

9. RETHINKING AFRICA'S CONTRIBUTION TO GLOBAL CULTURAL HISTORY

Lessons from a comparative historical analysis of mankala board-games and geomantic divination¹

Wim van Binsbergen

African Studies Centre, Leiden/ Department of Cultural Anthropology and Sociology of
Development, Free University, Amsterdam

1. Introduction

The *Black Athena* debate² to which the present volume is a contribution,

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²Bernal, M., 1987, *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic roots of classical civilization, I. The fabrication of Ancient Greece, 1785-1985*, London etc.: Free Association Books; Bernal, M., 1991, *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic roots of classical civilization, II. The archaeological and documentary evidence*, New Brunswick (N.J.): Rutgers University

has made at least one thing clear: we require new modes of thinking about cultural dynamics and interdependence. Are ‘continents’ or ‘races’ viable units of analysis in this connection? It is scarcely likely, not even if these claims come from African and African American, ‘Afrocentrist’ authors seeking to overcome the the exclusion to which they and their ancestors have been subjected for the past few centuries, in North America and in the world system at large.³ We know that ‘facts’ of cultural distribution and history never speak for themselves, have no independent objective existence, but are to a large extent determined by the paradigmatic selectivity under which they have been produced. The Eurocentric and racist bias which *Black Athena I* has sought to expose and explode is unlikely to be absent from other products of North Atlantic scholarship besides classical studies. It probably left its marks, e.g., on African Studies,⁴ one of my own disciplines, which has provided much of the data for the present article. Meanwhile the counterpart of such Eurocentric racism, notably the *extremist variant* of Afrocentrism which claims that European, North Atlantic, and increasingly global civilisation sprang uniquely from Africa, constitutes essentially the same sort of bias. In the sense that one cannot defeat one racism by invoking another, there is an awkward contradiction here, which has given rise to unnecessary confusion in the context of the *Black Athena* debate.⁵

In the context of critical, comparative empirical research involving a complex body of data (each of whose components may have been collected by a different researcher and for different purposes, under varying ideological, epistemological and methodological conditions), such biases may provisionally be hoped to become manifest, or to cancel out. Empirical research is not an alternative to theoretical, methodological and philosophical critique, but it may open up vistas and suggest new models and interrelations which otherwise would have remained outside our scope. However, such empirical exploration is not a final phase; after completion, its findings are to inspire further, more focused theoretical work.

Much of the identity discourse, in the hands of African and Afrocentrist philosophers, literary writers and politicians, as well as in the hands of

Press; Lefkowitz, M.R., & MacLean Rogers, G., eds., 1996, *Black Athena revisited*, Chapel Hill & London: University of North Carolina Press; Wim van Binsbergen, ‘*Black Athena Ten Years After: Towards a constructive re-assessment*’ (this volume); and extensive references cited in these publications.

³For a definition and an extensive bibliography on Afrocentrism, cf. Wim van Binsbergen ‘*Black Athena Ten Years After*’, nn. 3-4.

⁴*Ibid.*, n. 37.

⁵See Bernal’s defence on this point in: Martin Bernal, ‘Responses to *Black Athena: General and linguistic issues*’ (this volume); and my ‘*Black Athena: Ten Years After*’, n. 3.

racialist or Eurocentric opponents of Afrocentrism, is of an aggregate and extremely abstract nature. It pays little attention to the details, the attending specific social practices and experiences, the specific dynamics and the range of variation between, and within, African countries and periods of African history. Today however it is no longer necessary to discuss matters of African cultural history in broadly sweeping terms. A century of specialised ethnographic and historical research on Africa, however teeming with biases, has allowed us to proceed to much greater precision, dividing up cultural heritages on the African continent into component strands and linking each of these strands specifically to global cultural history. What we lose in the process is an, ideologically attractive, blanket concept of mystical Africanness — focus of so much positive and negative bias. What we hope to gain is a more realistic view of the continental and intercontinental connections of the varieties of cultural achievements, borrowings and transformations — so that the African continent itself (whose name in the course of two millennia has inflated from the designation of a minor North African region⁶ to cover an entire continental land mass, and to entail a myth of racial identity encompassing a sizeable section of mankind) dissolves as a unit of study, to be relegated once more — together with all other continents — to the status of a culturally and politically indifferent land mass and nothing more.

What does an analysis of the type advocated suggest as to Africa's place in long-term global cultural history? Is Africa the unique and universal matrix, the primal origin of civilisation, as claimed in extremist appropriations of *Black Athena*? Is it, on the contrary, the exclusively receptive, passive end station of imported culture produced by the genius of other continents, as in the Eurocentric myth? Do more subtle models of exchange and transformation present themselves?

⁶Cf. Leglay, M., 'Africa', in: Ziegler, K. and Sontheimer, W., 1979, *Der Kleine Pauly: Lexikon der Antike: Auf der Grundlage von Pauly's Realencyclopädie der Classischen Altertumswissenschaft*, 5 vols., München: Deutscher Taschenbuch, I, cols. 109-110, with references; Gsell, S., 1913-1928, *Histoire ancienne de l'Afrique du Nord*, Paris: Hachette, 8 vols. Of course, the name Asia went through a similar geographical expansion, originally deriving from a particular region Assuwa in 'Asia Minor'; cf. Bernal, *Black Athena II*, pp. 33f; Georgacas, D.J., 1969, 'The name Asia for the continent; its history and origin', *Names*, 17, 1: 1-90; Wainwright, G.A., 1915, 'Alashia-Alasa; and Asy', *Klio*, 14: 1-36.

2. *Two case studies: geomantic divination and mankala board-games in Africa and elsewhere*

2.1. *Focus*

In order to explore these questions, I will offer two — extremely truncated — case studies, tracing the trajectory of two famous genres of African cultural production widely attested across the continent since the sixteenth century CE, and featuring in many constructions of Africa as a continental cultural unit: *geomantic divination*, and *mankala*.

Geomantic divination consists in the systematic production, naming and (by reference to a fixed catalogue) interpretation of one randomly produced combination of lines, seeds, pebbles, or wooden or ivory tablets, from among the total set of 2^n possible combinations.

The term *mankala* refers to a family of board-games where, under elaborate rules, a fixed number of pebbles or seeds is repeatedly redistributed over a number of holes placed in 2 to 4 rows, and successively captured.

These two cultural systems are part and parcel of African life, cutting across the many cultural and linguistic boundaries which that continent exhibits. They feature prominently in many attempts to define Africa, African culture, Africanness. But are they unique to Africa? Do they have an African origin? Are they perhaps merely extensively localised forms, on the soil of the land mass we have chosen to call Africa, of cultural production which have a much wider distribution in the world, and which essentially originated outside that land mass? Does their Africanness lie in this localisation? Is that the reason why they are so dominant and ubiquitous in Africa? Or is the geographical claim in itself correct but is the very concept of Africa as a viable unit of cultural analysis, misleading?

My aim is not to reduce the vital political and historical questions posed by *Black Athena*, to a neo-diffusionist analysis of two sets of cultural terms which, however charming and fascinating, would appear to be rather too harmless to create much of an impression in the context dominated by the burden of several centuries of North Atlantic cultural and racial domination. I have chosen them as exemplary, as a test case. It is my contention that the surprising patterns which such obviously African cultural items can be shown to exhibit on closer analysis, have heuristic value towards a more comprehensive and profound assessment of Africa's (and Europe's) place in the cultural history of mankind. Nonetheless, I am speaking of illustrations, not of a unique, all-encompassing model, let alone of proof and refutation.

Both material divination systems, and board-games, are *formal systems*, which can be fairly abstractly defined in terms of constituent elements and

rules *relatively* impervious to individual alteration. Both consist in a drastic modelling of reality, to the effect that the world of everyday experience is very highly condensed, in space and in time, in the game and the divination rite; and while the elements of the model mimic real life, events occurring between the model's elements have no direct and instantaneous real-life consequences. The unit of both types of events is the *session*, rarely extending beyond a few hours, and tied not only to the restricted space where the apparatus (e.g. a game-board, a divining board or set of tablets) is used but, more importantly, to the narrowly defined spatial configuration of the apparatus itself. The formal nature of divination and board-games lead them to be relatively a-historic (in the sense of being rather inert in the face of general social and cultural change) and to elude localisation (crossing cultural, linguistic etc. boundaries and, while allowing for local adaptation, diffusing in such a way that they can hardly ever be said to truly reflect the central orientation of a local culture).⁷ This makes divination systems and board-games very welcome guiding fossils in cultural history, but their own history (in the sense of movement in space and transformation over time under explained conditions) is far more difficult to write.

2.2. A Neolithic context








I have elsewhere argued a Neolithic context for the emergence of board-games and divination.⁸ These cultural forms are specific modellings of time and space, linked to agriculture and animal husbandry as man's most drastic redefinition of space and time before the rise of the modern

⁷This point was implied by Tylor, E.B., 1880, 'Remarks on the geographical distribution of games', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 9: 23-30. Remarkable examples of the mankala game's variants being persistent to change in the face of migration across vast areas and being surrounded by distinctly different variants, are e.g. given by: Townshend, P., 1979, 'Mankala in eastern and southern Africa: A distributional analysis', *Azania*, 14: 109-138, p. 127f.

⁸Van Binsbergen, 1996, 'Time'; van Binsbergen, in press. Cf. Anonymous, 1990, 'Playing board games in the Stone Age', "'Geographica'", *National Geographic Magazine*, 177, 2; Rollefson, G.O., 1992, 'A Neolithic game board from 'Ain Ghazal, Jordan', *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*, 286, May 1992: 1-5. Considerably later are the Bronze Age 'gaming stones' (regular rows of cup-holes cut in stone and thus suggestive of mankala boards) found elsewhere in the Eastern Mediterranean basin: Lee, J., 1982, 'Early Bronze Age game stones from Bab edh-Dhra, Jordan', *Levant: Journal of the British School of Archaeology in Jerusalem*, 14: 171-174 (with 3x10 cups suggestive of three-row mankala); Swiny, S., 1980, 'Bronze Age gaming stones from Cyprus', *Report of the Department of Antiquities of Cyprus*, pp. 54-78. Similarly, Deledicq & Popova, who wrote a brilliant study of the finite mathematics of the mankala game, claim that mankala originates in Mesopotamia: Deledicq, A., & Popova, A., 1977, *Wari et solo: Le jeu de calculs africain*, Paris: CEDIC.

technology of communication and transport, and of electronic media. The Neolithic constitutes a base-line beyond which we need not seek for historical clues and geographical connections, at least not in the limited context of the present argument.⁹ The parcelling up of a local area in adjacent yet separately worked and administered fields, surrounding a localised community whose ritual unity is expressed by a shrine or temple, a cemetery, a megalithic structure, etc. — a community whose main *raison d'être* may well have been to pool resources not only against outside attack but also against internal food shortages, through redistribution —, fits the Neolithic archaeological record as well as the form and rules of *mankala*. It also has a link with the iconography of historical early agricultural communities, in whose representations a grid-like pattern not unlike a *mankala* board is a recurrent feature, even although we may not assume the correspondence to be as neat as in the earliest forms of Sumerian, Egyptian and Chinese writing, where such a pattern indeed means 'field'.¹⁰ Looking

⁹It is important to realise that the context of *mankala*-like artefacts characterised by two to four rows of cup-holes, is formed not so much by the set of all certified *mankala* boards (which could only lead to tautology), but by the set of all artefacts with cup-holes. The latter set is much larger, much more varied, has a much wider distribution in space and time, and is likely to include artefacts which, while not yet *mankala* boards themselves, constitute the non-ludic prototypes for such boards. Among Upper Palaeolithic and later rock art, cup-holes occur perhaps as frequently as grid marks (e.g. Capitan, L., & Peyrony, D., 1921, 'Découverte d'un sixième squelette moustérien à la Ferrassie, Dordogne', *Revue Anthropologique*, 31: 382f; Levy, G.R., 1948, *The gate of horn: A study of the religious conceptions of the stone age, and their influence upon European thought*, London: Faber & Faber, pp. 6, 65f, and p. 41, cf. 125, 146). Cup-holes are also a regular feature in Neolithic and Bronze Age ritual contexts, where they often appear on altars or 'libation stones'. The early alleged '*mankala* boards' in stone, or 'gaming stones', from the Near East as discussed in the previous note, and from East Africa as referenced below, may belong to the same family of cupped stones, and may therefore be merely pre- or proto-ludic, rather than ludic. Calling them '*mankala* boards' is begging the question. For an extensive discussion, see: van Binsbergen, in press.

