

***‘Rethinking Africa’s transcontinental continuities in pre- and protohistory’***

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***Key note – Rethinking Africa’s transcontinental  
continuities in pre- and protohistory***

Wim van Binsbergen  
African Studies Centre

***1. How I came to study Africa’s transcontinental  
continuities<sup>1 2</sup>***

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? This conference is organised in my honour, I set the topic, so let introduce this topic by explaining how I myself came to study Africa’s transcontinental continuities. My interest here is not to engage in 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.

***1.1. Internalising the localising and presentist paradigm of classic  
anthropology***

I read social anthropology and development studies at Amsterdam University,<sup>3</sup> 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

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<sup>1</sup> I will refrain here from a discussion of transcontinental continuities between the Americas and sub-Saharan Africa, partly because these emerge from the work of the Americanist Yuri Berezkin who participates in our conference, because this conference’s focus (and that of my own recent research) has been on Africa-Asian continuities. Yet there are unmistakable continuities in the field of language (the convergence between the African macrophyla, Austric, and Amerind as ‘peripheral cluster’ within \*Borean), divination and games (where American and African artefacts look very similar and may go back to common Eurasian prototypes from the Upper Palaeolithic – as I have argued elsewhere in detail), comparative mythology, technologies of hunting, fishing, basketry, and puberty rites.

<sup>2</sup> I have not been able to touch on all the ambitious topics of our conference’s initial Call for Papers, which therefore may still be referred to for further critical reflection.

<sup>3</sup> Then still a programme of an interdisciplinary and temporal scope inconceivable at present, scheduled to span seven years full time, and comprising not only full training in anthropology and sociology, but also minors in physical anthropology, linguistics, and psychology.

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 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* 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. 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,<sup>4</sup> seeking to apply the methods of proto-history which I had explored in my North African research, to regional comparisons reaching into the middle of the second millennium CE, way before the onset of European mercantile and colonial involvement in South Central and Southern Africa.

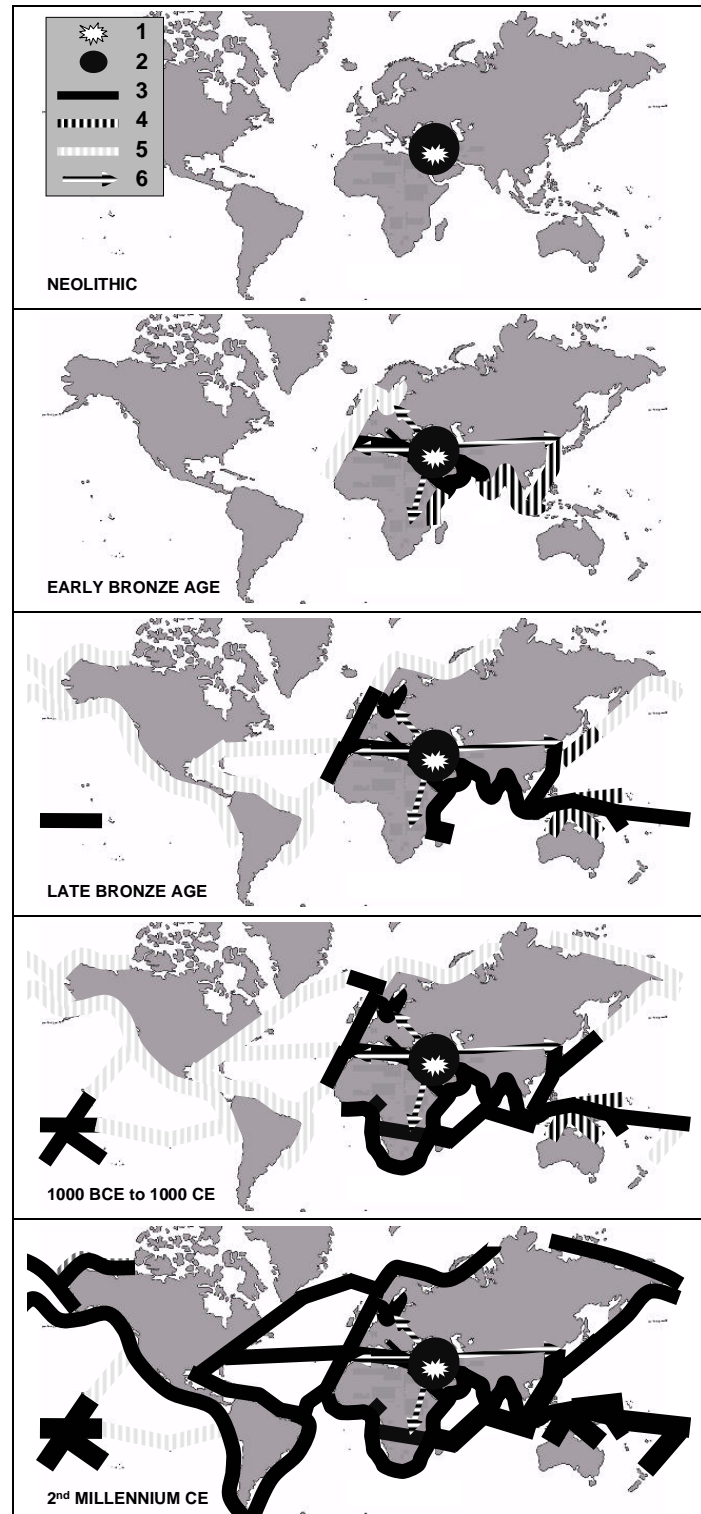
Despite my substantial background in Islamic and Asian studies, it took a surprisingly long time before I got so much as an inkling of the transcontinental resonances surfacing in my various African fieldwork sites. This had a number of reasons.

