apartheid, massive cultural (including linguistic, and metallurgical) South Asian influence on Southern Africa in protohistory, and was severely criticised (*e.g.* Hall & Borland 1982) – apparently on the grounds of political incorrectness; however, a closer scrutiny of Hromník's work up to the present brings out such ignorance or contempt of scientific method, linguistic analysis etc. that also on second thoughts the details of his work cannot be taken seriously, even if we concur with his overall idea of extensive South Asian influence upon sub-Saharan Africa.

⁹ Bent 1892 / 1969; MacIver 1906. I visited the site of Great Zimbabwe in 1989 during a short extension of my Botswana fieldwork into Bulawayo and the Matopos Hills. Incidentally, the fishbone-masonry pattern that is popularly celebrated as one of the hallmarks of Great Zimbabwe architecture and related archaeological sites on the Zimbabwe and Botswana Plateau, is not so unique as is often assumed. In Ancient Roman architecture it was explicitly known as *opus spicatum* (*cf.* Schram & Passchier 2004-2012, especially s.v. 'Opus caementicium'), and I have also seen it applied sporadically at the famous Greek archaeological site of Olympia – as well as in recent Eastern French rural architecture, and in South India. I am bringing this up, not to insist on a Northern connection of Zimbabwe (like Bent and MacIver did), but to defuse a myth.



(a, b) *lingam* (Bent 1969: 188) and *yoni* (Bent 1969: 202), Great Zimbabwe; (c) *lingam* and *yoni* from Sukhothai medieval city, at Ramkhamhaeng Museum, Old Sukhothai, Thailand; (d) *lingam* at the Wat Pho temple, Bangkok, Thailand; (e) *yoni* at the Wat Sri Sawai, Old Sukhothai, Thailand. Note that the distinctive feature of the *yoni* shape is a circular shape with central hole connected with the object's outer rim through a straight groove – an abstraction of female genital anatomy. While here depicted from Buddhist contexts, the *lingam-yoni* symbolism is also ubiquitously represented especially in Hinduist contexts all over South Asia.

Fig. 2. Evidence of the Shiva cult from South East Asia and from Great Zimbabwe.

Also Forke's (1904) extensive study of possible Chinese contacts in the Red Sea region in the Bronze Age was still dismissed as mere fantasy by Chittick. Although a recognised specialist on Malagasy history, Kent's claim (1968, 1970; similarly Birkeli 1936) of extensive South-East-Asia-derived kingdoms in continental East Africa was ridiculed (Southall 1975).

Thus we have the contradictory situation that historico-philological scholarship has by now accumulated piles of evidence concerning Asian-African transcontinental continuities,¹⁰ and that much of this evidence was even anthologised and transmitted to Africanist circles half a century ago (Davidson 1959), yet mainstream African studies, like mainstream Asian studies,

¹⁰ E.g. Yule & Cordier 1913-1916; Duyvendak 1938, 1949; Neville *et al.* 1975; Ahmad 1989; Casson 1989; Chami 2001; MacDowall 1964; McCrindle 1879; Rockhill 1915; Sauvaget; Schoff 1912; Tibbets; Toussaint; van der Sleen 1958; Vincent 1805; Walsh & Blench, forthcoming; Fa-hsien / Legge 1886; Weerasinghe 1995; Chang Hsing-lang 1930; Filesi 1972; Sutton 1974; Winters 1979; Snow 1988; Li Anshan 2000 (with an adequate picture of Ancient Chinese representations of the South African coastline); Lin Bin 2005; Davidson 1959; Wheatley 1975a, 1975b; Schwarz 1938; Fripp 1940, 1941; Hirth 1909. In the background, the monumental, multi-volume work of Joseph Needham and 王玲 Wang Ling (1954-) on *Science and Civilization in China* in its Vol. I reviews much of the older literature on this point and established the plausibility of extensive contacts between China and the Western parts of the Old World.

on the power of prevailing intra-disciplinary paradigms (and the ensuing power relations in the politics of knowledge production), aided by an inveterate condescending and othering geopolitics vis-à-vis Africa and Africans, could afford to dissimulate these facts until quite recently.

Interestingly, in the study of Madagascar awareness of transcontinental continuities has always characterised the work, not only of historians but even of anthropologists.¹¹ In regard of this huge island, under the African coast but with predominantly Indonesian populations and languages, the facts of transcontinentality were clearly so unmistakable that the trap of localising myopia was more easily avoided. One can only regret that, due to the relative isolation of Malagasy studies (mainly in French), little of this admirable positioning transpired to other provinces of African Studies. Madagascar has remained difficult to accommodate within the framework of African Studies, and its relations with continental Africa have continued to puzzle the specialists.¹²

2.3. The strengths and weaknesses of British-European classic anthropology: Objectification and alterisation, localisation and presentism

In the third place, until the 1990s¹³ classic anthropology¹⁴ was entirely dominated by the practice of *ethnography through participant observation under conditions of total social and mental immersion*. Whatever the merits of this practice in terms of local relevance, validity and depth, it had the disadvantage of forcing the researcher to invest excessively in linguistic, cultural and relational localisation. As a result, the wider geographical (let alone the wider historical) horizons of contact and comparability have tended to be obscured in the process. Diffusion, although it was to remain a standard concept in archaeology and art history, had become a dirty word in anthropology once that discipline had shed the earlier paradigms of evolutionism and diffusionism, and had emerged in its classic, mid-20th century form combining culture theory with prolonged participant observation.

Perhaps the main factor blinding me from the transcontinental traits my African fieldwork sites now appear to be replete with, was – in the fourth place – *the objectifying and alterising stance of the classic anthropology* in which I had been trained at Amsterdam University. Classic anthropology was the sublimated intellectual result, the optical reflection so to say, of the colonial grip in which Western Europe had held a substantial part of the world from the late 19th to the mid-20th century CE. Despite all good intentions and individual protestations to the contrary, classic anthropology, therefore, was the hegemonic study of the objectified other is defined as geographically, socially, culturally, linguistically and historically distant;¹⁵ in other

¹¹ Cf. Ardant du Picq 1930, 1933; Beaujard *et al.* 2009; Blench 2008; Donque 1965; Ferrand 1891-1902, 1910; Ottino 1975, 1976.

¹² Cf. Nativel & Rajaonah 2003; Blench 2009b and in press.

¹³ In the 1990s, neo-diffusionism and multi-sited fieldwork became the shibboleths of globalisation studies; cf. Marcus 1995.

¹⁴ My point of reference is specifically the British tradition of social anthropology, which arose in the 1930s around such names as Firth, Evans-Pritchard, Forde, Fortes, and Radcliffe-Brown, and became standard throughout most of Western Europe in the 1950s. Even in Western Europe, various national schools have continued to deviate from this model, e.g. German and Scandinavian anthropology retaining a greater interest in history and material culture, and thus keeping more closely to the model of a holistic, humanistic anthropology which evolved in the United States of America from the late 19th century.

¹⁵ Cf. Asad 1973; Leclerc 1972; Pels 1997; Pels & Salemink 1994; Magubane 1971; Lewis 1973; Copans 1975.

words, *anthropology was literally predicated on the implied notion of transcontinental discontinuity*. This phase of my career was over, and my cosy acceptance of the classic paradigm shattered, when, instead of nicely staying in his Tunisian *duār* ('village') *waiting for me to visit him*, my 1968 field assistant Hasnāwi bin Ṭahar, in the mid 1970s, for the first time ever, spoke to me over the phone, from what turned out to be a location in my home town Amsterdam, and the next day visited me in my home.

2.4. Contempt for material culture, physical anthropology and – to a lesser extent – for linguistics

Central to the paradigm of classic anthropology is the contempt for material culture and physical anthropology. In the process of establishing itself as a dominant, fully-fledged discipline, both the 'measurement of human skulls' and the 'retreat into museum collections' were discouraged and ridiculed. The proper *rite of passage*, and the hallmark, of a serious anthropologist was prolonged participant-observatory fieldwork concentrating on the documentation and analysis of local social and political relations. After half a career dominated – as dictated by this paradigm – by the study of social relations (especially in the fields of ethnicity and religion), my turn towards urban culture, and ultimately divination, in the context of Francistown (Botswana; see below), meant that all of a sudden – and unhindered by any training in the ethnography and comparative study of material culture – I had to relate to objects, their cultural styles, and their historical trajectories (*cf.* van Binsbergen & Geschiere 2005). At first the divinatory apparatus and other paraphernalia of the *sangoma* cult therefore remained utterly alien to me as a research object, but gradually I learned (on the basis of the vast older literature that had been devoted to them, and that in my student years I had learned to discard as obsolete) to appreciate the material, stylistic and artistic beyond the social-relational. It was only then that these objects began to deliver their message of transregional and transcontinental contact and innovation (van Binsbergen 1995, 1996).

Also, I was compelled to return to what little I had learned, during my studies, of physical anthropology: the global distribution of somatic types, classic genetic markers, and especially (since the 1990s) population genetics based on the molecular biology of individual genes allows us to reconstruct patterns of movement and interaction with greater precision and confidence¹⁶ than patterns of socio-political organisation can ever reveal.

Around 1900, African Studies were supposed to have their centre in linguistic studies, which were (rightly) considered to be inseparable from intensive ethnography. In Germany, Belgium, and perhaps the USA this situation persisted more or less right up to the fourth quarter of the 20th century. In the Netherlands, and to a lesser extent in the United Kingdom, however, African linguistics was increasingly marginalised as compared to Africanist anthropology, history, economics, etc. Fortunately, my BA and MA training in Amsterdam had included specialist training in general linguistics under Reichling and Dik, and Arabic under Suudi, and this at least enabled me to appreciate long-range linguistics when that field, in the 1990s-2000s, along with comparative mythology, developed into a major window on humankind's remotest prehistory – even though I have always lacked the specific, state-of-the-art Bantuist training to back up my practical command of a few Bantu languages.

¹⁶ Even though the confidence intervals associated with state-of-the-art population genetics are notoriously large, so that periodisation based on them may easily be wrong by millennia.

3. A local African divination system as an eye-opener to the globally distributed family of geomantic divination systems

3.1. Geomantic divination

After ethnohistorical and ethnographic work on North, South Central and West Africa from 1967 on, I embarked on new urban fieldwork in booming Francistown, Botswana, in 1988. Here I learned what I thought was a local divination¹⁷ system – first through private tuition with a prominent Ndebele herbalist Mr Smarts Gumede, subsequently, and as part of group process, as member of a multi-ethnic and multilingual lodge of the *sangoma* cult. That divination system was organised around 16 standard combinations produced by the throwing of four differently marked two-sided wooden tablets, each combination being named in an anecdotal and vaguely kinship and generation related idiom. It is here that I began to suspect that such a system – with all its suggestions of a literate, scholarly, mathematical, more specifically astrological background – had not sprung directly from local African culture, but had reached Francistown at the end of a long trajectory through space and time. I was soon to learn, from painstaking library research, that the Francistown system was a variant of what is commonly designated ‘geomantic divination’. The literal, originally Ancient Greek, meaning of *geomancy/geomantic* is ‘divination by the earth’.

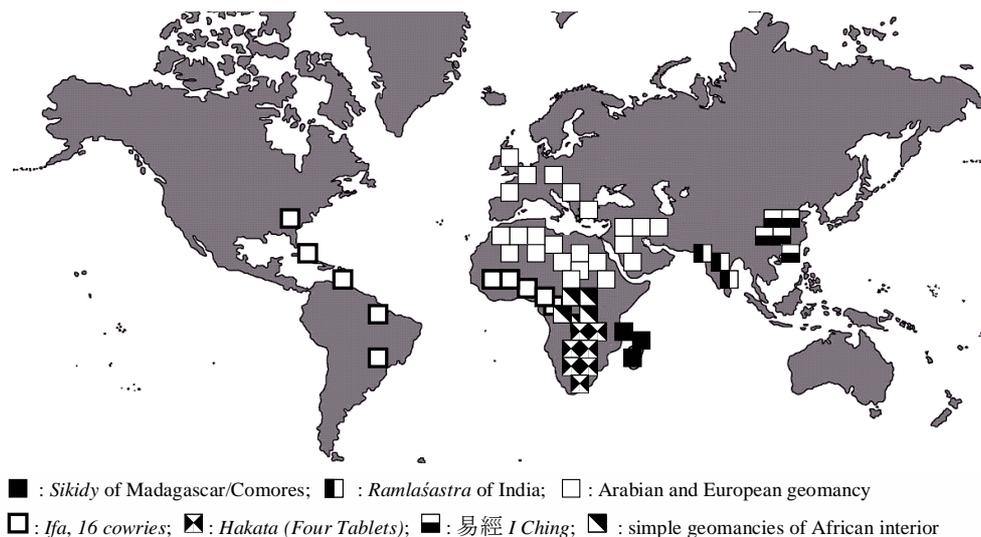


Fig. 3. The world distribution of geomantic divination c. 2000 CE

The term *geomancy/geomantic* occurs in Antiquity¹⁸ to indicate an unspecified kind of divination involving the earth, e.g. by reference to cracks in the soil, sounds from the earth, vapours emanating from the earth, etc. Since Earth (in the form of the *Pars Fortunae*, ⊕) also features as one of the ‘planets’ in astrology in the Greek-Arabic-Indian tradition, ‘geomancy’ could also be a form of astrology. In actual fact, the term *geomancy/geomantic* is reserved for a class of divination where a material apparatus, usually through contact with the earth (on which

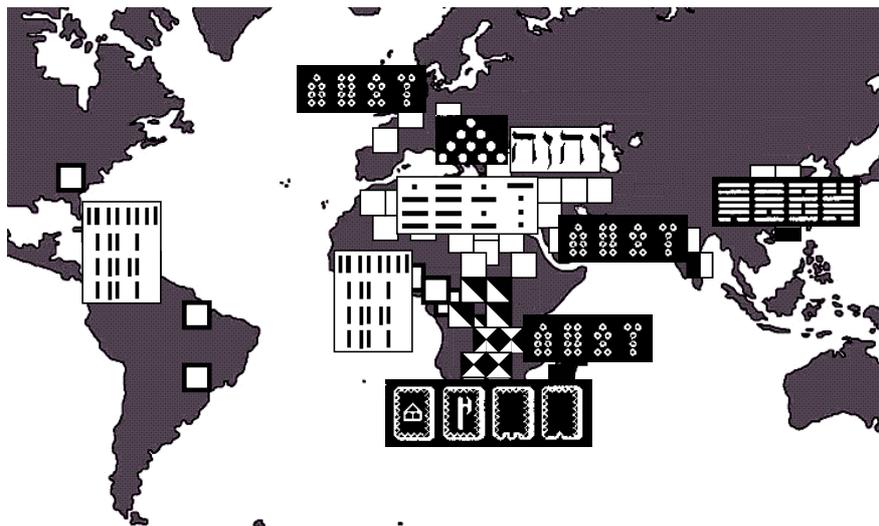
¹⁷ Divination could be defined as a culturally sustained formal procedure aiming at the generation of information (of a type that is locally, culturally considered valid) in the absence of tangible sensory clues.

¹⁸ Notably with M.T. Varro, 116-27 BCE, cf. Cardauns 1976; and in the earliest Middle Ages, with Isidore of Sevilla, c. 560-636 CE, cf. Lindsay 1957.

coins, yarrow stalks, wooden / ivory / bone tablets are being cast, or on which a walking stick is stricken in a bouncing movement leaving an even or uneven number of indentures especially on sand, etc.), produces chance outcomes, to be rendered according to a conventionalised notational system displaying 2ⁿ named different values, each with their proper meaning as listed in a written or oral interpretational catalogue. The more or less adulterated astrological background of Islamic geomancy (e.g. al-Zanati 1970 / 1200) is unmistakable (also cf. Ibn Khaldun 1980 / 1377), and it is from the Islamic variety (emerging in °Abbāṣīd Iraq by the end of the first millennium CE) that Jewish, Byzantine, Indian, Medieval Latin, and West European geomancies are derived. Also the Chinese *I Ching*, used as an oracle with coins or yarrow stalks as random generators, is a form of geomancy, although here we cannot readily demonstrate, that it was derived from pre-existing astrology (Chinese, or Greek-Arabic-Indian).

Unmistakable varieties of geomantic divination (cf. Fig. 3, 4 and 5) have been attested from °Abbāṣīd Mesopotamia in the end of the 1st mill. CE, Byzantine and medieval Europe, India, Madagascar, the Comoros Islands, Renaissance courts and peasant divination in Western Europe, and the dominant divination systems of West Africa (van Binsbergen 1991, 1996). Graduated as a *sangoma* in 1991, I have continued in this local practice and have made it a cornerstone of my empirical, theoretical, and epistemological reflections.¹⁹

Since this argument is to be published in the context of Chinese Africanist research, I take the liberty of dwelling a bit longer on Chinese-African affinities such as they become manifest in geomantic divination.



legend as in Fig. 3; Pythagoras' *tetractys* (⬤⬤⬤) and Ancient Israelite *tetragrammaton* (literally 'four-letter word' denoting "God" 'יהוה') shown as early expressions of a four-element system leading to proto-geomancies in Mediterranean Late Antiquity

Fig. 4. Comparing geomantic notational systems worldwide.

