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Rethinking Africa's transcontinental continuities in pre- and protohistory

An international conference to mark the retirement of Wim van Binsbergen, and one of the activities in the context of the 65th anniversary of the African Studies Centre, Leiden (the Netherlands)

Leiden, the Netherlands, ca. 12-13 April 2012 (exact venue and dates to be announced)

CALL FOR PAPERS

> *this conference is open to Africanists, archaeologists, linguists, geneticists, comparative mythologists, comparative anthropologists / ethnologists, palaeoanthropologists, historians, classicists, Egyptologists, Assyriologists, Mediterraneanists, Afrocentrists, and to any scholars who propose to make an original and path-breaking contribution to the topic*

As recent African and Africa-orientated scholarship has stressed (Valentin Mudimbe, Emmanuel Eze, Heinz Kimmerle; also cf. the *Black Athena* debate initiated by Martin Bernal), European / North Atlantic thought, from at least Early Modern times on, has conceived of Africa in terms of oppositions and juxtapositions. It has used (*e.g.* in the works of Immanuel Kant and Georg W.F. Hegel) the concept of Africa in order to contrastively construct the European / White / Western identity as different from, discontinuous *vis-à-vis*, and superior to, African somatic, socio-cultural, productive, political and religious forms. The subsequent consolidation of Africanist anthropology in imperialist, colonialist and racialist times initially largely (though usually implicitly) followed the same orientation. Lacking a sophisticated theory of culture, cultural integration and culture change, the diffusionist and evolutionist perspectives that dominated scholarship until well into the 20th century CE sought to explain the details of African societies as encountered in historical times, by invoking a low level of socio-cultural evolution, claimed to have been enriched (under the now notorious Hamitic hypothesis) by the influx of superior genes, minds, language forms, production technologies and forms of socio-political organisation from *outside* Africa, notably from the Mediterranean and the Middle East. It was only towards the middle of the 20th century CE that African Studies, in turn, began to function as a corrective of the general anti-African orientation of North Atlantic thought. African Studies used the concepts of culture (Edward Burnett Tylor, Franz Boas, etc.) and of cultural relativism (Melville Herskovits), the critique of 'scientific' racialism, the increasingly vocal discourse of human rights, and the specific critique of the colonial situation, in order to vindicate (e.g. Max Gluckman) African cultures' specificity and dignity, claiming for them major contributions in their own right to the

global heritage of humankind. However, in a way that continued to reflect 19th-century geopolitics, the prehistoric emergence of comparatively advanced forms of human culture (with microliths, symbolic thought, articulate language, art, bodily adornment) was until quite recently considered to have taken place in Europe and West Asia. The very idea that the African continent could have made a significant, even decisive, initial contribution to global cultural history only became widely thinkable and acceptable, several decades after the actual decolonisation of that continent in the second half of the twentieth century CE.

Recent decades have seen breath-taking genetic, linguistic and archaeological advances: the *Out-of-Africa* hypothesis (Rebecca Cann *et al.*); the *Back-into-Africa* hypothesis (Michael F. Hammer *et al.*, Fulvio Cruciani *et al.*, Valentina Coia *et al.*); the Nostratic hypothesis (Vladislav Illich-Svitych, Aron Dolgopolsky) and the *Borean* hypothesis (Harold Fleming, Sergei Starostin); the retrieval, from African soil, of the oldest traces left by Anatomically Modern Humans (Christopher Henshilwood *et al*.); and the development, within comparative mythology, of new methods to make that field open up new vistas on the conceptual systems of humankind in the very distant past, and on their transcontinental ramifications (Michael Witzel, Yuri Berezkin, Wim van Binsbergen).

Still, such a revision of remote prehistory as was brought about by these developments, did not immediately lead to the revision of the place attributed to Africa in regard of more recent centuries and millennia.

Taking their distance from the conceptual violence that they felt the earlier, Eurocentric and racialist scientific orientations had done to the global image of Africa, Africanists (both from the North Atlantic region, from Africa, and world-wide), from the 1960s onward, came to insist on a strict 'Africa for the Africans' form of political correctness. Under that facile orthodoxy, African phenomena still are to be explained by almost exclusive reference to the specificity of African conditions; and any transcontinental argument, in the genetic, linguistic, archaeological, mythological, or comparative ethnographic field, has to be distrusted and dismissed as an assault on the integrity and the dignity of Africans – even as, allegedly, an attempt to deprive Africans of a uniquely local past that (as seems to be the tacit underlying assumption of this orthodoxy) would seem to constitute their only source of solace and their only justified ground for pride anyway. This orientation is not only to be found among professional Africanists; it has also been incorporated in the Afrocentrist movement (starting in the 19th century but gaining momentum after the mid-20th century: William E.B. Du Bois, Cheikh Anta Diop, K. Molefi Asante, Clyde Winters, etc.) – which in its most militant variants tends to see Africa as the *fons et origo* of human culture, not only in Lower and Middle Palaeolithic times (where this view is most probably correct), but also in more recent millennia, – scarcely tolerating the thought that major transcontinental elements of culture, genes and / or language may have contributed to the shaping of latter-day African societies and cultures from the outside.

