

# From global distribution of traits to conjectural world history: A methodological and theoretical exercise with special reference to head-hunting

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**ABSTRACT.** In this paper I examine the distribution of head-hunting and other cultural practices-relating to the human skull. After setting out the reasons to revive this apparently obsolete and antiquarian topic and pointing out its heuristic value for the construction of long-range cultural pre-and proto-history, I have presented the worldwide distributional data and their bibliographical background, arranging the data into three major categories: head-hunting (purposeful violent acquisition of human skulls), the skull complex (practices after acquisition), and (as significant subset of the latter) drinking from skulls. The transition from distribution to conjectural world history of these traits is informed by a number of explicit underlying hypotheses, whose bibliographical background is briefly outlined and which are, in turn, also secondarily underpinned by the outcomes of the present analysis. These hypotheses are: (a) Out-of-Africa; (b) Back to Africa; (c) the Oppenheimer–Tauchmann–Dick-Read ‘Sunda’ Hypothesis, stressing widespread demic and cultural diffusion from the flooding of South East Asia at the onset of the Holocene; (d) the Pelasgian Hypothesis, stipulating a South West Asian Neolithic origin, subsequent westbound spread and transformation into the Mediterranean during the Bronze Age, to be followed by transmission into the four directions (Mediterranean and Western Europe, possibly with trans-Atlantic extensions; northbound to Central and Northern Europe; Eastbound across the Steppe Belt to East and South Asia and beyond, to South East Asia, Oceania, perhaps even the New World; and southbound into Africa) from the Late Bronze Age on. Next I set out a set of seven rules of thumb that are to govern the transition from global distribution to conjectural world history; the most important among these are: the dominance of diffusion over parallel invention, the technological feasibility of global diffusion since Middle Palaeolithic times, and the multicentred, multidirectional nature of that process. On this basis, the three distributions of our skull-related traits may be convincingly understood as sustained historic processes. The Pelasgian Hypothesis is shown to account fairly well for the distribution of ‘drinking from skulls’ and the ‘skull complex’ in general – as it has been shown to account for a great many other trait distributions discussed in detail elsewhere. For head-hunting in the narrower sense the Pelasgian Hypothesis might be invoked as well, but in fact a more satisfactory model turns out a combination of a Pelasgian and a Sunda model. Thus, beyond the specifics of skull-related practices (which despite the recent reviving of decapitation in the context of militant Islamism could be considered to be of only limited specialist interest) the present argument is particularly interesting as a theoretical and methodological exercise towards the construction of long-range cultural pre- and proto-history, i.e. on a global scale.



Fig. 1. A Dayak head-hunter under his trophy tree, Borneo, Malaysia (source: Cavallé 2014)

## **Introduction**

‘Cross-cultural’ or intercultural comparison has been a constant aspect of my research ever since my first published monograph, *Religious change in Zambia* (1981) – where I tried to reconstruct the most recent half millennium of South Central African religious history, mainly in a pre-literacy period that produced no local records, by a close reading of disparate ethnographic data and the tracing of ethnographic distributions, against an elaborate innovative Marxist / materialist theoretical framework informed by the paradigm of the articulation of modes of production. In more recent decades, I have combined the methods pioneered then with the techniques of proto-historical reconstruction which I first employed in the analysis of my first fieldwork (1968 and 1970, on oral history and popular religion in the highlands of North-western Tunisia), and such linguistic and statistical methods circulating in the newly revived field of comparative mythology. Gradually, taken some distance from that neo-Marxist framework and exploring alternative theoretical perspectives, an approach emerged where long-range conjectural history of mythemes, other ethnographic traits, and the associated social, ethnic and political social formations was written on the basis of global distributions in combination with a handful of explicit, overarching hypotheses concerning global cultural history since the Middle Palaeolithic onward. Such approaches have enabled me, over the last few years<sup>1</sup>

- to advance new and fairly convincing suggestions concerning the ethnic and cultural identity of the Sea Peoples who played havoc in the Eastern Mediterranean at the end of the Bronze Age;
- to argue the fundamental continuity between the Nkoya of South Central Africa and the cultures of Eurasia in terms of comparative mythology;
- to challenge Oppenheimer’s suggestion as to the South East Asian Early Holocene origin of the core mythology of the Ancient Near East, and
- to argue the existence of a transcontinental substrate of cyclical transformative element cosmologies, in Eurasia, Africa and North America, which have surfaced, e.g., in East Asian, West Asian, African and European systems of geomantic divination, in African clan systems, in the four-element cosmology which was (myopically and anachronistically) attributed to the Greek Presocratic philosopher Empedocles and which subsequently spread world-wide and was a vital factor in the development of global natural science.