¹⁹ Cf. van Binsbergen 2003; Devisch 2008. For the social-science aspects of my divination studies, I am indebted to three of my long-standing colleagues and friends: René Devisch and Richard Werbner, who were deeply engaged in African divination studies, and shared their growing insights with me, long before my own fieldwork guided me in that direction; and Sjaak van der Geest, whose initiative for the 7th Market Day on Medical Anthropology, Amsterdam 1990, persuaded me to write my first account of *sangoma* divination, and explore the extensive literature.

3.2. The African-Chinese connection as it manifests itself in the context of geomantic divination

3.2.1. China and Africa in pre-Modern times

The contemplation of transcontinental continuities has been counterparadigmatic, even anathema, for most present-day Africanists (and Asianists, for that matter). Yet, fortunately, throughout the 20th century Sinologists and Africanists in East and West have collaborated to develop a coherent picture of the extensive contacts between China and the East African coast (see above, note 10). A rapidly increasing production of Chinese scholarship is now correcting the potential Eurocentrist one-sidedness of such Western approaches, have provided ample information on the extensive maritime relations between China and sub-Saharan Africa. There is now convincing evidence²⁰ that, to East Asian mariners after the T'ang 唐朝 dynasty, the outline of the South African coast had few secrets. Nor did this transcontinental knowledge system stop at the Cape of Good Hope.

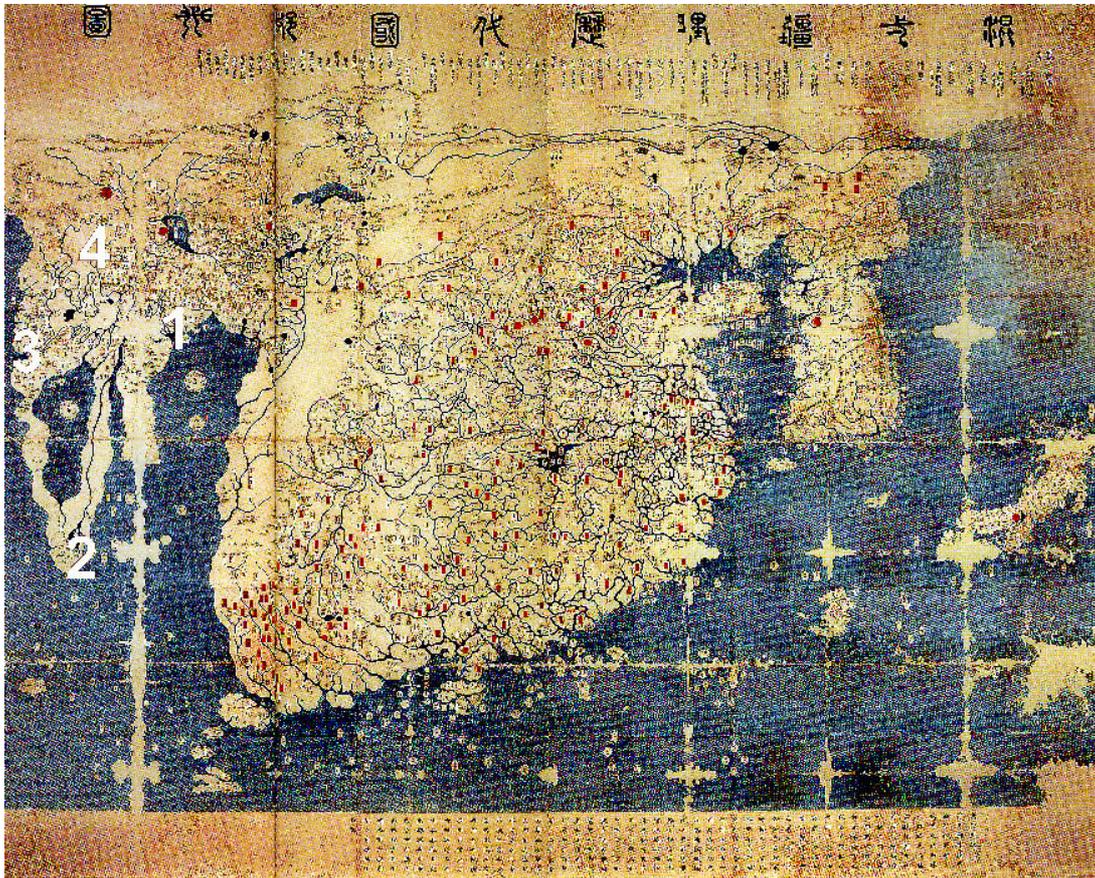


Fig. 5. The Japanese Honkōji copy (16th-19th century) of the Korean 'Kangnido' 강리도 / 疆理圖 (Honil Gangni Yeokdae Gukdo Ji Do) map (1402), which in itself is very similar to the Chinese Da Ming Hun Yi Tu 大明混一圖 Great Ming Amalgamated Map, which some scholars judge slightly older (Anonymous, 2012, 'Da Ming Hun Yi Tu'; Anonymous, 2012, 'Kangnido'. I have indicated major regions for the historical use of divining bowls: (1) Mesopotamia; (2) Venda (3); Bight of Benin; (4) Ancient Greece.

²⁰ Li Anshan 2012 and references cited there. But also, in the West: Fuchs 1953; Mills 1954; cf. above, note 10.

Fig. 5 presents a more recent Japanese copy of a late medieval Korean map dating from 1402 CE,²¹ depicting East and South Asia and Africa. Twentieth-century research has brought to light a number of such maps as proofs of extensive Chinese contacts, not only with East but also with South and West Africa. As contemporary nautical manuals indicate, Chinese ships commonly called on the harbours of the Persian Gulf in ^cAbbāšīd times (late 1st mill. CE).

3.2.2. *I Ching* and Africa

I became aware of the distinct possibility of Asian-African borrowing already nearly two decades ago. Both Chinese geomantic divination (易經 *yì jīng*, often designated '*I Ching*' in the West)²² and African geomancies, as well as Islamic ones from ^cAbbāšīd Mesopotamia (c. 1000 CE) and the Indian Ocean forms derived from the latter, all operate, as we have seen, on the basis of an interpretative catalogue of 2ⁿ configurations, n varying from 4 yielding 16 basis position (Southern Africa) to 8 (256) (West Africa), with China occupying an intermediate position with 6 (64) (*cf.* van Binsbergen 1996, in press (a)). While these are the mathematics underlying the composition of the interpretational catalogues on the basis of which very specific divinatory pronouncements are being made, divination must in the first place ascertain where to look in the locally prevailing divinatory catalogue. This question is decided on the basis of a *random generator*, i.e. a material apparatus that produces one or a series of chance outcomes, which by virtue of locally established, intersubjective rules produces a particular figure in a notational system peculiar to the local variant of geomantic divination (*e.g.* a six-line hexagram (*e.g.* , or , or ) as in *yì jīng*, or a geomantic combination symbol (*e.g.* , , ) as in ^c*ilm al-raml* and the divination systems derived from the latter in East, Southern and West Africa,²³ in India, and in Europe since the height of the Middle Ages. As shown in Fig. 4 and Table 1, both the notational systems and the random generators used in geomantic divination vary greatly, from the casting of coins and/or milfoil stalks in *yì jīng*, to the reading of a zodiac-based divination compass throughout East and South East Asia (the likely basis also for the medieval *zairja* divination circle as described by Ibn Khaldun),²⁴ the casting of wooden, ivory or leather dice or tablets (*hakata*) in Southern Africa, the manipulation of divining chains consisting of four strings each of which can take two values (up or down) due to a coin or cowry attached to it, the casting of cowries or nutshells in Southern and Western Africa (on a wooden tray or in a bowl), or the generation of the geomantic figures from repeated chance procedures such as hitting the ground with a stick in a near horizontal movement, and counting whether the resulting series of indentures is of an odd (stroke) or an even number (dot). Clearly, the Chinese and the Islamic geomantic notational systems (based on broken or

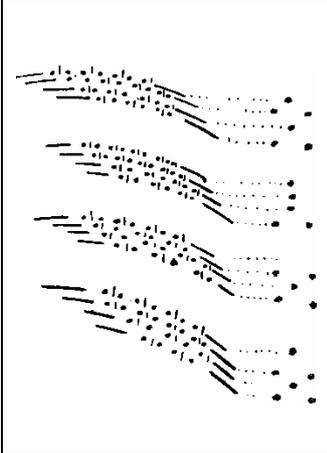
²¹ Except for the depiction of the Eastern coast of the Indian Ocean, and of Europe, the Korean map closely follows the *Great Ming Amalgamated Map*, to which some scholars assign the contested date of 1389 CE; *cf.* Li Anshan 2012. While these maps testify to the Chinese's sound if schematic knowledge of the African coast and even the African interior (a large central lake from which a large river flows to the north: Lake Victoria and the Nile), their depiction of West Asia (*e.g.* the Caspian Sea with fictional islands) suggests dependence on Arab sources.

²² *Cf.* Needham *c.s.* 1956; Fiskejo 2000; Carus 1898; Chu & Sherrill 1977; Legge 1993; Anonymous, 2008; Shaughnessy 1993; Wilhelm 1924 / 1950.

²³ On West African geomantic divination, *cf.* Apostel 1981: 214-244; Abimbola 1983, 1975; Akiwowo 1983; Aromolaran 1992; Eze 1993; Bewaji 1994; Uyanne 1994; Maupoil 1943; Jaulin 1966. On East African and comparative forms of geomantic divination: Ardant du Picq 1930; Trautmann 1939-194; Hébert 1961; and my various publications on divination as cited below.

²⁴ Ibn Khaldūn 1980, written in Arabic 1377; also: al-Zanati 1970 AD.

unbroken lines) are closely akin, and the other geomantic notation systems can be argued to be derivations from the Chinese / Islamic prototypes. Underlying their symbolism is probably a much older use of sticks as counting and divinatory rods, which is found all over Eurasia. Once the geomantic figure has been formed, the next step is to look up its meaning from the divinatory catalogue specific to the local geomantic system in use. Typically, the geomantic diviner weaves a made-to-measure story out of the conventional meanings of a long series of geomantic figures, so as to reflect the client's predicament and proposed solution.

			
<p>a. rhythmically 'hitting the sand' with a stick (Islamic <i>ilm al-raml علم الرمل</i>) (el Tounisi 1845).</p>	<p>b. throwing of numbered milfoil sticks (East Asia) (Michael 1999-2008)</p>	<p>c. throwing of coins (East Asia) (Laurel 2001-2009).</p>	<p>d. throwing of temple-blocks that can take two values: up or down (East Asia) (author's collection)</p>
			
<p>e. geomantic dice consisting of four strung cubes, revolving around a central axis in fixed order, while each cube can take four values (India, Africa) – Southern African <i>hakata</i> may be considered as such dice detached from the central axis (Cf. Pirzada 2011).</p>	<p>f. clockwork emulation of the geomantic process: an Islamic divinatory machine of the early 2nd millennium CE (Hosken n.d.)</p>	<p>g. throwing of cowries (West Africa) (author's collection)</p>	<p>h. throwing of a divining chain (West Africa) (author's collection)</p>

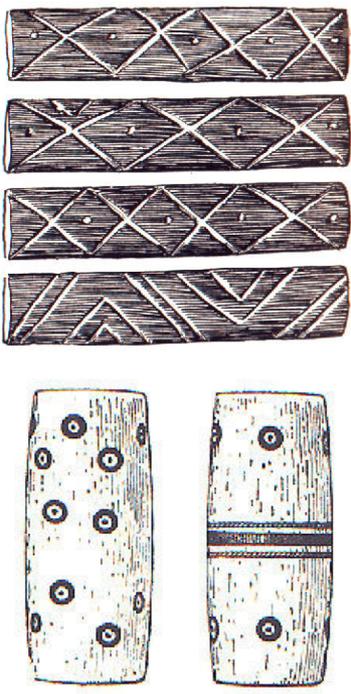
		
<p>i. <i>hakata</i>: four ivory or wooden tablets (Southern Africa) (author's collection)</p>	<p>j. throwing of half-shells of <i>mungongo</i> (<i>Schinziophyton rautanenii</i>) or other nuts (West Africa, Southern Africa)²⁵</p>	<p>k. divining and gaming pieces of North American Indians in historical times (Culin 1975 / 1907).²⁶</p>

Table 1. Alternative random generators in transcontinental forms of geomancy and related forms of divination.

3.2.3. Divining bowls and their connections in space and time

Since there is no theory explicitly claiming that Chinese *I Ching* came from Africa, this is not the place to enter into a discussion of the origin of the Chinese *I Ching* system.²⁷ An interesting

²⁵ Robbins & Campbell 1990; Rodrigues de Areia 1985; with kola nuts: Nassau 1904: 207f ; Bosman 1967 / 1704: 152ff; Dennett 1968 / 1910: 149. The coin is included for size comparison only – although often random generators including coins are mixed in divinatory usage.

²⁶ Meanwhile, the fact that Southern African *hakata* can hardly be distinguished from gaming and divinatory tablets of Native Americans may suggest continuities from at least the Upper Palaeolithic. State-of-the-art genetic and comparative mythological research indicates that these connections indeed go back to a common source in Central Asia 30,000-15,000 years BP – it is from here that at least two major demic flows (with inevitable demic diffusion of cultural traits) originate:

- One leading to population of the New World, in various waves mainly giving rise to Amerind languages, whereas the most recent one may have been that producing the Nadene speaking peoples of North America (who, as long-range comparative linguists have argued since the 1980s, belong to the linguistic macrofamily of Dene-Sino-Causasian, stretching from the Gulf of Biscay ie. Basques, via the Caucasus and Tibet/China to North America)
- The other leading West, to West Asia, Europe and back into Africa

We will come back to similar findings below, when we touch on the indebtedness of today's linguistic macrophyla to the hypothetical language construct *Borean (Upper Palaeolithic).

further case for Chinese-African continuities in divination can also be made for wooden divination bowls, such as attested in historical times (mainly from the nineteenth century CE on) both in Southern Africa and on the Bight of Benin (Nigeria); *cf.* Fig. 6.²⁸ Soon after their discovery the signs in the rim were interpreted as some kind of zodiac, but scholars were puzzled by their sheer number of such signs: well over thirty, rather than the 12 one was accustomed to on the basis of Western, South Asian, and Chinese astrology. The solution to the puzzle probably lies in early Chinese astrology. In earliest times the well-known Chinese zodiacal cycle of 12 animals spanning 12 years (not months) was depicted as comprising not 12 but 36 animals, both real and fabulous. These animals were represented on the rim of a Chinese divination board, i.e. a planisphere which must be considered a predecessor of the well-known Luo Pan 羅盤 geomantic compass which is still in use among the practitioners of the Chinese spiritual location method called *feng shui* 風水. A similar (but not identical) list of c. 36 animals is contained in a mystical work on the Five elements *Wu-hsing Ta-I* by Hsiao Chi 小琪, of the middle of the first millennium CE (Sui dynasty 隋朝, 581-618 CE).²⁹

However, we must be careful lest we attribute too much to the proposed Chinese connection. The recent work of Dierk Lange (2004, 2009, 2011a, 2011b, 2011c), based on impressive linguistic, archaeological and documentary research comparing West African and Ancient Mesopotamian kinglists, made us aware of the possible Assyrian influence on West Africa around 600 BCE, when divining or incantation bowls were in evidence in Mesopotamia. The Assyrian king Esarhaddon (early 7th c. BCE) speaks of consulting the gods through a wooden temple bowl (Koch 2010: 11; Borger 1956: 3), probably filled with water so as to produce the mirroring surface that is used all over the world as a major aid in trance divination. This was also the period when the Ancient Near East exerted a considerable influence on China, as has been argued for astronomy / astrology (*cf.* Ungnad 1932; Bezold 1919; Boll 1912) – perhaps the correspondence between Chinese and West African divining bowls simply springs from a common Mesopotamian origin. Meanwhile the high time for the Mesopotamian use of incantation or divination bowls was a millennium later (Naveh & Shaked 1985), when there is so far no evidence on *direct* Mesopotamian influence on West Africa – although it is as an

²⁷ However, *cf.* van Binsbergen 2012d. The idea of an Ancient Mesopotamian origin of both the Chinese people and of *I Ching* was launched in the early 1880s by the distinguished French-British Sinologist A.E.J.-B. Terrien de Lacouperie. In the paper cited, after vindicating the stature of Terrien's scholarship and situating it in its own time and age, I summarise his views, consider its weaknesses, and dismiss his reductionist view of the wholesale origin of the Chinese. However, I also maintain that his point as to the Western origin of *I Ching* still stands, adducing much new material to that effect, including a long excerpt from my book in press (c) *Before the Presocratics: Cyclicity and transformation as features of a substrate element cosmology in Africa, Eurasia and North America*. With its predilection for obsolete authors once championing now counter-paradigmatic causes (e.g. Leo Frobenius), Afrocentrism has also identified Terrien de Lacouperie as a partisan (Rashidi 1988), transforming the latter's thesis in the following terms:

‘One of the oldest oracles of antiquity, the *I-Ching* was constructed by the Black Akkado-Sumerians of Elam-Babylonia and is dated circa 2800 BCE’.

