

March 2010: Extensive journey through South East Asia

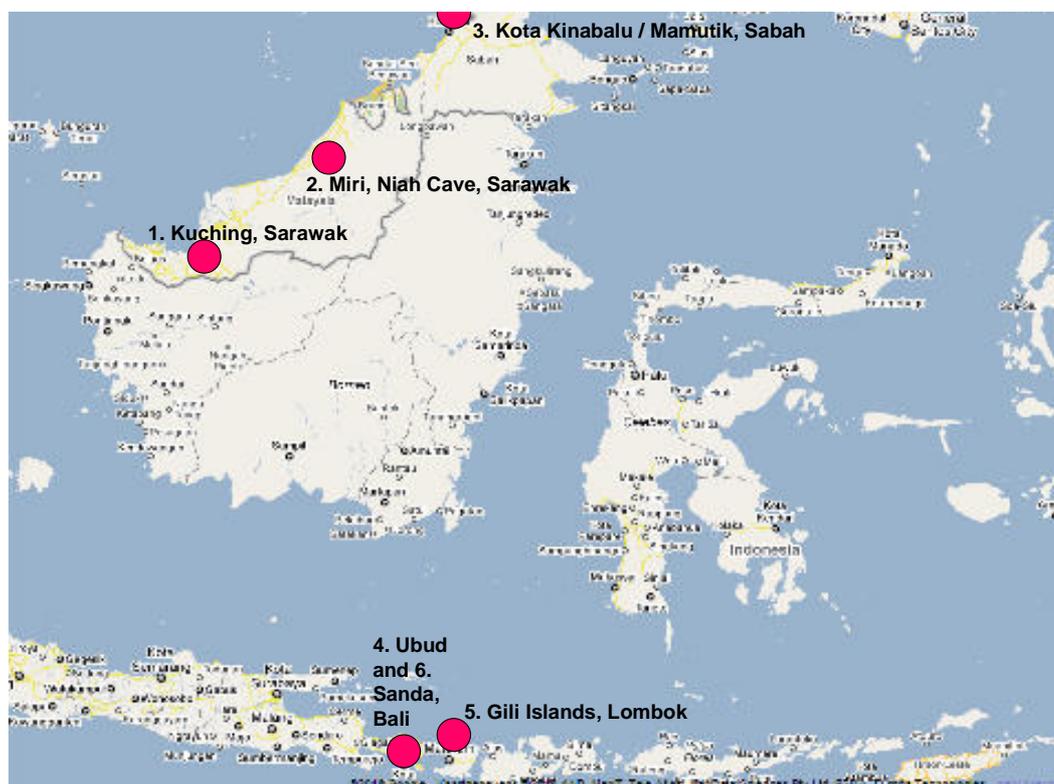
Wim van Binsbergen

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This text reports on the scholarly relevant aspects of an extensive journey through South East Asia, which my wife Patricia and I made in March 2010.

Having worked for some years now on the topic of long-range cultural and demographic relations between South East Asia and Africa, and having several draft texts on this topic to be finalised for publication in the course of 2010, a self-sponsored journey through Sarawak and Sabah (Malaysian Borneo), Bali and the Gili Islands (Indonesia), throughout March 2010 enabled me to considerably extend my first-hand knowledge of South East Asia. Indonesian studies constituted a central part of my BA and MA studies in social science at Amsterdam University in the 1960s, under the Marxist jurist / historian / sociologist Willem Wertheim, whose radical political and epistemological stance has greatly influenced me throughout my life. However, I finally specialised in North African popular Islam, soon ended up in South Central Africa, and became effectively an Africanist – never setting foot in South East Asia before 2007, in the context of the supervision of my PhD student Stephanus Djunatan, a lecturer in philosophy at Bandung Catholic University (cf. van Binsbergen 2007).

Fig. 1. Places referred to in the text



1. Malaysian Borneo

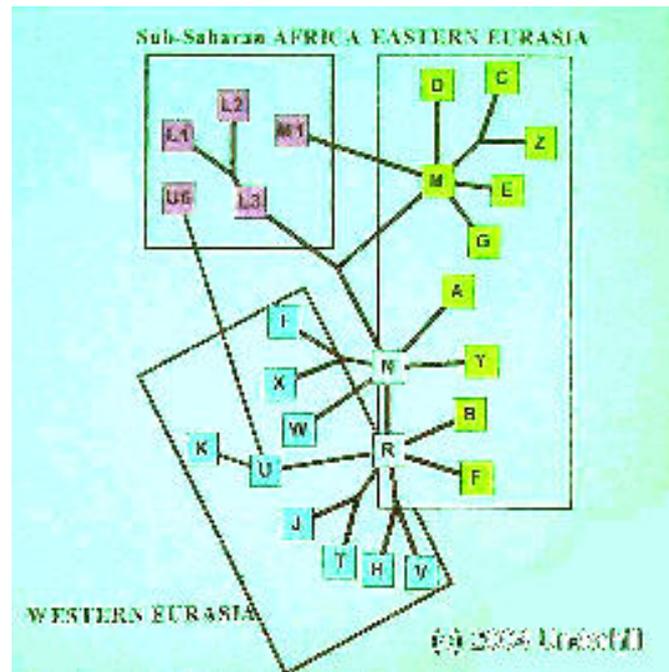
1.1. Sunda influence on sub-Saharan Africa? An exercise in genetic distribution patterns

In preceding months, Professor Kurt Tauchmann of Cologne University, Germany, has been so kind as to comment on one of my book drafts on the Sunda thesis from his own specialist perspective – he has been looking at South East Asian / African connections for many years. He proposed to add a few specific traits (paramour, joking relations and rulers' *ius primae noctis*) to my list of Sunda traits which I propose are detectable in Africa. While corroborating the incidental, personalised South East Asian effect upon Africa through traders and royals – a factor stressed in my draft analyses so far – his main point was that attention should be given to a massive *demic-diffusion* element, i.e. cultural diffusion because populations on the move bring their cultural baggage with them. In his opinion, prior to the Bantu expansion in East and South-East Africa, pre- and proto-historic migrations from South East Asia (such as have long been recognised to have populated Madagascar and given it its distinction cultural and linguistic characteristics) had given rise to a considerable Austronesian genetic and linguistic presence in those parts of Africa. This is a moot point – the historian Kent who claimed – 1970 – extensive Sunda kingdoms on the East African coast was not taken seriously.

This presumed Sunda presence in Africa would then have to be detectable in the form of an Austronesian substrate in Eastern and Southern Bantu languages (a phenomenon already suggested – albeit for only a few East and South-eastern African languages, notably Makuwa, and the SothoTswana cluster – , by the sometime Leiden Professor of African Linguistics Thilo Schadeberg; personal communication 1994). Also, Tauchmann's point calls to mind the fact that recently, population geneticists have formulated the 'Back-into-Africa' hypothesis, which conceivably might specifically have involved an influx of East Asian and South East Asian genes into sub-Saharan Africa in pre- and proto-historical times (e.g. Hammer et al. 1998; Cruciani et al. 2002; Underhill 2004; Coia et al. 2005).

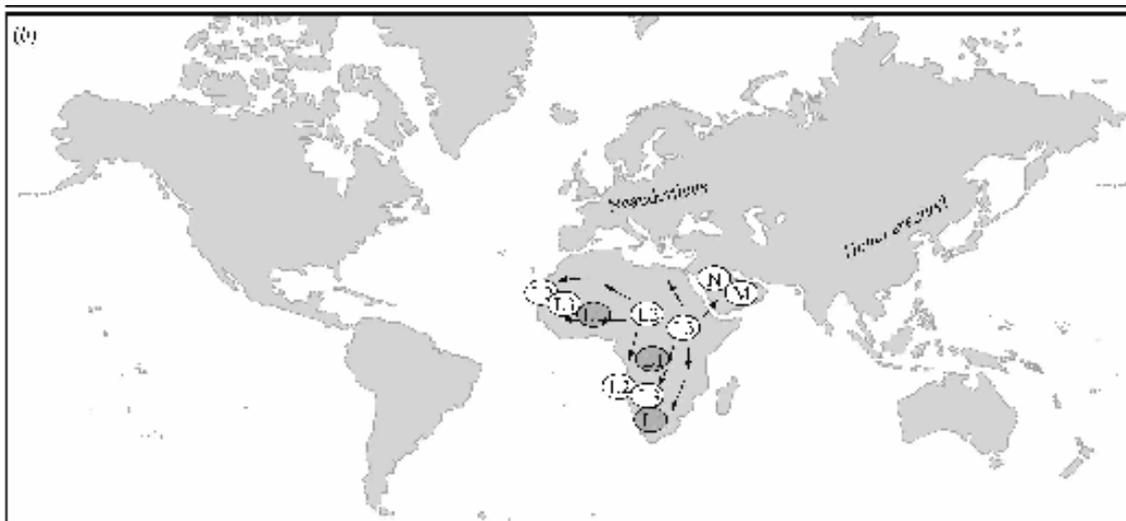
In his 2004 paper, Peter Underhill rendered this process as a transmission of haplo group M from Eastern Eurasia to sub-Saharan Africa, yielding haplo group M – complementary to the transmission of Western Eurasian haplo group U to sub-Saharan Africa, in the form of haplo group U6.

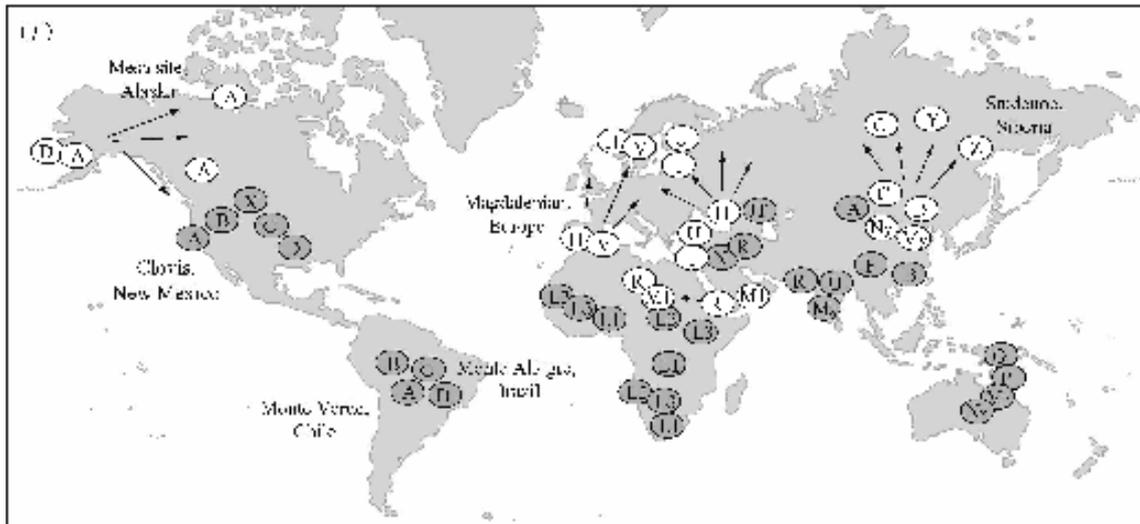
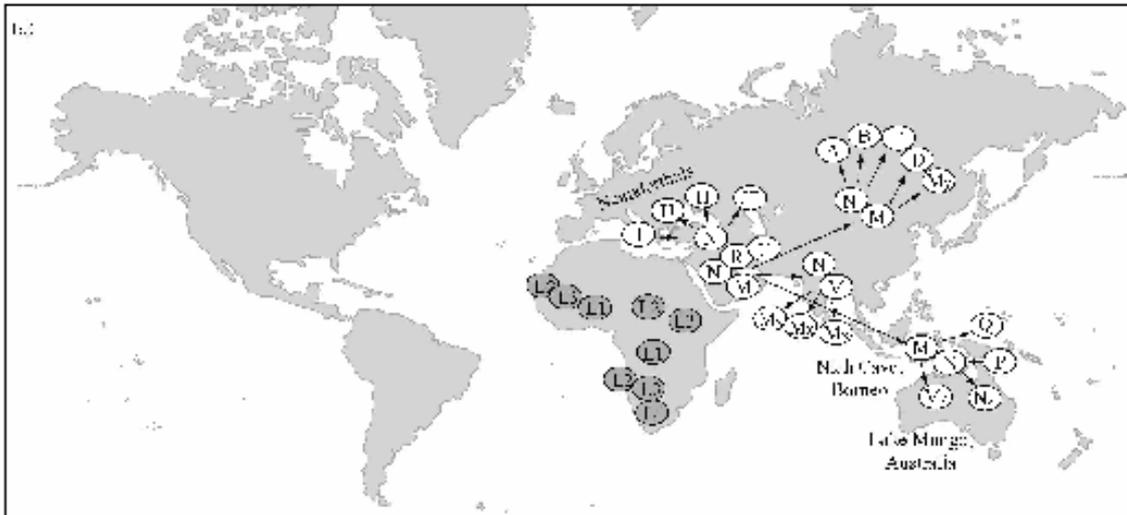
Fig. 2. 'Back into Africa' according to Underhill (2004)



Forster (2004: Fig. 2b (80-60 ka BP), 2c (60-30 ka BP); and 2g (15-2 ka BP; ka = kiloannum = 1,000 years; BP = Before Present) renders essentially the same process in a geographically more explicit and detailed form. Although the complexities of the U haplo group in Western parts of the Old World during the Upper Palaeolithic are notorious (Maca-Meyer et al. 2003; Plaza et al. 2003; Cherni et al. 2005; González et al. 2003), it may not be impossible to read the transmission of Eurasian U to sub-Saharan African U6 as corresponding with the cultural transmission of Scythian, Uralic, or otherwise West Asia / Pelasgian traits into sub-Saharan Africa from the Late Bronze Age onward, as a result of chariot technology, as discussed in some detail in some of my recent work (van Binsbergen 2009, 2010b).