## **1.2. The sheer unimaginable extension of the postulated global maritime network since the Bronze Age**

In the first place, there is the sheer unimaginable extension of the postulated global maritime network since the Bronze Age, as most tentatively presented in my Fig. 1.

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<sup>4</sup> Whence this historical inclination, which was counter-paradigmatic at the time? In our post-Hegelian Age, the history of a thing is considered its essence, so in fact it is not an individual anthropologist's historical inclination but classic anthropology's lack of it that needs explanation (such an explanation can be found in the blind zeal with which early anthropologists, especially in Western Europe including the British Isles, in the foundation and definition of their new subject, sought to keep those disciplines out that until then used to deal with the topics that anthropology was appropriating – history, art history, philosophy, linguistics. Personally, I was driven to ethnohistory in North Africa because (characteristically, I am afraid) it has been the topic of my predecessor in the field, the late Guus Hartong; moreover, under the immensely stimulating guidance of my supervisors Douwe Jongmans and Klaas van der Veen I found that I needed to reconstruct, on the basis of myriad oral sources, the highly complex residential history of a local valley since the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, before I could account for the distribution and selective veneration of the several dozen shrines in that area. Soon, as a young lecturer at the University of Zambia, I engaged in ethnographic and contemporary-historical research of an urban healing cult among the Nkoya people of Western Zambia, and of a major millennial movement, that of Lenshina, in Northern Zambia; this allowed me to be co-opted in the company of the Manchester School and of Terence Ranger's comprehensive Ford Foundation project on religion and history in Central Africa, which brought me in contact with my future PhD supervisor Matthew Schoffeleers and also resulted in my Simon Professorship at Manchester at a tender age. But much more is involved – my scientific career is marked by the constant strong passion to try and write history where previously there was none, and this truly pre- and protohistorical passion (which brought me to extend of my historical reconstructions ever further into the past, right into precolonial times, the Bronze Age, even the Palaeolithic) must have to do with my self-perception as a childhood victim of family secrets.



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)

*Fig. 1. Proposed emerged 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-20<sup>th</sup> c. CE) anthropology, 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 (the mouth of the Red Sea), into Asia, and especially the peopling of Australia c. 60 ka BP (at no point during Anatomically Modern Human's 200 ka history was there less than 70 km of open sea between Timor and Australia!) make it abundantly clear that some degree of navigation was done already in the Middle Palaeolithic.<sup>5</sup> This is an essential corrective to our 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).

### 1.3. The paradigm of classic anthropology: localisation and presentism

In the second place, those seeking to affirm transcontinental continuities are up against a dominant, institutionally highly powerful scientific paradigm. Culture is a machine to produce self-evidences in the collective human experience; 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 self-evidently untrue or incredible – whatever the supporting data to the contrary.

I had internalised, like most of my colleagues, and had not yet taking my distance from, the localising wisdom of regional studies at the time. *According to this unspoken paradigm, things*

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Bednarik 1997a, 1997b, 1997c, 1999a, 1999b, 2003.

*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.); Seligmann's 'Hamitic hypothesis' (attributing cultural initiatives in sub-Saharan Africa as the result of the immigration of lightly-pigmented cattle keepers from West Asia); and the arch-diffusionist global Egyptocentrism of Elliot Smith and Perry; or the early-twentieth-century (CE) suggestions (from Trombetti (1905), van Oordt (1907), Johnston (1907) etc.) on the transcontinental affinities of the Bantu (< Niger-Congo) linguistic phylum.

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 comparativist of religion Harold von Sicard (who in his mid-20<sup>th</sup> 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).

Similarly, Cyril Hromnik, who at the height of South African apartheid dared suggest (1981) massive cultural (including linguistic, and metallurgical) South Asian influence on Southern Africa in protohistory, and who was severely criticised for the political incorrectness of such a view (e.g. Hall & Borland 1982) – only to be more or less vindicated in the last decade, as is suggested by his much appreciated presence at our present conference.

When, in the 1930s, Schwartz<sup>6</sup> 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,<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup> For me, personally, this issue was clinched when I came across, in Bent's early account, archaeological finds unmistakably representing the standard *linga* and *yoni* representations which I, by now, have encountered in numerous Hinduist and Buddhist temples in South and South East Asia.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Schwarz 1938.

<sup>7</sup> Caton-Thompson 1931.

<sup>8</sup> Bent 1892 / 1969; MacIver 1906,. 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 all that. In Ancient Roman architecture it was explicitly known as *opus spicatum* (cf. 'Opus caementicium', at: [www.romanaqueducts.info/aquasite/hulp/tekusbreed.htm](http://www.romanaqueducts.info/aquasite/hulp/tekusbreed.htm)), 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. I am bringing this up, not to insist on a Northern connection of Zimbabwe (like Bent and MacIver did), but to defuse a myth. I visited the site of Great Zimbabwe in 1989 during a short extension of my Botswana fieldwork into Bulawayo and the Matopos Hills.