Even though Rashidi's formulation does unmistakable violence to Terrien's original, in the paper cited I argue that Rashidi has a point in suggesting the origin of proto-geomancies (and thus of *I Ching*) to lie with a nearly forgotten, highly pigmented West African population segment, which can be argued to be somewhat continuous (genetically, culturally and linguistically) with highly pigmented populations both in sub-Saharan Africa, and in South and South East Asia and beyond. So implicitly there may be an African connection to *I Ching*.

²⁸ *Cf.* van Binsbergen, Wim M.J., in press (a). Illustrations of such Venda bowls are available with Bent 1969 / 1896 [first edition 1892] : frontispiece (see my Fig. 6); Canby 1980: 31; and Nettleton 1984. Some West African counterparts are to be found in: Frobenius 1954; first published Wien 1933; Skinner 1980.

²⁹ *Cf.* Walters 1989 p. 80. Hsiao Chi's work is also mentioned in: Needham 1980: 14.

Islamic Mesopotamian system of the late 1st millennium CE that geomantic divination, probably³⁰ via the detour around the Cape of Good Hope, established itself as the standard divination system in West Africa under such names as Ifa and Sixteen Cowries.



(a) Venda divining bowl from Northern Limpopo Province (formerly Transvaal), South Africa, © <http://www.metmuseum.org/explore/oracle/soafbowlL.html>; (b) A wooden divining bowl found c. 1890 near Great Zimbabwe, Zimbabwe, Africa; Bent 1892: frontispiece; (c) Yoruba divining bowl. © http://www.toledomuseum.org/Collection_NewAccessions.htm; (d) Ancient Greek *kylix* bowl, possibly used for divination <http://www.christusrex.org/www1/vaticano/ETb-Kylix.jpg>; (e) Mesopotamian divining/magical bowl, c. 600 CE; © <http://www.trocadero.com/PassageToAntiquity/items/392508/en1.html> – such bowls have been attested throughout the 1st millennium CE in Zoroastrian Iran, Mesopotamia and Syro-Palestine, going back to Mesopotamian and Phoenician prototypes from the 1st millennium BCE (also cf. Nettleton n.d.; Davis 1955). In Fig. 5, presenting a late medieval East Asian nautical map, I have marked the regions corresponding with these bowl types: A. Mesopotamia; B. Venda; C. Bight of Benin and D Ancient Greece. Only D seems to lie outside even the far periphery of Chinese maritime contact, yet was of course strongly influenced by Mesopotamia, in divination, astrology, other proto-sciences including mathematics and astronomy, in mythology etc.

Fig. 6. Divining bowls through time and space

Moreover the cowries that are cast in the context of dominant forms of West African divination are not indigenous but come from the Indian Ocean, often via trading networks involving Asian and European intermediaries; in China, the character for money 貝³¹ is a schematised

³⁰ Here I follow Dick-Read 2005, who on the basis of Levtzion & Hopkins 1981 maintains that the Arab trans-Saharan caravan routes did not reach all the way to the Bight of Benin, where the West African forms of geomantic divination (Ifa, Sixteen Cowries) are found.

³¹ 貝, Modern (Beijing) reading: *bèi*; Preclassic Old Chinese: *pāts*; English meaning: ‘cowry’; Karlgren code: 0320 a-e (source: Starostin & Starostin 1998-2008 ‘Chinese characters’).

representation of the cowry.

3.2.4. Divination, ecstatic cult, and transcontinental continuities in the Southern African *sangoma* context: Discussion

Is it possible to cast light on the origin of the Southern African geomantic dice or tablets? In many East Asian temples, pilgrims are invited to conduct a personalised divination using a pair of wooden dice that, like the Southern African ones, are convex on one side and that tend to be strung together. *E.g.* Chau Ju-Kua 趙汝适 's work on the Chinese and Arab trade in the twelfth and thirteen centuries, entitled 諸蕃志 *Chu-fan-chi*:³²

'In the eastern part of the city is the Po-chu Tu-kang miao or "Temple of the ship-captain Tu-kang". Whosoever with profound faith prays here for an omen, gets a reply. Passing ships make an offering here before preceeding (farther).

The back-front asymmetrical tablets thrown in African geomantic divination are similar, in form and use, to the lunar-shaped temple blocks that feature in Chinese popular divination. If (in the light of extensive parallels in Madagascar, the Comoro Islands, West Africa, and Medieval and Early Modern European Renaissance, with unmistakable prototypes in Arabic geomancies from the late 1st millennium CE on: *ilm al-raml* علم الرمل) the geomantic system in itself can hardly be maintained to be originally Southern African, why should not the attending material apparatus be imported as well? Geomantic dice have been recorded from South Asia, where the divination system to which they belong is called *ramlaśastra*, in unmistakable recognition of Arabic provenance.^{33 34}

³² Chau Ju-Kua 1911: 181, speaking of the island of Hainan 海南島.

³³ An uncanny experience was reported by the British writer on divination D. Farrington Hook (1975): an illiterate diviner she consulted while living in South Africa turned out to be fully aware of the number system that, according to the Chinese Taoist symbolism, was supposed to be associated with the tortoise carapace! Of course there is the obvious risk here that, steeped in Chinese divination, Mrs Hook's perception of the African diviner was tainted by unconscious projection. However, there are similar experiences. The Ndebele (Zimbabwe) diviner Mr Gumede (1928-1992), one of my two teachers of divination and herbalism in Francistown, Botswana (1998-1992) had worked as steward on a South African cruise ship for more than 25 years when the illness announcing his diviner career struck him, and he received his initiation in South Africa; a quarter of a century later I trained with him in Botswana, at the time when my knowledge of Taoism was virtually limited to Needham's account (Needham *c.s.* 1956, Vol. II). Only much later could I see the Taoist parallels in Mr Gumede's medical practice and his habitus. Also the Chinese traditional (Taoist) pharmacopaea, about which we have very detailed descriptions, turns out to display striking parallels with that of diviner-healers in Southern Africa. (On both topics the literature is too abundant to discuss here. For the Chinese pharmacopaea, *cf.* Needham *et al.* 2000, vol. VI part 6; Li 1977; Jiang 2005; Zheng Guili & Zhang Chengbo 1997; Long Zhixian *et al.*, 2005; Read *c.s.* 1931; Hyatt 1978; and references cited there. An interesting overview, with an abundance of sources and bibliography, is meanwhile offered by: Anonymous, 2010, 'Traditional Chinese medicine'. For the Southern African herbalists' pharmacopaea, *cf.*: Ashton 1943; Barnard 1979; Blake-Thompson 1931; Bourdillon 1989; Chavunduka 1994; de Zoysa *et al.* 1984; Fako 1978; Gelfand 1956, 1964; Gilges 1974; Hammond-Tooke 1989; Hoernlé 1937; Hours 1986; Hutchings 1996; Jackson 1918; Mokgosi 198; Morris 1986; Morris 1996; Ngubane 1977, Prins 1996; Staugård 1985; Symon 1959; Thorpe 1993; van Wyck *et al.* 1997; Watt & van Warmelo 1930. Since both pharmacopaeas are extensive and complex, my claim of 'striking parallels' needs to be adstruced in detail, which would be beyond our present scope; it however based, in part, on my personal training in Southern African pharmacopaea as a *sangoma*.)

³⁴ Further, it is amazing that the Chinese expression *chi chü* 箕踞 or *chi tso* 箕坐 'sitting winnowing-basket (箕 *chi*) fashion, i.e. with one's legs stretched out' also exactly conveys the (otherwise exceptional) stance clients of divination are to assume in Southern Africa. *Cf.* Harper 1985: 483 f., and n. 75. Harper interprets the Chinese expression (which can also refer to a sexual position) as meaning 'sitting so as to emulate the shape of a winnowing basket', but that shape is circular and does not suggest the notion of stretched-out legs. Instead, the reference seems to be to *the standard position in which one makes productive or divinatory use of the winnowing*

All this suggests the possibility of extensive cultural borrowing between China, West Africa and South Africa in the course of the 1st mill. CE. However, it was in the specific form of *ilm al-raml* that geomantic divination travelled from the Persian Gulf over sea and along the African coastline, via Madagascar and Southern Africa to West Africa – the same route than can also be argued for cowry shells, divination bowls,³⁵ ecstatic cults, and certain types of musical instruments and of boat types.



Fig. 7. A Roman coin from the reign of Constantine the Great – similar to the one found in Buea in the 1930s.

The trajectories of artefacts may be capricious and difficult to interpret. Thus, a Roman coin from the time of Emperor Constantine the Great (c. 272-337 CE) was found near Buea, Western Cameroon, in the 1930s.³⁶ Although we have been made to expect differently on the basis of the disputed reports of the Phoenician Hanno sailing down the West African coast and probably sighting Mt Cameroon ('the Chariot of the Gods') in the end,³⁷ there is no record of Roman Atlantic trade all the way to Mt Cameroon. Therefore Robert Dick-Read (2005) surmises that this coin is one of the large number that found their way to the Indian Ocean, where Roman trade was going through a revival under Constantine, and where such coins were much in demand. In that case the Buea coin suggests a trajectory that brought probably quite a few other

basket. There is nothing in the shape of a winnowing basket that suggests a particular mode of sitting. It may be used while the person wielding it is sitting with his (more typically her) legs stretched out, although this would require the place to be fairly windy; winnowing in a standing position is usually a better strategy: because of friction with the soil, the power of the wind decreases the closer one gets to the ground. The winnowing basket is a standard divining apparatus in China, however, and it is likely that the client sits through the session with legs stretched out – exactly like in Southern Africa. In view of our indication of African-Buddhist parallels, below, this is a remarkable case. In Thai Buddhist, particularly, it is absolutely forbidden to show the soles of one's feet, let alone to point these towards an object of worship, such as a Buddha image. The *yuye* or *chi tso* stance therefore may be Chinese but not Buddhist – during much of the last two millennia Buddhism was an important expression in China, but it often had to contest with Confucianism and Taoism, and the stance is probably Taoist in the first place. Equally remarkably, the Buddhist solution is that of South Central African court etiquette: squatting or sitting on one's haunches with the legs folded aside in a twisted position.

³⁵ Another major form of divination is that of the divining basket (e.g. Rodrigues de Areia 1985), filled with all sorts of figurines most of which evoke aspects of the concrete reality of the African village and court. The basket is shaken and the selection of figurines that falls out, and the pattern they form on the ground, is interpreted as clues for the problem at hand. The parallel use of vessels for divinatory purposes suggests some kind of genetic relation between the divining bowls and divining baskets, but how? I am inclined to see the baskets as adulterations and localising transformations of the divining bowl, which after all have been argued above to have arrived, already with a divinatory function, from a distant transcontinental provenance, either the Ancient Near East, or China. The cluster analysis summarised in Fig. 8 suggests that it may well be China, rather than the Ancient Near East.

³⁶ Bovill 1958: 41, n.; I owe this example to Robert Dick-Read (2005). More recently, the find of Roman beads in the Rufiji Delta, on the Indian Ocean coast in Tanzania, came to balance the Buea find, cf. Chami 1999a, 1999b.

³⁷ Falconer 1797; Lacroix 1993; Schoff 1913; Illing 1899; Cory 1828.

items of culture to West Africa via Madagascar and Southern Africa, *e.g.* (in the following list I have somewhat added to Dick-Read's own items):

- cowries (*cf.* Jackson 1917; Jeffreys 1938)– of monetary value both in China and in Africa –,
- divination bowls and geomantic divination in general (see above),
- ecstatic cults such as *bituma*, *sangoma*, *voodoo* and *bori*, for which an Indian Ocean / South East Asian epicentre of westbound diffusion may be proposed – even though below we shall find reason to postulate an eastbound movement, from Africa to Asia, for much older ecstatic cults *e.g.* those connected with fire,
- Indonesian food crops *e.g.* taro, banana, cloves;³⁸
- perhaps even trans-Pacific American food crops such as cassava and maize, transmitted via South East Asia; Dick-Read claims (and he is not the only one) that such crops were already available in West Africa before Columbus' crossing of the Atlantic – but rather than the enormous detour via the Pacific, it is more likely that such availability was based on direct pre-Columbian trans-Atlantic communications, such as claimed by Afrocentrists and others³⁹ but largely rejected by mainstream researchers (*cf.* Ortiz de Montellano 2000).

And all this probably away from the usual Arab trade routes connecting West Africa with West Asia and the Mediterranean.

Yet we must not jump to conclusions on the basis of parallels between Chinese and African divinatory apparatuses. Similar parallels could be cited between African material and that from other parts of the Old World, for instance divination bowls from Mesopotamia and Phoenicia (1st mill. BCE-CE) might also be invoked: not only was there (*cf.* Lange) considerable influence from Assyria onto West Africa, but also there are strong indication that Africa was actually circumnavigated (notably by the Phoenician captain Hanno) in these relatively early times.⁴⁰ Even the Aegean (*i.e.* Ancient Greece) and the Central Mediterranean (Etruria) produced artefacts similar to African divination objects in Antiquity, and indeed an earlier vintage of scholars (Frobenius, S. Davis) was inclined to look for explanations in Graeco-Roman Antiquity. Afrocentrists would be inclined to reverse the arrows and see the influences emerging from Africa – and given the multidirectional, multicentred nature of the proposed global maritime network, they have (as so often) a strong point. And finally, recent discussions (Dick-Read 2005; van Binsbergen 2012b) initiated by Oppenheimer's Sunda hypothesis (1998;

³⁸ Stephen Oppenheimer (2007) suggested to me to these examples of banana and cloves as revealing potential Sunda influence in Western parts of the Old World. Banana can only be transplanted from one region to another through carefully tended living sprouts; therefore the appearance of bananas (originating in New Guinea) in 1st millennium BCE West African sites (Mindzie *et al.* 2001; Lejju *et al.* 2006; Neumann & Hildebrand 2009; Blench 2009) indicates concrete and effective transcontinental communications. Cloves (originating in Indonesia) were found for roughly the same period in Anatolia (*cf.* Wright 1982).

³⁹ Wiener 1920-1922; Van Sertima 1976; Gordon 1971. Van Sertima and Wiener may have been controversial writers with relatively weak scholarly credentials (however, *cf.* van Binsbergen 2000a, 2000b, 2005a, 2011c for vindications of Van Sertima's and others' Afrocentrism; Martin Bernal's first (1985) major formulation of his *Black Athena* thesis was in another book edited by Van Sertima), but Gordon was one of the leading Semitists of his time.

⁴⁰ *Cf.* Herodotus' claim of a circumnavigation of Africa under the Egyptian Pharaoh Necho II, 600 BCE, *Historiae*, IV, 42

see below) have introduced another candidate (Indonesians) to be agents of intercontinental diffusion; but also the possibility of an eastbound cultural flow emanating from West Asia and even the Aegean and the Mediterranean at large.

Probably all these monocentric explanations are myopic. The most important point is that there is unmistakable convergence, indicative of a finely-meshed intercontinental network of proto-globalisation, and reminding us that Africa has always been an effective part of the wider world.

In the pursuit of the remotest historical antecedents of the widely distributed family of geomantic divination systems, I was fortunate to join the Work Group on Religion and Magic in the Ancient Near East, during an intensive sabbatical at the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study (NIAS), 1994-1995. It was here, in a most stimulating and productive environment of Assyriologists and Semitists, and with the benefit of NIAS's fabulous library facilities, that I could familiarise myself with the oldest literate, therefore documented, systems of human thought, writing, mythology, magic, religion, and science – dating from a time when divination was still the queen of the sciences, even for centuries the only form of science, rather than the pseudo-science that astrology has inevitably become today on Popper's grounds that its pronouncements cannot be falsified (Popper 1959, 1976; cf. Glymour & Stalker 1982). At the NIAS the foundation was laid for much of my text-based and archaeological transcontinental explorations of the last decade – however, it was to take years before this investment was to be brought to fruition.

