

tronic globalisation) is carefully distinguished from geographical space – even although even the latter is, like that other Kantian *a-priori* category, *time*, far less self-evident and unchangeable than Kant, and naïve modern consumers of secondary school physics, would tend to believe. In the same way as the Euclidean two-dimensional geometry of the flat plane can be demonstrated to be only a special case of the immense variety of n-dimensional geometries which modern mathematics has come to conceive, the insistence on geographical propinquity as a prime determinant of social relations is merely a reflection of the state of communication technology prevailing, during much of humankind's history, in the hunting and herding camps and the farming villages that until only a few millennia ago were the standard human condition. As such it has been built into classic anthropology. Meanwhile, the distinction between social space and geographical space does not mean that the material technologies of geographical space have become irrelevant or non-existent in the face of the social technology of locality construction – a prudent approach to globalisation has to take account of both.

As advocated by Appadurai, we have to study in detail the processes through which localisation as a social process takes place. The local, in other words, is in itself a problem, not a given, let alone a solution. We need to study the process of the appropriation of globally available objects, images and ideas in a local context, which more often than not constitutes itself in the very process of such appropriation. Let us take our cue from the history of geomancy, a major family of divination systems found throughout Africa and in many other parts of the world, spread under conditions of 'proto-'globalisation (with the intermediate technology of seafaring, caravan trade and elite-restricted, pre-printing literacy).

E. GEOMANTIC DIVINATION AS A WELL-DEFINED FORMAL SYSTEM, WITH A VERY WIDE DISTRIBUTION IN SPACE AND TIME. Geomancy is not the vague *ominal* doctrine based on the perception of qualitative changes in the surface of the earth (as it was for the Roman writer Varro (1976), 1st century BCE, or for St Isidore, 560-636 CE (1911: s.v. 'geomantia', VIII, 9.13, p. 328).

Geomancy is the Latin term under which Europe, by means of translations from the Arabic, Hebrew and Persian, has appropriated a highly formalised divination systems whose original name was *'ilm ar-raml*, علم الرمل 'sand science'.¹¹² 'Sand science' is an astrologising form of divination, originating in Iraq c. 300 AH (early 9th century CE) under the influence of, of rather sharing common origins with, the Chinese cosmological classification and divination system 易經 *yì jīng* ('I Ching').

¹¹² And, incidentally, even in medieval Arabian culture such schemes were already highly virtual in that their symbolism and iconography did not derive from the local society of that time and age, but carried (in clearly demonstrable ways, open to the patient scrutiny of scholarship even though inviting, at the same time, the brooding fantasies of *New Age*) distant echoes of Hebrew, pre-Islamic Arabian, Old-Egyptian, North-West African, Sumerian, Akkadian, Indian, Iranian and Chinese systems of representation...

Geomancy spread over a large part of the Old World (*i.e.* Asia, Africa, Europe) in subsequent centuries. It is based on four parameters ('head', 'body', 'legs' and 'feet'), all of which can assume two different values: present or absent – as indicated by a dot, or a line (or double dot) in each of the four superimposed lines of which the standard geomantic sign consists.¹¹³ Especially in Africa, geomancy is very widespread; many authors consider it a major component of African philosophy and claim it to be an autochthonous African invention.¹¹⁴ In the light of comparative research the claim of an African origin is implausible, see van Binsbergen 2012d, and 2010b. Most probably, we need to distinguish two phases in the spread of geomancy:

- its emergence as a major cosmological and divinatory idiom in Neolithic West Asia (on the basis of a widespread elemental system of cyclical transformations), and its subsequent spread across the Old World, including China (probably in the Neolithic or Early Bronze Age) and also (probably the Late Bronze Age) into the Sahara and sub-Saharan Africa
- the development, on the basis of the conditions set out in the previous point, in Mesopotamia / Iraq, of *'ilm ar-raml*, and the latter's spread, in the course of the second millennium CE, into Africa, producing complex interaction and feedback effects with less formalised and non-astrological geomancies already in existence there.

This process produced the interpretative catalogues for all African divination systems based on a material apparatus producing 2n different configurations, such as Fa, Ifa, Sixteen Cowries, Sikidy, Four Tablets: illiterate African versions so elaborate and so saturated with local African imagery that they would appear to be authentically, autochthonously African. In the same way it can be demonstrated that the actual material apparatuses used in this connexion (tablets, divining boards, divining bowls), although conceived within an African iconography and carving techniques, and clad in awesome African mystery and imputed authenticity, in fact are largely the extreme localisations of the intercontinentally mediated scientific instruments (the sand board, the wax board, the lode compass, and the square wooden simplification of the astro-labe) of Greek, Arabian, and Chinese nautical specialists and scribes.

The example has considerable relevance, because here some of the main factors of globalisation and universalism (notably literate scholarship, empirical research and long-distance sea-faring), have rather ironically ended up as forms of the most entrenched, stereotypical African localisation and particularism.