<sup>9</sup> van Binsbergen 2012.

Also Forke's extensive study<sup>10</sup> 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; cf. 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 (e.g. Duyvendak 1938, 1949; Neville c.s. 1975), 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, 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.

#### 1.4. The strength and weakness of classic anthropology

In the third place, still dominant until the 1990s (when neo-diffusionism and multi-sited fieldwork became the shibboleths of globalisation studies), the model of ethnography through participant observation under conditions of total social and mental immersion, whatever its merits in terms of local relevance, validity and depth, had the disadvantage of forcing the researcher to invest so excessively in linguistic, cultural and relational localisation, that the wider geographical (let alone the wider historical) horizons of contact and comparability tend 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-20<sup>th</sup> century form combining culture theory with prolonged participant observation.

But perhaps the main factor blinding me from the transcontinental traits my African fieldwork sites now appear to be replete with, was the characteristic objectifying and altering stance of the classic anthropology in which I had been trained (foremost by André Köbben) at Amsterdam University. Classic anthropology was the sublimated intellectual reflection (in the optical, not the mental sense) of the colonial grip in which Western Europe had held a substantial part of the world from the late 19<sup>th</sup> to the mid-20<sup>th</sup> 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; in other words, *it 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 first field assistant Hasnāwi bin Ṭahar, 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.

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<sup>10</sup> Forke 1904.

## 2. Counter-paradigmatic and interdisciplinary experiences

### 2.1. An eye-opener

In Francistown c. 1990, I was learning what I thought was a local divination system during total immersion at a multi-ethnic *sangoma* lodge where Ndebele, Tswana and Kalanga were the main languages. That divination system was organised around 16 standard combinations produced by the throwing of four differently marked wooden tablets, each combination being named in an anecdotal and vaguely kinship and generation related idiom. It is only 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 soil, 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 variants of the same system (commonly designated ‘geomantic divination’) had branched off from that Francistown-bound trajectory in order to make their way to ‘Abbāṣīd Mesopotamia in the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> mill. CE, Byzantine and medieval Europe, India, Madagascar, the Comoros Islands, Renaissance courts and peasant divination in Western Europe, and that variants of it had even installed themselves as the dominant divination systems of West Africa.<sup>11</sup> Graduated as a *sangoma* in 1991, I have continued in this local practice and have made it the cornerstone of my empirical, theoretical, and epistemological reflections.<sup>12</sup> The latter enabled me to trade, in the late 1990s, my chair in anthropology at the Free University, Amsterdam, for one in intercultural philosophy, Erasmus University Rotterdam.

Meanwhile, 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

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<sup>11</sup> van Binsbergen 1991, 1996.

<sup>12</sup> 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 7<sup>th</sup> Market Day on Medical Anthropology, Amsterdam 1990, and for a Dutch-language book on medical anthropology, in 1990, persuaded me to write my first account of *sangoma* divination, and explore the extensive literature. However, becoming a *sangoma* meant, for me, the end of the kind of complacent, distancing, othering, condescending anthropology as I had pursued until 1989, and put me on the road to intercultural-philosophical reflection, where my colleagues Jos de Mul, Henk Oosterling and Heinz Kimmerly (the latter my predecessor in the Rotterdam chair of the foundations of intercultural philosophy which I occupied in 1998) were so generous and courageous as to offer me a framework to explore an entire new set of questions, often ranging beyond Africa. In the person of Wiep van Bunge, Dean of the Philosophical Faculty of the Erasmus University Rotterdam, I wish to thank that institution for the immense inspiration which it has brought me in the past fourteen years – exploring the philosophical possibilities and impossibilities of interculturality, and increasingly concentrating, also in my empirical Africanist research, on the central questions of the fundamental underlying unity of humankind, and of intercultural epistemology. In the background, all these ventures had been impossible without the constant and massive support from my employer through the years, the African Studies Centre, Leiden, where therefore my greatest institution debt lies. In the personal sphere, my greatest debts lie with Henny van Rijn, a physicist who as my first wife and mother of our daughter Nezmia took me to Africa and had an great impact on my scientific and statistical outlook; and my present wife Patricia Saegerman, who as trained Africanist and mother of our four children encouraged and shared my research over the last 29 years.

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.<sup>13</sup> 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 some years before this huge investment was to be brought to fruition.

Also at the NIAS, I realised that it was fruitful to combine the investigation of the global cultural history of geomantic divination with that of other formal systems, such as games, writing systems, and myths. Here I began to look at the global distribution of a family of games based on the circulation and reaping of tokens around holes organised along two to four rows, and known not only as *mankala* but even as 'the national game of Africa' (Culin 1896; van Binsbergen 1996, 1997, 2012). Initially I followed Culin's cue and adopted an Afrocentrist perspective (which was subsequently heavily criticised in Amselle's (2001) *ad hominem* argument), but more recently I realised that the distribution of *mankala*, with geomantic divination, the belief in a unilateral mythical being, and numerous other traits, is more convincingly understood if we look at it another instance of the exemplary ('Pelasgian') distribution pattern of the hunting device known as the *spiked wheel trap* (Fig. A): found all over Africa, and only sporadically in West and Central Asia, *my hypothesis is that this pattern yet originates in West Asia in Neolithic times, from there was spread West and South, and only became so massively represented in sub-Saharan Africa not because it originated there but because it found an uncontested, open cultural niche there by the Late Bronze Age.*