Meanwhile, riding the waves of the times and discharging our institutional responsibilities, my Leiden Africanist colleague Peter Geschiere and I had taken the initiative for the WOTRO (the Netherlands Science Foundation's tropical branch) national research programme on globalisation (1993-1999), which at its peak comprised some forty senior and junior researchers from the Netherlands and world-wide. It is in this stimulating and congenial context that I explored the theoretical and methodological requirements for an approach to pre- and protohistorical transcontinental continuities – conceiving of the latter as a form of proto-globalisation.⁴¹

In the early 1990s, exploring the iconography of divination tablets in Southern Africa, I had begun to see continuities between wood-carving patterns there and throughout the Indian Ocean region (cf. Nettleton 1984). Around 2000 (cf. van Binsbergen 2003: ch. 8, and 2005b) I began to suspect the transcontinental, specifically South Asian connections of the entire *sangoma* cult and not just of its divination technique. The black garments, the staves, the modes of greeting through prostration and hand-clapping, the underlying combinatorics of the divination system, the latter's symbolism – much of this seemed to stem from Asian (especially East Asian) cultural worlds that were discontinuous with South Central and Southern Africa. A philosophy-Master's student of mine from Italy, Luca Domenichini, steeped in Buddhism, pointed out to me that one important *sangoma* song

Sala- salani
Salani madhodha nokotura
Ndiye- ndiyenda
Ndiyenda madhodha sesegamba

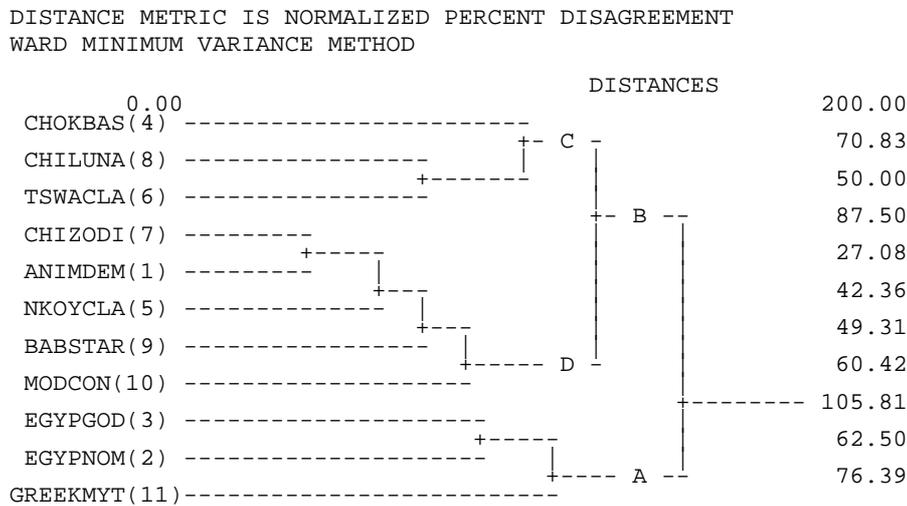
Stay – stay well
stay well, my brothers, I am leaving
I – I am going
I am going, my brothers, ?where you cannot reach me?

typically sung by a *sangoma* when he or she is about to enter deep trance, had striking

⁴¹ I therefore wish to express my indebtedness to WOTRO / NWO, to my fellow-directors of this programme (Peter Geschiere, Bonno Thoden van Velzen – in the 1960s one of my first teachers of anthropology – , and Peter van der Veer), and to the programme's members and associates. In the elaboration of this programme in the context of the Leiden African Studies Centre, I was fortunate to collaborate closely with Rijk van Dijk and Richard Fardon.

similarities with the central mantra⁴² of the famous *Heart sutra*.⁴³ Puzzlingly forced, at my *sangoma* graduation at a secluded spot in rural Northern Botswana, to wear (as the only member of my lodge, and greatly envied for that) a leopard skin which was proclaimed to be ‘the traditional attire of my kind of people’, I started on a worldwide search into leopard-skin symbolism, which brought me, eventually, to the realisation that my *sangoma* leopard skin was an African adaptation of the tiger skin which is not only donned by the principal South Asian god Indra and by the South Asian kings identified with him at their enthronement, but that was also stipulated (in a famous Indian text from the beginning of the Common Era, *Viṣṇu Smṛti / The Institutes of Vishnu*, XXVII, 15-17; Jolly 1988: 111) as the standard initiation dress for adepts from the Kshatriya (military / aristocratic) class – while the *sangomas* had constantly insisted on my real, adoptive, or imagined, military background (van Binsbergen 2004).

Thus finally aroused to transcontinental continuities, I undertook, also around 2000, a statistical analysis of animal symbolism in ancient astronomical, divinatory and clan systems throughout the three continents of the Old World (van Binsbergen, in press (b) / 2002).



1. ANIMDEM = Old World animal demons; 2. EGYPNOM = Ancient Egyptian nome names; 3. EGYPGOD + Ancient Egyptian gods; 4. CHOKBAS = Chokwe divining basket items; 5. NKOYCLA = Nkoya clan names; 6. TSWACLA = Tswana clan names; 7. CHIZODI = Chinese zodiac items; 8. CHILUNA = Chinese moon stations; 9. BABSTAR = Babylonian star names; 10. MODCON = Modern constellation names; 11. GREEKMYT = Attributes of gods in Ancient Greek mythology.⁴⁴

Fig. 8. Comparing Old World formal systems through cluster analysis (van Binsbergen 2002),

⁴² The mantra’s text is as follows. Sanskrit: गते गते पारगते पारसंगते बोधि स्वाह, *gate gate pāragate pārasaṃgate bodhi svāhā*; Chinese: 揭諦揭諦 波羅揭諦 波羅僧揭諦 菩提娑婆訶. Conze suggests as translation of this admittedly untranslatable mantra: ‘gone gone, gone beyond, gone altogether beyond, O what an awakening, all hail!’ cf. Anonymous 2012, ‘Heart Sutra’.

⁴³ Sanskrit: प्रज्ञापारमिताहृदय *Prajñāpāramitā Hṛdaya*; Chinese: 般若波羅蜜多心經. (cf. Anonymous 2012, ‘Heart Sutra’; Conze 1958; Nattier 1992). Given Nattier’s hypothesis of the predominantly Chinese origin of the *Heart sutra*, this would suggest considerable Chinese, rather than South Asian, influence on the *sangoma* cult; such an interpretation would tally with the Taoist parallels in Southern African herbalism and divination, and the black gowns (reminiscent of Taoist robes) featured in the Mwali version of the *sangoma* cult.

⁴⁴ These eleven distributions (numbered as in the caption to this Figure) are each derived from a considerable literature, from which I here list only a small selection: 1. Fontenrose 1980; 2. Roeder 1952; 3. Bonnet 1971; 4. Rodrigues de Areia 1985; 5. author’s fieldnotes and van Binsbergen 1992; 6. Schapera 1952; 7, 8. Walters 1989; 9. Walker & Hunger 1977, Hunger & Pingree 1989; 10. Moore 1984; 11. Smith 1880, Graves 1964.

provisionally bringing out the unexpected clustering of African nomenclatural material with Chinese and Babylonian material, away from Ancient Egyptian and Greek material.

I found,⁴⁵ much to my surprise, that Chokwe and Tswana, and to a lesser extent Nkoya, systems of nomenclature from South Central and Southern Africa, clustered more closely with those of Ancient China and Ancient Mesopotamia than with those from Ancient Egypt, Ancient Greece, and Early Modern Europe (Fig. 8). On the basis of the assumption that the formal systems of, mainly animal, symbolism underlying astronomical classifications, divination systems, clan systems, and toponymical systems (notably the nomenclature of the Ancient Egyptian *nomes*) might have enough in common to treat them as belonging to one corpus whose internal patterns of coherence could be subjected to statistical cluster analysis, I found already close affinity between the African systems of animal symbolism, on the one hand, and the Chinese zodiac and Chinese lunar mansions, on the other hand – whereas Ancient Egyptian, Ancient Mesopotamian and Ancient Greek series of animal symbolism (astronomical, topographical and as attributes of gods) turned out to cluster only at much greater distances from each other and from the African and Chinese material.

At the time, I was so enamoured with Afrocentricity that I could not think of a better explanation than a common, African origin for all these systems, which origin then would have to be situated in the Upper Palaeolithic. Was this (as I thought at the time) a very old, Upper-Palaeolithic substrate surfacing both in East Asia and in sub-Saharan Africa? Or was the surprising communality the result of specific and much more recent cultural exchange in protohistorical time – i.e. the last few millennia (as I believe to be the case now)? Or was my statistical finding merely a research artefact such as multivariate analysis, and especially cluster analysis so often produces, with its wide optionality of parameters, every option giving different outcomes? I am now aware (van Binsbergen in press (c)) that the catalytic transformative cycle of elements is relatively advanced and recent, and can only be a few millennia old. As we have seen, the affirmation of Chinese influence on Africa has been the subject of numerous studies,⁴⁶ and the circulation of material objects and forms of symbolism reminiscent of East Asian specifically Taoist divination (divining tablets, numerical symbolism, divining bowls etc., Buddhism, see another footnote) makes it quite conceivable that such relatively recent East Asian influence (which probably also took the form of extended actual Asian settlement in sub-Saharan Africa; van Binsbergen 2012b) resulted in the South Central African clan nomenclature as a catalytic transformative cycle of elements in disguise.

Here, for the first time, I was beginning to find firm ground (reached through a methodologically convincing procedure) in my groping for cultural-historical interpretation, now that the ‘Africa for the Africans’ intracontinental explanatory model proved unsatisfactory. Earlier inklings in the same direction had been slow to bear fruit. In 1994, just before joining the NIAS, I had acquired, in Lusaka, Zambia, a wooden statuette of a Kuba king (Fig. 9b), whose iconography, while continuous with other South Central African specimens (*cf.* Fig. 9a), yet

⁴⁵ These results are provisional in that recently, in anticipation of final publication (van Binsbergen, in press (b)), the analysis has been replicated with some additional material and with closer attention to the specific mathematical requirements for cluster analysis on this kind of (dichotomised) data. There also a methodological problem is explicitly discussed: cluster analysis is notorious for the fact that a different choice of methods (distance measures, and procedures) leads to significantly different outcomes (*cf.* Finch 2005; Majone 1970; Everitt 1974; Romesburg 1984).

⁴⁶ *Cf.* note 10, above. Numerous studies also have been devoted to Indonesian influence across the Indian Ocean, see Dick-Read 2005; Solheim II 2000; and references cited there.

struck me as indicative of South / South East Asian Buddhist influences. However, for over a decade I failed to substantiate this mere gut feeling. The fields in Asian studies I had done at Amsterdam University in the 1960s had concentrated on sociology and politico-social history and had not extended into art; nor had they explored the layered cultural and religious history of South, South East and East Asia, with their superposition of various heterogeneous religious worldviews (Archaic / Vedic / Hinduist / Buddhist / Islamic in South, and partially also South East Asia; Archaic / Confucianist / Taoist / Buddhist in East Asia). And my extensive Asian travelling of the last decade had not yet begun. My first visits to Japan (2x), China (2x), Indonesia (3x) and insular Malaysia (1x) had scarcely yielded any first-hand experience of the cultural and social implications of South East Asian Buddhism – despite a contemplation of the unique devotional site of Borobudur in Central Java (and its informal, popular parallels in the cult of Nagara Padang in West Java; cf. Djunatan 2011; van Binsbergen 2011e), and extensive visits to and short stays at Buddhist temples in 京都 Kyoto, 東京 Tokyo, 北京 Beijing and 五台山 Wu Tai Shan.⁴⁷ Subsequent trips to Asia (Thailand, Sri Lanka, South India) were specifically undertaken in order to gather an overall initial impression of the kind of social and cultural effects Buddhism might be expected to have on Asian-African transcontinental cultural exchanges.

Our conclusion can be that conical headdresses are common in the representation of numerous South Asian gods and demigods within Hinduism and Buddhism, including Vishnu, Parvati, the Bodhisatva Maitreya, and various temple guards.

In these various ways I gradually became aware of the large extent to which cultural interpenetration from South, South East and East Asia is likely to have informed the details of the sangoma cult in Southern Africa. Meanwhile, it remains amazing that I was still so much under the spell of the ‘Africa for the Africans’ paradigm that for decades I did not consciously perceive, let alone pursue, the many Asian elements that stared me in the eye in my most frequented and best known research site in Africa from the early 1970s on: the Nkoya people of Western Central Zambia. It is to a discussion of this research context that we will now turn. But it is useful first to discuss a number of seminal influences upon my work, that set the scene for a better appreciation of transcontinental continuities.

⁴⁷ Cf. Djunatan 2011; van Binsbergen 2011e. I am indebted to the Department of Sanskrit and Indian studies, Harvard University, Cambridge MA, USA; the African Studies Centre, Leiden, the Netherlands; the Philosophical Faculty, Erasmus University Rotterdam; the Department of Philosophy, Parahyangan Catholic University, Bandung, Indonesia; The Institute for West Asian and African Studies (IWAAS), Chinese Academy of Sciences, Beijing; and Peking University, Beijing. For generous financial and logistic contributions towards some of these trips; other such trips were made at the personal expense of my wife Patricia and myself – I am greatly indebted to her both for her material contribution and for her intellectual feedback during the fieldwork and writing-up.



a. Kuba / Bushongo *ndop* sculpture: King Shamba, British Museum London (Parrinder 1967: 121); note the *mankala* board and the staff of office; b. Kuba / Bushongo *ndop* sculpture (author's collection); note the copper neck ring, the conical coiffure and the serene facial expression reminiscent of Buddhist representational conventions; c. Ancestral image, Nias Isl. (West of Sumatra), Royal Tropical Institute Amsterdam / Schnitger 1991; note the two hand-held staves, and the diadem which follows a very widely distributed type, from the Nkoya King Mwenekahare in Zambia to Tut-ankh-Amun in New Kingdom Egypt and to Samoyed shamans;⁴⁸ d. sculpture of a temple guardian in front of the Ruwanwelisaya dagoba, Anuradhapura, Sri Lanka, 2011; e. two of three dozens of gigantic sculptured heads of celestial guardians at the City of Angkor, Cambodia, early 2nd mill. CE, Angkor temples, Stierlin 1983; f. Stone sculpture of the South Asian goddess Durga (Sri Lanka National Museum, Colombo, 2011); g. temple guard with conical headdress and flyswitch, Kandy, Sri Lanka, Temple of the Sacred Tooth Relic. Photographs © Wim van Binsbergen unless stated otherwise. The headdress of the royal sculpture (b) seems to follow a South East Asian Buddhist iconographic convention relating to celestial guardians – which well in line with the idea of kingship, as a major form for the connection between Heaven and Earth to take. More in general the expression of the face, but also the position of arms and legs in the South Central African sculptures (a) and (b) is suggestive of meditation stances and ritualised hand gestures (*mudras*) prevalent in the iconography of the Buddha in continental South East Asia; such gestures are not the prerogative of the Buddha but tend to be emulated by Buddhist believers in meditation.

Fig. 9. Iconographic suggestions of Buddhist-African continuity: Congo sculpture and Sunda parallels.

⁴⁸ What seems to unite these three cultural expressions, even though wide apart in space and time, is the mechanism of my 'Pelagian Hypothesis', cf. van Binsbergen & Woudhuizen 2011; van Binsbergen 2011b, and in press (d).

4. Decisive external influences and ancillary disciplines

Meanwhile, I had taken aboard various other decisive influences.

In the first place, my association, from the mid-1990s on, with Martin Bernal and with the *Black Athena* debate initiated by him, rekindled my interest in the Mediterranean and forced me to pursue the knowledge-political and epistemological dilemmas of long-range research. Although there is much reason (van Binsbergen 2011b) to distrust Bernal's *specific empirical conclusions* concerning the transcontinental linguistic, religious, and cultural continuities between Ancient Egypt, the Ancient Aegean, and sub-Saharan Africa, his book *Black Athena I* (Bernal 1987) has been an extensive and convincing reminder that not accidentally has the West has 'forgotten'⁴⁹ its massive historical indebtedness to the other continents, and that retrieving this awareness, in our present age of globalisation and global identity/religious conflict, not only puts the record straight but is, in fact, a *conditio sine qua non* for the survival of our species.