Fig. 3. Back-into-Africa according to Forster 2004, b, c and g





Forster's rendering highlights the South and South East Asian connotations of haplo group M (as a gradual transformation, along the South coast of Eastern Eurasia, of haplo group M brought to South West Asia (the Arabian peninsula) in the second sally 'Out of Africa' (from 60 ka BP on) – while another offshoot of M was transmitted to East Central Asia and eventually became ancestral to part of the population of the Americas. Moreover, Forster's diagram c brings out the strategic position of the Niah Cave, Borneo, as yielding evidence of a 40,000 BP (hence, extremely early) Anatomically Modern population in South East Asia. Finally, Forster shows how the M1 haplo group was transmitted via the Persian Gulf into Northern Central Africa; considering the prominence of other M haplogroups in South East Asia, this region might also have been the ultimate origin of M1, but so far the evidence for such an assumption does not seem to be available.

Against this background, it was inspiring to be able to visit Niah Cave on Borneo, at the end of an exciting journey through the primary and secondary tropical rain forest of the Niah Cave National Park, Sarawak, Malaysian Borneo – even though this environment has been thoroughly domesticated under park conditions. Of course, no Middle Palaeolithic remains were available here for inspection by passing visiting

scholars, but that did not diminish the thrill of visiting one of the earliest archaeological sites manifesting evidence of the (hypothetical) Out-of-Africa exodus, which has been at the heart of long-range genetic and culture historical reconstructions since the late 1980s (Cann et al. 1987).

To my ongoing research, the Niah Cave (especially the subsidiary site called the 'Painted Cave' or 'Painting Cave') had a further point of interest. In 1998, the British paediatrician and subsequently leading geneticist Stephen Oppenheimer formulated his Sunda thesis, claiming:

- (a) with the melting of the polar caps at the end of the last Ice Age (10 ka BP), the ensuing global rise of the ocean level with 200 m and the inevitable flooding of much of the then subcontinent of South East Asia ('Sunda'), a massive Sunda out-migration came to populate not only Oceania but also ramified in a westerly direction along the Indian Ocean coast, all the way to the Indus and the Persian Gulf (and by implication possibly even to Africa, although that continent remains out of Oppenheimer's scope)
- (b) this Sunda influx into South-western Eurasia is held responsible, according to Oppenheimer, for fertilising the Indus and Sumerian civilisations, bringing the cosmology and mythology of the Ancient Near East including that of Genesis.

In a recent publication I have sought (van Binsbergen 2008) to demonstrate, by a painstaking statistical analysis of flood myths worldwide, that Oppenheimer's 'Special Sunda thesis', i.e. (b) (which I thus designate by analogy with Einstein's Special and General Theory of Relativity; Einstein 1960) does not stand up to the empirical evidence. However, Oppenheimer's 'general Sunda thesis', claiming an overall South East Asian influence on Western Eurasia (and by extension, on sub-Saharan Africa) during the last 6 ka or so, I have found rather inspiring especially for an understanding of the long-range cultural dynamics in the recent prehistory, and the proto-history, of sub-Saharan Africa; cf. Dick-Read 2005; van Binsbergen 2007b; in press [2010c]).

Oppenheimer's 1998 book contains a brief depiction and discussion of the Niah Cave. With his occasional tendency to the fallacy of misplaced concreteness (Whitehead 1997: 52, 58), Oppenheimer seems inclined to see the boat representations in the Painted Cave as a reminiscence of the Sunda flood and the resulting out-migration, which play such a large part in his argument. Along with pottery (Solheim et al. 1966), boat-shaped plank coffins dating from 1-3 ka BP (calibrated C¹⁴ analysis) have in fact been excavated in the Painted Cave (Fig. 4b). However, I would be disinclined to regard this as evidence of flood-related events: the Niah Cave, as typical *Karst* phenomenon, is situated in a limestone plateau 20 km away from the present coast of the South China Sea – there never was a serious local flood threat here. Alternatively, the Niah boat coffins tally with the religious and cosmological symbolism of the 'funerary ships' or 'death ships', widespread in South East Asia and representing the final journey to the land of the dead. But let us not rush to conclusion: it certainly remains remarkable that this westerly direction should at the same time be the route of Oppenheimer's proposed Sunda migration fertilising Western Eurasia (and Africa) with what he believes are the unique early achievements of Sunda in the Early Neolithic; so perhaps there is yet more to Oppenheimer's Special thesis than meets the eye.

Fig. 4. Excavations at Niah main cave (a), and a boat-shaped plank coffin, Painted Cave (b), Niah National Park, Sarawak, Borneo, Malaysia



By now the rock paintings in the Painted Cave have become barely visible, and although I managed to photograph whatever remains of them, I was relieved to find, on the spot, copies of the pictures taken in 1987, when the signs were still well-defined. I reproduce these copies here (Fig. 5).

Given the great variety of ethnic and cultural groups in Malaysian Borneo; the considerable impact of globalisation, the money economy and the modern state; and the fact that this was fieldwork of the barest exploratory nature, there was no reason to expect that this trip would shed any new light on my ongoing work on African / South East Asian cultural and demographic connections. I kept Tauchmann's challenging hypothesis revolving in my head, though, and the result of these reflections will be found in the genetic discussion below.

One thing meanwhile struck me: the illusion of having familiar African faces around me. I began to realise that the model of the finely featured, beautiful young woman's face, that for decades has constituted my point of reference for African beauty, in fact had many parallels in Borneo, and later in Bali. Also faces of my male Nkoya friends and relatives, which have been familiar to me since the early 1970s, came to mind when looking at some of the members of, especially, Borneo's 'tribal' populations. From the highly stylised, tense faces depicted in Dan and other West African facial sculpture, to the somewhat similar faces, with taut frown and pouting lips, familiar from my Tswana and Sotho (Lozi) speaking friends and informants in Southern Africa, – despite the considerable difference in complexion and hair texture, the parallels with Bali and especially Borneo seemed persuasive although hard to substantiate (after all, I was only peripherally trained in physical anthropology, 45 years ago, and the subject is no longer popular, has even become suspect among non-initiates for its apparent association with the reification of 'race'). I was reminded of linguistic theories that sought the origin of Austronesian populations on Madagascar especially in Borneo (e.g. Adelaar, 1995 and in press). Could it be that I was looking some of the

ramifications of the M haplo type in the face, distributed both in South East Asia, and in East and South-eastern Africa? Or were this merely subjective projections of an Africanist who intended to serve Africa by exploring Asia, but now is being punished with nostalgia for the continent on which he has concentrated for decades?

Fig. 5. Rock paintings from the 'Painted Cave', Niah National Park, Sarawak, Borneo, Malaysia, photographed in 1987

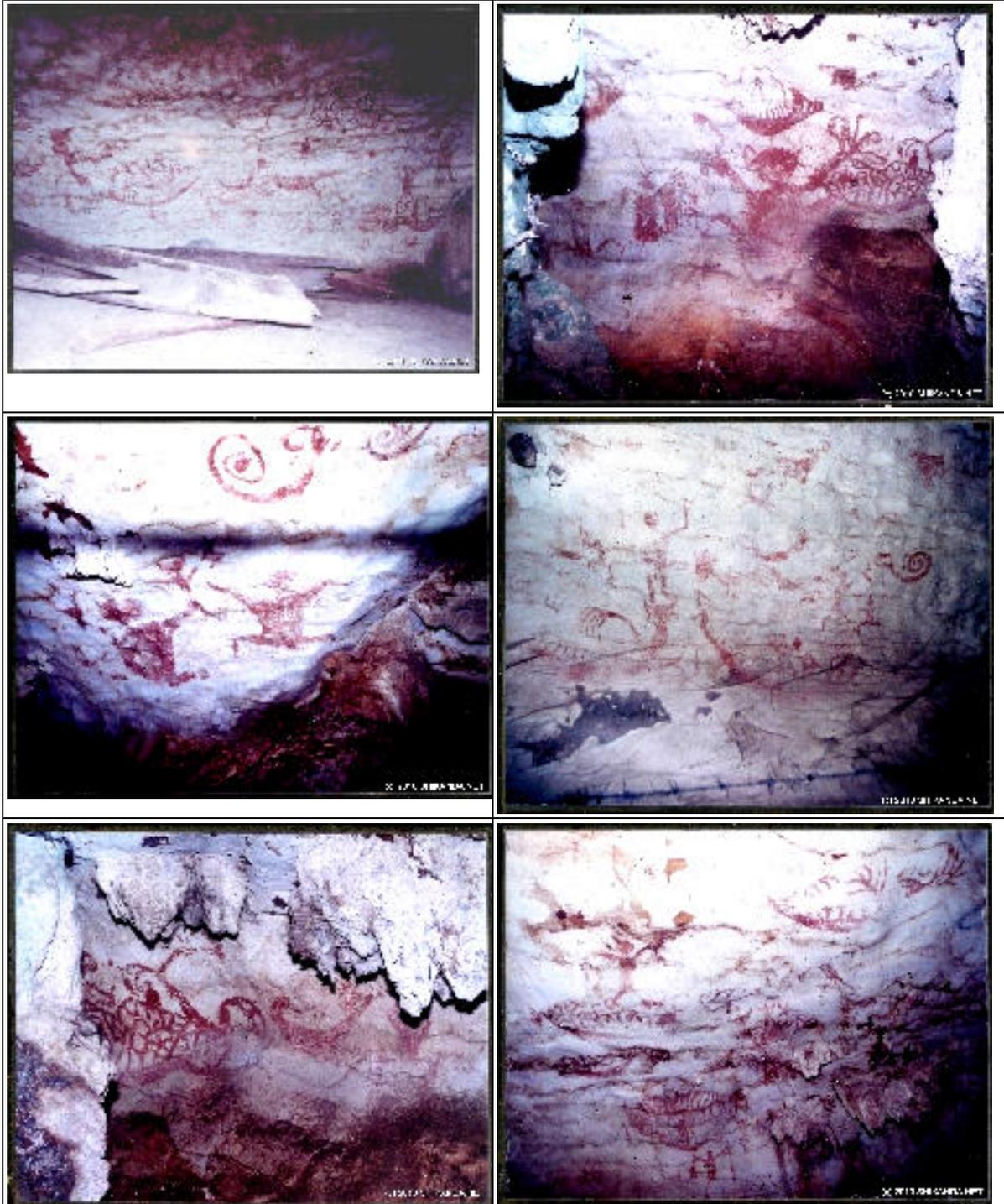




Fig. 6. African faces in South East Asia?