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

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

<sup>13</sup> Popper 1959, 1976; cf. Glymour & Stalker 1982. I do realise that the position which I summarise here as my own, and which I discussed and autocritiqued extensively in my book *Intercultural encounters* (2003) and other writings, have all but expelled me from the discipline of social and cultural anthropology; cf. Olivier de Sardan 1988 – especially in written in reaction to a postmodern genre emerging in ethnography and exemplified by Paul Stoller's engagement with the occult in an African setting. (Stoller & Olkes 1987; Stoller 1989.)



Meanwhile, riding the waves of the time and discharging our institutional responsibilities, the prominent Dutch Africanist 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 over forty senior and junior researchers from the Netherlands and world-wide. It is in this stimulating and congenial context of textual scholars 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.<sup>14</sup>

So far my explorations into the antecedents of geomantic divination had been concentrating on the Ancient World of West Asia and North Eastern Africa – without yet paying much attention to the more recent civilisations of South, South East and East Asia. After all, I had by now become firmly established as an Africanist, and I was convinced ( more than I am today) that the life-long investment involved in becoming a specialists in one continent, cannot be extended to or repeated for other continents.

## 2.2. Continuities revealed

In the early 1990s, however, 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; 2005)<sup>15</sup> I began to suspect the transcontinental, specifically South Asian connections of the entire *sangoma* cult and not just of its divination technique. A philosophy-Master's student of mine from Italy, steeped in Buddhism, pointed out to me that one important *sangoma* song had striking similarities with the famous *Heart sutra*. 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, *The Institutes of Vishnu*, XXVII, 15-17; Jolly 1988: 111) as the standard initiation dress for adepts from the Kshatriya class – while the *sangomas* had constantly insisted on my real, adoptive and imagined, military and aristocratic 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, and I found, much to my surprise, that Nkoya and Tswana systems of nomenclature appeared to cluster much more closely with those of Ancient China than with those from Ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, the Aegean, and Early Modern Europe. Was this 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? Or was my statistical finding merely a research artefact such

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<sup>14</sup> 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 my first teacher of anthropology –, and Peter van der Veer), and to the programme's members and associates.

<sup>15</sup> van Binsbergen 2005.

as multivariate analysis, and especially cluster analysis so often produces, with its wide optionality of parameters, every option giving different outcomes.

In 1994 I had acquired, in Lusaka, Zambia, a wooden statuette of a Kuba king (Fig. B.b), whose iconography, while continuous with other South Central African specimens, yet struck me as revealing South / South East Asian Buddhist influences.



a. Kuba / Bushongo *ndop* sculpture: King Shamba, British Museum London / Parrinder 1968: 121; note the mankala board and the stave 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 Mwenekahare in Zambia to Tut-<sup>c</sup>anh-Amun in New Kingdom Egypt and to Samoyed shamans;<sup>16</sup> d. Two of three dozens of gigantic sculptured heads of celestial guardians at the City of Angkor, Cambodia, early 2<sup>nd</sup> mill. CE, 'The Angkor temples' © 2004 Dave Parker; the coiffure follows an iconographic prototype for the Buddha; the reduction to a conical shape is especially noticeable in the Angkor Wat context of 12th c. Cambodia

The headdress of the royal sculpture (b) seems to follow (cf. d) a continental South East Asian Buddhist iconographic convention relating to celestial guardians – which of course 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 me emulated by Buddhist believers in meditation.

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

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'; and with the musicologist Jones' findings (1964) that African xylophones were tuned very similarly to Indonesian ones.

<sup>16</sup> What unites these three cultural expressions, even though wide apart in space and time, is the mechanism of the 'Pelagian model', briefly discussed towards the end of the present argument, and more fully elsewhere (Cf. van Binsbergen & Woudhuizen 2011; van Binsbergen, Wim M.J., in press [2010]).

Such instruments were prominent in the Nkoya royal orchestra; the stranger founder of the Kahare dynasty himself was reputed (van Binsbergen 1992)<sup>17</sup> to have arrived in the region not only with a *Conus* shell bottom used as a regalia (which could only have come from the Indian Ocean)<sup>18</sup> 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)<sup>19</sup> she married him on the spot. Yet my identification with the dominant, localising paradigm was so strong that it was only with the greatest effort that I could bring myself to see the Kahare situation as one potentially testifying to transcontinental diffusion from South East Asia. But finally<sup>20</sup> I began to look with different eyes upon the royal capital of King Kahare; I opened up to the 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 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 1999); 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.<sup>21</sup> The following distributional equation or rather transformation presented itself:

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<sup>17</sup> Van Binsbergen 1992.