Further the association with Michael Witzel, the Harvard Department of Sanskrit and Indian Studies, and its annual interdisciplinary Round Tables, which created the immensely stimulating environment in which I could visit various East Asian countries and engage with Asianists and comparative mythologists worldwide, as essential steps towards the formulation of my theoretical and methodological long-range approaches in comparative mythology (also as founding member and one of the directors of the International Association for Comparative Mythology), and as vehicles towards the several ancillary disciplines (comparative linguistics, archaeology, genetics) without which such approaches could not be developed. In recent years, and especially as a result of the intellectual and organisational initiatives of the prominent Sanskrit scholar Michael Witzel of Harvard, comparative mythology has rejuvenated itself and has come to constitute, in its own right, an richly revealing window on humankind's preliterate past (Witzel 2001, 2010; van Binsbergen & Venbrux 2010). One of my contributions to this process has been the formulation of my Diachronic Model of World Mythology (van Binsbergen 2006a, 2006b, 2010a). There I have sought to identify (from an inspection of African cosmogonic myths as recorded in historical times) what Pandora's Box may have contained in terms of mythology, and I indicated ways of tracing the innovations and transformations of this package after the Exodus out of Africa, largely inside Asia, and then fed back into Africa in the 'Back-into-Africa' process, thus affirming Africa's place in the transcontinental space.⁵⁰

It is in this connection that I came across Stephen Oppenheimer's (1998) Sunda thesis (attributing decisive importance, in global cultural history since the onset of the Neolithic and the Holocene, to the dissemination of genes, material culture, and stories from South East Asia once that region was flooded as a result of the melting of the polar caps after the last Ice Age). Oppenheimer does not mention Africa in the context of his Sunda thesis – it is enough for him to let westbound Indonesian marines, fleeing the flooding of their Sunda subcontinent, trigger the protohistorical civilisations of the Indus Valley and the Persian Gulf (Sumer); however, Tauchmann (personal communication) and Dick-Read have extended Oppenheimer's Sunda thesis to Africa, and rather successfully so, as we shall see. My MA and subsequently PhD

⁴⁹ In Bernal's reading: only as recently as Early Modern times, after allegedly affirming 'the Ancient Model' [of such indebtedness] throughout Antiquity and at least implying it throughout the Middle Ages.

⁵⁰ My Pelasgian model and my linguistic explorations into the *Borean connotations of Niger-Congo / Bantu further refined the conceptual and methodological apparatus, as did my subsequent application of these tools, largely outside Africa, upon *Ethnicity in Mediterranean Protohistory* (van Binsbergen & Woudhuizen 2011).

student from Indonesia, Stephanus Djunatan, created a context in which to revive my strand of Asian studies, and to have my first modest experiences of fieldwork in and publishing on South East Asia. On a lesser scale, my Cameroonian PhD students Pius Mosima and Pascal Touoyem took me to their respective rural areas of origin and made me appreciate especially what I came to see as the Sunda element in Western Grassfields / Bamileke cultures and kingships. And finally there has been my close collaboration, over the years (initially in the context of the *Black Athena* debate, then as my PhD student, and ultimately as co-author) with the ancient historian Fred Woudhuizen, which not only led to our monumental and provocative book *Ethnicity in Mediterranean Protohistory* (2011), but also forced me to further develop my linguistic, archaeological and comparative-mythological skills as a stepping-stone towards viable transcontinental analysis – with my Pelasgian Hypothesis as one of the project’s outcomes, illuminating for the analysis of African protohistory in the light of the Sunda hypothesis.

Despite his (by and large unconvincing) excursions into comparative mythology and archaeology, Oppenheimer was in the first place a paediatrician turned geneticist, and he was to become one of the leading geneticists of the United Kingdom. It was a genetic puzzle in paediatrics in the New Guinea context (the debilitating effects of thalassaemia blood conditions, yet granting immunity to malaria) which put him on the track of his Sunda thesis. I therefore began to pursue more or less recent genetic literature for clues as to the possible application of the Sunda thesis to Africa. The results were very stimulating, even downright positive (van Binsbergen 2012b).

5. Transcontinental continuities as revealed in ethnohistorical and ethnographic fieldwork among the Nkoya of South Central Africa

5.1. Introducing the Nkoya

After extensive work on historical reconstruction (largely on the basis of mythical and oral historical materials) in the field of North African popular Islam and of Central African pre-colonial religious forms, and before exploring urban culture and ecstatic cults in Southern Africa, the Nkoya people of Zambia constituted, for decades from 1972 onward, my main research focus in Africa. Speaking a Central Bantu language, the Nkoya (numbering ca. 100,000) emerged (under the effect of the ethnic dynamics of the colonial state as mediated through the indirect rule of Barotseland, with local Christian intellectuals as major ethnic brokers) as a comprehensive self-affirming ethnic identity towards the middle of the 20th century CE. This ethnic label emerged as a bundling of a great many smaller identities each characterised by their own name, clan affiliation, areas of residence, royal and chiefly leaders, dialectical variations, historical traditions *etc.* (van Binsbergen 1992; also cf. the short introduction to the Nkoya in van Binsbergen 2010a, with adequate bibliography).

5.2. Selected transcontinental themes among the Nkoya

The indications of transcontinental continuities among the Nkoya were staring me in the face. For a long time I had been familiar with the work of the nautical historian Hornell (1934) who already stressed ‘Indonesian influences on East African culture’,⁵¹ with Raymond Dart’s work

⁵¹ His claims, in so far related to music, were later discussed and amplified by Kirby 1961. The latter adduces much that is of interest in our present context, e.g.:

(1951, 1954, 1955, 1957, 1962, 1967) on transoceanic traffic, the evidence from blood groups, and the parallels between West African and South East Asian death ships; and with the musicologist Jones' findings (1964) that African xylophones were tuned very similarly to Indonesian ones. Such musical instruments were prominent in the Nkoya royal orchestra. The stranger founder of the Kahare dynasty himself was reputed (van Binsbergen 1992) to have arrived in the region, an unspecified number of generations ago, not only with a *Conus* shell bottom used as a regalia (which could only have come from the Indian Ocean)⁵² but also with a xylophone whose sublime alien sounds so enraptured a local queen that (given the great sexual freedom Nkoya female royals have – again with South Asian parallels)⁵³ she married him on the spot.⁵⁴ However, my identification with the dominant, localising paradigm was so strong that it was to take decades before I began to look with different, transcontinental eyes upon the royal capital of King Kahare.

An important step was my realisation (van Binsbergen 1993 / 2003) that the Nkoya kingship constitutes an entirely different cosmological and value system from that of the commoner villages that surround the royal capitals and on which the latter feed. Was this merely an internal segmentation of local culture, as in Leach's famous *Political systems of highland Burma* (1954); was it a sign that the Nkoya kingship was a totally alien body implanted from

'...[Hornell] actually quoted a number of early references, from the eighth century onwards, which prove that many Bantu were taken to Indonesia by the eastern visitors; but he seems to have overlooked the possibility that some of these, who had seen the great Indonesian structures in situ, may have eventually returned to Africa and have been responsible for the imitations of them which are now found in the Rhodesias.'

⁵² In general, and with emphasis on the world of material production rather than symbolic production, early Nkoya kings appear in tradition as culture heroes, bringing new seeds and agricultural methods, as well as metallurgy. Such traditions resonate with South Asian royal ones, and with protracted scholarly discussions on the origin and spread of ironworking. This takes us to the much-debated general question whether Africans did or did not invent ironworking (Alpern 2005). Decades ago, an analysis of metallurgical terms in Bantu suggested already (de Maret & Nsuka 1977; cf. Miller & van der Merwe 1994; Childs & Killick 1993) that Bantu-speakers did not invent metallurgy themselves, considering their reliance on loan words for metallurgical matters. Also in a recent examination of proto-Bantu (even though the very concept of one, consistent and delineable corpus of proto-Bantu is contentious, in ways that are beyond our present scope; cf. Guthrie 1967-1971; Ehret 1972, 2001; Dalby 1975, 1976; Flight 1980; Heine 1973; Henrici 1973; Ehret 1972; Vansina 1979-1980, 1990: appendix, 1995, 2008; Chami 2001; Oliver *et al.* 2002; Nurse & Phillipson 2003) I found that *all* the metallurgical terms (a mere handful, anyway) that I identify in proto-Bantu can be construed to be reflexes of *Borean – an hypothetical language construct supposed to be spoken in Central Asia in the Upper Palaeolithic (cf. Starostin & Starostin 1998-2008 and below, note 76), and since only 27% of the reconstructed *Borean roots can be traced back in proto-Bantu, this is another indication that it was not Bantu speakers but the speakers of some preceding language form spoken in Eurasia between 15 and 5 ka BP who were primarily involved in the invention of metallurgy. Incidentally, my demonstration of Bantu being among the languages spoken in the Bronze Age Mediterranean (van Binsbergen & Woudhuizen 2011; van Binsbergen 2011b; and note 71, below), perhaps among some of the Sea Peoples, as well as my statistical demonstration of the affinity between Niger-Congo and Austric, suggest that we might reconsider the established, Africa-for-the-Africans view that the Bantu linguistic subphylum not only started its expansion, but actually arose, inside the African continent in the Early Holocene (c. 8 ka BP). In line with its partial continuity with *Borean, I submit that important components towards Bantu originated in the West Asian Black population cluster to which I also tend to attribute (cf. note 26, above) the origin of proto-geomancies.

⁵³ E.g., cf. Sankalia 1960; Brubaker 1977; Beck 1969, 1971; Blumenberg 1994-1996-2006.

⁵⁴ Tauchmann, personal communication 2010, claims that this is a general pattern of Sunda influence upon sub-Saharan Africa.

afar? Or was the similarity to the South East Asian situation as described by Leach the result of specific transcontinental influence, in South Central Africa, from that region?⁵⁵

I opened up to the royal capital's many potential reminiscences of South and South East Asia in mythology, kingship and court culture, music, personal names, etc., and set out to document and understand these more fully. I found that apparently cognate forms of both the hourglass drum (Nkoya: *mukupele*) and the kettle drum (*mawoma*) – major regalia used by the Kahare royal orchestra, the latter even the object of human sacrifice – had a wide distribution in South and South East Asia, which by the late 1990s I had still attributed to Islamic transcontinental influence (van Binsbergen 1999b); when I found that in Sinhalese a kettle drum, widely in use in temples, is called *mahabela*, 'big drum', it became tempting to interpret the Nkoya word *mukupele* (which although phonologically Nkoya has no transparent Nkoya etymology) as a loan from across the Indian Ocean. By the same token, South and South East and East Asian temples abound with ritual bells, used to announce any kind of offering to the residing deity; on the other hand, royal bells constitute a trait throughout South Central and West Africa.⁵⁶

The following distributional equation or rather transformation presented itself:

$$\left(\begin{array}{c} \text{religious-priestly use in} \\ \text{Hinduism and Buddhist} \\ \text{(Brahmin caste connotations)} \end{array} \right) : \text{Asia} = \left(\begin{array}{c} \text{ceremonial use in sacred} \\ \text{kingship (Kshatriya caste} \\ \text{connotations)} \end{array} \right) : \text{sub-Saharan Africa}$$

as if the kings of sub-Saharan Africa only secondarily derived at least part of their regalia and court culture, from a localisation of Hinduist and Buddhist ritual from Asia. Below, in my tabulated overviews of Nkoya–Asian apparent continuities, I present several other indications for such an equation.

Meanwhile, a note of caution is in order here. I am not suggesting that kingship in West, Central, South Central and Southern Africa is entirely derived from Asian prototypes crossing the Indian Ocean in protohistorical times. It has long been recognised that Ancient Egypt, during the three millennia of its existence as a more or less powerful state, must necessarily have exerted considerable influence on East, Central and West Africa, especially in the field of kingship as one of Ancient Egypt's most central institutions – which again is not to deny Ancient Egypt's indebtedness to sub-Saharan Africa.⁵⁷ As we have seen, to this debate Lange has recently added the notion that the demise of the Assyrian empire c. 600 BCE had a considerable cultural, political and even demographic impact on West Africa; since Egypt was also Assyrian in the 7th c. BCE, further Egyptian elements may have flown into West Africa in the process. Lange thus revives an old debate on 'Hebraeisms in Africa'.⁵⁸ An 'index fossil' of these relationships may be found in the royal umbrellas that abound in the West African contexts of kingship: despite Ancient Egypt's relative proximity of Egypt these cannot have

⁵⁵ The contemporary-historical and legal analysis of African political systems was a major strand in my work from the 1970s to 1990s, and I acknowledge the inspiration from my colleagues during these years: Martin Doornbos, Emile van Rouveroy van Nieuwaal, my PhD student Gerti Hesseling (later Director of the African Studies Centre), Piet Konings, and especially the late Robert Buijtenhuijs.

⁵⁶ Cf. Vansina 1969. The potential influence, on royal bells, of Roman Catholic church bells in Western South Central Africa cannot be denied but seems minimal since few other Christian elements have been incorporated into African kingship, whereas Asian parallels abound in conceptualisation, organisation, enthronisation, burial and mythology of African kings.

⁵⁷ The literature on this point is extensive, for a brief overview cf. van Binsbergen 2011c.

⁵⁸ Cf. Williams 1930; von Sicard 1952; van Warmelo 1966; Parvitt 2002; Thomas *et al.* 2000.

their origin there because Ancient Egyptian royal shades usually had the shape of vertical planes (often plumed), but they may have come from Ancient Mesopotamia where the royal umbrella is shown on several reliefs e.g. those involving the Assyrian kings Sennacherib and Shalmaneser. Having arrived in West Africa, via Egypt and the Sahara, from an Assyrian context, these regalia may then have become part of the Niger-Congo speaking culture of kingship, and (by a suggestion from Lange 2012) may subsequently have been transmitted to Central and Southern Africa on the wings of Bantu expansion – even though the latter concept is now redefined as one of cultural including linguistic transmission rather than of demic diffusion. Given the likely impact of South and South East Asia on West Africa, the umbrellas abounding in Hinduist and Buddhist temple contexts in historical times may have been converted to royal use in West Africa, and may have further supported such use of royal umbrellas as already existed in West Africa as a result of Assyrian impact.

5.3. A gem of transcontinental imagination?

I cannot bring myself *not* to burden this argument with the following gem of possible transcontinental imagination. For forty years, my research into the ethnohistory of South Central Africa has been haunted by the image of Kapesh Kamunungampanda, ‘The Kapesh [Tower] of joined forked branches’ – a legendary incumbent (female or male) of the kingship who built a tower in order to steal the moon, which was intended as a royal pendant on the breast of the heir apparent. Like in *Genesis 12*, the tower collapsed and ethnico-linguistic diversity then came into the world. In my analysis of Nkoya myth (van Binsbergen 1992, 2010a) I have come closer and closer to an appreciation of the possibly South Asian strands in this story, e.g. deriving *kapesh* (without convincing Bantu etymology) from the proto-Indo-Aryan **ghabasti*, ‘carriage beam, forked pole’; and interpreting the Kale alias of the Kahare kingship of the Nkoya, as an indication of ‘Gypsy’ / Roma connections (throughout the near-global distribution of ‘Gypsies’, the name Kale is found in the sense of ‘black person’), which have been recognised to ramify into East Africa in the course of the second millennium. (The name or nickname Kalu is also used in present-day Sinhalese, likewise to denote persons with high skin pigmentation.) A century ago, the classicist / anthropologist Frazer (1918: ch. 2) has interpreted this kind of story as a quest of immortality, of which the moon (being reborn every month) is a widespread symbol. The history of the Sigiriya rock fortress, a volcanic chimney rising a perpendicular 200 meters above the plains of Central Sri Lanka, added a serendipity to this analysis – after all, the very word ‘serendipity’ derives, via Jonathan Swift’s (1899 / 1725) *Gulliver’s Travels*, from Serendip, the ancient Arabic and Persian name (in itself a garbled version of the Pali and Sanskrit names) for the isle of Ceylon – which in ancient India was called Lanka / Sīhaḷādīpa / Siṃhaladvīpa. In the late 5th c. CE, prince Kashyapa (born from a mere concubine) killed his father and usurped the throne of the North-Central capital Anuradhapura; and for fear of revenge from his father’s close kin and loyal followers, Kashyapa took refuge on the Sigiriya rock (Vann 1987; Bandaranayake 1999, 2005; Athukorala n.d.). Here he built a fabulous palace. His brother exiled himself to Southern India, but after some 12 years came back with an invasion army. Instead of confidently awaiting the enemy in his impenetrable Sigiriya fortress, Kashyapa ventured into the plain, his war elephant made an unexpected move which his army interpreted as a sign of retreat, and Kashyapa was defeated and killed. Many of the elements of the South Central African Kapesh legend are here: the hubris and transgression, the strong vertical element reminiscent of a tower, the collapse and dispersion, even the name of the protagonist (Kapeshe <? Kashyapa). If, in the course of more than one and a half millennium, the

echoes of Kashyapa's apparently⁵⁹ historical fate were transmitted across the Indian Ocean, they may well have been distorted into something like the Kapesh story – especially in an environment that already had the Flood and Tower complex on the basis of a historical substrate going back several millennia. Kashyapa's rival was hiding with the Tamil Chola dynasty, which has a long history of invading Sri Lanka in a bid to reconvert it to Hinduism. If many kingships in South Central Africa trace their origin to a legendary land 'Kola', it may be to this Tamil context – also, since many other Tamil elements may be detected in the kingship of Kahare. The Nkoya kings' royal orchestra, to be played every morning and evening as sign that the king is all right, has a counterpart in similar musical routine recorded for historical royal courts in South Asia under Buddhism.