Meanwhile, the wave of globalisation studies since the 1980s has played havoc with the very idea of continental boundedness and specificity – at least, when it comes to modern

phenomena such as the adoption and appropriation of new weaponry; new technologies of information and communication; new expressions of increasingly fragmented but also increasingly transcontinental identities; new forms of a-historical fundamentalism in the North Atlantic and in the realms of Islam and Hinduism – forms that implicitly deny what since Hegel has been a basic orientation in North Atlantic culture: the inherently relativistic and change-orientated idea that a thing's, a person's or a group's history is its most important dimension. In the light of globalisation studies, the idea of an Africa evolving – from Palaeolithic times on – in splendid isolation from the other continents (or even, in the Afrocentrist variant, of an Africa merely giving to, but not at the same time receiving from, the other continents), has become less and less tenable. Recent studies of proto-globalisation have projected back into preceding millennia, today's typical phenomena of intense cultural plurality and hybridity, albeit under older technologies of information and communication – those of the sailing ship, the mail pigeon and the chariot or horseback. Transcontinental arguments continue to both intrigue and offend – in the times of Thor Heyerdahl (although the accumulated indications for trans-Pacific contacts in all directions have turned out to be rather more extensive than is generally admitted) no more than today: *cf.* Stephen Oppenheimer's Sunda thesis for South and West Asia; Robert Dick-Read's application of a similar idea to sub-Saharan Africa – where incidentally the Indian Ocean coast has always been regarded as a window on Asia; Clyde Winters´ insistence on Mande elements in South and East Asia. A considerable library has grown up around the thesis of the Ancient Hebrew background of the Southern African Lemba people (Harold von Sicard, Nicolaas J. van Warmelo, Tudor Parfitt, Magdel Le Roux; but also for other parts of Africa Ancient Israelite associations have been suggested), whilst Dierk Lange has cogently argued Assyrian-West African continuities in state building. West African-Egyptian continuities have been discussed extensively (though not always convincingly) by Gerald Wainwright and Eva L.R. Meyerowitz – as part of a large literature assessing (and ideologising…) the relationship between Ancient Egypt and sub-Saharan Africa. Extensive work now due for publication on the Mediterranean Bronze Age brings out striking Mediterranean/sub-Saharan continuities in the linguistic, religious and cultural field and situates these in a more general Old World pattern (Wim van Binsbergen & Fred Woudhuizen), and the same has recently been done for South Central African mythology (Wim van Binsbergen).

Over the last decades, studies of modern Africa have driven home the fact that one cannot understand *current* African conditions *unless from a transcontinental, global perspective* – whether it comes to capital and demographic flows, development, formal education, statal political organisation, or the dynamics of world religions.

This makes it all the more pressing to investigate the transcontinental continuities involving sub-Saharan Africa *in pre- and protohistoric times*.

- To what extent is it true (as is widely assumed) that the roots of contemporary African predicaments, and their possible solutions, lie primarily in the recent conditions and developments of the 19th-21st centuries CE?
- *Or, alternatively, to what extent can we discern transcontinental relations, and dynamics, of a much longer time span, shaping and reshaping, in the course of*

pre- and proto-history, African cultures, polities, economies and religions in close relation with the other continents?

- And, lest we make the mistake of attributing self-evidence and global applicability to the dominant (but rapidly declining), potentially hegemonic North Atlantic perspective: *what instruments do we need to develop in the theoretical, methodological and epistemological fields, in order to avoid the blinkers of regional self-interest and ethnocentricity, and to move effectively – with an ever increasing and ever more vocal African participation – towards valid, reliable and relevant global knowledge about Africa?*

These are the central questions that we will address in the present conference, drawing on a critical mass of prominent international contributors from the various disciplines indicated above. It appears to be premature to define, at this stage, specific topics and points of special emphasis, beyond the introductory exposé above. Wim van Binsbergen (e-mail: wimvanbinsbergen@gmail.com) will act as scientific convenor for this conference, and the book is to be published under his editorship, in the *Afrika-Studiecentrum Series* of Brill, Leiden; this brings out the fact that, whilst being linked to the convenor's retirement, the focus in this conference will be on critical, innovative and cumulative academic debate concerning a central issue in present-day Africanist and comparative empirical research, and not on the convenor's work or person *per se*. The African Studies Centre's Conference Officer Mrs Marieke van Winden MA (e-mail: WINDEN@ascleiden.nl) has been entrusted with the practical organisation of this conference. In pursuit of its proposed research focus on 'Africa in the world', the African Studies Centre, Leiden, has voted basic funding towards this project (hopefully to be augmented by subsidies from other sources including the Royal Netherlands Academy of Sciences).

What we have in mind is a critical mass of some 15 participants / speakers, with a considerably wider audience of observers and discussants.To achieve the right mix of disciplinary, regional and period specialists, this call for papers is to go out to many more colleagues than the envisaged number. Meanwhile, a few score potential participants will be personally approached in view of their specific expertise on the conference topic.

Prospective participants are hereby invited to submit the title and abstract of their proposed contribution **by 15 September 2011**. These proposals will be responded to before 15 October 2011, and accepted papers are to be submitted by 15 March 2012, in order to be included in the conference website. Depending on available funding (additional applications are still in progress), acceptance of a paper proposal is to provide, for a substantial core group of participants only, paid travel to Leiden v.v. and accommodation there – with an inevitably somewhat less generous arrangement for other accepted participants. The provisional conference dates are 12-13 April, 2012, Leiden; definitive place and dates will be announced in time. All communications are to be addressed to Marieke van Winden (e-mail: WINDEN@ascleiden.nl).

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