<sup>18</sup> 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. This resonates with South Asian royal traditions, 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). My provisional analysis of metallurgical terms in proto-Bantu (even though I realise that the very concept of one delineable corpus of proto-Bantu is extremely contentious, in ways that are beyond our present scope) suggests that Bantu-speakers were close to the invention of ironworking (cf. the Homeric references to the Sinti as special servants of the firegod Hephaestus, and the Gypsy / Sinti / Roma parallels of the Kahare / Kale title), but did not invent it themselves: *all* the metallurgical terms (a mere handful, anyway) that I identify in proto-Bantu can be construed to be reflexes of \*Borean (cf. Starostin & Starostin 1998-2008), and since only 27% of the reconstructed \*Borean roots can be traced back in proto-Bantu, this is an 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 extensive demonstration of Bantu being among the languages spoken in the Bronze Age Mediterranean (van Binsbergen & Woudhuizen 2011; van Binsbergen 2011), perhaps among some of the Sea Peoples, as well as my statistical demonstration of the affinity between Niger-Congo and Austric, suggest the need to reconsider the established, Africa-for-the-Africans view that Bantu arose inside the African continent (Lake Chad is often suggested) some 8 ka BP.

<sup>19</sup> E.g., cf. Sankalia 1960; Brubaker 1977; Beck 1969, 1971; Blumenberg 1994-1996-2006.

<sup>20</sup> 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 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? The contemporary-historical and legal analysis of African political systems was a major strands 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, and especially the late Robert Buijtenhuijs.

<sup>21</sup> 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

religious-priestly use in  
Hinduism and Buddhist

⋮

Asia

=

ceremonial use in  
sacred kingship

⋮

sub-Saharan  
Africa

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

Ten years later, this endeavour led to an extensive statement on the transcontinental continuities of Nkoya mythology (van Binsbergen 2010), and ultimately to the present conference.

### 2.3. Decisive external influences and forms of support

Meanwhile, I had taken aboard various other decisive influences.

In the first place, my association with Martin Bernal and 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 2011)<sup>22</sup> to distrust Bernal's *empirical conclusions* concerning the transcontinental linguistic, religious, and cultural continuities between Ancient Egypt, the Ancient Aegean, and sub-Saharan Africa, *Black Athena I* (Bernal 1987) has been an extensive and convincing reminder to the effect that it is not by accident that the West has 'forgotten' (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) its massive historical indebtedness to the other continents, and that retrieving this awareness (in our present age of globalisation and global identity and 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 my Diachronic Model of World Mythology (van Binsbergen 2006a, 2006b, 2010) I 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. Having thus firmly affirmed Africa's place in the transcontinental space, my Pelasgian model and my linguistic explorations in Bantu, further refined the conceptual and methodological apparatus, as did my subsequent application, largely outside Africa, upon *Ethnicity in Mediterranean Protohistory*

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African kingship, whereas Asian parallels abound in conceptualisation, organisation, enthronisation, burial and mythology of African kings.

<sup>22</sup> van Binsbergen 2011.

(2011, with Fred Woudhuizen), until finally Africa's transcontinental continuities in pre- and protohistory can now be considered, at the present conference.

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). My MA and subsequently PhD 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 respective rural areas 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 outcome, illuminating for the analysis of African protohistory in the light of the Sunda hypothesis.

If, in the course of 44 years, I could do intensive and prolonged participant-observational fieldwork in several African contexts, could become competent in several African languages and cultures, and involve myself (as a form of action research, far beyond the call of duty as an ethnohistorian and ethnographer) in local social, political and religious situations and adopt locally defined specific roles there – is that then merely because, genetically, I share with Africans (on the basis of a communality going back 200,000 years) merely the basic datum of an Anatomically Modern Human's body and mind – *or is the continuity much more recent, and are Africans like me because we share a recent history of a few millennia of intensive transcontinental movements and exchange?*

### **3. Nonetheless, the empirical fruits of fieldwork: The substantiation of African-Asian parallels in text**

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 our conference has been to scan through texts on South Asia in the light of whatever I know of Nkoya and *sangoma* life. 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.

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
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
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: [ <b>add pages</b> ]
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 [ ‘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 <sup>23</sup>
216	In a previous life, the Boddhisatva 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,	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’...

<sup>23</sup> However, as I have discussed in fully referenced detail in van Binsbergen 2010: 192 f., this motif is not at all specific to the Nkoya but has a wide global distribution.

	<p>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</p>	
245	<p>Kashyapa was the leader of a fire cult; in a typical hagiography with numerous Islamic and Christian parallels, the Buddha demonstrates his superior power over a snake associated with Kashyapa's place of worship, and thus converts him to Buddhism</p>	<p>Kapesh Who-Joins-the-Forked-Branches, a name without proper Nkoya / Bantu etymology, seeks to steal the moon from Heaven as a regalium, but collapses in the process.</p>
248	<p>'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'</p>	<p>Nkoya kings, like many dynasties in South Central Africa, claim to hail from Kola, a mythical, 'distant Northern land'<sup>24</sup>. 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<sup>25</sup>), 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.</p>

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

<sup>24</sup> Not unlike the 'distant Northern land' Zembla in Nabokov's novel *Pale Fire* in the diseased imagination of the novel's protagonist, Kinbote.