Further work along these lines is in preparation or in press now, e.g. on the connections between the Ancient Egyptian god Ptaḥ and the Ancient Greek god Hephaestus; and on the Asian dimensions of the culture of the Nkoya people in South Central Africa (where my

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<sup>1</sup> E.g. van Binsbergen 2010a, 2010b, 2011, 2012; van Binsbergen with Isaak 2008; van Binsbergen & Woudhuizen 2011. These studies have already traced, for whatever it is worth, the conjectural world history of such traits as ‘male genital mutilation’, ‘spiked wheel trap’, ‘mankala’, ‘the unilateral mythical character’, ‘geomantic divination’, ‘the cosmic egg’, ‘flood myths’, and ‘the White cosmogonic god’. I apologise for the high level of self-citation in the present argument, which however is justifiable in the light of the fact that this is a report on a sustained research project in progress, on which I have been producing books, papers and *interim* reports for nearly a decade now – and which is moreover far from mainstream and paradigmatic.

fieldwork has concentrated since the early 1970s). In these studies in progress, reconstructions of the long-range global history of specific mythemes and ethnographic traits is playing an important role: as well researched and references modules in themselves (and as thus sometimes already posted on the internet in pre-publication versions), they are indispensable for the underpinning of the steps in my long-range empirical and theoretical arguments.

## ***Head-hunting***

In my current research on patterns of transcontinental continuity between South Central Africa and South, South East and East Asia, the trait ‘head-hunting’ emerged as of potential heuristic value, since the corresponding practices are found in both continents. However, the term has a hegemonic ring about it and is typical of a condescending, stereotyping and pejorative mode of representing foreign and ancient cultural practices. It has gained perhaps new relevance in relation to the amply publicised and discussed decapitation practices of present-day extreme forms of radical Islamism. It is, all in all, an unsavoury topic with which a self-respecting modern anthropologist / intercultural philosopher like myself would only reluctantly engage.



Fig. 2. Head-hunting by the ancient Assyrians (source: Maspero & Sayce 1903: vol. IX )

As a topic in comparative ethnography, head-hunting clearly presents major puzzles. Once proverbial for the deplorable state in which colonised ‘primitive peoples’ outside the

European, urban middle classes were supposed to find themselves, the concept – not unlike its companion ‘cannibalism’ – carries all the burdens of an antiquated scientific approach and an obsolete, hegemonic and Eurocentric perspective. On the other hand, serious scholars have maintained that head-hunting, as the institutionalised, systematic collection of human heads through life-terminating violence, constituted not so much a North Atlantic racist myth but rather an actual practice, extending into the 20<sup>th</sup> century even in parts of Europe,<sup>2</sup> – a practice so widespread that the 1937-1950 Cambridge professor of anthropology John Henry Hutton could maintain:

‘Head-hunting, therefore, has been world-wide. It was associated with tribes still living in the stone ages, and may even go back to Palaeolithic times; as in the Azilian deposits at Ofnet in Bavaria, heads were found carefully decapitated and buried separately from the bodies, indicating beliefs in the special sanctity or importance of the head.’<sup>3</sup>

Against this background, suggestive of an almost unlimited distribution in space and time, one would not readily engage in a distributional and historical analysis of head-hunting and related institutions. On the other hand, Hutton’s emphasis on Nigerian-Indonesian continuities is excellent for our present purpose. Let us therefore reluctantly examine the empirical distribution of head-hunting in space and time, and try to propose a provisional world history on that basis.