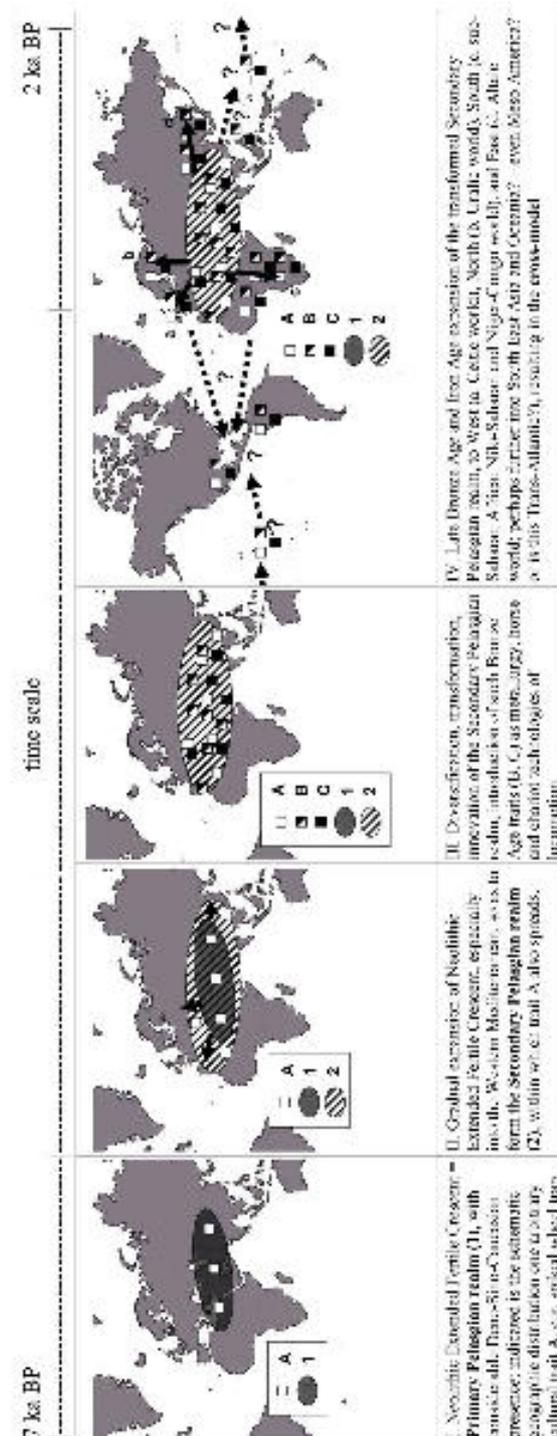


1.2. Sunda and the Pelasgian hypothesis

However, if Tauchmann's hypothesis is correct (it certainly tallies with Oppenheimer's General Sunda thesis even though Oppenheimer does not touch on Africa), then this would have considerable consequences for the Pelasgian thesis I have recently formulated as an alternative to the General Sunda thesis. With the Pelasgian hypothesis, I postulate that much of the long-range cultural dynamics of the Old World since the Early Neolithic may be explained on the basis of a Primary Pelasgian Realm extending from the fertile Sahara to Central Asia ca. 7 ka BP, and containing, *in nucleo*, a considerable number of cultural and genetic traits, which (while undergoing transformations in detail) subsequently spread West to cover the entire Mediterranean,

and East to cover China, to finally be transmitted, on the wings of chariot technology (invented in Central Asia 4 ka BP) in the four directions of the compass (hence my term 'cross-model' for this process): to North Western Europe, to Northern Europe, to East Asia, and to sub-Saharan Africa. The empirical backing for this hypothesis is supplied by an extensive lists of over 80 traits (some genetic, most of them cultural), with summary indications of their distributions in West Asia, the Mediterranean, Western Europe, Northern Europe, the Steppe region of Asia with extensions to East, South and South East Asia, and finally in sub-Saharan Africa.

Fig. 7. The Pelagian hypothesis



cultures, in such fields as puberty rites, divination, mythology, astronomy, games, basketry / weaving, hunting and fishing technology, and confirm the hitherto overlooked Central Asian affinities of today's sub-Saharan African cultures), while these three macro-phyla together with Austric constitute one main branch of *Borean, the other main branch being composed of the dominant languages of Eurasia (with Eurasiatic and Afroasiatic constituting one rather close cluster, and with Sino-Caucasian at a considerable distance). In the light of this analysis, recent suggestions by Manansala (e.g. 2006) and Pedersen (n.d.) as to the closeness of Indo-European and Austric cannot be systematically sustained – such affinities as have been identified can only be due to intrusion / borrowing and not to a direct, shared genetic origin. My statistical outcomes suggest an initial bifurcation of the *Borean-speaking linguistic, cultural and demographic stock, with

1. one, ultimately peripheral branch vacating the Central Asian homeland and moving on (being chased? or differentially equipped with the necessary technology to explore new continents and their own initiative?) to South East Asia, Oceania, the Americas and sub-Saharan Africa, and
2. the other, ultimately central, branch remaining in the Eurasian homeland, gradually expanding westward to finally occupy most of Eurasia, and the Northern half of Africa.

When we confront these statistical results with the reconstruction of the global history of mtDNA haplo groups as given about by reference to Forster 2004 (Fig. 3 above), an elegant solution presents itself to explain the proposed initial bifurcation of *Borean into a peripheral and a central branch: the peripheral branch, producing African languages, Amerind and Austric appears to derive from mtDNA haplo type M, the central branch from type N – the bifurcation appears to mainly reflect an initial segmentation, already in the Arabian peninsula some 60 ka BP, of the second sally 'Out of Africa'.

Now, under Tauchmann's hypothesis of an extensive pre-Bantu Sunda presence in East and South Africa during the first and perhaps early second millennium of the present era, my earlier, Sunda-centred model may need to be reconsidered, perhaps, to some extent, restored to the central explanatory position in which I held it a few years ago. A considerable number, perhaps even the majority, of 'Pelagian' traits in sub-Saharan Africa might have come to the latter region, not directly as a result of southward expansion of Pelagian traits from the Mediterranean, but only indirectly, carried on the wings of Sunda expansion, so via the detour of South and South East Asia.

Even the language situation might be reconsidered in this light. Given my demonstration (van Binsbergen 2010a) that the Niger-Congo / Bantu macrophylum is to a considerable extent *Borean-derived, and given the several traces of Niger-Congo being spoken, as a minority language, in the Eastern Mediterranean / West Asia during the Bronze Age (van Binsbergen & Woudhuizen, in press), my inclination has been to postulate an emergence of Niger-Congo (most probably in association with the Khoisan and Nilo-Saharan macrophyla) in West to Central Asia, more or less directly from *Borean stock, in one cluster with Amerind and Austric languages, ca. 20 ka BP – turning the typological closeness that was brought out by statistical cluster analysis and expressed by the resulting dendrogram, into a generic rendering of origin and historical genesis. However, bringing to bear Tauchmann's hypothesis upon this model, it becomes conceivable that in fact Sunda was the underlying original substrate in Pelagian cultural traits, and that Bantu (as postulated by some analysts in the early 20th century CE) not only has a relatively close genetic relation with Austric at the moment of origin c. 20 ka BP, but also subsequently, secondarily, underwent considerable Sunda intrusion / borrowing before materialising as a major macrophylum in sub-Saharan Africa. (The closeness of proto-Bantu *-ntu and proto-Austronesian *-taw, both meaning 'human', could be regarded as a case in point; however, I prefer to see this (van Binsbergen & Woudhuizen, in press) as two cognate manifestations of a 'global etymology' (Bengtson & Ruhlen 1994), found in all known macrophyla and hanging on the semantics of 'earth' / 'under, down' / 'human'.)

For the interpretation of Mediterranean proto-history giving up the Pelasgian hypothesis and reverting to my Mediterranean / African version of the General Sunda thesis would have major consequences. We would have to interpret the apparent Bantu elements in the West Asian and the Eastern Mediterranean Bronze Age as a further indication of Sunda influence – and by the same token we would interpret as distant Sunda effects the rapid improvement, in the Eastern Mediterranean, of nautical skills, and the emergence of Neolithic trading ports (such as Jafa / Joppe and Corinth). Puzzling elements such as shell money (indistinguishable from current Melanesian versions) in the royal tombs of Ur would come closer to a solution; the many Mediterranean / Oceanian parallels in the field of mythology (van Binsbergen 2010c) would be explained as Sunda (in line, again, with Oppenheimer), and the emergence of Indus and Sumerian civilisation may have been indebted to some Sunda catalytic influence, again just as postulated by Oppenheimer. Thus the General Sunda hypothesis seems to have no lack of explanatory power and appeal, and my dismissal of the Special Sunda thesis with regard to Genesis mythology specially flood myths (van Binsbergen c.s. 2008), does not in the least mean that I consider the General Sunda hypothesis to have been refuted wholesale and once for all.

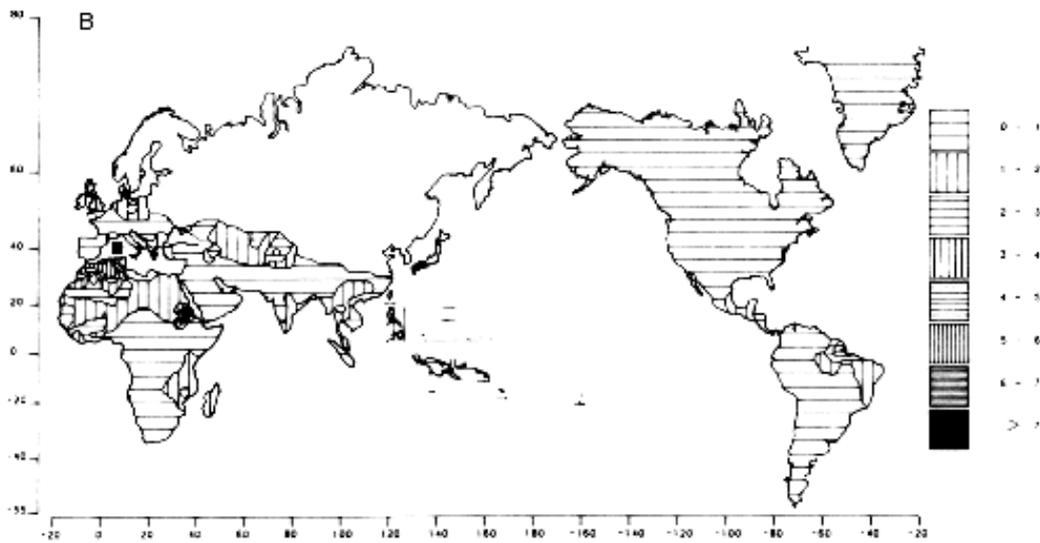
However, if Tauchmann is right and there was in fact a massive South East Asian / Sunda / Austric presence in East and South East Africa prior to the effective penetration of the Bantu expansion there, then this would have to show in the genetic record. In that case distribution maps of classic genetic markers and of single genes would have to bring out patterns that link sub-Saharan Africa with South East Asia, more than with other parts of the Old World.

We have already seen that, at the level of mitochondrial DNA types (Forster 2004), this is the case: African continuities in terms of the 'Back-into-Africa' thesis are to be found in relation with the haplo groups M1 and U6, but these have no recognised South East Asian connotations (although, both having emerged in West Asia, they might conceivably be connected with prehistoric gene transmission from South East Asia, for which however, as stressed above, so far the evidence does not seem to be available).

Although predating the contemporary advances in molecular biology, hence to a certain extent obsolete, yet the distribution maps which Cavalli-Sforza et al. (1994) present in abundance, offer a further opportunity of testing Tauchmann's hypothesis. Here we expect especially to derive insight from the distribution of thalassaemias (hereditary blood conditions that have a debilitating effect yet render immunity to malaria), for Oppenheimer (one of the main researchers of the genetic aspects of these conditions) advances the world distribution of thalassaemias alpha and beta as the main genetic underpinning of his General Sunda thesis (Oppenheimer 1998).

Yet, for beta thalassaemia the evidence does not look good (Fig. 9; Cavalli-Sforza et al. 1994: Fig. 2.14.6.B). Without denying the possible Sunda implications of the relative highs, in Africa, in Eritrea and the Maghrib, the African incidence of beta thalassaemia remains so low, across the continent, that no massive Sunda influence throughout East and South East Africa can possibly be based on it. If there was any Sunda influence on Africa, it appears (on the basis of Fig. 9) to have been limited to Eritrea and the Maghrib – although from there it may have exerted some further, diffuse influence.