<sup>25</sup> 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. Z2. Vishnu with a hog's snout as depicted on a relief at Mahabalipuram, Tamil Nadu, South India

## 4. Obscuring transcontinental continuities from the local actors' consciousness

### 4.1. 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',<sup>26</sup> so also in Sri Lanka Africa was conceptually remote, and tended to be

<sup>26</sup> 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 my main paper for this conference, reveals that East Asian detailed maritime knowledge (not necessarily first-hand) reached as far as the Mediterranean and Greece. So



demonised<sup>27</sup> – like in a series of statues in a temple 20 km East of the town of Galle, where the Buddha image is surrounded by a square 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. W). 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 beads<sup>28</sup>) but never highlighted.

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, Arabian and South Asian social perceptions of somatic differences in pigmentation would already make emphatically clear.

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rather than as an expression of contempt, 非洲 *fēi zhōu* 'The Non-Continent' might be taken as a neutral and correct geographical expression.

<sup>27</sup> Sri Lanka's popular religious and therapeutic scene is replete with demons, often represented through very specific and elaborate masks. [ **add refs** ] Could these 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 also the other way around? Sri Lanka and Indonesia have African minorities as a result of Africans moving East as slaves and soldiers in Early Modern times; Barnes attributes the presence of *mankala* in Indonesia to such movement, and it might also explain the presence of the game in Sri Lanka (see my notes on the Oppenheimer-Tauchmann thesis, at the present conference). It stands to reason that with the recognised African-Asian transfers of Neolithic times (cattle, foodcrops) also cultural items were transmitted, but how to identify them? The Afrocentrist linguist and educationalist Clyde Winters, implying a similar global maritime network since the Bronze Age, has claimed considerable African impact on South and East Asia, but his publications are difficult to find and cannot be assessed here.

<sup>28</sup> 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 tradebeads 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 XXXX....) ; 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).



*Fig. W. African demonised in Buddhist iconography in South Sri Lanka<sup>29</sup>*

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. V), dating from the early 2<sup>nd</sup> 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 goddess Meenakshee centrally venerated at the South Indian town of Madurai.



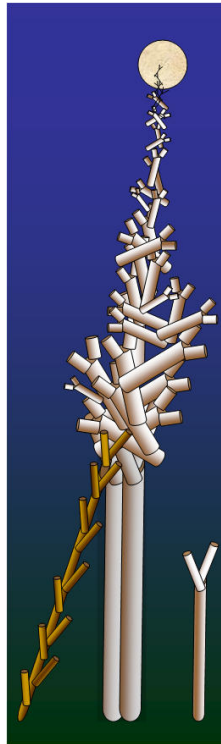
*Fig. W2. One of the Sigiriya ‘damsels’ – note the double left-hand nipple*

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<sup>29</sup> My fieldwork in Sri Lanka, April-May 2011, was generously financed by the African Studies Centre, Leiden, for which I wish to register my great indebtedness.

## 4.2. 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, 2010) I have come closer and closer to an appreciation of the possibly South Asian strands in this story, e.g. deriving *kapes*h (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 has interpreted this kind of story as a quest of immortality, of which the moon (being reborn every month) is a widespread symbol [ REFERENCES]. 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 *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 / Sīhaḷadīpa / 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. 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 Asian 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 (Kapes h <? Kashyapa). If, in the course of more than one and a half millennium, the echoes of Kashyapa’s 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 [ REFERENCES ] . 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 – especially since, as we shall see presently, 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.



*Fig. W3. Artist's impression of Kapesh 'Who-Joins-Forked-Branches'*

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

Incidentally, the same problem 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 (e.g. Seligmann, Meyerowitch, Wainwright etc. – a brief overview of the relevant literature in van Binsbergen 2011: 268 f.), 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 (4<sup>th</sup> mill. BCE) to the Late Period (1<sup>st</sup> 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 be downtrodden (cf. Fig. U).



Left-hand column: Battlefield pallet, Late Predynastic (there is a perfect join between the fragments); right-hand column: New Kingdom

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

#### 4.4. 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 is a central question to our conference,<sup>30</sup> 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 evaporated 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

<sup>30</sup> For which I am indebted to Patricia van Binsbergen.

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,<sup>31</sup> 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 explorations, 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.

## ***5. Geographical focus and methodological considerations***

Although my own ethnographic expertise is mainly on South Central and Southern Africa, shorter spells of fieldwork in West Africa, 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.

Meanwhile, let us not pretend that we have entered on a smooth, royal road once we have seen the light and admitted the existence of extensive transcontinental continuities in Africa's pre- and protohistory. For with the best of intentions one might still easily jump to unwarranted conclusions.

- Is mere similarity, proof of historical connection?
- How superficial or how profound is the similarity?

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<sup>31</sup> Cf. Allen 2002.



- Suppose the similarity is indicative of genuine historical connection, how can one begin to assess its nature:
  - from A (Africa) to B (Asia)
  - or from B to A (which is in line with the Oppenheimer-Tauchmann hypothesis, and with the evidence concerning the peopling of Madagascar),
  - or (in general the most convincing alternative when genuine historical connections are involved) do A and B both derive their similarities from a hitherto unidentified common historical source, C?
  - *Or is sheer provenance the wrong question, once we have resigned ourselves to the existence, gradually building up since the Neolithic, of a global maritime network that by its very nature is multicentred and multidirectional?*

Whatever the correct answers, far more fieldwork and library research will have to be done before meaningful and methodologically grounded conclusions can be attempted.