Before we can trace a distribution, we should be clear about the categories in which we divide and recognise our data. In the voluminous literature, a selection from which appears in Table 1, the topic of head-hunting is mainly presented under three different headings:

- a. *head-hunting*: where the emphasis also on the active, usually violent even murderous, acquisition of skulls as trophies
- b. *skull complex*: where the emphasis is on the procedures executed on or with the skull, once acquired
- c. *drinking from skulls*: a typical aspect of (b)

Since all people die and have skulls, skull-related ritual practices in general are likely to be very wide-spread and to have a rather different distribution from the more specific trait ‘head-hunting’ in the narrower sense. For instance, for the Nkoya of Zambia, South Central Africa, we have only the drinking from enemy skulls on record but not specifically the violent and purposeful acquisition of skulls in its own right (as among the Nkoya’s eastern neighbours and kinsmen, the Ila), it seems better to examine the ‘drinking from skulls’ variables separately.

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<sup>2</sup> Montenegro and other parts of the Balkan, 1912; Ireland, into the 20<sup>th</sup> century; even USA soldiers in World War II; Hutton 1961; Anonymous, ‘Head-hunting’.

<sup>3</sup> Hutton 1961: 295. *Azilien* is considered a form of Mesolithic, dated between 13 and 10 ka BP (Orliac 1997) and famous for its painted pebbles. However, the precise dating of Masset as *Azilien* is contested by specialists (Masset 1997).

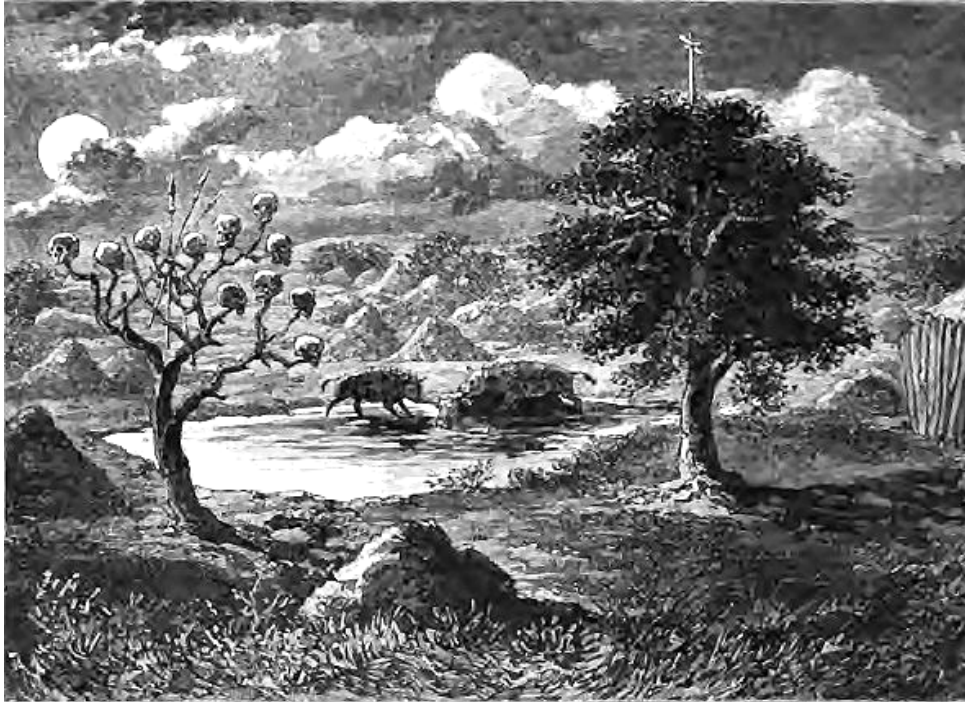


Fig. 3. Artist's impression of a human-skull-trophy tree among the Ila /Mashukulumbwe of Central Zambia

The image appeared in Holub's book on his expedition to the Ila (Holub 1890; Holy 1975); but although the practice of head-hunting did exist among this people (Smith & Dale 1920: I, 177; Muntemba 1977), and piles of enemy skulls have been reported notably in the context of Lozi raids upon the Ila (Smith & Dale 1920: I, 44), the mounting onto tree is not recorded in the standard Ila ethnography (Smith & Dale 1920), and may be apocryphal (van Binsbergen 2014).

### ***Distributional data***

The global data on head-hunting at my disposal have been compiled and referenced in Table 1.