¹⁰In the most archaic Sumerian writing (c. 3000 BCE) the agricultural field was simply represented by a rectangle divided by vertical lines: the image of a field divided by irrigation ditches: . In the subsequent archaic script (Borger, R., 1978, *Assyrisch-babylonische Zeichenliste*, Kevelaer/ Neukirchen-Vluyn: Butzon & Bercker/ Neukirchener Verlag, 12; character no. 105 I) this was only slightly transformed into: . which ultimately led to the standard character (no. 105 I (77); Borger, p. 87): . Similarly, in Chinese (*Hàn Yǐng Cídián/ A Chinese English dictionary*, 1988, Beijing), the character for field is: , which as a radical occurs in a great many combinations. In the combination signifying man (agriculturalist), later standardised as ; this representation of 'field' is already attested in the most archaic Chinese writing on seals and oracle bones (2nd mill. BCE), as:  (Needham, J., with Wing Ling, 1956, *Science and civilization in China, vol. 2. History of scientific thought*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 226). In Egyptian hieroglyphic, the oblong grid:  has the cognate meaning of 'district', 'administered land area' — which was translated in Greek as *nomós*; Faulkner, R.O.,

for further corroboration I came across Gilbert's work which explicitly links the layout of Egyptian board-games (though not *mankala* but *znt*) with the pattern of irrigation ditches in the Egyptian agricultural landscape.¹¹ Here may be an important key to the layout of the *mankala* board.¹²

2.3. Geomantic divination

Geomancy constitutes a ubiquitous and dominant family of divination systems, including such famous members as *Ifa*, *Fa*, 'Sixteen Cowries' (Nigeria and West Africa in general), *Sikidy* (Madagascar and Comoro Isl.), *Hakata* (Southern Africa), *ilm al-raml* or *khatt al-raml* (North Africa).¹³

1962, *A concise dictionary of Middle Egyptian*, Oxford: Griffith Institute, p. 54, 178 and *passim*; Gardiner, A.H., 1957, *Egyptian Grammar*, 3rd ed., Oxford: Oxford University Press, sign N24 p. 488.

¹¹Gilbert, P., 1965, 'Irrigation, jeux de damier et sens du rectangle dans l'art Égyptien', *Chronique d'Égypte*, 40: 72-78; the Egyptologist Arno Egberts however points out to me that Gilbert's view has not been generally adopted among Egyptologists. Martin Bernal, however, draws my attention to the fact that the *znt* hieroglyphic sign (Gardiner number Y5; cf. Gardiner, *Egyptian Grammar*, p. 534) is also prominent in *mni*, 'moor, marshland'.

¹²A caveat is in order on this point. The grid-like pattern is extremely simple and hence has a ubiquity — in rock art (e.g. Breuil, H., H. Lothe & le Col. Brenans, 1954, *Les roches peintes du Tassili-n-Ajjer*, Paris: Arts et Métiers graphiques), vessel decoration, tattooing patterns (e.g. Marcy, G., 1931, 'Origine et significations des tatouages de tribus berbères', in: *Revue de l'Histoire des Religions*, 51, tome 102: 13-66), textile decoration etc. — which may well defy any convincing systematic and converging interpretation by reference to productive and community patterns. Grid patterns abound in pre-Neolithic rock art, where they are usually interpreted by archaeologists as representing traps or nets in which to capture animals. Also Upper Palaeolithic techniques like weaving and basket-making suppose or produce grid-like patterns which are likely to persist in iconography. In the Chinese context, the interpretation of the simple grid sign as 'field' appears to be superimposed on an earlier reading of the sign as animal foot-prints, again in a hunting context; Wang Hongyan, 1993, *The origins of Chinese characters*, Beijing: Sinolingua.

¹³The literature, both scholarly and practical/ esoteric, on geomantic divination is fairly voluminous, and much of it is of excellent standards; I can only present the barest selection here. For a recent review by the author of one of the most original contributions in this field, cf.: Jaulin, R., 1991, *Géomancie et islam*, Paris: Christian Bourgeois. On the West African material, which is so conducive to the construction of geomancy as a typically African item of culture, cf.: Cf. Kassibo, B., 1992, 'La géomancie ouest-africaine: Formes endogènes et emprunts extérieurs', *Cahiers d'Études Africaines*, 32, 4, no. 128: 541-596; Traoré, M.L., 1979, 'Vers une pensée originelle africaine: Exposé géomantique, critiques de la négritude et du consciencisme', Thèse de 3e cycle, Paris-IV, unpublished; Abimbola, 'W.', 1976, *Ifa: An exposition of the Ifa literary corpus*, New

Africa is often presented as the continent in which divination is still part of everyday life, and these prominent divination systems tend to be presented as incorporating the very spirit of African life today and in the past. The material apparatus in all these regions is very different, ranging from divination chains, or shells cast in a square, rimmed wooded board covered with sand in West-Africa, or four tablets in Southern Africa; to piles of grain or pebbles in the Indian Ocean area, and — in North and North East Africa — the forceful ‘hitting of the sand’ (*ḍarb al-raml*) with a stick, in order to produce a chance number of indentures which number can then be scored as either odd or even.

Also in geomancy, therefore, one is justified to see the many variations of the ‘art of drawing lines in the sand’ (Arab. *khayt al raml*) as primarily an evocation of the several transformations of space through which the environment is turned into a productive field: through demarcation, clearing, ploughing, irrigation perhaps, and harvesting.¹⁴ Whatever

York: Nok. For a more popular overview, also dealing with the spread of geomancy to late medieval Europe, where it became a standard and increasingly popularised form of divination as from Renaissance times, cf.: Skinner, S., 1980, *Terrestrial astrology: Divination by geomancy*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, which however should be used with caution when it comes to the early history of geomancy. On geomancy (*Sikidy*) on Madagascar in relation to the general African material, cf.: Trautmann, R., 1939-1940, *La divination à la Côte des Esclaves et à la Madagascar: Le Vôdoû Fa — le Sikidy*, Mémoires de l’Institut Français d’Afrique Noire, no. 1, Paris: Larose; Hébert, J.C., 1961, ‘Analyse structurale des géomancies comoriennes, malgaches et africaines’, *Journal de la Société des Africanistes*, 31, 2: 115-208. For possible links with the Egyptian magic, cf. Barb, A.A., 1971, ‘Mystery, myth, and magic’, in: Harris, J.R., ed., *The legacy of Egypt*, 2nd ed., pp. 138-169, Oxford: Clarendon, pp. 138-169. Merely for the sake of brevity, may I further refer to my own recent writings for extensive references on geomancy in Africa, the Islamic world, Asia and Europe: van Binsbergen, W.M.J., 1994, ‘Divinatie met vier tabletten: Medische technologie in Zuidelijk Afrika’, in: S. van der Geest, P. ten Have, G. Nijhoff & P. Verbeek-Heida, eds., *De macht der dingen: Medische technologie in cultureel perspectief*, Amsterdam: Spinhuis, pp. 61-110; van Binsbergen, W.M.J., 1995, ‘Four-tablet divination as trans-regional medical technology in Southern Africa’, *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 25, 2: 114-140; van Binsbergen, W.M.J., 1996, ‘Transregional and historical connections of four-tablet divination in Southern Africa’, *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 26, 1: 2-29; all in preparation for my forthcoming monograph.

¹⁴These patterns are so widespread in the Old World, that e.g. Arabian divination practices might be better understood in the light of customs in South East Asia; cf. Granet, M., 1988, *La pensée chinoise*, Paris: Albin Michel, nouvelle édition, p. 486 n. 86 (earlier ed. Paris: La Renaissance du Livre, 1934):

‘La tradition des rois cloche-pied s’est conservée au Siam et au Cambodge jusqu’au XIXe siècle. Après avoir tracé un sillon (désacralisation du sol par le chef au début

departure from more original forms of divination we encounter, there is always the link with the ground: if the divination no longer takes place on the actual ground but in a miniature representation such as the square West African divining-board, then at least its bottom has to be filled with sand; if the soil imagery has been almost entirely abandoned and the system reduced to the fall of four tablets, these are at least cast upon the soil — typically a soil which is transformed and demarcated by covering it with a sacred cloth or sacrificial animal skin. I think it is highly significant that at the beginning of the divination session the Southern African diviner usually smacks down, with great relish, onto the soil the bag containing his tablets — thus awakening the spirits of the soil (his ancestors, notably).

When in an above note I compared Arabian geomancy with South East Asian agricultural practices, I was merely pointing out a parallel which is historically conceivable in the light of the east-bound Old World diffusion of agriculture as a human invention.¹⁵ The last thing I want to suggest is that the Arabian symbolism derives from South East Asian agricultural practices. The link is far more indirect, and even the Chinese *I Ching* system,¹⁶ which via Chinese/Arab trade on the port of Basra in the late first millennium CE is only one of several formative influences that produced *‘ilm al-raml*.

d'une campagne agricole), ils devaient aller s'appuyer contre un arbre et se tenir debout sur un seul pied (le pied droit placé sur le genou gauche).' (italics added — WvB).

Of course, ritual ploughing was one of the important duties of the archaic Chinese king; Maspero, H., 1978, *China in antiquity*, tr. F.A. Kierman, Folkestone: Dawson, of *La Chine antique*, revised edition, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France; first published 1927.

¹⁵Cf. the theoretically obsolete but of lasting descriptive persuasiveness: Leser, P., 1928, 'West-östliche Landwirtschaft: Kulturbeziehungen zwischen Europa, dem vorderen Orient und dem Fernen Osten, aufgezeigt an landwirtschaftlichen Geräten und Arbeitsvorgängen', in: Koppers, W., ed., *Festschrift/ Publication d'hommage offerte au P.W. Schmidt*, Vienna: Mechitaristen-Congregations-Buchdruckerei, pp. 416-484.