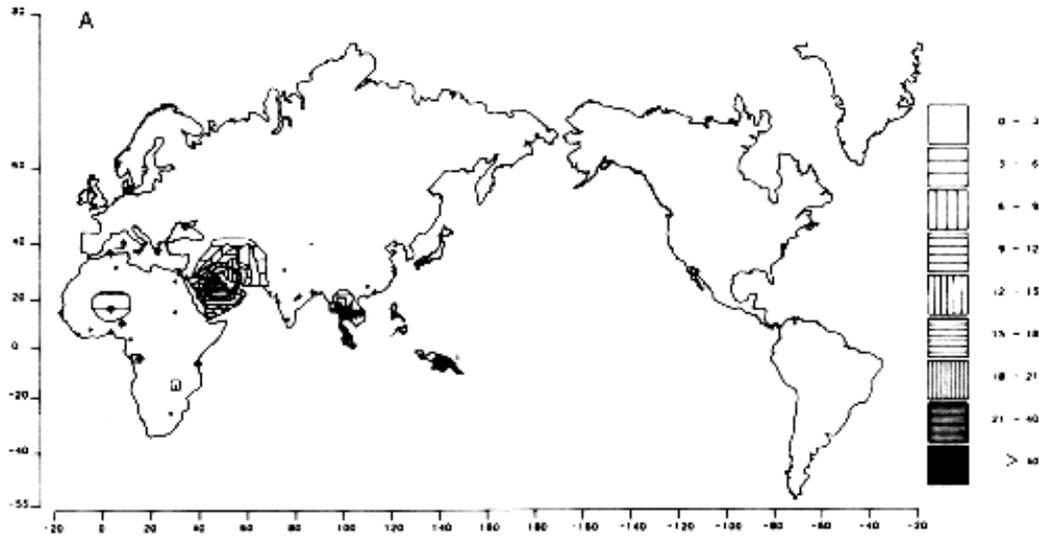
Fig. 9. World distribution of beta thalassaemias



For alpha thalassaemia (Fig. 10) the conclusion concerning Sunda influence on sub-Saharan African can be even more straightforward:

- there is clearly a succession of highs extending from South East Asia to South West Asia (Iran and Arabian peninsula), suggestive of consistent movement along an East-West axis (but the direction of that movement cannot be determined from the distribution alone – it may have been from East to West as postulated under the Sunda thesis, but just as well from West to East, as would be in line with the Pelasgian thesis; in fact looking at the distribution, the most likely interpretation would be an original epicentre in South-west Asia (Iran and Arabian peninsula), whence subsequent transmission to South East Asia and New Guinea
- anyway, none of the apparent influence appears to have reached sub-Saharan Africa.

Fig. 10. World distribution of alpha thalassaemias (after Cavalli-Sforza et al. 1994: Fig. 2.14.5.a)



However, although this seems to spell doom for Tauchmann's hypothesis (and even for Oppenheimer's General Sunda hypothesis), some single-gene distributions offered by Cavalli-Sforza et al. would still make a massive Sunda influence on sub-Saharan Africa appear a possibility:

- not HLAB*12 (which reaches even a global low in South East Asia);
- nor RH*CDe or RH*C (both of which are very high in South East Asia, but not conspicuous in Africa);
- nor even RH*D (which is relatively high in South East Asia, and in some parts of Africa, but has the disadvantage of similar highs throughout the New World, and in much of East and North Asia – although all of this might possibly be explained as manifestations of the mtDNA Type C, which in South East Asia and Oceania could be claimed to have marked Sunda connotations
- but perhaps positive in the case of IGHGIG3*za;b0b1b3b4b5, and
- GC*IF

For the latter two single-gene markers, high in South East Asia and sub-Saharan Africa but hardly anywhere else, I give the global distributions:

Fig. 11. Global distribution of IGHGIG3*za;b0blb3b4b5 as a possible indication of massive Sunda influence on sub-Saharan Africa

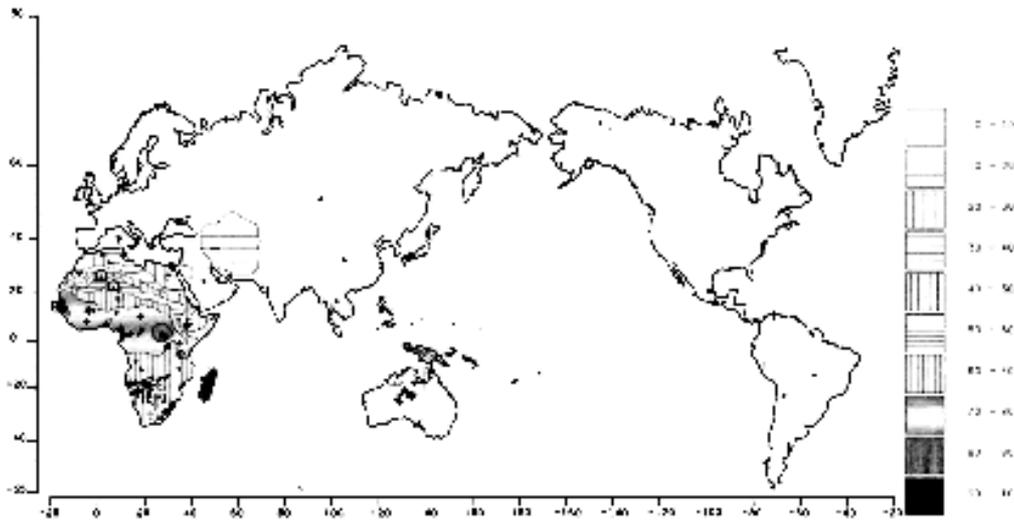
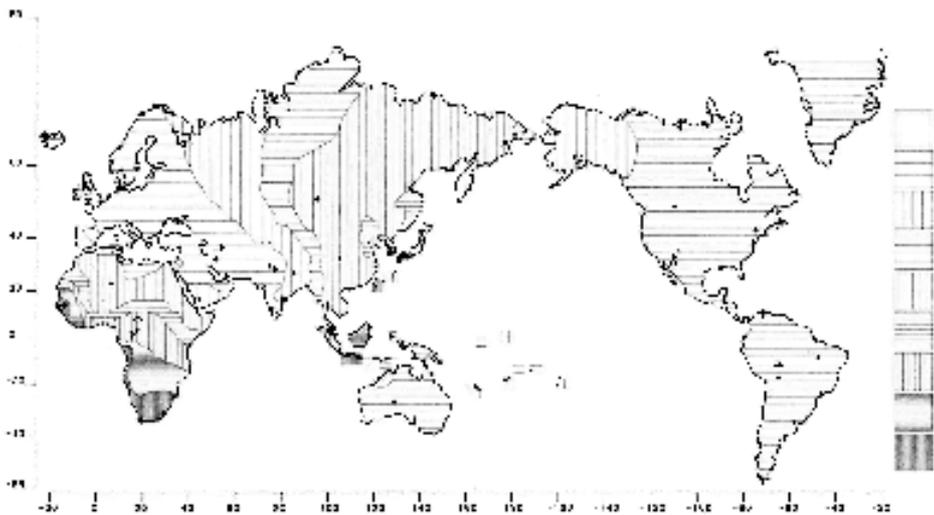


Fig. 12. Global distribution of GC*IF as a possible indication of massive Sunda influence on sub-Saharan Africa



I am far from a specialist in population genetics, and find it difficult to evaluate this ensemble of somewhat contradictory evidence. However, I am inclined to consider the evidence from only two single-gene indicators, in the absence of corroborating evidence from other well-studied markers as discussed above, insufficient as corroboration of Tauchmann's thesis. *For the time being I take it there is no genetic evidence of a more than local Sunda influence on sub-Saharan Africa. The idea of massive Austronesian / Sunda presence in East and South-East Africa prior to the expansion of Bantu must probably be discarded. Yet it must be admitted that there are genetic indications for much more limited Austronesian / Sunda presences in coastal South and West Africa, and perhaps even in two narrow inland corridors: one stretching from Southern Sudan via the Western Grassfields of Cameroon, to Mali and Senegal; the other from Mozambique to Angola.* In the Sunda texts that I have drafted

so far, my empirical ethnographic discussions of Sunda traits concentrate on these two inland corridors. Admittedly, some of the data on these corridors are also amenable to an interpretation in terms of my Pelasgian hypothesis – as Pelasgian traits brought to sub-Saharan Africa as southern extensions of the cross-model, from the Late Bronze Age onward. Probabaly a combination of Sunda and Pelasgian models works best, but at any rate Sunda effects on sub-Saharan Africa can hardly be ruled out, even though they are now as massive and as old as Tauchmann’s hypothesis suggests.

1.3 Hornbill representations as Sunda index fossils?

Meanwhile, of possible relevance for the Sunda thesis is the fact that the hornbill has acquired the status of national symbol of Sarawak (South-western Malaysian Borneo). Mass-produced as well as more unique representations abound in the craft industry there (Fig. 13). Apparently this national symbolism goes back to the Iban (Sea Dayak) people’s veneration of the Rhinoceros hornbill bird as go-between between heaven and earth, possibly with the status of demiurge of divine trickster comparable to that of Raven or Eagle in other circum-Pacific mythologies.

Fig. 13. Hornbill representations at Kuching airport (top row) and in a sophisticated antiquarian / craft shop in Miri



I was intrigued, because in 1983 I bought a hornbill representation in Guinea-Bissau, West Africa (picture to follow), whose shape (although more elongated) and bright primal colouring are very similar to the top left-hand items. Even long before working

on the Sunda thesis, I had toyed with the idea of parallels between the Guinea Bissau piece and bird representations from South East Asia specifically the Philippine Ifugao. Without managing to build the case I subjectively cherished the impression that such representations (along with other traits such as rice cultivation, head-hunting, slavery, raiding, maritime trade, the veneration of a demiurge – son of the sky king – who once a years descends to earth in order to destroy witches) could be an indication of South East Asian / Sunda influences on the West African coast. The case remains very weak, since the extensive family of hornbills actually does extend from sub-Saharan Africa to Melanesia and the Philippines, and especially the top left-hand items follows the natural colours of locally endemic species of hornbills in West Africa and Borneo rather closely. At any rate, with the mangrove forests and the enormous trees with their enormous, ‘winged’ bases, the continuity between the Sarawak environment and that of Guinea Bissau was so deceptive that, perhaps equally deceptive, ideas of socio-cultural continuity were difficult to suppress.

Fig. 14. Mangrove in Bako National Park, and winged-based ‘fromager’ trees, Niah National Park, Sarawak



1.4. The longhouse

Another characteristic of the Iban people, widely discussed in classic ethnographies, is the longhouse as the typical dwelling place: a kind of traditional wooden apartment building, in which close kin, remote kin and non-kin live together in what is essentially a socio-political, rather than kin-based, unit. In modern parlance, Sarawakans distinguish between people raised in the longhouse (i.e. under traditional rural conditions), and those raised in town. The longhouse model still informs (Fig. 15) patterns of housing in official contexts such as staff dwellings in National Parks, and apart from the touristic version which deliberately and performatively mimics the tradition forms, there is also the modern longhouse, whose dwelling section retains the ancient forms of conviviality and informality, but whose basement – whilst still setting the scene for traditional training of fighting cocks – is now also stacked with the motorbikes and small cars that modern cash crop production (mainly of palm oil, on new clearings in the forest) and low petrol price have now rendered affordable to many inhabitants of the longhouse.

Fig. 15. Transformations of the Iban longhouse



Puzzled by the absence of any obvious shrines in the Sarawak rural landscape apart from mosques and Christian churches, I was relieved to find an unmistakable shrine along the forest road at the outskirts of this longhouse (Fig. 16). Although the form was rudimentary and lacked all stylised embellishment, still this type of shrine (as well as some of the offerings: an egg, liquids, token produce) pointed towards the emphatic presence of highly elaborate and ornate shrines we were to encounter, soon, in the Isle of Bali, Indonesia.