5.4. Beyond, but on the basis of, fieldwork: The identification of African-Asian parallels in texts

Although in some respects classic anthropological fieldwork may be a pitfall of narrowing spatial and temporal horizons, yet its great merit is that it equips the researcher with a very comprehensive and profound inside view of local cultural practices and perceptions, that (even if the anthropologist may envy the philologists' usually superior language skills) can never be derived from textual scholarship and library research alone. On the other hand, an Africanist anthropologist at the end of his career, despite repeated explorations into the South and South East Asian field, can never hope to gain sufficient first-hand ethnographic knowledge on Asia to spot relevant Asian-African parallels. Therefore, my favourite method in approaching the central question of this argument has been to scan through texts on South Asia in the light of whatever I know of Nkoya life (and *sangoma* life, for that matter). For example, one arbitrarily chosen text which yielded an astonishing number of such elements, is from a Buddhist lady of European background, Marie Musaeus-Higgins' (1914 / 2000) charming, simple recounting of Arya Sura's Jataka cycle of stories (showing the ascent of the Buddha through previous incarnations as Boddhisatva in the animal and human world – followed by an effective and moving account of the Buddha's life; cf. Arya Sura 1895). I note the following Buddhist-Nkoya parallels.⁶⁰

page	Buddhist trait	Nkoya parallels (from <i>Likota Iya Bankoya</i> ; van Binsbergen 1988, 1992) unless otherwise stated
16	royal orchestra must play every morning and evening	same (ethnography)
10	Boddhisatva as king of fishes produces rain, although he is not rain himself	Mvula / Rain, is the demiurge linked Heaven and Earth/humankind
103	A Brahman has to live on gifts alone	literally the same claim for the Nkoya king, who seems to be a secular adaptation of the idea of the Brahmin or Boddhisatva
154 f., 158	King of the Cibis, lives by tribute alone, but is fond of redistributing his wealth among his subjects; emphasis on the king's largesse	same

⁵⁹ *Apparently historical*: the Sigiriya fortress and palace are there to testify that the Lankan story has some tangible historical basis, yet it, too, has mythical overtones. The sheer hybris of a king's tower fortress resonates through comparative mythology ever since King Nimrod in *Genesis* 11, and even in the latter context the association between transgression, tower and flood reflects a globally widespread pattern that is also, for instance, manifest in the Indo-Pacific region (cf. Shi Yang 2006; Demetrio 1968; van Binsbergen c.s. 2008). Also the period of 12 year (the cycle of the Chinese zodiac) has mythical overtones, and so does the accidental swerving of the king's mount – one suspects an astronomical background to this narrative element.

⁶⁰ A similar exercise, with very rich yield especially concerning the Tamil traits detectable in Nkoya society and culture, was completed for Chitty 1992 / 1934; however, space is lacking to present the results here.

174, 175	reference to female warriors and to a female sword-bearer	same
179	whatever is requested from a king the latter cannot refuse	whatever Nkoya joking partners ask from one another, cannot be refused ⁶¹
185	florid royal praise names, e.g. 'a Prince like Vessantara, whom they called the 'Fruit-Tree', the 'Foster child of Mother Earth'...'Well of Pure Waters of Wisdom', 'Well of Plenty'..	quite similar praise names among the Nkoya, e.g. the discussion in van Binsbergen 1992
186 f., esp. 189- 190	under the influence of the rule cited under p. 179 Prince Vessantara, has no option but to let a cruel Brahman take away his children, 'The poor children fell on their knees, embraced the legs of their father and pleaded with tears in their eyes to be allowed to wait till their mother came.'; 'Our poor mother will weep for us for a long time. Father, give her our last farewells, for I doubt whether we shall see her again'; reference to a magical fruit tree	There is a famous Nkoya court song, 'Nkeye-keye', whose lyrics present this very same story; also cf. Kawanga 1978; Brown 1984.
237	Mara [a Buddhist personification of 'the deceptive material world'] seduces Buddha as an artificial woman in the shape of Yasodhara	the envious sister princess Likambi Mange, a sorceress, sends an artificial woman to her brother prince Shihoka Nalinanga, who sleeps with her and dies ⁶²
216	In a previous life, the Bodhisatva Siddharta has won his wife as tiger: 'That veil of thine, in black and gold, does show me that thou also dost remember.' She only nodded and understood.	Nkoya royals have the royal privilege of donning leopard skins, but upon death they are really considered to turn into lions roaming around the royal capital at night. This trait is admittedly not very convincing as a Buddhist/Nkoya parallel]
241 f.	the Buddha praises himself with the following words: Many a House of Life Hath held me-Seeking ever Him, who wrought These prisons of the senses, sorrow-fraught; Sore was my ceaseless strife ! But now, Thou Builder of this Tabernacle -Thou ! I know Thee ! Never shalt Thou build again These walls of pain, Nor raise the Roof-tree of deceits, nor lay Fresh rafters on the clay ; Broken Thy house is, and the ridge-pole split! Delusion fashioned it! Safe pass I thence - Deliverance to obtain	cf. (albeit with a cruelty unbecoming a Buddhist yet not unheard of in South Asian Buddhist royal circles) the praise name of Mwene Kayambila, 'the Thatcher who thatches his house with the skulls of his enemies'...
245	Kashyapa was the leader of a fire cult; in a typical hagiography with numerous Islamic and Christian	Kapesh Who-Joins-the-Forked-Branches, a name without proper Nkoya / Bantu

⁶¹ Here we hit upon a phenomenon of possibly wider significance in the context of transcontinental continuities. Among the Nkoya, and throughout South Central Africa and parts of West Africa (cf. Radcliffe-Brown 1968 / 1952; Brelsford 1935; Wilson 1957; Tew 1951; Stefaniszyn 1950; Goody 1962; Hammond 1964) specific clans are paired so as to have *joking relationships* with one another (cf. van Binsbergen 1992 and in press (c) – expressed not only in verbal teasing but also in obligations of unconditional generosity, support, and funerary services. Such joking is an important social idiom for the expression of historical group conflict and the accommodation of group status differences. Although such joking relationships have been reported from many parts of the world, Tauchmann (personal communication 2010) looks upon their specific forms in sub-Saharan Africa as a Sunda trait, and lists *rulers' ius primae noctis* as another such trait. Not surprisingly, such joking relations have also been reported for Madagascar (Hébert 1958). Given the undisputed continuity between South Asian Buddhism, and Indonesia in the first millennium CE, one would not be surprised to find echoes of the same institution in a Sri Lankan kingship context.

⁶² However, as I have discussed in fully referenced detail in van Binsbergen 2010a: 192 f., this motif is not at all specific to the Nkoya but has a wide global distribution.

	parallels, the Buddha demonstrates his superior power over a snake associated with Kashyapa's place of worship, and thus converts him to Buddhism	etymology, seeks to steal the moon from Heaven as a regalia, but collapses in the process; see discussion in main text
248	'on his wanderings, the Buddha reaches Shravasti, the capital of Kola, where he lived and where he wished to build a Temple and dedicate it to the fraternity'	Nkoya kings, like many dynasties in South Central Africa, claim to hail from Kola, a mythical, 'distant Northern land'. Although this is beyond our scope in this Table, there are more applications of the word or name <i>kola</i> in the South Asian context (the Kola Sanni demon; the meaning of kola as 'hog, pig' in several relevant South Asian languages ⁶³), hence with an implied reference to the principal South and South East Asian god Vishnu (who may be depicted in that animal shape), but also reminiscent of the taboo on pork in many Bantu-speaking settings, and with the legend that the founders of the Nkoya dynasties left the Mwaat Yaamv's ['King of Death'! – we are in the middle of myth here even though Mwaat Yaav has been a recognised Paramount Chief's title in Congo], Musumba capital in South Congo because of the humiliation of being housed by the pigsties) and each has something to contribute to our view of Nkoya-South Asian relationships. There may also be a link with the Tamil Chola dynasty, which ruled large parts of South India and Ceylon from obscure and legendary beginning around the beginning of the Common Era, to the late 13th c. CE.

Table 2. Nkoya / Buddhist parallels gleaned from Musaeus-Higgins 1914/ 2000.

As a result of my explorations into the African applicability of Oppenheimer's Sunda thesis, I have recently come to the conclusion that Tauchmann is right in his claim that a sizeable South and / or South East Asian population was resident in sub-Saharan Africa in the first and second millennium of the Common Era (*cf.* Hromnik 1981). Perhaps an East Asian, Chinese contingent needs to be added to this, in the light of the first section of the present argument. The great, early-state associated archaeological complexes of Great Zimbabwe and Mapungubwe in Southern Africa, with their recognised transcontinental trade links, have been obvious candidates as the locations for such Asian presence (Caton-Thompson 1931; Fouché & Gardner 1937-1940). But also the Lunda region (of which the Nkoya form the Southernmost extension) seems a serious candidate (*cf.* van Binsbergen 2012a, 2012b).

⁶³ Sanskrit, Pali and Sinhalese; but not in the Dravidian family including Tamil, where 'pig' is denoted by reflexes of proto-Dravidian **pand_*; *cf.*? Pandava, the five brothers married to Draupadi who is venerated as a goddess in Southern India – Hildebeitel 1991. When applied to South Central Africa, the *kola* / 'pig' connection may be a red herring, for (as the many Nkoya parallels in Tamil culture and history as brought out by Chitty 1934/ 1992 indicate) it is especially with Tamil that we detect South Central African resonances.



Fig. 10. Vishnu with a hog's snout as depicted on a relief at Mahabalipuram, Tamil Nadu, South India

6. Obscuring transcontinental continuities from the local actors' consciousness

6.1. Asian representations of Africa and Africans are rare and may tend towards demonisation and racism

Meanwhile a problem needs to be faced that considerably complicates our approach to Africa's transcontinental continuities in pre- and protohistory: Asian representations of Africa and Africans are rare and tend towards demonisation. The study of African-Asian connections would be much easier if, on either side of the Indian Ocean, historical actors would display conscious awareness of such connections. This turns out to be very rarely the case. The Asian agents appearing to have culturally and genetically contributed to sub-Saharan Africa in recent millennia, are virtually invisible – by Robert Dick-Read's (2005) apt expression, they have been *Phantom Voyagers*. The South and East Asian, 'Sunda' elements I believe to detect in South Central, Southern, and West African kingship and religion, are hardly ever articulated in the local consciousness – except to the minute extent that cults of affliction, and *Conus* shell regalia, in the interior of South Central Africa are consciously traced to the Indian Ocean coast, – but not beyond. In Asia a similar situation is found. Just as in Chinese, 'Africa' is 非洲 *fēi zhōu* 'The Non-Continent',⁶⁴ so also in Sri Lanka Africa was conceptually remote, and tended to be demonised – like in a series of statues in the Uggalwala Temple 20 km East of the town of

⁶⁴ It may be that I interpret this lexical item out of context. The basic meaning of 洲 *zhōu* is 'island in a river', hence a stretch of land that can be circumnavigated on all sides. Given the Isthmus of Suez, this condition does literally not apply to Africa – despite man-made canals connecting the Mediterranean Sea and the Red Sea both in Antiquity and in modern times. The Korean map I show in Fig. 5 reveals that East Asian detailed maritime knowledge (not necessarily first-hand) reached as far as the Mediterranean and Greece. So rather than as an expression of contempt, 非洲 *fēi zhōu* 'The Non-Continent' might be taken as a neutral and correct geographical expression.

Galle, where the Buddha image is surrounded by a square of statues of orange-attired monks, at whose feet kneel statues representing all local and overseas peoples featuring in the Lankan maritime intercontinental complex – with at the end what seem demonised Africans (Fig. 12). Also in Museums, the extension of the Lankan maritime intercontinental complex to Africa is implied (*e.g.* in relation to African products of domestications such as kaffircorn, bullrush millet, a type of cattle, and trade beads⁶⁵) but never highlighted.⁶⁶

6.2. In search of the African contribution to Asia: Another look at Africa's, and Asia's demons

Sri Lanka's popular religious and therapeutic scene is replete with demons, often represented through very specific and elaborate masks.⁶⁷ Apparent echoes of these cults may be detected on Madagascar, where possession trance has been described as a standard religious expression.⁶⁸ These cults are also quite similar to the ecstatic cults of affliction and healing we encounter in South Central and Southern Africa (*cf.* van Binsbergen 1981, 2003, and references cited there). The standard model of interpretation, also in my own work, has been that the African forms are local adaptations of transcontinental South Asian ones – and indeed, in the interior of the continent they are considered as utterly alien, recent arrivals, specifically from the East, presumably from the Indian Ocean coast (*cf.* Alpers 1984). There can hardly be any doubt that *in recent centuries*, the flow of these cultic models has been largely from East to West, from South Asia to sub-Saharan Africa, across the Indian Ocean. However, what if we take into extent the full period of over five millennia which we have proposed for our global maritime network? Before the Neolithic times, population exchanges between Africa and Asia are implied in the Out-of-Africa and the Back-into-Africa models, and some of these have left archaeological traces in the Syro-Palestinian region (Bar-Yosef 1987). It stands to reason that with the generally recognised transfers of African products of domestication to Asia in Neolithic times (cattle, selected foodcrops) also cultural items were transmitted, but how to identify them?

The Afrocentrist educationalist and linguist Clyde Winters, similarly implying a global maritime network since the Bronze Age, has claimed very considerable African linguistic and political impact on South and East Asia (Mande elements in Sumerian and Dravidian; African

⁶⁵ In the Sri Lanka National Museum, Colombo, an African provenance is specifically claimed for carnelian / cornelian beads on display, and indeed, similar beads are widespread as trade beads especially in the Sahara and its fringes. However, they are not indigenous to Africa, but hail from Eurasia. The oldest attestation of human use of worked carnelian is from Neolithic Mehrgarh, Baluchistan, Pakistan (Anonymous, 2011, 'carnelian'). By the same token, ostrich-shell beads are commonly (not only in the South Asian situation but also in regard of Ancient Egypt and other parts of Africa) attributed to the presence and activities of Khoisan speakers – notably the hunter-gathers of South Western Africa (San) and of isolated groups in Tanzania. The situation is however far more complex and far less specific, once we realise that (a) Anatomically Modern Humans have been associated with such shells since at least 70 ka BP in South and East Africa; (b) that identical artefacts have also been attested (just like the ostrich itself occurred in South Asia in Upper Palaeolithic times (*cf.* Bednarik 1993) ; and (c) that ostrich-shell beads are strikingly similar to similarly strung shell beads which, from the Upper Palaeolithic on, have had a wide global distribution including Europe (*e.g.* Dimitrijevic & Tripkovic 2006; Tripkovic 2006). For a very full discussion of ostrich shell in cultural history, *cf.* Laufer 1926.

⁶⁶ It is remarkable that similar factors appear to have governed, both inside and outside academia, and both in China and in the West, the collective amnesia concerning China's possible indebtedness to Ancient Mesopotamia, especially in regard of *I Ching*; *cf.* van Binsbergen 2012d.

⁶⁷ Kapferer 1997; Wirz 1954; Caldwell 1829; Wijesekera 1987; Anonymous 2011 'Sanni Yakuma'; Bailey & de Silva 2006; Obeyesekere 1990; Claus *et al.* 2003.

⁶⁸ *Cf.* Besterman 1928-1929; Dupré 2001; Estrade 1985; Lahady 1979; Rusillon 1912; Sharp 1999; Lambek 1981.

founders of the Xia 夏朝 and Shang 商朝 dynasties; not to mention the Americas), but his publications – although often in peer-reviewed journals – are difficult to find and cannot be reviewed here. Note that his proposed transcontinental trajectory is the mirror image of the westbound Sunda trajectory on the basis of the Oppenheimer/Dick-Read/Tauchmann hypothesis – and since we have agreed that the global maritime network is to be defined as multidirectional and multicentred, both points of view could be correct. In a recent draft paper (van Binsbergen 2010b) I discussed the popular ecstatic fire cult found in Bali and elsewhere in South East Asia. Here fire is not so much in itself the object of veneration; rather, the capability to endure exposure to fire is proof of the presence of the divinity. Very different from the South and East Asian ritual Great Tradition centring on the fire god Agni and known as *homa* in both Hinduism and Buddhism (Staal 1984), there is in these popular fire cults much apparent continuity with the ecstatic cults of the circum-Saharan region (notably the West and North African *bori* cult, in which likewise rider and horse constitute the dominant metaphor). Could these popular fire cults be among the submerged *African* elements we have been looking for, largely in vain? Would the proposed installation of a global maritime network from the Neolithic onward, have made for the travelling of ecstatic cults, not only from South Asia to sub-Saharan Africa (for which there is considerable circumstantial evidence, but from the last few millennia), but also the other way around?