¹⁶*I Ching* may not even be Chinese in origin, as is suggested by its binary nature (as against the *five* elements of Chinese cosmology), and by the puzzling non-Chinese (Tocharian?) etymology of such key concepts as *kun*, 坤, trigram symbol ☷, the receptive earth-like principle, which the Sinologist E. Pulleyblank claimed to be a cognate of Greek *χθών khthōn*; also cf. Needham c.s.; I owe this reminder to Martin Bernal as Sinologist. However, by the time it spread to the world of early Islam, *I Ching* — as a result of transformative localisation — had been a pivotal part of Chinese culture for several millennia.

Meanwhile, it is only correct to point out that *many* layers are piled up in the geomantic symbolism, making for a multi-referential coding system whose co-ordinates in space and time are typically complex and confused.¹⁷ There is, as above, the maternal (and psychoanalytically oedipal), nurturative, agriculture-related symbolism of unfathomable and ungraspable earth as the source of life. But there is also the symbolism of fragmented and tangible earth, dust, dirt, pebbles, as the lowly (psychoanalytically anal) origins of man and of life in general. There is the combination of these two themes in the ‘black and red’, the fertile alluvial soil and the barren desert, which was how the ancient Egyptians conceptualised their country. There is earth as the time-less repository of the dead, as the underworld, the alternative source of power and knowledge. And, particularly relevant in the Arabian context with its heritage of magical, demonological and astrological ideas from the Ancient Near East and Graeco-Roman-Judaeo-Christian civilisation, there is earth as the opposite of heaven, so that geomancy is divination not by the stars but by the earth, while the earth is the typical place where magicians, by hitting the very ground with a stick or a wand,¹⁸ assert their autonomous right to divine status and power and by implication their kinship with Satan, as in the following Coptic formula for love magic (first millennium CE):

‘...Shurin, Shuran, Shutaban, Shutaben, Ibonese, Sharsaben,... Satan the devil, who beat with his staff upon the earth saying: “I am a god also”...’¹⁹

There can be no doubt that the *darb al-raml* procedure as described below implicitly emulates these magical themes.

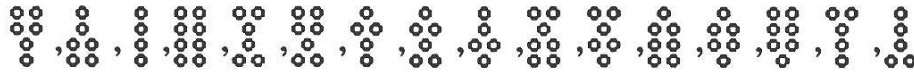
With the exception of the Southern African variant of geomancy (where the tablets’ fall is interpreted directly, i.e. without the construction of a standard geomantic symbol) the result produced by the geomantic apparatus is interpreted, through a process of transformation and

¹⁷Cf. van Binsbergen, W.M.J., in preparation, *Four tablets: A Southern African divination system in its transregional and historical context*.

¹⁸E.g. Exodus 7: 8-12 on Aaron’s rod, and Exodus 17 on water from the rock. In the context of the *Black Athena* debate with its Egyptocentric overtones, one is tempted to consider the iconographic theme of the pharaoh slaying his enemies with a mace — a constant of Egyptian representation which first appears on the Narmer palette c. 3000 BCE. There is also a conceivable link with Herakles and his formidable club, an iconographic and mythical theme which Bernal (*Black Athena II*, pp. 106ff) identifies as very ancient on the basis of being pre-sword, and which he links not only, in line with conventional wisdom, to the Sumero-Akkadian kingship (cf. Gilgamesh) but also to pharaonic kingship.

¹⁹Papyrus Berlin 8320 (Koptische Texte), as quoted in: de Jong, K.H.E., 1921, *De magie bij de Grieken en Romeinen*, Haarlem: Bohn, p. 238f; further brief reference to this text in: Meyer, M., & Smith, R., 1994, *Ancient Christian magic: Coptic texts of ritual power*, San Francisco: Harper Collins, p. 367, n. 75, l. 18, cf. p. 161; also cf. Isaiah 14: 13-14; Ezekiel 28: 2.

elimination, as contributing one horizontal line, of one or two dots (one for odd, two for even), to a four-line geomantic symbol, of which there are of course sixteen (2^4):



or, in the Arabian notation:



More complex procedures may raise this number to any higher power of 2. A written or memorised key (the catalogue) provides the interpretation of each geomantic symbol, and of their combinations.

The available evidence allows us to map the global geographical distribution of the geomantic family as in Figure 1, as a basis for the reconstruction of its geographical diffusion in Figure 2.²⁰

According to the current state of historical reconstructions, the Hellenic, Hellenistic, Hermetic, Jewish, Persian, African, Indian and Chinese borrowings²¹ into the Arabic literate corpus of geomancy point to a drafting (after unsystematic earlier forms) of the classic, strongly astrological geomantic system in Southern Mesopotamia in an Ismā'īlī context in the tenth century CE. Subsequently, the system's rapid and successful spread over the Islamic and Jewish intellectual world, and hence into Europe, Africa and the Indian Ocean region, was largely due to its being enshrined in widely circulated treatises. Of these, perhaps the most famous and successful has been the *Kitāb al-faṣl fī uṣūl 'ilm al-raml* by the Berber *shaykh* Muhammad al-Zanātī (c. 1200 CE).

An early, original North West African input into the system is suggested by al-Zanātī's origin, by the early circulation of Berber names for the sixteen basic geomantic configurations,²² and by the prominence of proto-

²⁰van Binsbergen 1996, 'Transregional'; van Binsbergen, in prep.

²¹Not by accident, a similar mix (althought the admixture of Indian and Chinese material is more conspicuous in geomancy) went, in the same period, into the compilation of that famous piece of Arabic magic writing, *GHāyat al-ḥaḳīm* also known as *Picatrix*: Pingree, D., 1980, 'Some of the sources of the *GHāyat al-ḥaḳīm*', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 43: 1-15; Hartner, W., 1965, 'Notes on *Picatrix*', *Isis*, 56: 438-51; Ritter, H. & M. Plessner, 1962, '*Picatrix*': *Das Ziel der Weisen von Pseudo-Magriti*, London: Studies of the Warburg Institute, 27.

²²Cf. Steinschneider, M., 1864, 'Über die Mondstationen (Naxatra), und das Buch Arcandam', *Zeitschrift der deutschen morgenländischen Gesellschaft*, xviii: 118-206, p. 177; Steinschneider, M., 1877, 'Die Skidy [sic] oder geomantischen Figuren', *Zeitschrift der deutschen morgenländischen Gesellschaft*, 31: 762-765, especially the table.

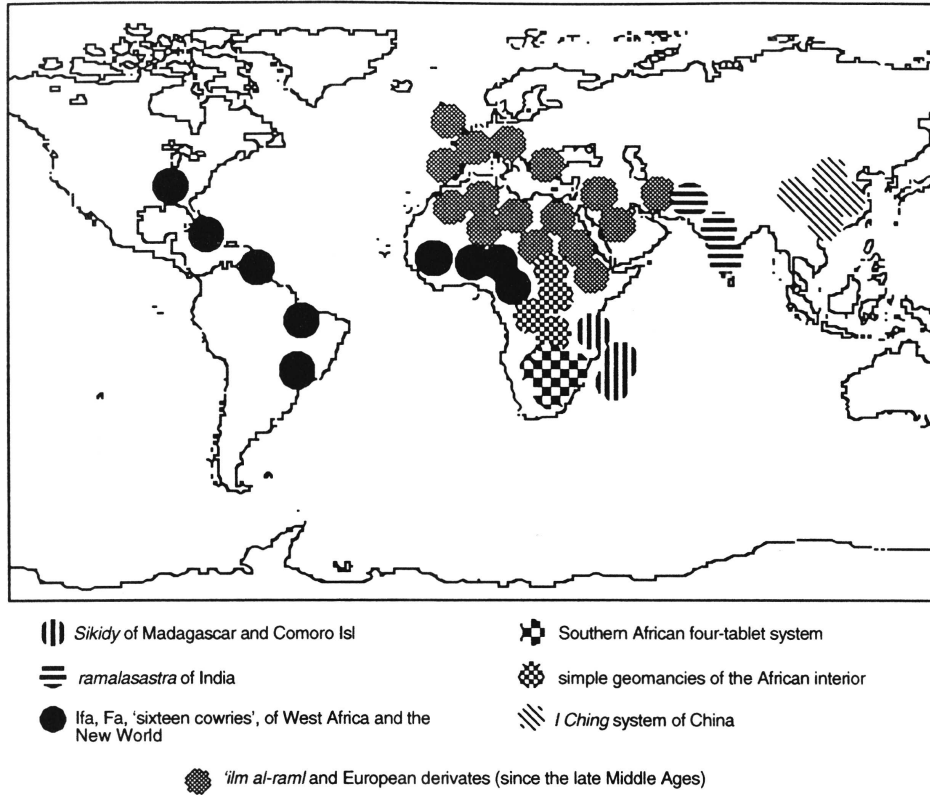


Figure 1. Distribution of the geomantic family of divination systems.

mankala and proto-geomancy in the latter-day North West African material.²³ Yet the latter-day *Ifa, Fa*, and ‘*Sixteen Cowries*’, the most prominent divination systems of West Africa, derive directly from the Arabian prototype. A careful examination of the binary mathematical structure of both the Southern African four-tablet divination system, and the more directly Arabian-derived forms of geomancy found in the Indian

²³E.g. Griaule, M., 1937, ‘Note sur la divination par le chacal (Population dogon de Sanga)’, *Bulletin du Comité d’Études Historiques et Scientifiques de l’Afrique Occidentale Française*, 20, 1-2: 113-141; Paulme, D., 1937, ‘La divination par les chacals chez les Dogon de Sanga’, *Journal de la Société des Africanistes*, 7, 1: 1-14; Pâques, V., 1964, *L’Arbre cosmique dans la pensée populaire et dans la vie quotidienne du Nord-Ouest africain*, Travaux et Mémoires de l’Institut d’Ethnologie de l’Université de Paris, no. 70; also cf. the work on West African geomancies as cited in previous notes. I shall come back to this point.

Ocean region led me to hypothesise historical connections. These could subsequently be ascertained when I found identical terms and concepts in the interpretative catalogues attending the divination system in these two more or less adjacent regions. The four horizontal lines of the standard geomantic symbols, where each line can take two values (uneven or even, one dot or two), turned out to be transformed into four tablets, where each tablet can take two values (obverse or reverse); in the process, the attending interpretative catalogue was partly maintained, partly localised.²⁴

Let us now discuss the mankala family of board games in some detail.