Fig. 16. Shrine at the outskirts of a modern Iban longhouse



1.5. Colonial templates

Also after nearly half a century of independence, the townscapes and the administrative routines of Malaysian Borneo still carry many reminders of a British colonial past – and in that respect are surprisingly close to South Central Africa. Apart from the different somatic appearance of most of the passers-by, and the prevalence of Chinese shop signs, the ‘second-class trading areas’ of Kuching, Miri and Kota Kinabalu, clearly constructed before World War II, are almost indistinguishable from those in Lusaka (Zambia), Bulawayo (Zimbabwe) and Francistown (Botswana). The relatively benign rule of three generations of ‘White Rajahs’ of the Brooke family (who apparently kept the most blatant forms of British imperialism at bay, even though in themselves constituting another, more indirect form of such imperialism) may have been among the factors that gave Kuching a relatively harmonious and well-designed, pleasant townscape; but in Miri and Kota Kinabalu the vestiges of the exploitative, extractive colonial interests of the North Atlantic are still unmistakable. The ancient jetty of Kota Kinabalu, now revamped and mainly used for tourism and recreation, is adorned with a series of enlarged ancient photographs which, together, tell the tale of British interest and expansion (Fig. 17).

Fig. 17. British colonial presence in Kota Kinabalu, as told in ancient photographs





1.6. Glimpses of Chinese diaspora culture

Both in Sarawak and in Sabah, Chinese people constitute an important and conspicuous part of the population, especially in the towns. The layout of the major cities still suggests a former, colonial pattern of residential segregation. Unheeded of the Islamic dress code enacted by the Malay population segment (which is constitutionally defined as Muslims), and remarkable for their own apparent insistence on somewhat informal clothing with maximum avoidance of exposure to the sun, the Chinese in the public space are a constant reminder of the ‘plural’ (to use a one-popular, colonial euphemism, cf. Furnivall 1948), tolerance-based nature of the society of Malaysian Borneo. Many shop signs etc. in the public space, as well as the remarkably fluency of state officials and airline personnel in English, Malay and Chinese, suggest that here, contrary to Java, Indonesia (where the massacre of 1966 led to general reluctance to display Chinese identity), Chinese is still a viable and self-affirming cultural and linguistic option, whose cultural and social expressions are in close contact with the Chinese mainland and the ancient Chinese tradition.

However, there are signs that under the impact of globalisation and modern media, Chinese diaspora culture is being eroded and transformed. A contrast can be noted between a living, time-honoured Chinese popular culture (centring, among other things, on the veneration of a complex pantheon encompassing Confucianist, Taoist and Buddhist elements, and on divinatory and protective – *feng shui* 風水 – practices centring on the Eight Trigrams *pa kua* 八卦, the Five Phases *Wu Xing* 五行; and the 64-element transformative system of *易經* *yì jīng*), and a commoditised, globalised, highly simplified and streamlined version of this tradition. The following contrasting pictures (Fig. 18), taken from facing shops in the main Miri shopping mall, bring out this contrast. In the left-hand picture, the standard objects needed for Chinese popular culture and religion are still offered in the form in which they have circulated throughout the Chinese communities of the world for centuries. In the right-hand picture, however, a rigorous selection of this enormous range of commodities has been made, mass-produced under highly controlled conditions dictated by the franchise holder Lillian Too, author of a number of highly successful *feng shui* manuals, and only to be retailed by licensed graduates of Too's *feng shui* courses. Apparently, a sufficient number of diasporic Chinese, used to operate in a context of mass production and globalisation, are inclined to prefer the globalised and commoditised version, which has the guarantee of packaging their 'traditional culture' in a safe, manageable, domesticated, and sophisticated form.

Fig. 18. Contrasting versions of Chinese diaspora culture



The example does not stand on its own. In the enormous new shopping mall of northern Kota Kinabalu (Sabah), a middle-aged symbolic entrepreneur from Sri Lanka, without any original roots in Chinese life, and having learned (as he volunteered himself in an extensive interview) a smattering of Chinese from the well-known *Teach Yourself Mandarin* book, offered his own high idiosyncratic version of Chinese calligraphy, as well as superficially Arabianising versions of the European alphabet, on picture frames instantly made to order and ready to take home. The entrepreneur had a number of locals to assist him setting up his display tables etc. Such practices can only find a market in a context where self-evident mastery of traditional Chinese culture and language (which have regarded calligraphy as a very highly developed and respected art for several millennia) has been largely replaced by mere folkloristic fetishism.

Fig. 19. A theme reminiscent of Oceania and even of the North American North West Coast cultures: Ceremonial carving on display in the Niah National Park headquarters



2. Bali

After Borneo, the journey was continued to Bali. The initial destination was Ubud, since this town has been known as a major ceremonial and spiritual centre. Bali of course has been one of the darlings of classic anthropology, not only of Dutch structuralist authors, but also of prominent American anthropologists like Margaret Mead, Bateson and Geertz. Bali is the one major island in Indonesia that has retained Hinduism as its principal religion whereas in most other parts of the archipelago Islam and Christianity have gained dominance.

Bali has an enormous tourist industry, and an enormous petty-commodity industry in which hundreds of thousands of skilled craftsmen (sculptors, painters, weavers etc.) produce the artefacts that not only adorn the thousands of small and large temples and that are used in the incessant rituals and ceremonies in which the majority of the population appears to be involved, but that are also exported by the shipload to ever expanding overseas markets.

The island thus presents a number of riddles.

- *What enabled this island culture to retain its cultural, Hindu distinctiveness, first in the face of Islamic encroachment in the Indonesian archipelago throughout the second millennium of the present era, secondly in the face of modern mass nationalism in Indonesia which is strongly allied with Islam, and thirdly in the face of globalisation? The latter is locally present both by the*

onslaught of tourism, and by modern technology (the entire island is electrified, and although car ownership and computer ownership is far from general, many adults and adolescents have their own motorcycle and most their own cell phone).

- *What has enabled Hinduism, apparently for most Balinese including young people, to remain a viable religion and cosmology, which inspires daily and ritual life with a sense of purpose of communality, and has largely kept at bay the destruction of meaning and of community typical of modern and post-modern conditions in the North Atlantic region?*
- *In the case of Bali, can we discard our habitual, culture-cynical post-modern deconstruction, which sees the appearances of viable communal and individual ritual life merely as a cunning device to attract tourism? Is tourism here merely the interface with the outside, post-modern world, which however has locally been domesticated so as to materially serve the reproduction and perpetuation of a balanced, time-honoured local socio-ritual system, in such a way that the outside influences are safely domesticated and have no chance of destroying the local system?*

I am reminded of my study, in the 1980s, of Manjak society in Guinea Bissau, West Africa – a remote rural society thriving on the adult population's labour migration to Senegal and France, yet offering, to its distant members, a ritual focus of personal and communal localised, village-centred religious concerns: the management of individual's mystical contracts – for protection, support and success, in exchange for humans' ritual prestations especially animal sacrifices and rum libations – with local spirits inhabiting trees and shrines, and the periodical initiation of boys in the sacred forest (van Binsbergen 1984, 1988). This religious orientation offered both a local focus to which the diasporic village members were obliged to return regularly (and strong enough to make them do so!), and offered them a system of signification that, apparently, was capable of counteracting the destruction of cosmological meaning typical of globalisation and secularisation. Labour migration, however taxing to social relationships in the village and the family, yet could be seen as subservient to Manjak village society, keeping it alive. A prototype of such an analysis may be found in Jaap van Velsen's (1961) analysis of international labour migration as constitutive of Tonga village society in Malawi, Southern Africa, in the 1950s.

Yet there is room for scepticism, in the Bali case as well as that of the Manjak and the Tonga. Tourism is massively present in Bali, and provides many income opportunities; in this light it is almost inevitable that tourism's commoditising, stereotyping and folklorising effects lead, at least in certain situations and for some Balinese people, to a drastic redefinition of their traditional worldview and value system. Indications of this process can be seen anywhere in the touristic areas, where many tourists appropriate the sites mainly as background to their family snapshots – and many Balinese oblige, in what can only be seen as a violent objectification and commoditisation of their traditional culture. The process was particularly in evidence at the Pura Ulan Danu Bratan Temple, in a mountain lake at Bedugal, northern Bali. Advertisements for adjacent spas and for instant caricature drawing dominate the temple site, where (despite stern signposting, even warning menstruating women to stay out) it was not even mandatory (contrary for all other temples I have visited) for the foreign visitors to wear a sarong over their short trousers or skirts, and where the impeccably attired temple servants went out of their way to please the visitors by taking their pictures and

carrying their camera bags. As a result, the temple site had more of a secular theme park, and – at least to the casual but serious visitor bringing his own stereotypes – lacked all sense of spiritual inspiration

Fig. 20. Scenes at the Pura Ulan Danu Bratan Temple; note the perpendicular shadow in the left-hand picture



The following picture (Fig. 21) conveys the sense of how this temple combines the aspects of a Hindu-Balinese devotion, the touristic theme park

Fig. 21. Bali-Hindu devotion, theme park and Islam combined in one picture



Of course, a two-week stay (both in Ubud and in the *desa* / village of Sanda in the South-western foothills of Mt Butakaru), even if very intensive and greatly facilitated by local assistance (especially on the part of Mr Sunarta, see below), is totally

insufficient to scratch even the surface of the questions outlined above. I present the following observations for what little they are worth.

2.1. Bali space and architecture

One of the most conspicuous features of Bali life, even today, is the extent to which space is sacralised and the object of ritual. One's first naïve impression when walking through a *desa* like Sanda or even a town like Ubud, is that all houses are simply temples. Some however one will learn to qualify this sweeping statement.

Some 20% of the total surface of the island (with a total of over 6,000 km², 1/6 the size of the Netherlands) is in use for rice cultivation. The complex irrigation systems gives rise not only to impressive feats of landscaping (Fig. 22), but also to a carefully managed social-organisation and political process whose task is the allocation of water over the members of the local community, and the containment of such conflicts as this may entail. One is reminded of the social system of irrigation described by Leach (1968) for Sri Lanka.

Fig. 22. Terraced rice cultivation in the western foothills of the Butakuru mountains



The economic dependence on the land at the community level and the family level is articulated in the religious sphere, by a number of complementary arrangements whose repetition at successive levels creates something like a fractal effect:

- every community has a community temple
- within the community, every extended family cluster has a family temple

- every individual dwelling compound has a compound temple in the North-eastern section of the compound
- in the North-eastern section of the compound temple, a guardian shrine is erected as the minimal expression of the religico-spatial logical governing the previous points

It is not only the sacred space which thus is defined by the directions of the compass. Every compound has ideally a fixed spatial structure determining the location of the compound head's dwelling; the central ceremonial area with ancestral connotations (often this is an elaborately appointed pavilion consisting of a roofed ceremonial platform covered with glazed tiles); the granary containing the rice crop; dwellings of other compound members; the kitchen, etc. Ideally the rice fields are adjacent to the compound. The family temple contains a number of shrines with specific designations and functions (see below). Fringed umbrellas are a typical adornment of the shrines; and so are the pieces of cloth that adorn the shrines and statuettes especially at times of festivals, they may come in symbolic colours (e.g. black for Shiva), and tend to be replaced by new ones at the time of festivals. Black-and-white chequered cloth, with Shiva connotations, is the standard ritual cloth to wrap statues and shrines in; it is also used by all Balinese men when formally taking part in ritual activities. In addition, all over the compound statues may be found for specific members of the Balinese Hindu pantheon, especially the elephant-headed primary god Ganesha, of the bird-god Garuda who is Vishnu's mount (cf. Fig. 23), and of Sarasvati, goddess of beauty and art. These statues are the recipients of small, standard offerings on a daily basis. Also in sections of the house that are used for commercial purposes, such statues are frequently found, and daily sacrifices to them are meant to enhance the owner's commercial success. In the rice fields, flimsy little platforms are sacrificial places for the rice goddess Sri Devi. Flowering plants abound and are the obvious sources of the flowers that are regularly used for offerings to the gods.

Fig. 23. The bird-god Garuda, dominating the ceiling of the ceremonial central pavilion in a family compound in central Ubud



Sacrifice is a constant concern for the Balinese, even today. In every community, one constantly comes across women (typically of reproductive age) who carry on their head baskets with several offerings they have made themselves. The typical form of such an offering is a small, flat lidless box folded out of palm leaf and containing some rice, a few flowers, a fruit, a piece of manufactured candy, a stick of burning incense etc. (Fig. 24). Also larger baskets may be used, and in many households and temples large collections of such baskets await further use. The offerings are not sacred in themselves, and their purpose is fulfilled as soon as they have been left at the shrine or statuette in question; immediately after this moment of sacrifice, they become meaningless dummies or corpses, and may be snatched away by the many stray dogs, or trampled underfoot by passers-by, without the slightest offence.