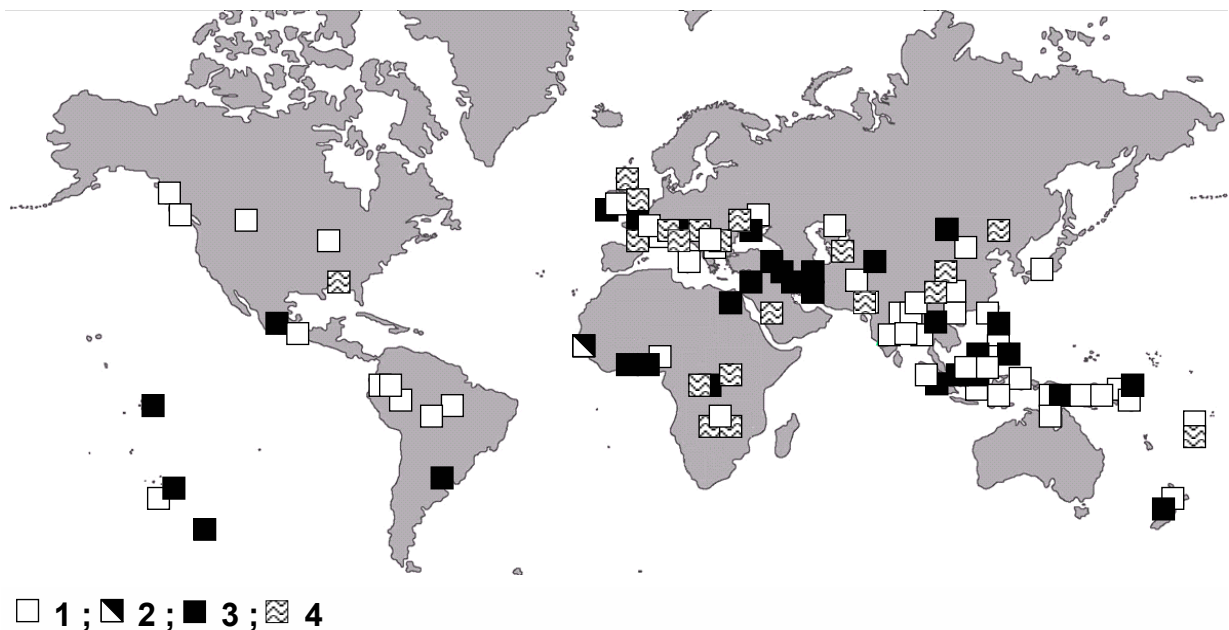
| <b>no.</b> | <b><i>ethnic group / country / period (Roman figures indicate century CE, or if negative BCE)</i></b> | <b><i>references</i></b>   | <b><i>remarks</i></b><br><i>a = head-hunting: emphasis also on active acquisition</i><br><i>b = skull complex</i><br><i>c = drinking from skulls: typical aspect of skull complex</i> |
|------------|---|--|---|
| 1          | Abipones, Paraguay  | MacCulloch 1908-1921; Dobrizhoffer 1822: II, 408                                     | b   |
| 74         | Amazon region, Brazil / Peru  | de Graff 1923  | a   |
| 2          | Ambon Isl., Indonesia   | Anonymous, 'head-hunting' [ 2013]  | a   |
| 3          | [ Ancient ] Arabs   | MacCulloch 1908-1921   | c   |
| 4          | Ashanti / Tshi  | MacCulloch 1908-1921   | b   |
| 5          | monsoon Asia' / South and South East Asia   | Watson Andaya 2004; Waterson 1996; Keane 1908-1921; Hastings 1908-1921: VI, 852, IV, | a   |