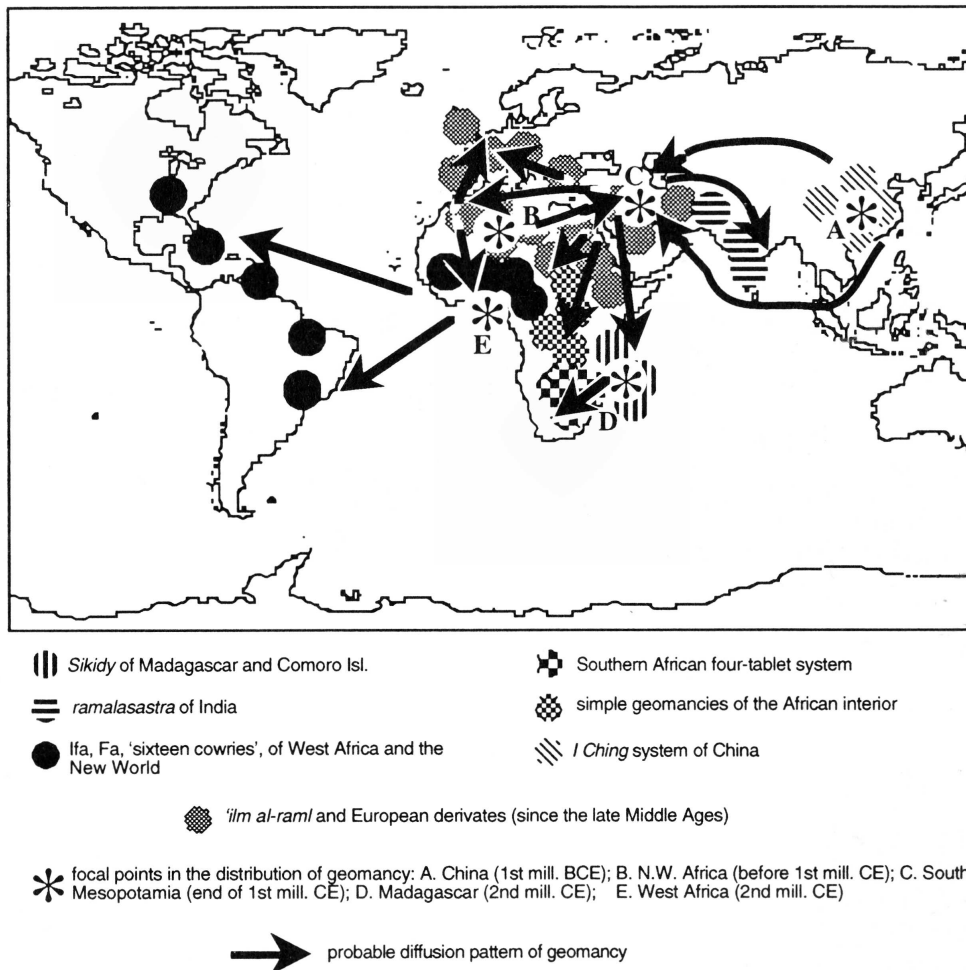


Figure 2. Probable diffusion pattern of geomantic divination.

²⁴Van Binsbergen, 'Transregional and historical connections'.

2.4. *Mankala*

The pioneer in this field, the late nineteenth-century American museum anthropologist Culin,²⁵ claims the *mankala* game to constitute ‘Africa’s national game’ — a claim since repeated many times and still upheld by some major authors in this field, Townshend²⁶ and Russ.²⁷ Of the five families of board-games into which the principal authority in this field of scholarship, Murray²⁸ classifies all known historic types, Africa is claimed to exhibit only one, for which he employs the generic, Arabic name of *mankala*. This type of game was first attested²⁹ in the *Kitāb al-Aghāni* by the Arab author *Abū’l Faradj* (897-967 CE). *Mankala* is found all over sub-Saharan Africa. In accordance with Murray’s claim, it is that continent’s only board-game outside clearly Arabianised contexts (where the checkers-like *dara* game appears, with a distribution as diverse as Islamic influence in Africa) or Europeanised contexts.

Figure 3 summarises the global distribution of *mankala*, and suggests the underlying pattern of diffusion as shown in Figure 4.³⁰

Townshend has extensively argued against the central role Murray had attributed to Asia and to Islam in the spread of *mankala*, and in favour of a uniquely African origin and transformation of the *mankala* family of board-games. So much so that in his opinion even their distribution in Asia should be directly derived from African models alleged to be recently imported to South Asia by black slaves — whose presence there regrettably cannot be denied. Already twenty years ago Townshend complained³¹ that everyone (except the archaeologist/ palaeontologist Louis Leakey³²)

²⁵Culin, S., 1896, ‘Mankala, the national game of Africa’, *US National Museum Annual Report*, Washington, pp. 595-607.

²⁶Townshend, P., 1976-1977, ‘The SWA game of ||hūs (das Lochspiel) in the wider context of African *mankala*’, *Journal — SWA Wissenschaftliche Gesellschaft* (Windhoek), 31: 85-98; Townshend, P., 1979, ‘Mankala in eastern and southern Africa’; Townshend, P., 1979, ‘Games of strategy: A new look at correlates and cross-cultural methods’, in: Schwartzman, H.B., ed., *Play and culture*, New York: West Point, pp. 217-225; Townshend, P., 1982, ‘Bao (*Mankala*): The Swahili ethic in African idiom’, *Paideuma*, 28: 175-191.

²⁷Russ, L., 1984, *Mancala games*, Algonac (Michigan): Reference Publications.

²⁸Murray, H.J.R., 1952, *A history of board-games other than chess*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.

²⁹Murray, p. 165.

³⁰On the basis of Murray’s detailed data: pp. 178, 240f; with additional input from Townshend (1979, 1979, 1980), as well as from the other references on *mankala* cited in this article.

³¹Townshend, 1976-77, p. 95.

³²Leakey, L.S.B., 1937, *White African*, London, pp. 165-173.

seemed to be utterly determined to find by all means a non-African origin for this family of board-games. In 1979 this point was repeated even more forcefully, when Townshend concluded a painstaking distributional analysis of *mankala* on the African continent with the words:

‘The conclusions I personally draw from all this are:

- (i) that 4-row *Mankala* is of black-African origin;
- (ii) that there is a better prima-facie case for 2-row *Mankala* being of African than of Asian origin;

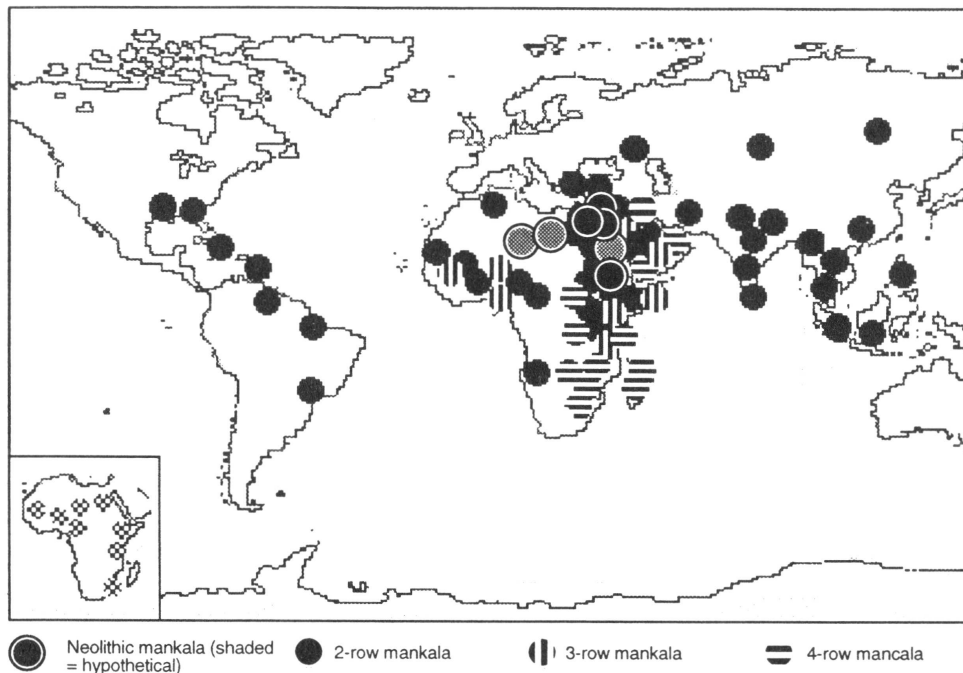


Figure 3. Geographical distribution of *mankala*.
inset: distribution of the *dara* game

- (iii) that there is a distinct possibility of *Mankala* having been introduced whether by slaves or returned travellers from Africa to Asia (Leakey’s conclusion of 40 years ago); and

- (iv) that the ‘ki-Arabu’ forms of 4-row *Mankala* may have been brought to the East African coast from the interior (e.g. the Lake Malawi region) by Arabs or their African employees or possibly by some earlier current of cultural diffusion.’³³

Townshend’s view, although tying in with the Afrocentrist point of view, is

³³Townshend, 1979, ‘*Mankala*’, p. 127.

misleading. It actually forces him to manipulate the data.³⁴ It would be

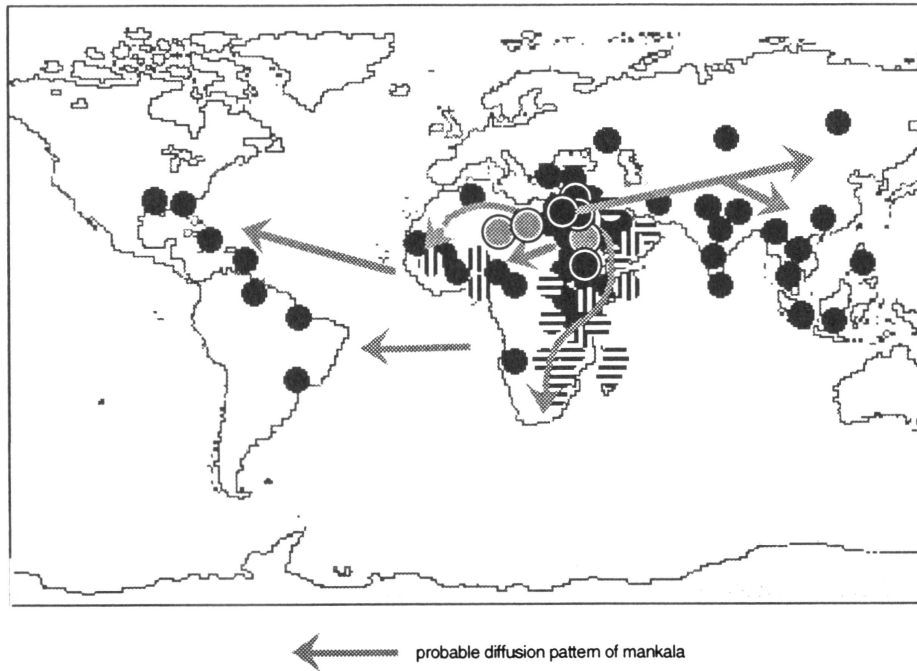


Figure 4. Probable diffusion pattern of Mankala.
 legend: as previous diagram

much better to use the considerable archaeological evidence, from various sites in East and Central Africa, of Mankala-like rock art.³⁵ These Mankala-

³⁴He has to close his eyes for the evidence (cf. Murray, 1952, p. 36; Piggott, S., 1961, *Prehistoric India: To 1000 B.C.*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, first publ. 1950, p. 190) on four-row Mankala outside Africa:

‘In the case of four-row Mankala the evidence is clear: not one such game has been recorded outside Africa.’ (Townshend, 1982, p. 186)

Moreover he has to deny that the Ancient Egyptian examples (e.g. Parker, H., 1909, *Ancient Ceylon*, London: Luzac & Co., pp. 587-603; Petrie, F., 1927, *Objects of daily use*, London, p. 55, plate 47) are Mankala boards. He bases such denial not on the grounds that context and information on the attending ludic practices is lacking (that would be an excellent point to make; see above, my note 8), but simply because they are too early to fit his Afrocentrist hypothesis; and he has to propose an unrealistically late date for the Ceylon artefacts (Parker, *ibid.*), which he does accept as being genuine Mankala.