There are however several difficulties with the hypothesis of ecstatic cults as Africa's gift to Asia. In the first place, such cults, while widespread in present-day Africa, do not really appear to be at home there. In a process that is historically attested (albeit patchily) for the second millennium CE (which is when we witness the first signs of shamanism in Ancient Mesopotamia (Ritter 1965; van Binsbergen & Wiggermann 2000), but that started probably considerably earlier, Sacred Outsiders installed themselves

- as bards,
- Islamic saints,
- leopard-skin chiefs,
- kings, and
- *sangoma* spirit mediums

around the northern, eastern and southern periphery of sub-Saharan Africa, wearing their leopard skins as a sign that they – as heralds, law-givers, healers, and mediators with the non-human, the ancestral and the divine – transcended the local African order (van Binsbergen 2004). In the second place, given the multidirectional, multicentred nature of the proposed global maritime network, it seems like taking one step back if still we insist on precisely determining the source and direction of transmission and innovation in the case of unmistakably transcontinental phenomena such as these cults. Instead, I propose a return to what seemed a plausible interpretation of recent, translocal, non-ancestral cults of affliction in South Central Africa (van Binsbergen 1981): the central motivating imagery of such cults, their ultimate implied referent, is not so much a particular, distant area of provenance, *but the very fact of proto-globalisation itself*, i.e. the opening-up of the local world to diffuse and intangible outside influences that cannot be controlled and that pose new thread, challenges and venues to power. In other words, such cults may not in the first place be manifestations of distant culture A in local B, but essentially an inchoate product whose cultural message revolves around the mutual interpenetration of A and B. One of the most striking aspects of the transcontinental processes we try to identify in the present argument, is the loss of consistence, the blurring of purity of types: hybridity and fragmentation are the hallmarks of proto-globalisation, and the cultural

forms it produces are neither here nor there, but reflect a plurality of provenances and an haphazard bricolage of cultural transformation and innovation.

La grande dame of francophone African history, Cathérine Coquery-Vidrovitch, recently (2012) summarised the African transcontinental contribution to the wider world since Early Modern times in plain material terms: ‘gold and slaves’. While we still have to identify the specific nature of Africa’s transcontinental cultural contributions to Asia in the last two millennia, that there was enough Africa-Asia movement to selectively transmit African culture is not in doubt. Black African slaves were sufficiently abundant in T’ang dynasty 唐朝 China (618-907 CE) to give rise to an entire genre of belletrise there, highlighting the exploits of a Black hero with trickster connotations (Irwin 1977). Sri Lanka and Indonesia have African minorities, maintaining a level of distinctiveness especially in the expressive domains such as music and dance, as a result of Africans moving East as slaves and soldiers in Early Modern times. Barnes (1975) attributes the presence of mankala in Indonesia to such movement, and it might also explain the presence of the game in Sri Lanka (see van Binsbergen 2012c).

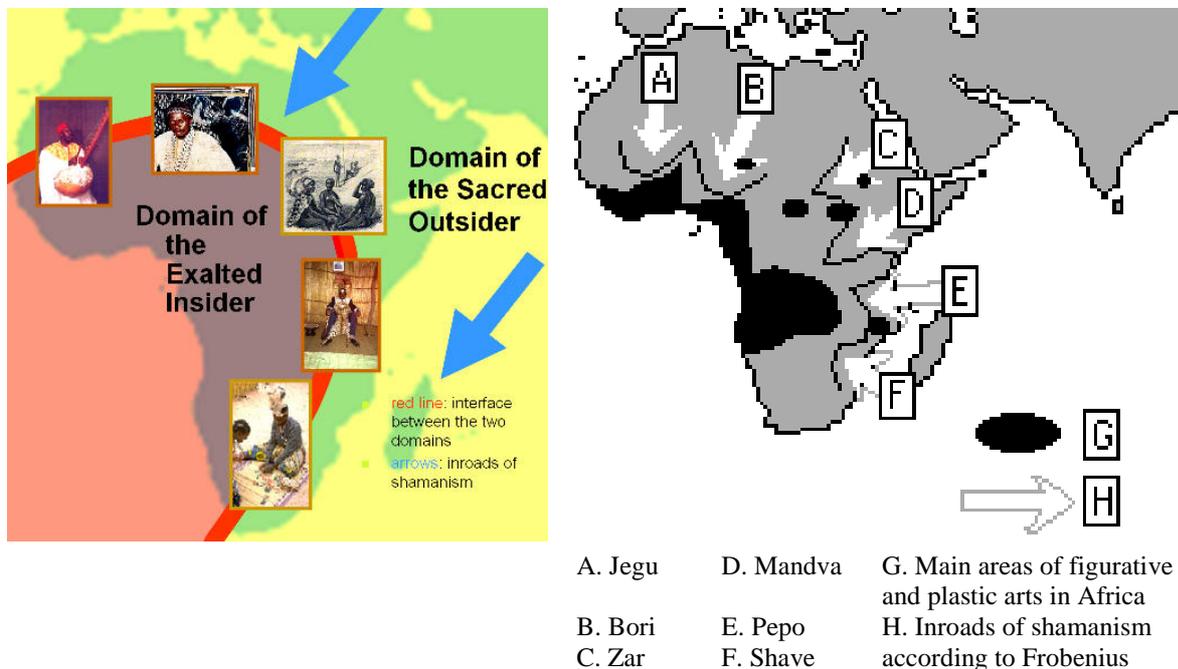


Fig. 11. a. Bards, Islamic saints, Nilotic speaking leopard-skin chiefs, Bantu speaking kings, and spirit mediums: A fringe of Sacred Outsiders around sub-Saharan Africa in protohistorical times, wearing leopard-skin as their emblem of office; b. The idea of such an intercontinental influx of shamanistic elements from Asia was already launched by Frobenius (1954 / 1933: 169-173): map rendering Frobenius’ ideas concerning the inroads of named shamanistic cults (A-F) as alternatives to figurative and plastic arts in Africa.

6.3. Obscuring from consciousness (continued)

Thus it appears as if a similar geopolitical ideology that has led to recent scholarship’s widespread paradigmatic repression of Africa’s transcontinental continuities in pre- and protohistory, has also informed Asian consciousness and artistic representation for millennia. Despite the passionate claims of the absence of anti-Black racism in classical and medieval times, and the attempts to construct Modern anti-Black racism as primarily a justification of the Transatlantic slave trade and colonial expansion (cf. Snowden 1970; Bernal 1987; Davidson 1987), racism is apparently not just an original invention of the North Atlantic region in Early

Modern times – as even a superficial inspection of North African, Islamic and South Asian social perceptions of somatic differences in pigmentation would already make emphatically clear.



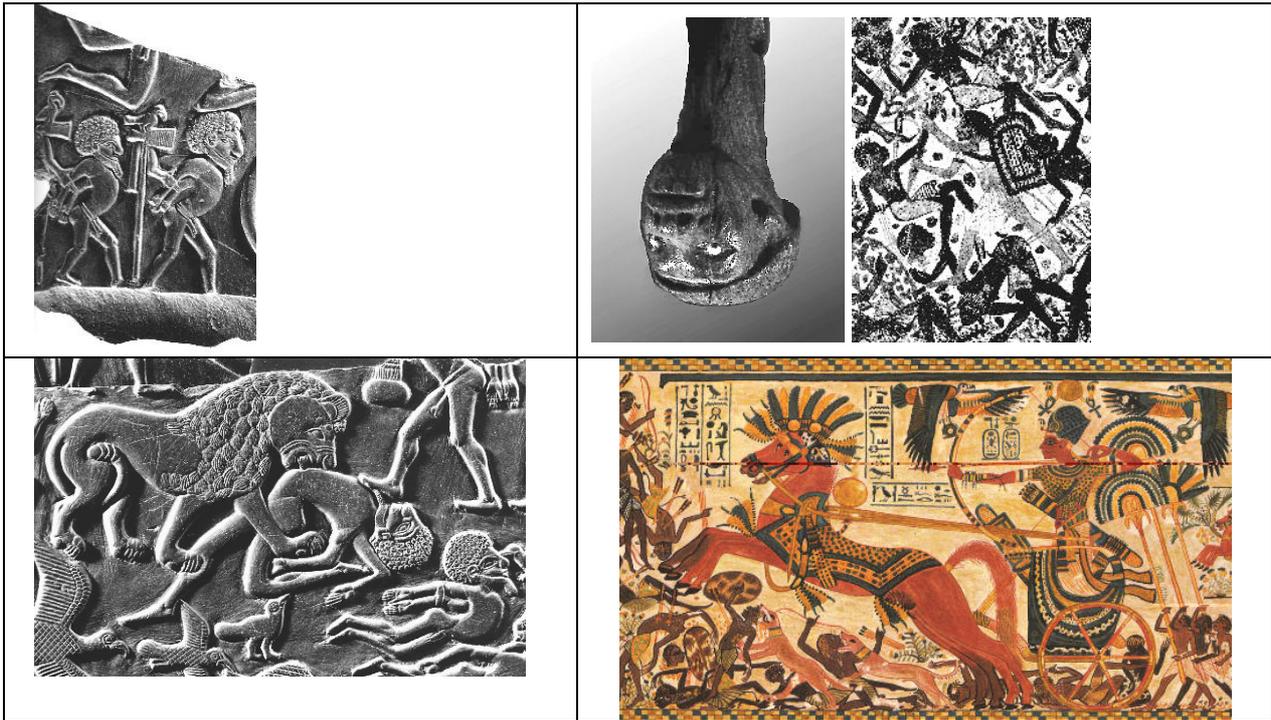
*Fig. 12. African demonised in Buddhist iconography in South Sri Lanka.*⁶⁹

And even where an African connection is consciously affirmed, as is the case (at least in popular tradition – no inscriptions accompany the paintings) for one of the damsels depicted in a crevice half-way the famous Sigiriya rock fortress in Central Sri Lanka, and known as ‘the African lady’ (fig. 13), dating from the early 2nd mill. CE, and again representing various local and overseas peoples); the portrait’s African features and pigmentation suggest anything but an African origin – and in fact, the third nipple suggests that we are looking at an image of the Lankan/ Tamil queen Kuwene (Chitty 1934 / 1992: 10 f.), an epiphany of the Hindu goddess Meenakshee centrally venerated at the South Indian town of Madurai.



Fig. 13. One of the Sigiriya ‘damsels’, known as ‘the African lady’ – note the double left-hand nipple.

⁶⁹ My fieldwork in Sri Lanka, April-May 2011, was financed by the African Studies Centre, Leiden, for which I wish to register my great indebtedness.



Left-hand column (a and d): Battlefield (Vultures, Giraffes, Lion) palette, perhaps from Abydos, Late Predynastic (c. 3150 BCE), British Museum 20791 and Ashmolean Museum 1892.1171. There is a perfect join between the fragments. Note the evidence of circumcision; *cf.* Spencer 1980, n. 576, p. 64, with full bibliography.

Right-hand column: b: Hollow wooden statuette of a Black African, to be mounted upside down at the lower end of an ancient Egyptian staff; New Kingdom, circa 1300-1200 B.C.E; Wildung n.d. (1997): 150, number 150; c: Black Africans massacred by an Egyptian warrior, as depicted on a stuccoed wooden chest, tomb of Tut-^cnh-Amun, Eighteenth Dynasty, 14th century B.C.E., adapted after: Strouhal 1993; d., idem, likewise from a chest in the treasure of Tut-^cnh-Amun.

Fig. 14. Black Africans depicted as victims in Ancient Egyptian iconography through the ages.

6.4. Also within Africa, the local actors' awareness of North-South indebtedness is shunned

Incidentally, the same apparent, amnesia-producing racism attends the claim (perfectly plausible, in fact inescapable) of intra-African continuities between Ancient Egypt (once firmly established as one of the Ancient World's most powerful and long-lived states) and sub-Saharan Africa: whether we wish to stress (I have called this 'Fairman's dilemma'; *cf.* Fairman 1965) sub-Saharan Africa's indebtedness to Egypt,⁷⁰ or Ancient Egypt's indebtedness to sub-Saharan Africa (*e.g.* Petrie 1914a, 1914b; Hoffman 1979; Celenko 1996) – from neither perspective one would really expect the Ancient Egyptian iconographic convention – persistent from pre-Dynastic times (4th mill. BCE) to the Late Period (1st mill. BCE) where Black Africans are reduced to powerless slain enemies, sacrificial victims, slaves, even end pieces of walking canes and chair legs so that they would automatically and constantly be downtrodden (*cf.* Fig. 14).

⁷⁰ E.g. Seligmann, Meyerowitch, Wainwright etc. – a brief overview of the relevant literature in van Binsbergen 2011c: 268 f. [**ziet eruit als een herhaling**]

6.5. Why was awareness of Asian-African continuities obliterated from the local actors' consciousness?

No doubt a critical, anti-hegemonic History of Ideas can help us to understand why the possibility, rather, the certainty of transcontinental continuities was not admitted to the North Atlantic modern mind. However, if it is true that there has been considerable Asian-African cultural, political and mythological interpenetration in the course of the Common Era or even since the Bronze Age, why then was virtually all awareness of such Asian-African continuities obliterated from the local actors' consciousness? This has to be a central question in our argument,⁷¹ and I would suggest that an answer would include the following factors, among others:

- to the extent to which Asian influences were underpinned by very specific forms of literate and organised Asian religion – Hinduism and Buddhism – the awareness disappeared as soon as the relevant forms of literacy, religious leadership, and Asian-derived state support evaporated;
- the short-lived nature and almost inevitable collapse of African state systems (Egypt being an exception, although even Egypt's history has known its well-recognised periods of chaos and collapse) has much to do with the exceptionally low carrying capacity of African soils, which – often dating from pre-Cambrian eras – are among the oldest and most eroded, most depleted in the world; states therefore thrive not so much on sustained regional agricultural production and its appropriation and subsequent recirculation by a ruling elite, but on the violent and destructive appropriation of both regional and transregional products and human personnel – which makes such states dependent on global markets beyond their control
- most African state systems encountered and scientifically studied in Early Modern and Modern times, derived much of their local legitimacy from the rulers' link with the local earth, the earth cult, and the local officiants in that cult (often considered 'owners' or 'masters' of the land); under such circumstances, shedding distant associations and posing as local is an excellent strategy
- to the extent to which Asian-influenced states on African soil had a Buddhist or Hinduist orientation, the advent of Islam in the course of the 2nd mill. CE made for a radical, theologically underpinned discontinuity, where (like in many parts of Asia, especially Central Asia, right up to the present day) the suppression of pre-Islamic religious forms and their material vestiges was pursued with pious fanaticism. If by the onset of British expansion in India in the late 18th c. CE (Allen 2002) Buddhism had been so radically wiped out – by the joined efforts of Islam and Hinduism – that it had to be very gradually brought back to scholarly awareness and retrieved through intensive archaeological and documentary/scriptural reconstructions, much like the Sumerian civilisation of Ancient Mesopotamia was retrieved in the course of the 19th century, then we have a model for the oblivion attending Asian influence in Africa, even if going back only one millennium or less.

7. Extension to West Africa

Although my own ethnographic expertise is mainly on South Central and Southern Africa,

⁷¹ For which I am indebted to Patricia van Binsbergen.

shorter spells of fieldwork in West Africa,⁷² once linked with the comparative knowledge I have derived from research supervision and library research, suggest that we may well extend the hypothetical ‘Sunda’ (i.e. South East, South and East Asian) protohistoric influence on Africa, to include West Africa. We may invoke a whole series of West African traits as indicative of such influence:

- the use of umbrellas in royal ceremony
- in general, kingship in East, South Central, Southern, and West Africa
- the preponderance of cults of affliction reminiscent of the Indian Ocean region
- the iconographic and agricultural material presented by Robert Dick-Read (2005)
- masks, generally associated with East, South Central and West Africa, yet conceivably stimulated there under the impact of the extensive mask rites of South and South East Asia – however, at the present, limited state of our knowledge the opposite vector appears also quite plausible.