Fig. 24. Daily offerings and the persons who make and distribute them



2.2. Veneration of trees and streams

One of the remarkable aspects of the sacralisation of space, with parallels throughout the Old World (I extensively studied similar arrangements in the highlands of North-western Tunisia, in a context of popular Islam; and in Guinea Bissau, in a context of historic African religion), is that temples are often found in the immediately vicinity of very ancient *banyan* trees, as if the temple were paired with the sacred connotations of that tree – or as if the temple was a later, man-made articulation of the tree’s sacredness (Fig. 25).

Fig. 25. An ancient banyan tree opposite the community temple of the desa of Nyuh Kuning; mark the chequered cloth around the stem, the motorcycles, and the use of the adjacent space as communal football field



The abundance of offerings near bridges and in streams are just one indication that, also in Bali, streams share with trees the sacred nature associated with manifestations of natural force. However, a difference needs to be appreciated: in this irrigation economy, water is locally recognised as the source of life, and we shall see that water plays a central part in Bali ritual life far exceeding that of trees and other arboreal or vegetal elements.

2.3. Nyepi – Balinese New Year celebrations

Despite globalisation, new media and tourism, one of the indications that, in Bali, we are dealing with a viable and relatively intact religious system which has its continued foundation and impetus in local community life and not in some folklorised tourist industry, is to be found in the New Year celebrations. These take place round about mid-March (incidentally, the astrological Vernal point, Carnival, Easter centring on the egg as a cosmogonic symbol of beginning, and the tax year's beginning at 1st April, in Britain and the Netherlands, are all indications that not only in Bali but in many parts of the Old World the year would traditionally begin around April). New Year's Eve is celebrated communally with a nocturnal parade of gigantic *papier-maché* monsters (*ogoh-ogoh*) prepared by sections of the population (villages, town quarters, school classes). The monsters (a selection of traditional Hindu ogres etc. combined with motifs from the global horror repertoire, e.g. Halloween iconography, a witch on a broom, and this year a magnificent leading character from the newly-released motion picture Avatar) are carried by dozen's of participants – all uniformed in chequered cloth – on large lattices of bamboo, to the accompaniment of a marching gamelan orchestra and the carriers' screaming. Wild movements of the monsters threaten the massive audience. At communal centres open-air activities (games, singing) continue deep into the night. However, the next morning, New Year, the community is to look totally deserted. All shops are closed, nobody is allowed on the roads and streets (the police see to this), there is no traffic whatsoever, no airplanes are allowed to land or take off anywhere in Bali, etc. These prohibitions, which run counter to the interests of the tourist industry, meet with 100% compliance, apparently all over Bali. The logic is that after their descent to earth on New Year's Eve, the next day the evil spirits, much to their disappointment, see that the island is totally deserted, and have no option but to return to their abodes empty-handed.

Fig. 26. Aspects of Nyepi New Year: three ogoh-ogoh from the village of Nyuh Kuning



2.4. A family ceremony in the Sunarta family at the *desa* Sanda

After we moved from Ubud / Nyuh Kuning to Sanda, in the south-western foothills of Mt Butakaru, the (peri-)urban environment of touristic retail outlets and specialised craft communities gave way to terraced rice fields, an abundance of green, and (apart

from ourselves) a virtual absence of tourism. It was in Sanda that we came closest to the living family and religious life of Bali, through our good fortune of making the acquaintance with Mr Sunarta (a local-level politician of the ruling Democratic Party of Indonesia, and our main host and informant).

The Sunarta family group, a cluster of nine nuclear families patrilineally descending from one grandfather, is one of the dozens of families that make up the *desa* of Sanda. This family group originally hails from the Lake Tamblingan region, ca. 25 km North-north-east of Sanda as the crow flies (but three times that distance over the main roads). Hence when the family temple was constructed at Sanda (presumably by the original grandfather, half a century ago), sacred water from the Lake Tamblingan temple had to be brought to give the temple its foundation of sacrality. Contacts with the Lake Tamblingan region have remained close, and twice a year a delegation of the Sunarta family group visits the Lake Tamblingan temple with offerings. (As is typical of incipient field-work, I am not quite sure of this information. In other interviews not the Lake Tamblingan temple, but the Ulan Danu Bratan Temple was mentioned, and the place name of Bedugul explicitly mentioned – both Lake Temples were visited by us in the company of the informant, but there was no opportunity yet for checking and feedback).

Fig. 27. Temple at Lake Tamblingan



The nine senior members of the family group have now dispersed over the *desa* and some even live at the urban centres in the South of Bali. The family temple is adjacent to the grandfather's original house, and it is here that the family group stages an elaborate ceremony twice a year. In March 2010, the time has come for a new ceremony.

However, this time ominous elements are added to the semi-annual routine. The present family head and hence family priest has recently been discharged from hospital where he had been admitted after a stroke, and although he will take part in the ceremony he is not yet able to officiate as family priest. Hence, while the ceremony is also intended to strengthen him and contribute to his recovery, two hired priests have to

be brought in, presumably from the district headquarters Pupuan. There is a strong caste awareness in the Sunarta family, and presumably the priests, who are reputed to have a certain training in Sanskrit and Vedic scriptures, belong to the Brahmin caste. Pupuan is also where, on the eve of the ceremony, Mr Sunarta rode on his motorbike in order to purchase two new parasols, for further adornment of the temple.

The family head's illness was associated, in the family's awareness, with a wider background of ill omen and misfortune. Divination had indicated that this illness had to do with wrath on the part of the gods and the ancestors: the family *keris* (ancestral ceremonial dagger) had not been properly cleaned and cared for, and the present family ceremony also included an element of atonement for that omission. There were also complex stories about another omission: from the relation with the Lake Temple this family derived the right to a particular priesthood which, however, it did not actually take up – apparently another reason for ancestral wrath. Here the overall family history appeared to merge with the specifics of one nuclear family of that group, which in much more than ten years of marriage was so far only blessed with one child, a healthy boy now five years old. Although in conversation with me and Patricia this problem was exclusively discussed in terms of global biomedicine (sperm counts, womb temperature etc.), clearly the case also had a subjective, mystical angle for the people involved: it was precisely in relation to this problem that the links with the Lake Temple and the vacant priesthood were volunteered, as if the fertility problem was also seen as a result of ritual omission. However the specifics of Balinese Hinduism, Balinese kinship structure, and the details of the composition and history of the Sunarta family group were too new to me than that I could already make the kind of in-depth, extended case analysis that anthropological method would indicate in this case.

Fig. 28. Location of desa Sanda on Bali

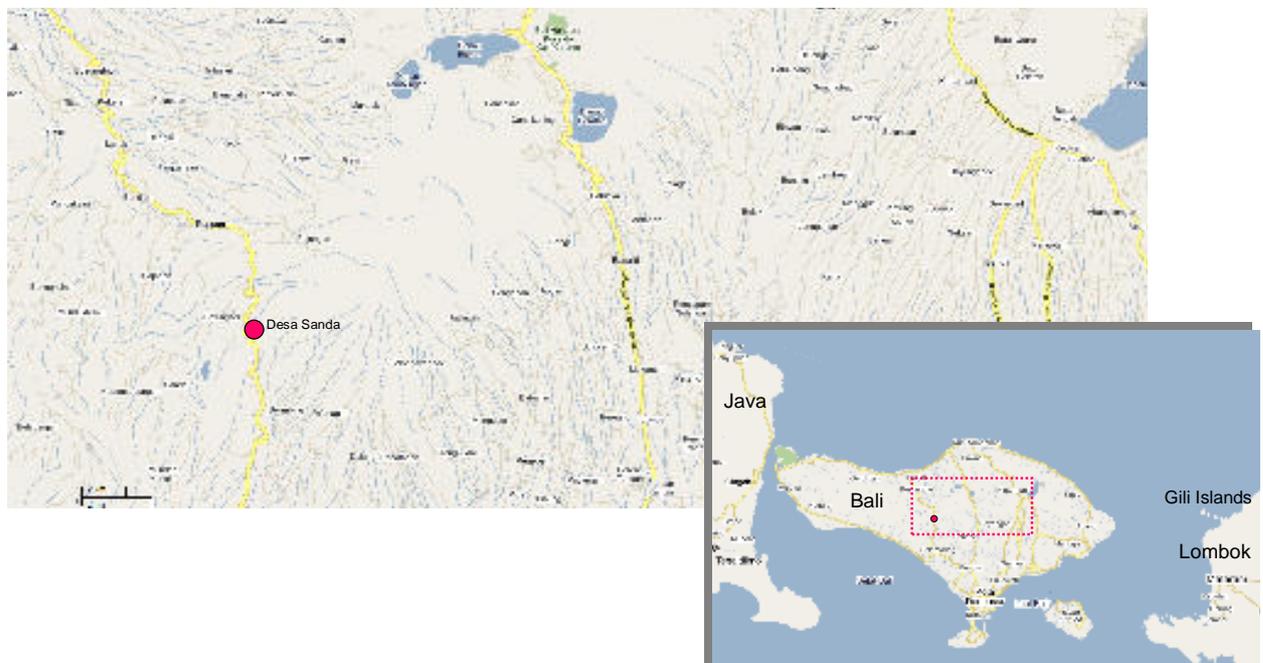


Fig. 29. Family temple ceremony at desa Sanda

		
<p>main street, <i>desa</i> Sanda</p>	<p>the ceremonial, tiled platform beneath the rice granary is used for preparation of the food and sacrifices; cylindrical containers cut out of fresh bamboo...</p>	<p>...have been prepared with sacred texts, tied together, and suspended from the granary, in anticipation of the arrival of the sacred water from the forest</p>
		
<p>the quantities of food used for sacrifice and for the sacrificial meal...</p>	<p>...of all participants is truly astounding, and represents a major effort ...</p>	<p>... both in terms of monetary value and in terms of sheer working hours</p>
		
<p>preparing the offerings is done by the women in an atmosphere of great cheerfulness; note Patricia, left, lending a hand</p>	<p>preparation of the temple, in the background, also involves scratching the moss and weeds from the stones and steps; note the two new ceremonial umbrellas waiting to be installed</p>	<p>but all the preparations going on do not prevent the young boys of the family to enjoy themselves in total leisure, inside the family temple, blowing soap bells from pipes of bamboo</p>

		
<p>on the day of the ceremony, when all preparations have been made...</p>	<p>...the temple looks magnificent, an impressive token of piety and faith; all family members have dressed in their ceremonial finery, and the atmosphere remains relaxed and festive</p>	<p>before the priests take their position in front of the shrine called 'seat of the gods', the members of the family enjoy themselves with coffee and sweets inside the temple. Note the neighbour's family temple in the background</p>
		
<p>the two priests sit next to one another, and the one to the left (foreground) leads the ceremony by the recitation of long incantations, in which the gods are thanked and asked to come to the temple and accept the offerings; these prayers of dozens of minutes' duration, made by heart, are accompanied by the incessant ringing of the small bell that is in the priest's left hand; in the process, a selection of the offerings on the altar are being manipulated and tossed towards the 'seat of the gods' in front</p>	<p>at the end of the long sequence of prayer, the water from the forest temple is considered to be further sacralised, and with other offerings the priest hands it to the family's senior women to see to the distribution; the latter sprinkle the water onto all objects in the temple, using rice stems brushes</p>	<p>Patricia (in touristic rather than ceremonial attire) partaking of the ceremonial offerings, see text; note the rice clinging to her forehead and hollow of her throat</p>

On the day before the ceremony, the temple and the original compound bristle with activities. In and around the house, all women of the family engage in the preparation of huge quantities of food, sweets, arrangements of fruits and flowers, and many dozens of standard offering trays made of palm leaf and filled with rice, sweets, flowers, incense etc. Preparing the temple involves draping large quantities of yellow cloth around the shrines and statues, installing the parasols, and transferring the offerings from the house to the temple. In the early morning of the actual ceremony, a family delegation rides (invariably the motorbike is being used for locomotion in and around the *desa*, trips to the rice fields, etc.) to a temple in the forest closer to Mt Butakaru (but apparently much nearer still than the original Lake Temple), in order to procure there sacred water that is to be used in the ceremony.