³⁵Costermans, le Dr., 1949, ‘Relevé des stations préhistoriques dans les territoires de Watsa-Gomabri et de Dungu’, *Zaire*, iii, 2: 154-166; Viereck, A., 1973, *Die Felsbilder von Twyfelfontein*, Windhoek, picture 21, p. 45; Cole, S., 1954, *The prehistory of East Africa*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, p. 265; Jensen, A.E., 1936, *Im Lande des Gada*, Stuttgart: Strecker & Schröder (as quoted in: Zaslavsky, C., 1990, *Africa counts: Number and pattern in African culture*, Brooklyn (N.Y.): Lawrence Hill, second paperback edition

like patterns (if that is what they are, despite their vertical placement, which defies their being used for actually *playing* mankala) have not been convincingly dated, and might be as recent as the East African Iron Age. However I would prefer, with Townshend and Leakey, to interpret them as Neolithic.

The geographical parameters of the Fertile Crescent were formulated³⁶ prior to two major developments in our perception of Old World post-Mesolithic history: the discovery of the Indus civilisation, and the discovery that in Africa independent Neolithic domestication of crops and livestock had taken place: in the once fertile central Sahara, in the Ethiopian highlands, but also outside these centres, in the ecotones between savanna and forest.³⁷ Combining this with the evidence on Neolithic (pre- or proto-) mankala from Egypt, Jordan and Cyprus, the conclusion suggests itself that any strict distinction between Africa and Asia may be irrelevant and misleading. The Neolithic transformation processes leading (among so many other components of civilisation) to mankala occurred fairly independently in parts of both continents. Thus mankala may have sprung from Africa probably as much as it sprung from Asia: the crucial characteristic of the locus of its emergence was its being the scene of Old World agricultural revolution — a kind of greatly extended Fertile Crescent, redefined so as to stretch deeply into North West and North East Africa, and straddling both continents.

2.5. *The special position of North West Africa*

North West Africa stands out as an interesting area for a further exploration of a possible African contribution to the two cultural systems we have examined. Here ritual and divination offer many converging examples of grid-based procedures. One instance is jackal divination,³⁸ where in the evening the soil is divided in a rectangular grid in order to be able to

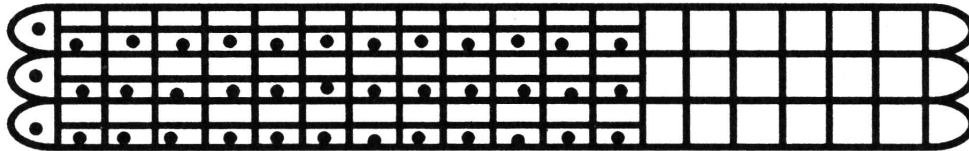
(first published 1973, Boston: Prindle, Weber & Schmidt), p. 126, fig. 11-6); Anfray, F., 1970, 'Notes archéologiques', *Annales d'Éthiopie*, 8: 35. Townshend is well aware of this material, cf. Townshend 1976-77, p. 91 n. 1, p. 92.

³⁶Breasted, J.H., 1935, *Ancient times: A history of the Ancient World*, New York: Harper & Brother, first published 1926.

³⁷Cf. Harlan, J.R., de Wet, J.M.J., & Stemler, A.B.L., eds., 1976, *Origins of African plant domestication*, The Hague: Mouton, espec. pp. 3ff; Mauny, R., 1967, 'L'Afrique et les origines de la domestication', in: W.W. Bishop & J. Desmond-Clark, eds., *Background to evolution in Africa*, Chicago/ London: University of Chicago Press, p. 583-599; Stemler, A.B.L., 1980, 'Origins of domestication in the Sahara and the Nile Valley', in: Williams, M.A.J., & Faure, H., eds., *The Sahara and the Nile: Quaternary environments and prehistoric occupation in northern Africa*, pp. 503-26, Rotterdam: Balkema; Zohary, D., & Hopf, M., 1988, *Domestication of plants in the Old World*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.

³⁸Griaule, 'Note sur la divination par le chacal'; Paulme, *o.c.*

inspect, in the morning, if and how a jackal has disturbed the surface in that grid. Another example concerns the harvest ritual as described in Viviane Pâques's classic book *L'Arbre cosmique dans la pensée populaire et dans la vie quotidienne du Nord-Ouest africain*;³⁹ this ritual is locally conceptualised and represented exactly as if it were a three-row mankala board, with small piles of grain deposited as sacrificial offerings in the middle of each square cell, i.e. each field (figure 5). In addition to an actual description of a mankala-type game,⁴⁰ Pâques also presents⁴¹ intriguing diagrams of patterns of irrigation in arid circum-Saharan communities, which almost read as descriptions of mankala (figure 6). As far as hints of possible formative influences upon both mankala and geomancy are concerned, the North West African material is of such abundance and consistence, and presents the imagery of these two formal systems with such clarity, that a historical contribution from this region to their initial formulation must be considered quite likely.



Mali: Serpent triple figurant le champ cultivé au Soudan avec une butte de mil dans chaque morceau découpé après le sacrifice (dessin d'informateur Bobofin)

Figure 5. A harvest ritual in North West Africa⁴²

'Mali: threefold snake representing the cultivated field in the [western] Sudan, with a pile of sorghum in each section cut after the sacrifice' (from left to right the three vertical series are marked 'red', 'black' and 'white')

But here again⁴³ we should add, to the argument of origins and diffusion, the argument of subsequent *transformative localisation* after arrival at the new destination — an aspect on which diffusionist approaches have always been rather silent. If part of the cultural material that went into

³⁹Pâques, *o.c.*

⁴⁰Pâques, p. 91.

⁴¹Pâques, p. 83.

⁴²Pâques, p. 157.

⁴³Cf. Wim van Binsbergen, 'Black Athena Ten Years After'; Wim van Binsbergen, 'Alternative models of intercontinental interaction towards the earliest Cretan script' (both this volume).

the making of both geomancy and mankala originally derived from cultures situated on the African land mass, it is clear that both systems owe at least as much of their final ramifications and success to the Islamic connexion: by decisively re-formulating this material in terms of the fully-fledged, astrologically-oriented divination system of *‘ilm* or *khatt al-raml*, and by putting the effective and (through its access to very elaborate magical arts)⁴⁴ pervasive vehicle of Islam and Islam-oriented trading at the disposal of both geomancy and mankala as a main vehicle of spread.

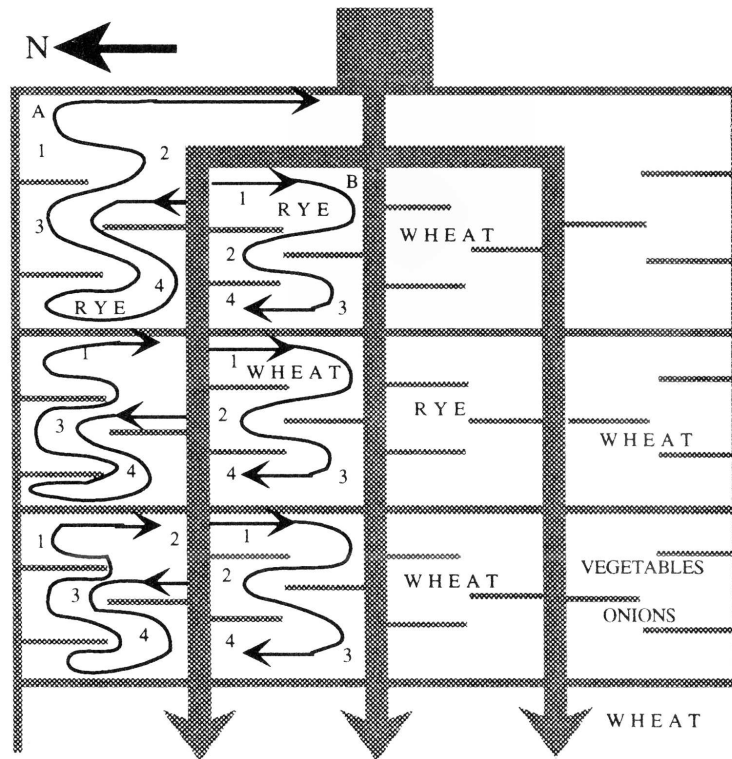


Figure 6. An irrigation pattern in North West Africa⁴⁵

⁴⁴For the idea that it was access to the magical arts of Islam, more than the latter's lapidary monotheism, which attracted Africans to this world religion, cf. Becker, C.H., 1913, 'Neue Literatur zur Geschichte Afrikas', *Der Islam*, 4: 303-312; cf. Becker, C.H., 1911, 'Materialien zur Kenntnis des Islam in Deutsch-Ostafrika', *Der Islam*, 1: 1-48; this idea was more recently revived by Brenner, L., n.d. [1985], *Reflexions sur le savoir islamique en Afrique de l'Ouest*, Bordeaux: Centre d'Etude d'Afrique Noire, Université de Bordeaux I.

⁴⁵Source: Pâques, *o.c.*

2.6. *The general convergence of geomantic divination and mankala*⁴⁶

What strikes us is the similarity between the distribution and diffusion patterns of mankala and geomancy. Although their earliest histories differ, both took root, diversified and transformed in Africa, and both spread from there the New World. The differences concern the periphery of their geographical distributions. Contrary to geomancy, which from the early second millennium CE spread to Europe across the Mediterranean to become a mainstay of Renaissance magic, mankala never made it to Western Europe before the toy manufacturing industry along with the African airport art industry seized on the idea. In the Far East, mankala was a bit more successful than its esoteric distant cousin, geomancy, in penetrating Indonesia and the Philippines. But whereas geomancy, in the form of *I Ching*, has been a very old and central part of the culture of China as a whole and hence even spread to neighbouring countries e.g. Tibet, it is only in regional pockets of Southern China that we encounter mankala.

In general, these diffusion patterns show that Africa is not merely a passive importer of culture but also a place of active production, transformation, and export of culture for global use.

Within the African continent, this convergence between geomancy and mankala is also to be found at the regional level. As a detailed study of the iconography of the four tablets indicates, geomantic divination has reached Southern Africa via a corridor linking Tanzanian and Mozambican groups like the Konde to the Shona-speaking groups on the highlands of Zimbabwe; from there again links have existed with Sotho/Tswana speaking groups to the south and west of Zimbabwe. For many centuries the corridor constituted an important trade route, along which travelled Asian trade goods against gold and cattle, notions of more or less divine kingship, and Indonesian as well as — much later — Islamic cultural influences. For students of mankala this must ring a bell: in this part of South East Africa, the pattern of spread of four-tablet divination coincides with that of four-row mankala, whose virtual confinement to East and Southern Africa almost certainly shows it to be an African development. It is a tantalising question for further research to decide whether

- four-row mankala caused the apparatus of geomancy to be altered towards a four-tablet system, or
- four-tablet geomancy caused the incomparably more complex four-row variety of mankala to be produced out of the pre-existing two- and

⁴⁶Cf. Herodotus, *Hist.* ii.122, where the subterranean board-game the Egyptian king plays with Demeter/ Isis confirms not only the funerary connotations of board games like *znt*, but therefore also their chthonic or subterranean connotations which they share with geomancy as divination by the powers inside/below the earth.

three-row variants.