8. Beyond the empirical fruits of anthropological fieldwork: Its existential and political fruits

8.1. Crossing boundaries during the intercultural encounter of fieldwork, then deconstructing these boundaries in subsequent theoretical reflection

I had the great good fortune that the three major contexts of my African fieldwork, over the decades (the highlands of North-western Tunisia, the Nkoya people of Zambia in town and in the rural areas, and the booming urban society of Francistown, Botswana) prominently featured ecstatic cults; and that I was given the institutional and relational means to make these cults into the cornerstones of my anthropological, historical and even philosophical writings – contrary to my initial formal research plans. The promise of crossing and dissolution of cultural, linguistic, personality, boundaries – even of the boundaries between genders, generations, life and death, human and divine – is a central theme in such cults. This invites the researcher’s unconditional boundary crossing *into* the host society, its beliefs and especially its bodily enacted (including repetitive and trance-inducing; and as such largely pre-verbal) ritual actions. But also, these cults’ local and transregional past, have enabled them to cross great geographical and social distances. Thus they have constituted the ideal topic from which to embark on a prolonged

⁷² In the years 1981-1983 I conducted nearly half a year of fieldwork on the efficacy of traditional psychiatry in Guinea Bissau, working from the remote rural village of Calequise, among the Manjak people; I am indebted to the psychiatrist Joop de Jong for introducing me to the field, facilitating my stay, and stimulating co-operation. Here I sustained fantasies of transcontinental, especially East and South East Asian influences which however at the time I had neither the inclination nor the resources to substantiate; I was still a main-stream historicising anthropologist, and no attempts was yet being made, in the international literature, to revive and vindicate the diffusionist theories of transcontinental continuities. However, I could not escape the impression that the irrigated rice cultivation, with the use of iron-reinforced digging sticks several metres long, on inundated plots surrounded by dykes, owed a considerable debt to Asia. A four-hour track through the rain forest separated Calequise from the open sea, and along it one encountered mementoes of seafaring (anchors, prows) raised to the status of local shrines. The gaudily coloured local statuettes of birds (especially hornbills – a species of immense symbolic significance in South East Asia) and of royal ancestors reminded me of the art of the head-hunting Ifugao and other South East Asian peoples. So did the maritime raiding of the Manjak’s southern neighbours, the Bijagos, superb mariners of the high seas. While I never pursued these inklings at the time, they helped prepare me for the investigation of Asian influences in the two field settings where I did far more extensive fieldwork over far more years: the Zambian Nkoya and the Botswana *sangomas*. I was not in the least surprised when ideas on Sunda influence upon Africa were also extended to West Africa (Dick-Read; and, *avant la lettre*, Dart, Jones).

study of transcontinental continuities, throwing into relief both enduring similarities and local specificities – the results, often, of localising transformations and innovations. In the process, such cults are also deconstructing the classic anthropology's obsession with social relationships (the classic assumption⁷³ that all religious imagination and action is simply a model of and for actual social relationships concretely existing on the ground, is far too much of a simplification in the domain of ecstatic cults and healing), boundaries and distancing objectification between researcher and the researched. Instead they invite the researcher to turn the intercultural encounter in the field into a most productive laboratory situation for the exploration and experiencing of such continuities.

Intellectually, interculturally and existentially, my 'Becoming a sangoma'⁷⁴ (title of a piece I drafted in 1990 and published a few months later) was the turning point for me. The shocking point is not that, from then on, I would combine my scientific work with going through the motions as a diviner and healer – the latter could be merely learned imitative behaviour, as every anthropologist adopts in the field. The shocking point is that when I go through these motions, effects seem to be produced (the production of scraps of knowledge about my clients I could not have acquired by ordinary sensory means; the signs of actual effective healing) which have made me suspect that *sangoma* science – contrary to the condescending, dismissive perspective of North Atlantic religious anthropology) may have its own validity parallel to that of North Atlantic science (*cf.* van Binsbergen 2003, 2007 2009). Adopting a layered (and, admittedly partly performative – but performativity is an aspect of all religious leadership, certainly among the *sangomas*, where it is explicitly taught to novices and trainees) identity as *sangoma* and as Nkoya prince (even chief, from 2011 on), engaging in African rituals, healing, divination and philosophy, and adopting a bricolaged African worldview hinging on ancestral continuity and intercession, I felt free to leave behind the localising political correctness of 'Africa for the Africans'.⁷⁵

8.2. Transcontinental continuities: Giving Africa a place among the continents, but reducing it to passivity once more?

The West has, since Early Modern times including the writings of Kant and Hegel, constructed itself by claiming contrastive identity vis-à-vis Africa and Africans. That inveterate tendency in North Atlantic thought is not over – as my sallies into Philosophers' Land have made clear to me over the past decade and a half. A telling example is the following. Luigi Cavalli-Sforza (*1922-) has been one of the world's leading geneticists under the pre-molecular-biology

⁷³ Feuerbach n.d. [1957], 1967 [1846]; Marx 1941; Marx & Engels 1975; Godelier 1975; Feuchtwang 1975; Maduro 1975; Mudimbe 1967; Geertz 1966. These Marxist references bring me to acknowledge my indebtedness to my fellow-members of the Amsterdam Working Group on Marxist Anthropology, who in the late 1970s created a stimulating environment for my Africanist and theoretical work.

⁷⁴ *Cf.* van Binsbergen 1991, 2003: ch 5, pp. 155-193. The latter book is, among other topics, concerned with the problem of how to overcome the hegemonic, subordinating stance of the anthropology of religion, which may be summarised as follows 'I understand why you could not by yourself arrive at my superior, deconstructive insight in your religion; your religious convictions, of course, are not true and cannot be true, but if you could please step aside, I will explain to you why you erroneously cling to them'.

⁷⁵ This is not the place to consider in detail my intimate relation with Afrocentricity across the decades. Having increasingly identified as an African in the sense of Robert Sobukwe ('a person who considers Africa home'), let it suffice for me to say that affirming *both* scientific methodically underpinned truth, and Africa's dynamic place among the continents, is more important in the long run, certainly for Africa and Africans, than merely contemplating a glorious origin and distant past whilst depriving oneself intellectually of the main tools (methodic scientific ones) to fully participate in shaping the future.

paradigm of classic genetic markers (*cf.* his monumental synthesis Cavalli-Sforza *et al.* 1994). Fig. A2 presents his much-cited diagram (published as recently as Cavalli-Sforza 1997: 7722) of the correspondence of major genetic and linguistic groupings of Anatomically Modern Humans. Here African languages and population groups are consistently relegated to the far periphery of present-day humanity – genetically clustering together whereas the entire rest of humanity constitutes the other cluster.

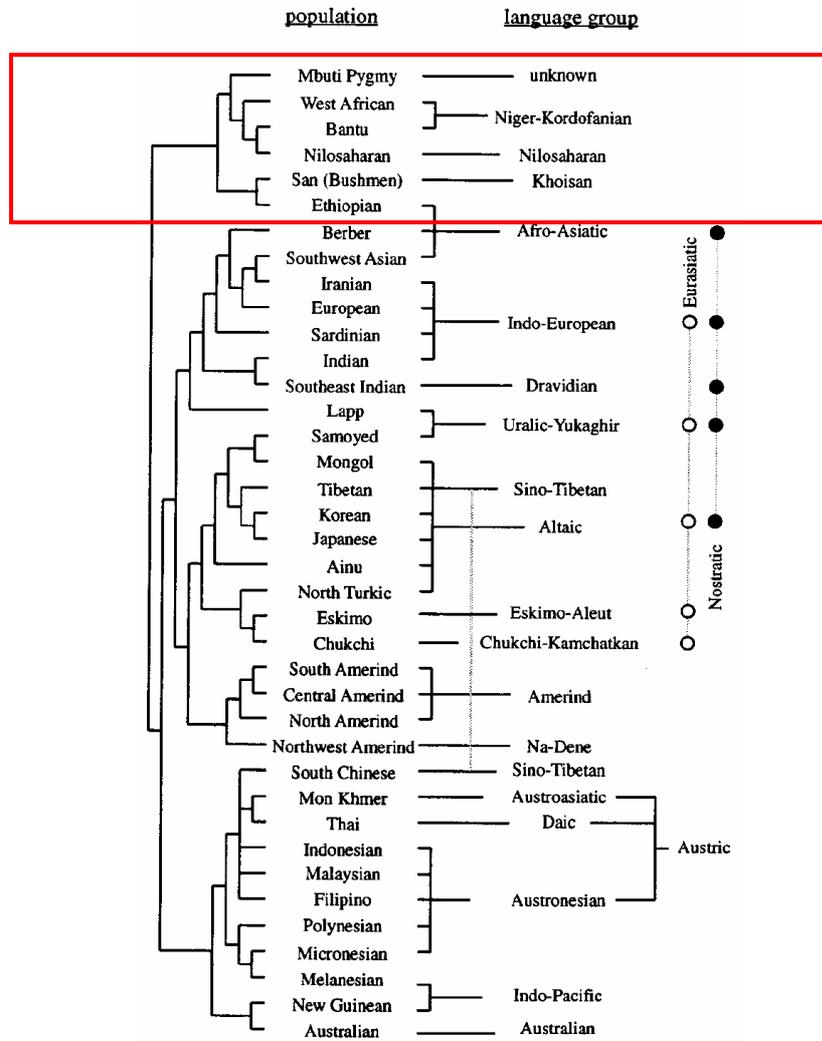


Fig. 15. The othering of Africans disguised as inescapable science.

Meanwhile, this apparently inescapable scientific verdict as to the irreparable otherness of Africans has to be revoked, as a result not only of political correctness, but especially as a result of three recent developments in empirical science:

- (a) the geneticists' state-of-the art 'Back-into-Africa' hypothesis, (*e.g.* Hammer *et al.* 1998; Cruciani *et al.* 2002; Underhill 2004; Coia *et al.* 2005) which affirms genetic continuity between present-day Asian and African populations),

- (b) long-range comparative linguistics (Starostin & Starostin 1998-2008, which leads us to recognise⁷⁶ the extensive *Borean roots in the African Khoisan and Niger-Congo macrophyla – like in all other macrophyla spoken today); and
- (c) comparative mythology (van Binsbergen 2010a, stressing the great continuity between African and Eurasian mythologies).

By stressing Africa's transcontinental continuities in pre- and protohistory, we are at least affirming that the African continent has always been part of the wider world. That is one step in the right direction, but it is not enough to restore Africa to its proper place among the continents in the modern world – for cynically, also the trans-Atlantic and trans-Indian-Ocean slave trade in Africans could be read as such an affirmation of Africa as part of the wider world.

⁷⁶ van Binsbergen 2010a, 2010b, 2011b, in press (e); van Binsbergen & Woudhuizen 2011. My principal findings in this respect are contained in the dendrogram of Fig. 16, where today's linguistic macrophyla are clustered according to the extent and the specific pattern in which they can be argued to contain reflexes of the hypothetical reconstructed parent language *Borean, proposed to be spoken in Central Asian in the Upper Palaeolithic. The results are truly remarkable in that they bring out the relatively close affinity between

- a. a central cluster of macrophyla, comprising Eurasiatic (e.g. Indo-European, Dravidian), Afroasiatic (e.g. Semitic, Ancient Egyptian, Berber, Cushitic, Omotic, Chadic – this macrophylum is represented both in Asia and in Africa) and Sino-Caucasian (e.g. Sino-Tibetan, Basque, Yenissei, Na-Denē), on the one hand, and
- b. a peripheral cluster of macrophyla, comprising today's African macrophyla Niger-Congo (including Bantu), Nilo-Saharan (including Nilotic languages) and Khoisan, as well as Austric (including Austroasiatic and Austronesian: continental and insular South East Asia, and of Oceania) and Amerind.

The Middle Palaeolithic background to this bifurcation, and its correspondence with genetic haplotypes (mtDNA types) I have suggested elsewhere (van Binsbergen & Woudhuizen 2011). That Niger-Congo and Austric have considerable affinity is already suggested by the fact that the eponymical Bantu (< Niger-Congo) lexical root *-ntu*, 'human', comes back as *taw*, 'human', in proto-Austronesian. However, there are substantial reasons for us not to isolate the case of these two macrophyla, but to see this correspondence as just two indications of a truly 'global etymology' (cf. Bengtson & Ruhlen 1994; however, they do not include this case), whose outlines I have sketched in van Binsbergen 2010a: 155 f., around the semantics 'under, bottom, human'. Meanwhile it is very likely that the spread of Bantu (< Niger-Congo) as a phylum in Africa, from the 1st mill. BCE onward, and the expansion of South East Asian demographic / genetic and cultural influence in that continent, have gone hand in hand, and that it is in that combination in the most recent millennia, rather than in the common *Borean elements of both Austric and Niger-Congo in the Upper Palaeolithic, that we must look of an explanation of the *-ntu* / *taw* parallelism.

This means that there is evidence of a considerable linguistic *communality of origin* between Asia and Africa, going back to the Upper Palaeolithic, which however in that same period led to an early split between the peripheral cluster (including most macrophyla now represented in Africa, South East Asia and Oceania) and the central cluster (including most macrophyla now represented in Asia). However, the subsequent 'Back-into-Africa' migration, as brought out by recent genetic (as distinct from linguistic) research, made for considerable demic diffusion of Asian cultural and linguistic material into Africa. To this we may add the effects of the 'cross model' of Pelasgian diffusion from the Early Bronze Age onward. Meanwhile, the proposed establishment of a multcentred and multidirectional global nautical network from the Neolithic onwards suggests that Africa was not exclusively on the receiving side but also donated genetic, cultural (including religious) and linguistic material to Asia.

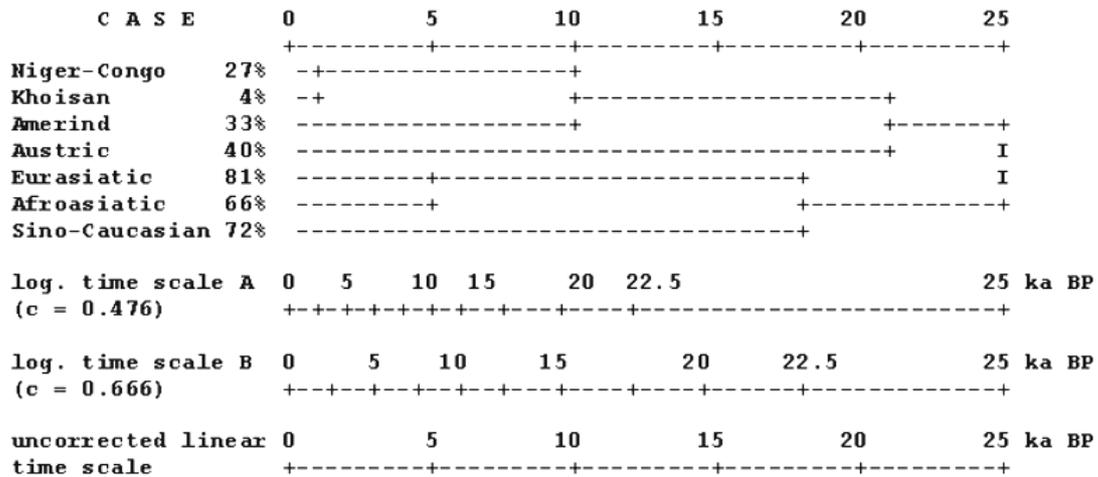


Fig. 16. Cluster analysis of *Borean reflexes in macrophyla.

How can we prevent that our recognition of Asian-African continuities has the effect of reducing Africa, in the scientific and popular perception, once more to total passivity? Despite the glorious origin of Anatomically Modern Humans, 200 ka BP (and of humankind in general, 3 or 4 million years ago), in Africa, the Back-into-Africa population genetic movement since 15 ka BP (as discovered by geneticists in recent years) suggests (contrary to Strong Afrocentrism) that, by and large, in recent millennia, more has moved westward, into Africa, than eastward, into Asia; and the increasing, detailed empirical evidence from culture, religion, political systems, material culture etc. appears to point in the same direction. Yet the global maritime network which we have postulated to grow from humble regional beginnings in the Neolithic, is explicitly conceived as multidirectional and multcentred, suggestive of two-way traffic between Africa and Asia.

This invites us to try and put the record straight and search for Africa in Asia. This is by far more difficult than to search for Asia in Africa, even though our insistence on a multidirectional, multcentred global maritime network, rather than in a onedirectional flow from Asia to Africa, already gives us a good start.

Asia-Africa comparisons are hampered by an asymmetry in the archaeological and documentary record on either side of the Indian Ocean. Because Asian civilisations have been literate for three to five millennia, and most of sub-Saharan Africa only for a few centuries (with Ethiopia, the West African centres of Islamic learning, and the Swahili coast as notable exemptions), we tend to be much better informed, in much more detail, on Asian historical situations in the course of the last two millennia, than on African ones – even though present-day Africanists would be less likely than those of one or two generations ago, to fall into the trap of taking African situations as recorded in historical times, to be timelessly representative for the African past. So we have little means of identifying relatively recent (1st and 2nd millennium CE) African borrowings on Asian soil as originally – they would almost irretrievably disguise as Asian – just as it is only by accident, by the unique opportunity of catching in a comparative net of transcontinental parallels, Southern African divination forms that looked so convincingly African, that I detected their older °Abbāṣīd, perhaps even Chinese, surface manifestations. Above I have explored some of the possible African contributions to Asia in the field of ecstatic religion, but much more work is required here. In the field of comparative ethnography and

comparative religion there is an enormous exercise of codification, classification and comparison ahead of us, before we can claim to have exhausted the possibility of identifying African traits in Asia.⁷⁷

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⁷⁷ Given the counter-paradigmatic nature of African influences on Asia (in previous scholarship, at least), combined with the historical actors' tendency to suppress and deny African-Asian contacts, evidence of such influences may be oblique and difficult to appreciate. What, for instance, should we make of the discovery, in Southeast Asia, of a tone system strongly reminiscent of African tone systems (Hyman 2007; Evans 2008, 2009): coincidence? African intrusion on Asian soil? Or a reminder of the proposed Asian contributions to Niger-Congo especially Bantu?

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