These difficulties, however, will sort themselves out, by the concerted critical efforts of large numbers of researchers in debate with one another – provided African and in general non-Western researchers vocally participate in the debate and exposing and counter-balancing its potentially hegemonic nature. Personally, I feel that the real problem lies not in empirical methods, better databases, more discriminating statistical tests, but in a conceptual and paradigmatic change that is, by its very nature, combines empirical concerns with critical reflection.

## ***6. Beyond the empirical fruits of fieldwork, it existential fruits***

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

I had the great good fortune (not to say I was congenitally / ancestrally predestined) 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 both 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 constitutes the ideal topic from which to embark on a prolonged 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 assumption<sup>32</sup> 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 the 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, interculturality and existentially, my ‘Becoming a sangoma’<sup>33</sup> (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 (finally 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’.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Feuerbachn.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 work.

<sup>33</sup> 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: ‘I understand why you could not by yourself arrive at my superior, deconstructive insight in your religion, which of course is not true and cannot be true, but if you could please step aside, I will explain to you why you erroneously cling to it’.

<sup>34</sup> 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* the cause of scientific methodically underpinned truth, and of 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 from the main tools (methodic scientific ones) to fully participate in shaping the future.



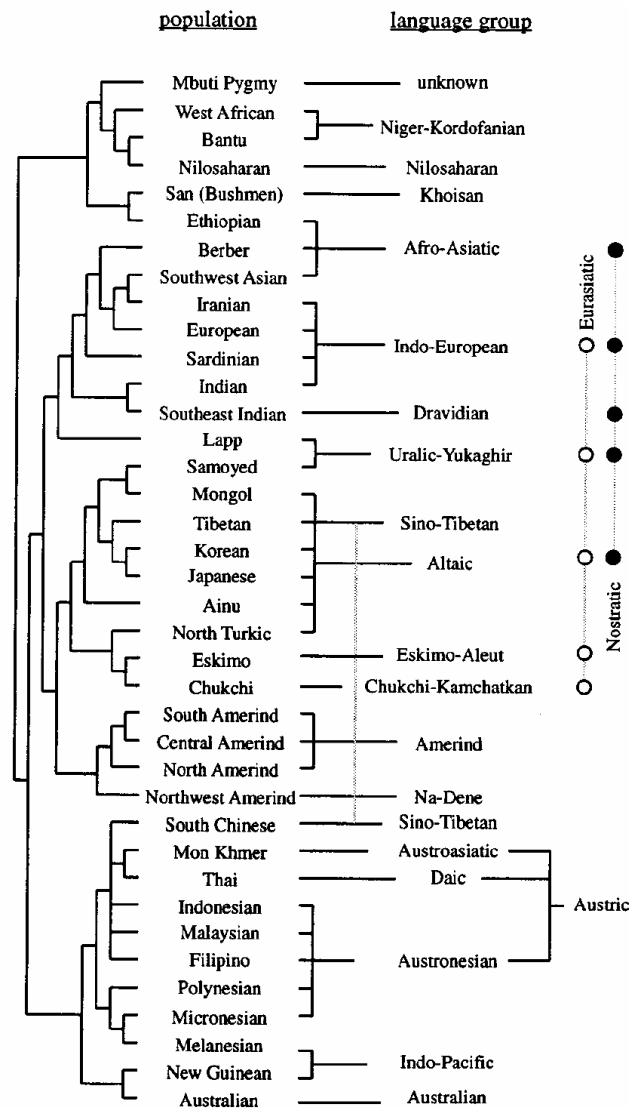


Fig. A2. The othering of Africans disguised as inescapable science.

## 6.2. 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 worlds leading geneticists under the pre-molecular biology 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.

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 admits the extensive \*Borean roots in the African Khoisan and Niger-Congo macrophyla – like in all other macrophyla spoken today); and (b) comparative mythology (van Binsbergen 2010, 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.

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-in-Africa population genetic movement suggests by and large that, in recent millennia, more has moved westward, into Africa, than that eastward, into Asia; and the empirical detailed evidence from culture, religion, political systems, material culture etc. so far highlighted in the context of our conference, appears to point in the same direction.

This invites us to try and put the record straight and search for Africa in Asia. Our insistence on a multidirectional, multicentred 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 Southern African divination forms that looked so convincingly African, in a comparative net of partly literate, transcontinental parallels, that I detected their originally cAbbāṣīd, perhaps even Chinese, background. 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.

### 6.3. From anthropology to intercultural philosophy – and back again?

The bitter history of global exclusion of Africa and Africans brings up some of the dilemmas which I have experienced in my research work over the past decade; let me end by briefly considering what to some must be one of the most puzzling aspects of my long and successful career as an Africanist. Having succeeded to the Rotterdam chair of Foundations of Intercultural Philosophy, I set out on fundamental research into the possibility and impossibility of interculturality, not only by practically adopting (from 2002 on) the Editorship of *Quest: An African Journal of Philosophy*, but particularly by confronting the immense epistemological difficulties of intercultural knowledge construction:

- culture is essentially a local device to construct the world (in a very literal sense) and make it appear self-evident, but the implication of that position (brought out popularly though forcefully by postmodernism) seems to be that knowledge and truth can really only be constructed and affirmed within one local cultural domain, and become meaningless across cultural domains
- yet every human being participates (especially under today's conditions of globalisation) at the same time in a plurality of local cultural domains whose presuppositions are differently constructed, as a result of a what appears to be an irreconcilably different history
- therefore both the *monolithic, integrated human subject*, and the *monolithic, all-encompassing culture within which it is possible to live an entire life from cradle to grave*, appear to be performative and deceptive collective representations without sound empirical and/or conceptual-theoretical grounds
- yet our everyday experience, as persons and as social actors, is that of constantly crossing into and out of such bounded cultural domains, of the promise of interculturality (even when this often seems to dissolve into the pre-language, oneiric and bodily experience, not of cultures meeting, but of not-yet-culture), and in fact of the existential encounters in the inchoate domains that do not already exist as bounded and structured cultural domains but that only constitute our inchoate attempts, together with our fellow-actors, to construct communality where it did not already exist – in the menacing face of the alternative – the violent destruction of parts of humanity by a rival parts, and ultimately the self-destruction of humanity as a whole.

Under such circumstances, as I sought to articulate as a budding intercultural philosopher, I was increasingly forced to take up my habitus as empirical scientist again, and to strive towards a much-needed result that I could not produce on the basis of first principles alone.<sup>35</sup>

- If the stale-mate of modern life presents itself as a plurality of mutually inimical cultural positions that yet each lay a total claim to truth and meaning, and therefore cannot be reconciled by recourse to formal logical means
- and if both the social tools of negotiation and persuasion, and the philosophical instruments of critical reflection, conceptualisation and logical analysis produce the

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<sup>35</sup> This empirical turn should not come as a surprise. I had already indicated repeatedly that, given the factual claims many philosophers make with regard to the present-day world and its structure, philosophy should be much more of an empirical science than it is in actual practice, and should heed, more fully, social-scientific methods for the production of valid and reliable knowledge about man and society. (van Binsbergen 1999, 2000, 2003: esp. ch. Introduction and ch. 15.

effect of highlighting and acerbating, instead of attenuating these contradictions, and instead of rendering them manageable in practical social interaction,

- then the very idea of fundamentally different positions constructed in fundamentally different cultural life worlds, needs to be deconstructed
- and such a deconstructed needs to take place with different, more compelling and more intersubjective tools, than ‘just’ philosophical analysis.

Already in my 1999 inaugural lecture I had launched my adage *Cultures do not exist* – but how could such a slogan contribute to solving the dilemmas of the modern world, unless it was translated into the idea of a *fundamental underlying communality*, that already informed the possibility of shared meaning, shared experience, shared existence, at a more comprehensive level (both existentially, historically and geographically) than that where the various actors, in their conceptualisations and utterances, created and maintained boundaries? If I could bring out the unity of present-day humankind, not so much as humanistic anthropology’s dream for the future, but as an empirically underpinned, firmly established shared historical heritage from the past, and not only from the very distant past (where we had always had and shared Adam, and Eve) but from the relatively recent past, then the modern stale-mate might be situationally exposed for the optical, perspectival illusion I had found it to be.

For that is what my decades of intensive participatory fieldwork in Africa had taught me for a fact: not of the alleged otherness of Africans, nor the alleged futility and stupidity of their beliefs and actions, but – having shed the armor of condescending deconstructive and disenchanting hegemonic distancing that has been the main result of my professional training as a fieldworker in the 1960s – the liberating and healing existential interpersonal dynamics of both sameness and difference that is the vehicle of social interaction, of wisdom,<sup>36</sup> and of love – as well as the eye-opening experience of allowing myself to live in a world culturally constructed on a different footing than what I was taught in childhood, and yet validly known and effectively handled also within that other culture.

I realised that the epistemology of condescending objectification on which also my own anthropology of religion had been based for its first twenty years, and that had a million counterparts in North Atlantic texts and their echoes in the South, in itself created and imposed the modern stalemate as a hegemonic artefact, whereas a worldview that (against the self-evidences of the global geopolitics of identity difference) could assert historical continuity and recent difference at the same time, might go a considerable way towards solving that dilemma. The approach had to be empirical, scientific in a state-of-the-art way, not only because of Foucault’s insight it is science which is the main legitimating force in the modern world, but also because the collective representations of difference had become so entrenched (by the political economy of imperialism, colonialism, and post-colonial North Atlantic military, political and economic hegemony) that they had wormed their way into the very paradigms and concepts much of modern philosophy is made of.

To do justice to the closeness I had always been experiencing with my African friends and relatives – a closeness that had fed my poetry and that I gradually learned *not* to betray in my academic writing,<sup>37</sup> it was not enough to argue our closeness theoretically, existentially, even

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<sup>36</sup> van Binsbergen 2009.

<sup>37</sup> Although, for the scholar, there may be no way out of the dilemma that all writing is violence and imposition upon those one writes about – unless they can be persuaded (as I tried to do in the case of my book *Tears of Rain*, 1992) to be co-authors.

poetically – I had to try and prove it scientifically. This is the background of what brought me to philosophise with my left hand only, within a few years after having secured one of the world's few chairs of intercultural philosophy, plunging myself, with my right hand, with the greatest possible passion into the retrieval of humanity's recent past, mobilising all the empirical means I could muster. This conference is one of the steps in that attempt, and I do hope it will be far from final.

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