3. Patterns of intercontinental cultural interaction

My overview of two major classes of pan-African cultural phenomena, mankala board-games and geomantic divination, has revealed fascinating generic and formal interrelations and distribution patterns, both within each genre and between these two genres.

At least these two significant cultural items of latter-day African culture suggest that it is a typical pattern of African cultural history to see

- active early participation in global cultural origins and flows (central in the case of early mankala, more peripheral and hypothetical in the case of early geomancy),

followed by

- local and regional processes of cultural and political creativity, producing splendid civilisations which however did not have a direct impact on global cultural processes

as well as

- entrenchment — ‘cultural involution’ is perhaps the word⁴⁷ — so that later, newer global trends are no longer picked up and locally fed back into the earlier models; instead the latter *localise* to the extreme, taking up residence in the very texture of local cultures and absorbing the latter’s symbolism and cosmology so effectively that the result is recognised as something uniquely local i.e. ‘African’, having lost all explicit references to, in fact virtually all traces of, an earlier intercontinental exchange.

For instance, in the context of divination in West Africa and Southern Africa practitioners and clients are no longer aware of the Arabian provenance of their geomantic divination. For Southern Africa, until recently, scholarship shared this ignorance. Inward-looking localisation, severance of intercontinental cultural ties and conscious references, the relativity yet of continental boundaries, and the general quality of having become a backwater in the world system of economic and cultural exchange — these are aspects of African cultural involution as suggested by my case studies. Admittedly, also in the last one or two millennia Africa turns out to be capable of cultural export and transmission (to wit, the export of both mankala and geomancy to the New World). But the cultural items it contributed to other continents in recent times have tended to remain culturally peripheral in the destination continent, limited to immigrant groups who define their particular transcontinental identity by

⁴⁷Cf. Geertz, C., 1963, *Agricultural involution*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

reference to these imports.

If this tripartite model of (a) initial global participation (b) splendid regional creativity and (c) cultural involution, peculiar to Africa? Not really so, since many of its features remind one of ancient Northwestern Europe until well into the second millennium CE, and even of China. Much further research is needed before the model can be considered sufficiently sophisticated. It is only then that the much more difficult task can begin, of *explaining* the features of cultural dynamics on the African land mass as highlighted by this model. Is there something about the physical geography of Africa (e.g. desertification in recent millennia; the paucity of navigable river systems and sea arms cutting deep into the land; the relatively impenetrable rain forest) that has impeded its continued participation in global culture? Is there something about African cultures (e.g. kinship systems, sorcery beliefs, reliance on non-verbal and non-representational cultural production in music, dance and ritual, the relative absence of a production of intercontinentally coveted petty commodities but instead a reliance — which has persisted to the present times — on raw materials) that entrenches the social communities which carry these cultures, closes their horizons, makes them less penetrable for intercontinental influences? Could not the same factors be shown to be at work in other continents, if only we could break the spell of implicitly racist and colonialist stereotypes about what is ‘typically African’?

It has been Basil Davidson’s life’s work, through a long series of books⁴⁸ and television productions meant for the non-specialist, to correct the Eurocentric stereotypes of Africa as passively receptive and as incapable of major achievements of culture and civilisation, drawing attention to the splendour of ancient kingdoms as well as Africa’s place in ancient intercontinental networks of exchange. But negative stereotypes that apparently fit so well, and apparently explain, the contemporary media image of Africa are difficult to eradicate.

The distribution and history of writing in Africa is a case in point.⁴⁹ Its

⁴⁸E.g. Davidson, B., 1964, *Old Africa rediscovered*, London: Gollancz; Davidson, B., 1969, *African Genius*, Boston: Atlantic, Little Brow; Davidson, B., 1969, *The Africans: An entry to cultural history*, London/ Harlow: Longmans; Davidson, B., 1972, *Africa: History of a continent*, London etc.: Spring, rev. ed., 1st ed. 1966; Davidson, B., 1978, *Discovering Africa’s past*, London: Longman; Davidson, B., 1994, *The Search for Africa*, London: New York: Times Books/ London: James Currey.

⁴⁹Cf. Diringer, D., 1996, *The alphabet: A key to the history of mankind*, New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, reprint of the 1947 British edition; Goody, J., ed., 1968, *Literacy in traditional societies*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Hassan, F.A., 1983. ‘The roots of Egyptian writing’, *Quarterly Review of Archaeology*, 4, no. 3: 1-8; Raum, O.F., 1943, ‘The African chapter in the history of writing’, *African Studies* (Johannesburg), 2, 4: 179-192; Ray, J.D., 1986, ‘The emergence of writing in Egypt’, *World Archaeology*, 17: 307-16; Thorold, A., 1992, ‘Script, prescription and the Scriptures: Writing as ritual in southern Malawi’, paper read at the Anthropology Association of Southern Africa Annual

pattern strongly reminds us of that of geomancy and mankala. Of the few oldest writing systems of mankind, one (Egyptian hieroglyphic script) was invented in Africa — with the authorities increasingly tending to play down the possibility of a ‘stimulus invention’ factor from Mesopotamian Sumer and Elam. In Antiquity, Nubia, Meroe, Ethiopia, Carthage and its African possessions, and Berber groups throughout North Africa had writing systems of their own. These derived in part from Egyptian non-alphabetic hieroglyphic writing and its hieratic and demotic derivatives, but mostly from (probably hieroglyphic-inspired)⁵⁰ alphabetic scripts, whose earliest, even pre-Phoenician forms spread rapidly across great distances. Greek and Latin writing established itself throughout North Africa from the first millennium BCE, towards the end of the first millennium CE to be supplanted (with the exception of Greek-derived Coptic script) by Aramaic-derived Arabic script. By the same time, Islam brought writing to Africa’s Indian Ocean coast and the Sudanic belt, and in the next half millennium this expansion continued slowly, via Muslim scribes at many royal courts from Zimbabwe to Senegal. In the next centuries these were, initially in small part and again very slowly, supplanted by Christians (mainly missionaries and Portuguese agents), — a movement to be greatly accelerated by the 19th century, and converging with the imposition of effective European colonial rule. That century also saw the intensified conversion of West African and Sudanic masses to Islam, lending them direct access to Islamic writing. Several African initiatives at the creation of local writing systems have also been recorded since the nineteenth century. The two world religions, Islam and Christianity, and modern statehood have been the main factors of massive literacy (however, still very unevenly spread across the African countries) as a recent phenomenon, after millennia of writing being concentrated in specific regions, outside of which it was a sporadic prerogative of a professional outsider class.

This is a rather different story than one would expect on the basis of the persistent stereotype of Africa as a composite of cultures without writing

Meeting, Durban-Westville, September 1992; Bernal, M., 1990, *Cadmean letters: The transmission of the alphabet to the Aegean and further west before 1400 B.C.*, Winona Lake (Ind.): Eisenbrauns; Bernal, M., 1987, ‘On the Transmission of the Alphabet into the Aegean before 1400 B.C.’, *Bulletin of the American School of Oriental Research*, 267: 1-19; and references in these publications.

⁵⁰Gardiner, A. H., 1916, ‘The Egyptian origin of the Semitic alphabet’, *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology*, 3: 1-16; Cerny, J., 1971, ‘Language and writing’, in: Harris, J.R., ed., *The legacy of Egypt*, 2nd ed., Oxford: Clarendon, pp. 197-219, 214f and table ‘The alphabet’ at the beginning of that book.

— an image to which anthropology has greatly contributed. And give or take a few centuries and substitute the names of other world religions and agents of expansion, but including the pattern of widespread and virtually total popular illiteracy until relatively recently,⁵¹ it is not a strikingly different story from that of writing in Europe and Asia — apart from the fact that contrary to Africa Europe so far has not been recognised⁵² as one of the cradles of writing.

One thing will be clear: within that land mass, different dynamics will have to be distinguished according to region, historical period, and strand of cultural tradition — the model will not yield generalisations about Africa, let alone Africans, as a whole.

Whatever the outcome of much needed further research on continental and intercontinental patterns of African cultural history, what I have formulated here is already highly pertinent to the *Black Athena* thesis. Partial but significant support for that thesis is offered by my argument in that it allows us to trace how the earliest civilisations in the Neolithic context were situated in, and derived from, *among other places*, Africa. In other ways however, looking at the last two or three millennia, my argument with its two cases illustrating *African cultural involution*, offers an indication of the severe limitations of a model of ‘Africa civilising the rest of the world’. In the extremist Afrocentric distortions or appropriations of the *Black Athena* thesis, interaction is replaced by one-way traffic, Asia is swept under the carpet, and ancient Egypt is, through *pars pro toto* (and without further analysis as to its place among the many and diverse cultures of Africa), equated with the African continent as a whole. Thus the

⁵¹Cf. Radwin, E., 1993, ‘Literacy and illiteracy’, *New Grolier Multimedia Encyclopaedia*, Release 6:

‘The Germans who conquered Rome during the 5th century AD (...) were illiterate and attached little value to literacy. Literacy was eradicated to such an extent that by the year 1000, probably only 1 or 2 percent of Europe’s population was literate. (...) After 1000, literacy slowly began to reemerge and spread through Europe. (...) By 1700, Europe’s literacy rate ranged from 30 to 40 percent; by 1850, 50 to 55 percent; and by 1930, 90 percent.’

In 1995 the literacy rate for sub-Saharan Africa was 54%, ranging between 85% for Zimbabwe and 14% for Niger (source: Information and Policy Analysis Statistics Division, 1996, *United Nations Statistical Yearbook*, 41st ed., New York: United Nations Publications, table 11, pp. 74-75; with thanks to my colleague Henk Meilink). Literacy is defined here in UNESCO terms as the percentage of the population age 15 and above capable of understanding and producing a simple written statement on everyday life.

⁵²Despite persistent claims of a Balkan neolithic script contemporaneous to or predating scripts from the Ancient Near East; e.g. Gimbutas, M.A., 1991, *The civilization of the Goddess: The world of Old Europe*, San Francisco: Harper ch. 8, ‘The sacred script’.

illuminating *Black Athena* thesis of multiplex intercultural interaction risks being reduced to a myth of mechanical and exclusive one-way dependence. The latter is more than anything else a projection back into the past of an exact mirror image of Eurocentric racialist images of Africa as passive, primitive and dependent. *Both* myths are all the more dangerous if endowed with the insignia of scientific respectability.

My proposed model of

- Africa's important early contributions to global civilisation, in the most recent millennia followed by
- Africa's local and regional cultural and political creativity but also and increasingly by
- Africa's entrenched cultural involution

does not of course apply to all instances of recent cultural interrelations involving Africa, as the case of jazz music clearly shows. It does not contradict the *Black Athena* thesis in its sophisticated form, since there the unit of analysis is not land masses, but civilisations. In that light it is perhaps more significant that ancient Egypt, along with the central Sahara and Ethiopia, belonged to a chain of early civilisations in the greatly extended Fertile Crescent, than that some these early civilisations were situated on or outside the African land mass. Yet for the popular perception of 'Africa' in the world today an awareness in terms of the *Black Athena* thesis must be a healthy corrective to sweeping, often racist- and colonialist-inspired, generalisations about that continent's place in global cultural history.