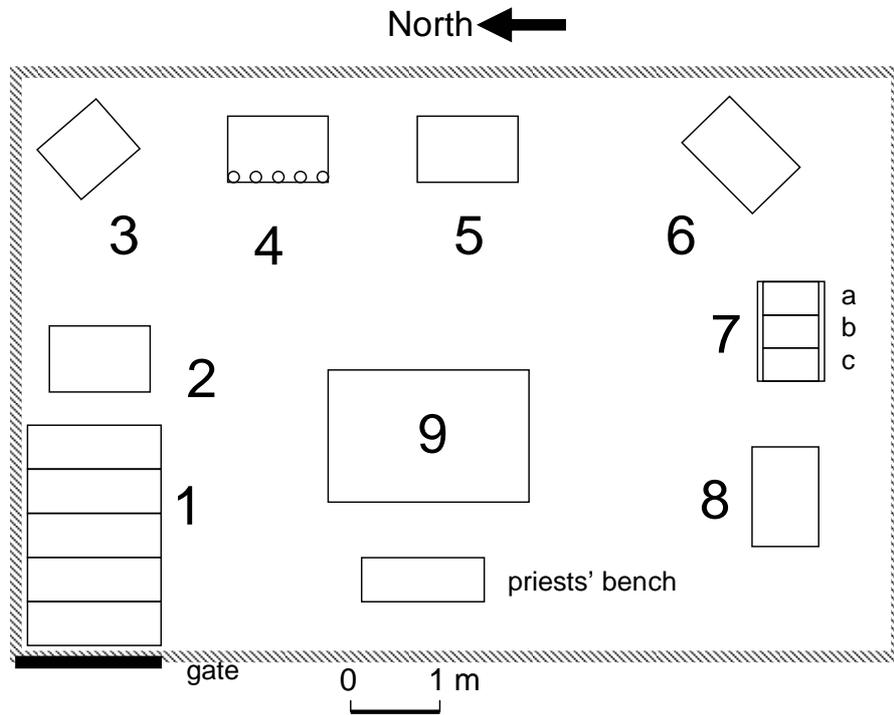
I was allowed to attend the entire morning part of the ceremony, and to cover this episode fully on video (YouTube version to come). When it was clearly time for me to leave, I was blessed with the sacred water, a small quantity of which was put on my hands for me to lick up, and similar quantities were smeared onto my forehead and in the hollow of my throat, after which these wet surfaces were sprinkled with rice that would cling to the spot for hours. Patricia had been unable to attend the ceremony, and I was given a small plastic bag of sacred water, and a small offering tray, to repeat the same ceremony with her.

However, clearly the central part of the ceremony was not (yet) open to me. I suppose that of the enormous quantities of prepared food (including whole ducks and chickens impaled on sticks and subsequently roasted), much was actually eaten by the family as a sacrificial meal, but I have no information (yet) on this point. At the height of the ceremony, one of the women of the family went into trance and divulged a message largely repeating the omissions around the family *keris*. While the family's senior women had been very much in evidence during the preparations and at the actual ceremony, and hence well known to me, I did not know the medium, and that was explained because 'she had been working so hard all the time, preparing the offerings' – which perhaps suggests her to be a person of relatively low status in the family, who seeks mediumship as a means to gaining higher status and additional authority.

What this family ceremony and the associated temple complex clearly bring out, is the extent to which universalising Hindu gods (who are mentioned by name during the priest's incantations – foremost Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva) are intertwined with purely local supernatural beings who are, in effect, the family group's ancestors. In this connection it is relevant to have a closer look at the various shrines in the family temple. With all reservations appropriate for exploratory research in progress, the following plan of the family temple reflects my information available to date.

So we see how the temple in fact presents a total cosmology, comprising both the One God, various ancestors, nature, the various manifestations of all gods, Shiva, Surya (the sun god), the weather as decisive for rain-fed irrigated agriculture, and the god's assembly where they meet with the humans venerating them. The subtle mixing of divinely transcendent, ancestral human, and natural themes, renders a particular flavour of meaning to this religious worldview, and makes it understandable that the main products of the landscape, rice and flowers and fruits, should form the vehicles of the thankful interaction between humans and gods. Meanwhile family dramas are enacted and a sense of family identity is being strengthened.

Fig. 30. Plan of the Sunarta family temple



legend:

- | | | |
|---|---|---|
| <p>0. low fence with gate</p> <p>1. steps</p> <p>2. Andong natural shrine (a shrub signifying that nature is the source and end of everything (Taman Bali, 'Garden Bali')</p> <p>3. Guardian shrine</p> <p>4. Banyaran (venerates all the various manifestations of the gods)</p> | <p>5. Taksyu (commemorating the origin of the first grandmother, from Bedugul [it is on this point that confusion between the two Lake temples arises] ; but with Shiva connotations)</p> <p>6. Surya temple (Surya compensates for any ritual omissions)</p> <p>7. Kumulan tiga (three doors)</p> | <p>a. ocean water denoting male deceased</p> <p>b. The One God, Sangyangwidi</p> <p>c. Ocean water denoting female deceased</p> <p>8. Rantunyoman (weather god)</p> <p>9. Paisan, 'meeting of the gods', main offerings are here and are handed by the priests sitting on the bench</p> |
|---|---|---|

(Remarks:

1. I apologise for any errors in orthography. Obviously the time was too short to familiarise myself with the details of the Balinese language.
2. Although my ethnographic data are still far too limited to build the case, I suspect that the layout of the family temple can be considered an application, and transformation, of the ideal layout of the family compound as described above – again a fractal effect since the family temple is part of the family compound)

Adjacent to this family temple are other family temples of the desa family groups, which seem to have essentially the same structure.

2.5. The comparative study of shrine cults throughout the Old World

Ever since my first fieldwork on religion and oral history, in the highlands of North-western Tunisia (1968, 1970), I have engaged in the comparative study of shrine cults throughout the Old World. My paper for the 1976 ASA (Association of Social Anthropologists) meeting in the UK, later to be published as Werbner 1978, was a comparison of shrine cults in North and South Central Africa, and as such a first attempt to sketch the outlines of such a comparative approach, although in the Werbner book I used more specifically my data on Western Zambia (van Binsbergen 1976, 1977; Werbner 1977). Over the decades, my impression has been that from North and West Africa, to South Central Africa, West Asia, and even East and South East Asia, shrine cults of essentially a cognate structure and origin have existed, ever since the establishment of sedentary agricultural societies, and as an expression of the sacralisation of the local land in agriculture – although it cannot be ruled out that such cults have assimilated and transformed earlier cults of the landscape peculiar to hunter-gatherers, who constituted the sole mode of production until c. 10 ka BP. I have listed the parcelling of the landscape through shrine cults as one of the Pelasgian traits extending over much of the Old World. My incipient research on Bali, hopefully to be continued in the near future, is a further step in this ongoing project into the history and transcontinental comparison of shrine cults. Obviously I cannot yet outline the specific contribution which the Bali inspiration is going to make to this project. However, the ritual parcelling up of the landscape; the involvement in an incessant cycle of ritual prestations; the awareness that the risk of ritual omissions is always to be counted with; the mapping of a group's territorial organisation and territorial history in the details of its ritual obligations and affiliations, the articulation of the misfortune of individuals and nuclear families within the wider family group as a concern specifically addressed in the shrine cult – all these themes emerge from the Balinese material already, and they tie in with aspects I have studied, in much more detail, over the years, in other parts of the Old World.

2.6. Sangoma parallels and further explorations into the transcontinental connections between African and South East Asia

Elsewhere (van Binsbergen 2003: ch. 8, and 2005b) I have argued that the ecstatic *sangoma* cult of Southern Africa, into which I was initiated in 1990, shows many indications of a South Asian origin. This would make one expect, in principle, parallels between *sangoma* and Bali religion, which has been recognised to be largely South Asian.

The prominence of an ecstatic cult on Bali is one such indication. After temple dances that enact the central drama of the classic Indian Ramayana epic, a typical sequel is a 'fire dance' in which an entranced medium, inspired by the sacred atmosphere engendered by the Ramayana, wields a hobby-horse mask and tramples in glowing embers of burnt coconut as a sign of sacred election and of the presence of the gods. On other occasions, the dancers are claimed to pierce themselves with knives.

These two proofs of sacred invulnerability under trance have detailed parallels in the ecstatic cult which I studied in the 1960s-70s in the highlands of North-western Tunisia. Such proofs of sacred invulnerability were absent the forms of trance ritual in sub-Saharan Africa, which were the central topic of my 1979 doctoral dissertation,

cf. van Binsbergen 1981. Yet there has been an inkling among the specialists that all these forms of ecstatic religion might derive from a common source. Considering that North African ecstatic ritual is commonly attributed to the influence of the *bori* cult brought by West Africa Haussa slaves (Tremearne 1914, 1915), we may have another African- South East Asian connection for which, again, the Pelasgian and the Sunda thesis provide rival – but possibly complementary – explanations. Having recently drafted a book on the fire god Hephaestus and his alleged Egyptian counterpart Ptah, and studies (van Binsbergen 2009 and 2010d) of the cyclical system of elemental transformation throughout the Old World (highlighting the transformative nature of the element Fire, of which Hephaestus is the main expression in the Ancient Greek context – in a way not at all paralleled by Ancient Egyptian Ptah), has sensitised me to the extent of fire mythology and fire cults throughout the Old World.

With regard to East and South Central Africa the general feeling is that ecstatic cults of affliction were relatively recent (19th-c. CE) introductions from the Indian Ocean region (Bourgignon 1968; van Binsbergen 1981; Alpers 1984), which makes a Sunda connection quite conceivable. This may even cover the West African ecstatic forms of the *bori* type, for the evidence of mankala, geomancy, divining bowls, *Voodoo*, musical instruments especially the xylophone, food crops, the massive import of cowries, even a stray Roman coin ending up on Mt Cameroon via the probable detour of the Indian Ocean; cf. Dick-Read 2005) all might be read as suggesting a major cultic influence from the Indian Ocean (Sri Lanka, Madagascar, possibly South East Asia) around the Cape to West Africa, in the course of the second millennium CE. But again this cannot be the entire truth, for already in the Mediterranean Mesolithic cowries sporadically appear in ritual and jewellery context, while in the second millennium BCE changes in the therapeutic system of Ancient Mesopotamia suggested the arrival of shamanism, i.e. ecstatic religion – traces of which also abound in Graeco-Roman classical Antiquity – probably not unrelated to the cult of the Hephaestus fire god, cognate forms of which are found all over the Pelasgian realm.

Fig. 31. The chorus during the kecak dance, and the fire dance



Again the dilemma appears to be between Pelasgian and Sunda explanations: the ecstatic cult could be

- an ancient West to Central Asian trait (this appears to be the Bronze Age epicentre of the fire cult) transmitted both to South and South East Asia and (either directly from West Asia, or via South East Asia) to Africa
- or it could be an original South / South East Asian trait spreading westward, with the Mesopotamian and Graeco-Roman forms to be interpreted as merely the early indications of a remote Sunda presence in Western Eurasia.

However, there is a third possibility which, as an Africanist known for his defence of Afrocentrism ((van Binsbergen 1997a, 2000a, 2000b, 2005), I should not overlook. It is significant that the Balinese trance-dancer in the fire dancer should masquerade as a horse. The imagery of trance possession as a horse being ridden by a spiritual rider, is central to *bori* trance possession (Besmer 1983). The use of the horse-rider metaphor is very widespread (e.g. in Plato's *Phaedrus* and throughout classical and late Graeco-Roman Antiquity it appears as a metaphor for the relation between body and soul), and could hardly be considered specific to West African ecstatic cults, even including their Caribbean derivatives (Deren 1970). In folklore studies, the widespread hobby-horse has also been brought in connection with the ecstatic cult (Alford 1978; Elwin 1942). Horse-riding (as distinct to horse-drawn chariots, which appears to be one or two millennia younger) seems to have started in Central Asia in the 5th millennium BCE (Chamberlin 2006) – very much later than the religious significance of the horse as a symbol of the sky, the sea, and the divine, as amply attested by European Upper Palaeolithic art (Rappenglueck 1999; Carr 1995), where the (undomesticated) horse is by the most frequently depicted animal; traces of this may still be found in the mythologies of Greece (where Poseidon and Demeter appear as horses) and South Asia (the horse-headed Hayagriva, an avatar of Vishnu). The horse / rider metaphor in ecstatic religion is likely to be younger than horseback riding as such (however, one could imagine the reverse relation: a prior trance / ritual imagery of being ridden in the form of an as yet undomesticated horse, bringing people secondarily to experiment with horseback riding), and a 5th millennium / Central Asian origin for horseback riding would be eminently compatible with a Pelasgian interpretation of the horse-rider symbolism in ecstatic religion, diffusing into West Africa and South East Asia in the course of millennia from a common Central Asian source.