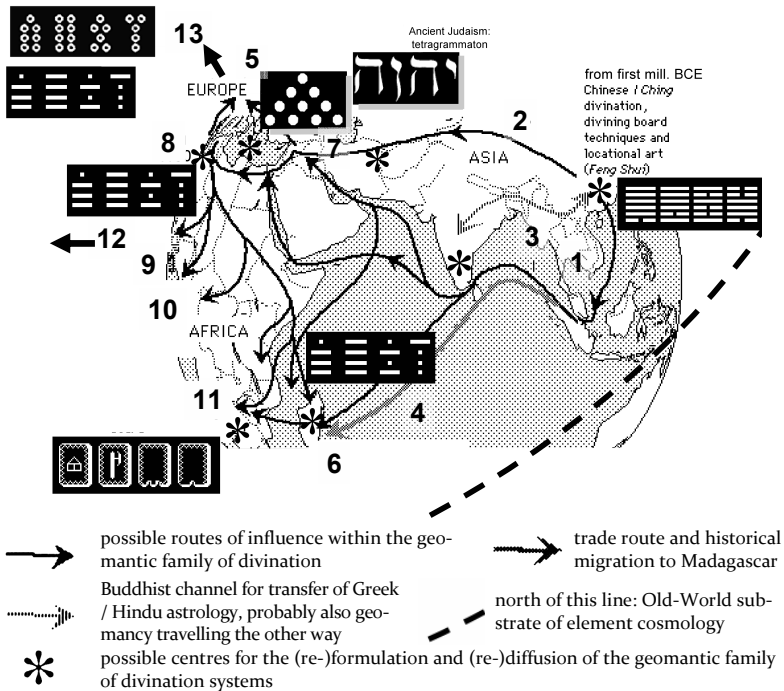
The hardest analytical and knowledge-political nut to crack is to explain why, and as a result of what ideological, social, economic, and technological mechanisms, such extreme localisation should appear to be more typical of sub-Saharan Africa than of other parts of the Old World in the second millennium CE. Does such a suggestion not amount to denying the cultural capability of Africans? Whatever of the original, distant contexts still clings to these localised African precipitates (the overall format of the apparatus, immutable but locally un-interpretable formal details such as isolated astrological terms and iconographic representations) amounts to virtuality and probably adds much to these systems' charisma (*cf.* van Binsbergen 1995c, 1995b, 1996c, 1996a).

¹¹³ *Cf.* Skinner 1980; van Binsbergen 1996c, 1996f 1997c, with extensive bibliography; also 2012d, 1996a, etc.

¹¹⁴ Apostel 1981: ch. vii: 'African geomancy, formal logic, and force metaphysics', pp. 214-244; Abimbola 1983; Abimbola 1975, also excerpted in: Abimbola 1991; Akiwowo 1983; Aromolaran 1992; Eze 1993; Makinde 1988; Bewaji 1994; Uyanne 1994.

Extreme localisation of outside influences, rendering them practically imperceptible and positioning them within the rural environment, although typical for much of Africa's history, is no longer the dominant form globalisation takes in Africa. Modern virtuality manifests itself through the incomplete systemic incorporation of cultural material which is both alien and recognised by the actors to be so, and which circulates not primarily in remote villages but in cities.

Examples of this form of virtuality are to be found all over Africa today, and in fact (in a way which would render a classic, holistic anthropological analysis nonsensical) they constitute the majority of cultural expressions: from world religions to party politics mediating world-wide models of formal organisation, development and democracy;¹⁵ from specialist production of present-day art,



1. Chinese 易經 *yì jīng* / *I Ching*, divining board techniques and locational art (風水 *Feng Shui*) as from 1st mill. BCE
2. Silk Road
3. Buddhist channel for transfer of Greek / Hindu astrology, perhaps geomancy travelling the other way (*i.e.* east-west)

¹⁵ Cf. van Binsbergen 1995a, where a cultural relativist argument on democracy is presented.

4. Trade route and historical migration (first millennium CE) from Indonesia to Madagascar
5. Pythagoreanism of the ancient Mediterranean; it is plausible that this belongs to this inter-continental system of interaction, but how remains unclear
6. *Sikidy* divination and Malagasy locational art
7. invention of *'ilm ar-raml* in the milieu of the *Iḥwān as-Safā* ('Brethren of Purity'),
اخوان الصفا, Baṣra, Persian Gulf, late 1st millennium CE
8. North African *'ilm ar-raml*, early 2nd millennium CE
9. Ifa, Sixteen Cowries: the elaborate geomantic systems of West Africa
10. Simplified geomancies of the African interior
11. Four-tablet divination and Venda divining board, Southern Africa, as from middle 2nd mill. CE
12. To the New World
13. Western Europe as from early second millennium CE (*Ars Geomantica*, *Punktierkunst*)

Fig. 1.1. Old-World geomantic systems.



belles lettres and philosophy inspired by cosmopolitan models, to the production – no longer self-evidently but, self-consciously, as a deliberate performance – of apparently local forms of music and dance during an ethnic festival like Kazanga in Western Zambia (van Binsbergen 1992a, 1994a); from fashionable lingerie to public bodily prudery demonstrably imposed by Christianity and Islam.

These symbolic processes are accompanied by, in fact carried by, forms of social organisation which (through the creation of new categories and groups, the erection of conceptual and interactional boundaries around them, and the positioning of objects and symbols through which both to reinforce and to transgress these boundaries) create the socially local (in terms of identity and home) within the global. Such categories and groups are (in general) no longer spatially localised, in the sense that they do no longer create a bounded geographical space which is internally homogeneous in that it is only inhabited by people belonging to the same bounded organisation ('village', 'ward', 'neighbourhood'). We have to think of such organisations (whose membership is typically *geographically* dispersed while creating a *social* focus) as: ethnic associations, churches, political parties, professional associations, *etc.* If they are geographically dispersed, this does not mean that their membership is distributed all over the globe. Statistically, they have a fairly limited geographical catchment area commensurate with the available transport technology, but within that catchment area, the vast majority of human inhabitants are non-members – it does therefore not constitute a contiguous social space.

Their typical, although not exclusive, abode is the town, and it is to African towns that we shall finally turn for case studies of urban puberty rites and ethical renewal that are to add a measure of descriptive and contextual substance to the above theoretical exercises. However, virtuality presents itself in those case studies in the form of an emulation of the village as a virtual image; so let us first discuss that unfortunate obsession of classic anthropology, *the village*.