Two swallows do not make summer, yet I submit that the underlying model explicitised in these two cases, has rather wide applicability when it comes to assessing 'Africa's' place in the world's cultural history, both in the Neolithic and during the latest few millennia. We have found that 'Africa' *might* claim both the initial and the later glorious contributions, and the subsequent stagnation and involution.

4. 'Africa' not a viable unit of scientific analysis but a welcome concept in identity formation

Might — for the more important message is that 'Africa' is the wrong unit of analysis altogether. My argument suggests that regions of cultural initiative are not fixed rigidly and once for all on the map, but show considerable dynamics, influencing each other, now taking precedence, then sinking into relative stagnation as compared to near and not so near neighbours. Such regions are typically the size of large states, a few hundred kilometres across, not of continents. It is the temptation of

blowing up of the *Black Athena* thesis to the scale of entire continents interacting (and then only two, Africa and Europe; and only in the form of one-way traffic), which threatens to deprive it of scientific value and to reduce it to a mere geopolitical (ultimately even racist) myth. Continents are far too large, too heterogeneous and too capriciously shaped, and their natural boundaries (oceans, seas, deserts, a narrow isthmus in the case of Africa's boundary with Asia) far too porous and too much an interface for human interaction coming from all directions, than that they can define viable units of analysis in cultural and social history.

However, for the same reasons continents provide excellent raw material for an intellectual process that at all costs needs to be distinguished from detached scholarship: *identity formation*. Under the conditions of technology, political and bureaucratic organisation, and international ideology, which together define (as an increasingly obsolescent) Modernity, political actors themselves set out to define their interactions in geopolitical terms by explicit reference to the map. This is nowhere better demonstrated than in the case of Europe, not only intercontinentally in the formative years of imperialism and colonialism, and continentally during the birth of nation states as from early Modern times, but also today, in the birth pangs of the European Union.

It is no accident that delusions about the pivotal place of Africa in the world's recent cultural history (meaning the latest few millennia) should occur now, in the 1990s CE. The internal social contradictions within the U.S.A. after the Cold War put a new premium on whiteness and blackness as social categories. In the world at large, processes of globalisation today do nothing but increasingly marginalise the African continent: an island of poverty and international debt; participating for no more than 1% (!) in the world's trade flow; getting less and less income out of even a lightly increasing production of crops such as cocoa, coffee and groundnuts; on the verge of being given up by development agencies, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund; torn by ethnic and civil war, with more than a dozen postcolonial states having effectively ceased functioning; yet more than ever open (through electronic media, education, world religions, intercontinental travel) to the images and aspirations of Late Modernity.⁵³ Just as it is no accident that we are forced to discuss these issues today, in a context where — with the unification of 'Europe' gradually taking political and economic shape — geopolitical ideologues are desperately looking for a binding symbol to define Europeanness as against the rest of the world: Is

⁵³Cf. Wim van Binsbergen, 1997, *Virtuality as a key concept in the study of globalisation: Aspects of the symbolic transformation of contemporary Africa*, The Hague: WOTRO, Working Papers on Globalization and the Construction of Communal Identities.

it to be Christianity? The Celtic heritage of Hallstatt and La Tène? Charlemagne? Prometheus? The Greek heritage? Minoan Crete, after all? *Athena*?! The relative lack of resonance of the *Black Athena* debate in continental Europe may indicate widespread apathy caused by the current confusion as to what role we as intellectuals are to play in the continental identity game. ‘Should we retreat to a superior deconstruction of such messy identity engineering as illusory, manipulative, and inherently Eurocentrist?’ (‘Yes!’) ‘Should we give up our academic distance and rush to the assistance of opinion leaders of our choice?’ (‘No!’) ‘Should we leave the choice to outsiders, so that Europe simply becomes, culturally and phenotypically, a model of the world at large: multicultural but under North Atlantic cultural hegemony, phenotypically mixed but with White/Caucasian as the norm, religiously diverse and with Islam as the second largest world religion, but under the implied hegemony of Christianity?’ (‘Disconnected’)

This is the context in which we must radically reject continents as appropriate scientific units of cultural analysis. Before the self-conscious political exploitation of the concept of Africa on a truly continental scale, map in hand, in the nineteenth century CE, Africa only existed as a land mass, not as a self-conscious cultural, social or linguistic unit. None of its many cultures, societies and languages ever encompassed the entire land mass, and each tended to share many traits with similar units outside that land mass, in what we now call Asia and Europe. These continental distinctions did not make much sense in the Palaeolithic and Mesolithic past, up to scarcely 10,000 years ago, and the instructive pattern of intercontinental continuity prevailing then, deserves closer attention from present-day scholarship as to its impact on cultural continuities today.⁵⁴

Instead, historians, linguists, anthropologists, writers, politicians, and most recently Afrocentrists, have dreamed up — partly in polemic response to Eurocentric myths, partly as a specific contribution to the continuous social and political construction of ‘otherness’ which goes on in all societies and at all times — myths to define a distinct cultural Africanness which was to be coterminous with the land mass or with the dominant somatic human type inhabiting it — characterised by considerable pigmentation of the outer skin. Here Hegel, who continues to be considered as one of the founding fathers of contemporary North Atlantic thought, set

⁵⁴Cf. Edwards, I.E.S., C.J. Gadd & N.G.L. Hammond, eds., 1986, *The Cambridge Ancient History*, vol. 1 part 1: *Prolegomena and prehistory*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 3rd ed., first ed. 1970, notably: Garrod, D.A.E., 1986, ‘Primitive man in Egypt, Western Asia and Europe in palaeolithic times’, pp. 70-89; Clark, J.G.D., 1986, ‘[Primitive man in Egypt, Western Asia and Europe] in mesolithic times’, pp. 89-121; Hughes, D.R., & Brothwell, D.R., 1986, ‘The earliest populations of man in Europe, Western Asia and Northern Africa’, pp. 156-172.

a trend from which Western thought still has not distanced itself sufficiently:

‘Jenes eigentliche Afrika ist, soweit die Geschichte zurückgeht, für den Zusammenhang mit der übrigen Welt verschlossen geblieben; es ist das in sich gedrungene Goldland, das Kinderland, das jenseits des Tages der selbstbewußten Geschichte in die schwarze Farbe der Nacht gehüllt ist. Seine Verschlossenheit liegt nicht nur in seiner tropischen Natur, sondern wesentlich in seiner geographischen Beschaffenheit. (...) Der eigentümlich afrikanische Charakter ist darum schwer zu fassen, weil wir dabei ganz auf das Verzicht leisten müssen, was bei uns in jeder Vorstellung mit unterläuft, die Kategorie der Allgemeinheit. Bei den Negern ist nämlich das Charakterische gerade, daß ihr Bewußtsein noch nicht zur Anschauung irgendeiner festen Objektivität gekommen ist’.⁵⁵

Of course, any Africanist today (and most other people) would be horrified by this Hegel quotation, and could cogently argue how African Studies has entirely and consistently constituted one sustained crusade against this sort of blatant racialism, which fortunately lies almost two centuries behind us. However, this is putting the matter far too simply. True enough, Africanists today can safely leave the public production of sweeping Eurocentric stereotypes about Africa to the electronic media and the press, who often oblige. Meanwhile the construction of images and formulae of, still, a compound and unitary Africanness has continued to be one of the conspicuous products⁵⁶ of African Studies so far — as a result of the pressures of professionalisation and institutional competition in academia, and also as an implicit reflection, largely unintended, of North Atlantic hegemony in the world system today.

5. Conclusion: Three tasks ahead of us

Our argument has taken us from across the entire Old World and a bit of the New World, and across an expanse of several millennia. It is time to face the here and now, and to draw lessons for the future, in the context of the ongoing *Black Athena* debate.

⁵⁵Hegel, G.W.F., 1992, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte*, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel Werke 12, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1st Suhrkamp edition 1986, pp. 120-122; posthumously published on the basis of his lecture notes 1822-1831; cf. Kimmerle, H., 1993, ‘Hegel und Afrika: Das Glas zerspringt’, *Hegel-Studien*, 28: 303-325.

⁵⁶For a critique of this voluminous literature, cf. the work of two cosmopolitan African philosophers: Mudimbe, V.Y., 1988, *The invention of Africa: Gnosis, philosophy, and the order of knowledge*, Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press/ London: Currey; Mudimbe, V.Y., 1994, *The idea of Africa*, Bloomington/ London: Indiana University Press/ James Currey; Appiah, K.A., 1992, *In my father’s house: Africa in the philosophy of culture*, New York & London: Oxford University Press.

As a first task, the kind of anti-racist anti-Eurocentric critique of scholarship which *Black Athena I* has so brilliantly and largely successfully undertaken for classics as a discipline, could and should also be undertaken for African Studies and anthropology.⁵⁷

Such a task would have to be completed before even we can set out to perform the second task: tracing the concrete implications of the *Black Athena* thesis further on to ancient African cultures as the most likely main sources of ancient Egyptian culture.⁵⁸

Only after these two tasks have been completed can we come to terms with a third task: A fair assessment of the Afrocentrist claims — extremist as well as moderate and plausible ones — which *Black Athena* has reinforced, much to the dismay of many of its critics.⁵⁹

If the latter task cannot yet be fully undertaken now, that does not mean that we cannot outline its parameters. I see these in the following terms. The future of Africa and of Black people living in or originating from that continent, and of mankind as a whole for that matter, lies in a radical rejection of racist claims to a *particularistic* birth right, in favour of models stressing the common heritage of universal humanity, in the light of a common future. Precisely one such model has been offered in *Black Athena*, with its exposure of the a-historical Eurocentric myth suppressing from consciousness the facts of multiplex interaction, interdependence and indebtedness straddling three continents. It rightly claims such initial contributions of Africans, people living in Africa, to global cultural history as have been filtered through the intermediary of Ancient Egypt. Yet it fails to analyse the wider African inputs into Ancient Egyptian culture, and the ways these must have been subjected to transformative localisation within Egypt before being handed on to the rest of the world, including the Levant and (probably largely via the latter) to Greece and thus further into Europe, finally to reach global distribution. The formal geographical location of the

⁵⁷This has been an recurrent discussion but seldom at the heart of the discipline: Cf. Asad, T., 1973, red., *Anthropology and the colonial encounter*, London: Ithaca Press; Leclerc, G., 1972, *Anthropologie et colonialisme*, Paris: Fayard; Copans, J., 1975, ed., *Anthropologie et impérialisme*, Paris: Maspero; Fabian, J., 1983, *Time and the other: How anthropology makes its object*, New York: Columbia University Press; Asad, T., 1986, 'The concept of cultural translation in British social anthropology', in: Clifford, J., & Marcus, G., eds., 1986, *Writing culture: The poetics and politics of ethnography*, Berkeley: University of California Press — and many other contributions to that important collection; Pels, P. & O. Salemink, 1994, 'Introduction: five theses on ethnography as colonial practice', *History and Anthropology*, 8, 1-4: 1-34.

⁵⁸Cf. Wim van Binsbergen, '*Black Athena* Ten Years After: Towards a constructive re-assessment' (this volume), section 'Into Africa?'