Admittedly, sub-Saharan African need not have been the passive recipient of transcontinental influences as it appears in this model. Afrocentrists take Africa as the source of much of the achievements in world cultural history since c. 10 ka BP. In their view, such widespread formal systems as geomantic divination and mankala boardgames have a West African origin and from there were diffused over much of the Old and the New World. When West African xylophones are found to have exactly the same tuning as Indonesian ones (Jones 1964), our first inclination would be to conclude to borrowing from Indonesia to Africa (after all, there is the evidence of massive linguistic and cultural transmission from South East Asia to Madagascar), but theoretically an Afrocentrist counter-view would be to postulate borrowing from West Africa to Indonesia. For the cheap and clumsy, locally produced thumb pianos now to be found in Balinese curio shops (Fig 31a) a similar argument may be made, and more convincingly so.

Fig. 31a. Tourist-market thumb piano from Indonesia



Source: http://dryleafdesign.com/yahoo_site_admin/assets/images/thumb-piano.298165621_std.gif, with thanks

By the same token, mankala board games, which appear sporadically in the South Asian (Sri Lanka; Parker 1909: 587f), South East Asian (Jones 1964: 198f; Barnes 1975) and East Asian context (Eagle 1995, 1999), may be considered the results of diffusion from the oldest forms of such boards as were archaeologically attested in Neolithic West Asia (Rollefson 1992; Simpson 1999). (On the basis of one stone slab with mankala-like indentures, Oppenheimer – 1998 – suggests mankala to be among the original Sunda package to be diffused westward in early to middle Holocene times under his General Sunda thesis, but considering the global distribution of mankala in space and time, this is very unlikely.) However, these Asian attestations could also be seen as more recent direct diffusions from Africa, where, in Culin’s (1896) words, mankala has become the national game. Indian-Ocean trade, discovery and occasional conquest between East Africa, Persian, India, Indonesia and China has been established extensively and is attested in an extensive literature (e.g. Neville et al. 1975; Duyvendak 1949; Snow 1988; Li Anshan 2000), to which the Afrocentric scholar Clyde Winters (1979, 1980a, 1980b, 1983a, 1983b, 1985, 1988, 1989) has made surprising but substantial contributions. Black African slaves were sufficiently abundant in T’ang dynasty China (618-907 CE) to give rise to an entire genre of belletrist there, highlighting the exploits of a Black hero with trickster connotations (Irwin 1977). Most probably, African slaves also went to other parts of East and South East Asia, and they may have brought African traits such as mankala and thumb pianos with them. In the course of the 19th century CE, Ashanti (Ghanaian) soldiers were recruited for the Royal Dutch Indies Army, and also to them the introduction of mankala in the Indonesian archipelago has been attributed. Against this background, we may have found an alternative explanation for my subjective impression of African faces in South East Asia: they may be due to a very sporadic gene flow from sub-Saharan Africa to South East Asia in historical times. And against the same background it becomes just conceivable that also the Balinese fire dance with its trance and equine connotations, is a recent introduction from Africa in the course of the second millennium CE. This presses all the more, in view of the fact that the equine imagery has been retained so emphatically. Horses have played a considerable role in Indonesian history in the second millennium CE (Boomgaard 2004) but they seem to be hardly conspicuous in Balinese iconography; this makes it thinkable that the horse imagery in the fire cult is a recent foreign import.

At this point it is imperative that I explain why such an Afrocentrist interpretation of *mankala*, and by analogy of the equine ecstatic imagery, does not appear obvious to me, despite the lip-service which I have repeatedly paid to Afrocentrism (van Binsbergen 1997a, 2000a, 2000b, 2005). *Mankala* is not alone in the peculiar nature of its distribution and attestation pattern. This pattern may be summarised as follows:

- *in historical times to be found all over Africa*
- *and only sporadically elsewhere,*
- *and in practice to be considered a typical African phenomenon,*
- *even though its oldest attestations are not found in Africa but in Neolithic West Asia.*

In my recent drafts towards the Pelasgian hypothesis, the Sea peoples' ethnicity in the Mediterranean Bronze Age, and the assessment, after more than 20 years, of Martin Bernal's *Black Athena* thesis (van Binsbergen, in press as 2010e), I have considered several other formal systems whose distribution and attestation pattern is very similar to that of *mankala*: geomantic divination, the spiked wheel trap, and the unilateral mythical being with only one side to his body (and variously associated with the weather, hunting, cattle, and metallurgy). Also the Niger-Congo / Bantu linguistic macrophylum could be considered to belong to the same series: while about a quarter of the proto-Bantu vocabulary can be demonstrated to derive from *Borean, and proto-Bantu can be attested in Bronze Age West Asia (van Binsbergen & Woudhuizen, in press), yet this macrophylum now features only as the main macrophylum of the Southern half of the African continent, from Senegal to Kenya and South Africa. I do not think these five formal systems have an origin in sub-Saharan Africa – they originate in West to Central Asia where their oldest attestations have been found. Subsequently, in West Asia they were superseded and supplanted by other such formal systems. After all, especially after the invention of agriculture, and of the potent package consisting of writing, the state, organised religion and protoscience, West Asia has been seething with a succession of some of global cultural history's most important and most successful cultural and technological innovations. But while being eclipsed in West Asia, our five formal systems managed to find a permanent and fertile niche in sub-Saharan Africa, where they were only up against the social-organisationally, economically and conceptually relatively defenseless prior formal cultural systems of Palaeo-African hunter-gatherers. I therefore take the distribution and attestation pattern of these five formal systems as corroborating evidence for my Pelasgian hypothesis, and prefer to see African / South East Asian parallels (such as the presence of *mankala*, and ecstatic cults with equine imagery) not in the first place as resulting from transmission from West to East or East to West, but as parallel transmission of the West to Central Asian Pelasgian heritage.

These were the considerations triggered by my encounter with the Bali ecstatic fire cult. Meanwhile, as we have seen, also during a ritual at the family temple, one of the family members may enter into trance and divulge messages from the gods, e.g. having to do with outstanding ritual obligations whose neglect has negatively affected the family.

Another parallel between *sangoma* and Bali religion may be seen in the use of white cloth as marking a crucial sacred path (Fig. 32). When I was initiated into *ukutwaza* (apprentice mediumship) in Francistown, Botswana, in 1990, one of the items I was

required to bring was a piece of white cotton cloth, about 10 m. long, which was to be laid out on the ground and over which my ritual coach Mma Shakayile was to guide me from central dancing area to the ancestral shrine where, after divination, the initiation was to be effected. The piece is still in my possession and is considered to be one of a sangoma's central paraphernalia.

Fig. 32. White cloth marking the steps to the holy of holies, in the community temple of the desa of Nyuh Kuning, near Ubud; note the chequered cloth on the lion guardian statues



2.7. Musical instruments

During our 2007 visit to Indonesia (Bandung, Jokjakarta, Magalang; cf. van Binsbergen 2007) xylophones were not in evidence, but in Bali we found them – both the ones with wooden sound boards (like in Africa – the xylophones, ‘wood instruments’, proper), and those with metal ones, like depicted in Fig. 33.

Fig. 33. Metal-thonged marimba at Leka Leka restaurant and dance theater, Nyuh Kuning, near Ubud, Bali, Indonesia



More typical however turned out to be the ensemble of gongs, where each player plays only one monotone gong (Fig. 34).

Fig. 34. Ensemble of gongs at the ARMA institution, Ubud



2.8. Royal establishment

For an appreciation of Sunda influences on kingship in East and South Central Africa, it is relevant to look at royal establishments in South East Asia today. Having had mere glimpses of Indonesian royal architecture in Jokjakarta, 2007 (cf. van Binsbergen 2007), Bali offered many more such opportunities. Although since Indonesian Independence (1945/1949) royalty no longer wields constitutional power, the royal palace of Ubud (a section of which still houses the Ubud royal family) opens interesting perspectives.

Fig. 35. The Northern orchestral pavilion, royal palace, Ubud, Bali, Indonesia



3. Gili Islands

Gili Meno also offers excellent opportunities to study varieties of the outrigger canoe – that splendid piece of nautical technology that was largely responsible for the peopling of Oceania during the last few millennia (Fig. 36). Most of the outrigger boats on this small island are owner-built from local materials (wood and bamboo), combined with aluminium sheets, rivets, or glass fibre, and painted in bright even colours. Nearly all have outboard engines.

Fig. 36. Owner-built outrigger canoes on the beach of Gili Meno



As is clear from the above discussion, since the mid-1990s I have been interested in the history and distribution of board games, especially mankala (van Binsbergen 1997). We have seen that the scholarly literature has sparingly reported on the presence of mankala boards in the Indonesian archipelago. In addition to a considerable number of mediocre specimens mass produced for the tourist market and found at airport curio shops, I spotted only two specimens in a more authentic environment (Figs. 37 and 38)

– which might suggest that, as argued above, mankala is only a relatively recent introduction in this part of the world.

Fig. 37. Mankala board supported by contorted human figures (one missing head), on display in a low-cost guest house on Gili Meno, Lombok, Indonesia



Fig. 38. Mankala board casually contained in a table at a bakery / coffee shop in the centre of Ubud, Bali, Indonesia



Gaming boards and divinatory apparatus often make use of a fixed grid divided in various registers; gaming moves or divinatory information (e.g. such as produced by the divinely-guided passing of nocturnal animals across the grid) may be inscribed inside these registers, as patterns of dots – such as constitute the main expression of the major family of divination systems I have studied, that of geomancy, whose ramifications extend from Southern Africa and Renaissance Europe to China. Many of these systems have an astronomical / astrological origin and may be considered adulterations or erosions of astrological divination based on the position of the

heavens. In South India / Sri Lanka (cf. Neugebauer 1969 [I am not totally sure of this reference]) a system of tokens placed in a grid constitutes an ancient but effective system of astronomical calculation. I was therefore intrigued to find, on the beach of Gili Meno away from the touristic area, the pattern of registers and dots shown in Fig. 39. Was it cognate to the South Indian system? Considering the Hindu signature of Bali, this was quite conceivable.

However, an important lesson of prudence and scepticism was learned when the people dwelling near that spot were questioned on the nature and meaning of these signs. They told me the indentures and lines on the ground resulted from the drip pattern produced when a bed frame with a bottom of several adjacent narrow planks had been left out in the rain.

This explanation seems definitive, and sobering. One is reminded of the elaborate discussion of taphonomics – the branch of science studying what may happen to human and other remains when entirely left to nature, without any human purposeful intervention – with which the sceptical palaeoanthropologist Binford (1981) dismissed as mere myths such well-established ideas as the cannibalism of Peking Man, the Neanderthal bear cult, etc.

However, I could not help being reminded of fieldwork in the highlands of North-western Tunisia, 1968. In popular, Islam-orientated religion there, the veneration of big trees played an important part, and sometimes, in emulation of the dolmen-like and apparently Bronze-Age stone alignments found around several other, non-arboreal, shrines, one day I spotted an imposing old tree that had a similar alignment of stones around it. ‘Oh that, that is the result of children’s play’, my trusted informants told me when questioned. However, the stones were up to one foot in diameter, and could scarcely have been moved by small children; moreover, their seasoned and mossy surfaces suggested that they had been in their present position for a very long time indeed. Embarrassment to admit the pagan veneration of trees which was frowned upon by urban, formal Islam, had brought my informants to try and conceal one of their religious institutions from me – I was known to be a ‘*Rumi*’ (Christian), but also to be better versed in Qur’an-reading than the majority of the local villagers, many of whom could neither read nor write. Perhaps the explanation given by my Gili Island informants is in the same bracket: they are now Muslims, in majority; although in the mid-19th century the great naturalist Russell Wallace still mentioned nearby Lombok as having largely retained Hinduism, like Bali.

Fig. 39. An apparent geometric gaming design due to natural causes, Gili Meno, Lombok, Indonesia



4. Conclusion

These impressions, of greatly varying quality and relevance, show how the ongoing concerns of my recent scholarly work were projected, in the course of this journey, onto the inspiring and beautiful contexts we were privileged to encounter in South East Asia. Whatever their future relevance, I am simply filing them now as notes for further use.

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