⁵⁹Cf. Lefkowitz & MacLean Rogers, *o.c.*; Lefkowitz, M., 1996, *Not out of Africa: How Afrocentrism became an excuse to teach myth as history*, New York, Basic Books; but see Bernal's review of this book, *Bryn Mawr Classical Review*, 1996, Internet journal.

civilisation of Ancient Egypt inside the African land mass is less relevant in the present context, than its specific cultural, religious and linguistic roots in sub-Saharan Africa — which are undeniable, yet probably less far-reaching than claimed in Afrocentrist discourse,⁶⁰ and which by and large

⁶⁰The theme of ‘Egypt in Africa’ has haunted Egyptological and African studies at least since Petrie, cf. Petrie, W.M.F., 1915, ‘Egypt in Africa’, *Ancient Egypt*, 3-4: 115-127, 159-170 — whose information however according to Shinnie (Shinnie, P. L., 1971, ‘The legacy to Africa’, in: Harris, J.R., ed., *The legacy of Egypt*, 2nd ed., Oxford: Clarendon Press, pp. 434-55) is often suspect. Throughout the twentieth century it has been habitual to characterise aspects of (especially pre- and protohistorical) Egyptian culture as African, often without being too specific; for excellent recent work however cf. Hassan, F.A., 1988, ‘The Predynastic of Egypt’, *Journal of World Prehistory*, 2: 135-85. Classic diffusionist studies include Schmidl, M., 1928, ‘Ancient Egyptian techniques in African spirally-woven baskets’, in: Koppers, W., ed., *Festschrift/Publication d’hommage offerte au P.W. Schmidt*, Vienna: Mechitaristen-Congregations-Buchdruckerei, Anthropos, Vienna, pp. 645-654; Wainwright, G.A., 1949, ‘Pharaonic survivals, Lake Chad to the west coast’, *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology*, 35: 167-75. The crucial challenge to the Egyptocentric diffusionist assumption was formulated by H.W. Fairman as quoted by Shinnie: *how do we distinguish between Ancient Egypt’s contribution to Africa, and Africa’s contribution to Ancient Egypt?* Despite earlier evidence to the contrary (e.g. Strouhal, E., 1971, ‘Evidence of the early penetration of Negroes into prehistoric Egypt’, *Journal of African History*, 12: 1-9), physical anthropology seems to tend towards a denial of too close links between Ancient Egypt and sub-Saharan Africa (Brace, C. L., D. P. Tracer, L. A. Yaroch, J. Robb, K. Brandt, and A. R. Nelson, 1996, ‘Clines and clusters versus “race”’: A test in Ancient Egypt and the case of a death on the Nile’, in: Lefkowitz & MacLean Rogers, *o.c.*, pp. 129-164, p. 145). The most up-to-date academic statement is probably Celenko, T., ed., 1996, *Egypt in Africa*, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996, which I have not yet seen. Also cf. O’Connor, D., 1994, *Ancient Nubia: Egypt’s rival in Africa*, Philadelphia: University Museum of Archeology and Anthropology. Several critics of Martin Bernal have stressed that Kush, as the other great civilisation of Northeast Africa besides Ancient Egypt, is a more likely candidate for spreading and receiving sub-Saharan cultural influences: cf. Bard, K., 1996, ‘Ancient Egyptians and the issue of race’, in: Lefkowitz & MacLean Rogers, *o.c.*, pp. 103-111, p. 104f; Yurco, F.J., 1996, ‘Black Athena: An Egyptological review’, in: Lefkowitz & MacLean Rogers, *o.c.*, pp. 62-100, pp. 87f, 95; Baines, J., 1996, ‘On the aims and methods of Black Athena’, in: Lefkowitz & MacLean Rogers, *o.c.*, pp. 27-48, p. 32. Apart from specifics (his contentious attribution of the Tassīlī al-Ḥadjār rock paintings to Ancient Egyptian cultural influence, and his identification of Nyoro kingship in Buganda as the sole convincing Black African case of Ancient Egyptian diffusion) Shinnie’s thoughtful essay and restrictive conclusions still contain much of value. Of the old, now obsolete, literature on the subject, cf.: Seligman, C.G., 1913, ‘Some aspects of the Hamitic problem in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan’, *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, 43: 593-705; Seligman, C.G., 1930, *Races of Africa*, London: Butterworth; repr. 1957, 3rd ed. London: Oxford University Press; Seligman, C.G., 1934, *Egypt and Negro Africa: A study in divine kingship*, London: Routledge. Pioneering Afrocentrist views include the popular: Noguera, A., 1976, *How African was Egypt: A comparative study of Egyptian and Black African cultures*, New York: Vantage Press; and Diop, C.A., 1981, ‘Origin of the Ancient Egyptians’, in: Mokhtar, G., ed., *General history of Africa, vol. II, Ancient civilizations of Africa*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: UNESCO and University of California Press, pp. 27-51. Bernal (*Black Athena writes back*, in press, Durham: Duke University Press) draws attention to what he considers ‘extremely interesting’ recent work by young Black scholars which combined conventional

await thorough scholarly assessment in the light of up-to-date data and of adequate interdisciplinary methodologies.

Moreover, for a responsible, non-Eurocentrist reassessment of Africa's place in global cultural history we clearly need even a larger framework than the *Black Athena* thesis, however stimulating and timely, can provide. It is certainly not enough to promote Africa to a status comparable to that attributed to Atlantis in Plato's *Timaeus* and *Critias*: producer of a superb culture which, however, unfortunately has long ago ceased to exist. Africa's global cultural birth-right was racialistically denied for centuries, but it is not going to be restored in popular global consciousness by simply pointing out that it once carried, and probably largely engendered, several millennia ago, the civilisation of Ancient Egypt. We also need to address the theme of more recent stagnation. And equally important, we need to situate Ancient Egypt within the full range of great African civilisations, from that of Kush which (although virtually absent from Bernal's work) was contemporary to Ancient Egypt and whose independent originality is now being more and more appreciated, to the great civilisations of West, East and Southern Africa throughout history right up to the present times.

Here the disappointment of that great Africanist Basil Davidson needs to be appreciated, who at the end of his jubilant review of *Black Athena I* yet had to write:

‘...the Hamites and their Caucasoid quick wits [as depicted by Seligman, not Davidson, of course] have in any case vanished from the scientific scene. So have other stereotypes of the racist model. The scholarship of the last thirty years and more has simply tipped them into the dustbin of exploded fantasies. This was not achieved easily or without a lot of stubborn effort; but it has now been achieved beyond any possibility of reversion to those aforesaid fantasies. *It may even be claimed that this achievement is among the most significant intellectual advances of the twentieth century.* Yet Bernal's treatment of this important aspect of his own subject is disappointingly deficient, being little more than an afterthought at the end of his book. No doubt he has it in mind to put this right in a later volume. As it is, reading his pages in this respect must leave one *without the slightest indication* of the fact that the study of African history and humanity, in many disciplines, has become the concern of manifold colleges and universities in all the continents, not least in Africa itself. (...) Valiantly toppling the Aryan Model for Europe, this sympathetic writer has not yet had

scholarship with Afrocentrist inspiration: Scott, T.M., ‘Egyptian elements in Hermetic literature’, Th.D., Harvard, 4/18/1987; UMI 1991. 3058; Karenga, M.N., ‘Maat, the moral ideal in Ancient Egypt: A study in classical African ethics’, Ph.D., U.S.C., 1994 (UMI 1994.9601000). This is a promising direction for future, sophisticated research into this central question to take.

time to notice that its partner for Africa has meanwhile bitten the dust.⁶¹

And finally a point which has been made repeatedly by critics of Martin Bernal:⁶² cultures should be appreciated in their own right as manifestations of the variety of human achievement and creativity, not merely according to the extent to which they can be demonstrated to have contributed to the culture of latter-day Western Europe. The great African civilisations are among the lasting triumphs of Mankind, even regardless of whether Arabs and Europeans came along to admire them and be inspired by them. Here however Bernal's appeal to the specific global context of cultural exchanges and identity discourse in our age and time (in other words, the contemporary dominance of Western European culture happens to be an empirical political fact, and it is in the light of this dominance that intercultural comparisons are made, if not at the level of scholarly analysis then certainly at the level of political praxis), in my view fully exonerates him from the ironic charges of Eurocentrism as laid against him:

'...it is certain that Western European culture is dominant in the world today, there is also no doubt that — directly or indirectly — the civilization of Ancient Greece has been central to the formation of this culture. Furthermore, Europeans holding the gamut of political views from fascist, to liberal, to communist have all agreed that Ancient Greece created philosophy, art, science and democracy. This myth of origin has been widely used to give Western European and their descendants elsewhere, the exclusive possession of such desirable cultural artifacts. This monopoly has been used to bolster and justify European military and political power in other continents.

If it can be shown that the greatness of Ancient Greek civilization came from its eclecticism, that it was not a purely European culture and had strong African and Asian components and that many crucial elements of 'Greek' philosophy, art, science and democracy had been introduced from the Near East[, t]his would have a fundamental and to my mind beneficial effect on peoples (...) not merely those of South West Asia and North East Africa but also those of the rest of the world

⁶¹Davidson, B., 'The ancient world and Africa: Whose roots?', *Race and Class: A Journal for Black and Third World Liberation*, 29, 2: 1-15, p. 9f, italics added; reprinted in: Davidson, *The search for Africa*, pp. 318-33.

⁶²Baines, p. 32; MacLean Rogers, G., 1996, 'Multiculturalism and the foundations of Western civilization', in: Lefkowitz & MacLean Rogers, *o.c.*, pp. 428-445, 442; Jenkyns, R., 1996, 'Bernal and the nineteenth century', in: Lefkowitz MacLean Rogers, *o.c.*, pp. 411-419, 416:

'And it is surely his aim also to do what he must know he cannot quite manage: to give African-Americans a share of the credit for Egyptian civilization ([*Black Athena*] I: 242). But is this project not Eurocentric? (...) it is because blacks are, seemingly, outside the traditional European story that Bernal wants to find them a place in that sun; and however well-meaning this aim, it can hardly help being patronizing. And there is another consideration which ought to weigh against Bernal: that he is encouraging blacks to enter an invidious competition.'

including Europe.’⁶³

Afrocentrism is not primarily a scientific theory; above all it is an indication of Black people’s determination to regain once more a place among the ranks of those taking globally significant cultural and political initiatives — not as a condescending concession grudgingly made by others, but as a birth-right. It is crucial to realise that we have this birth-right by virtue of being human, not by virtue of any past or present glory or misery of that section of humanity situated, now or in the distant past, on the African land mass. Intellectual support for Afrocentrism as primarily an orientation to the future requires placing Afrocentrist-related research issues involved (including a rigorous assessment of Ancient Egypt’s place among African cultures as advocated above) *at the heart* of current empirical and theoretical debate, and applying to them the same high standards of data and method that obtain in other fields of research today.

The alternative, of tolerating — even flirting with — a pseudo-scientific identity discourse in the periphery of academia and allowing it the trappings of scientific authority, means that one is utterly cynical about the academic profession and its responsibilities; about what the great physical anthropologist Ashley Montagu has called ‘Man’s most dangerous myth’, race;⁶⁴ and about our common future, that of humankind as a whole.

⁶³Bernal, M., 1992, ‘Response to Edith Hall’, *Arethusa*, 25: 203-14.

⁶⁴Montagu, A., 1974, *Man’s most dangerous myth: The fallacy of race*, 5th ed., first published 1942.