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|----|--|--|--|
|    |  | 443, VII, 242; Anonymous, 'head-hunting' [ 2013]   |  |
| 6  | Asmat, New Guinea                                  | Zegwaard 1959  | a  |
| 72 | Assam, N.E. India                                  | Hodson [ year ] ; von Heine-Geldern 1917; Hutton 1928  | a  |
| 7  | Ancient Assyrians                                  | MacCulloch 1908-1921; Bienert 1991   | b  |
| 8  | Azande / Niam-Niam, Congo                          | MacCulloch 1908-1921   | b  |
| 9  | Ancient Babylonians                                | MacCulloch 1908-1921; Bienert 1991   | b  |
| 76 | Ancient Balkan                                     | Durham 1923  | a  |
| 10 | Bijagoes?  | fieldwork rumour   | a  |
| 11 | Bontoc, Mountain Province, Philippines;            | MacCulloch 1908-1921; Hastings 1908-1921: X, 650   | b (head enhances farm success)   |
| 12 | Borneo ( <i>cf.</i> Dayaks, Iban)                  | Hastings 1908-1921: II, 239-240; MacCulloch 1908-1921; Roth & Low 1896; Hose & McDougall 1912  | a  |
| 68 | Ancient Bulgaria                                   | Anonymous, 'skull cup'   | c  |
| 73 | Burma  | von Heine-Geldern 1917   | a  |
| 13 | Celebes  | MacCulloch 1908-1921; Grubauer 1913  | a; b   |
| 14 | Ancient Celts / Irish / Gauls                      | Cotterell 1989:79; Cisalpine Celts: Livy, <i>Ab Urbe condita</i> , XXIII, 4; Cassius Dio, <i>Historia romana</i> , XV, 3.2. ; Diodorus Siculus, <i>Bibliotheca historica</i> , V, 2; MacCulloch 1908-1921; <i>Encyclopaedia Britannica</i> | a; c; b  |
| 15 | Ancient China, notably 秦朝 Qin dynasty              | Anonymous, 'head-hunting' [ 2013 ] ; MacCulloch 1908-1921; 史記 Shiji 123; Chavannes 1895-1905: V, 185n-186n. 43   | a ; c  |
| 16 | Congo  | MacCulloch 1908-1921   | a; b; c  |
| 17 | Dahomey / Benin                                    | MacCulloch 1908-1921   | b  |
| 19 | Dayaks, Borneo                                     | MacCulloch 1908-1921; Hastings 1908-1921: VI, 84-86, 534-535; also in collusion with USA and British troops World War II, Anonymous, 'head-hunting' [ 2013]  | a; also: b   |
| 75 | Ecuador  | Karsten 1923   | a  |
| 19 | Ancient Egyptians                                  | MacCulloch 1908-1921   | b  |
| 20 | Ancient Elymians, Sicily                           | Ions 1980: 147   | a  |
| 21 | Fijians  | MacCulloch 1908-1921   | c  |
| 22 | Flores, Indonesia                                  | Barnes 1993  | a  |
| 23 | Ancient Germany                                    | MacCulloch 1908-1921   | skull buried in horse stable; pigeons thrive by c  |
| 24 | Haida, Kwakiutl, and neighbours N.W. Coast, Canada | Collison n.d.; Curtis 1914   | a  |
| 25 | Iban, Malaysian Borneo / Sarawak                   | Haddon 1901: 325, 394 f., and <i>passim</i>  | human head trophy prerequisite for marriage; allegedly a institution no more than 200 years old here; very elaborate b |
| 26 | Ila, Zambia (XIX-XX)                               | Smith & Dale 1920: I, 177; Shimwaayi Muntemba, personal communication, 1977  | human head trophy prerequisite for marriage; c   |
| 27 | Ilongot, Luzon,                                    | Rosaldo 1980   | a  |

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|----|--|---|---|
|    | Philippines (XIX-XX)                                       |   |   |
| 28 | Ancient Iranians / Persians                                | MacCulloch 1908-1921  | b   |
| 29 | Ancient Israelites (-X)                                    | MacCulloch 1908-1921; Bienert 1991  | b   |
| 30 | Ancient Japan (X)  | Nelson 1993   | a   |
| 71 | Kafiristan, N.W. India                                     | Hutton 1961   | a   |
| 31 | Ancient Karmanians, S. Iran                                | MacCulloch 1908-1921; Strabo, <i>Geographica</i> , XV, p. 727                               | b   |
| 32 | Khasi tribal people, N.E. India                            | Hastings 1908-1921: I, 241  | a   |
| 67 | Ancient Kingdom of Kiev (X)                                | Russian Primary Chronicle; Anonymous, 'skull cup'   | c   |
| 33 | Kiwai Island and surroundings, Fly River, Papua New Guinea | Haddon 1901: 107; Riley 1925  | a   |
| 34 | Kukis / Lushei (N.E. India / Bangladesh / Burma)           | MacCulloch 1908-1921  | a   |
| 35 | Lakher / Mara hill tribe, NE India, SE Burma, etc.         | Lorrain n.d.  | a   |
| 36 | Ancient Ligurians, S. France / Basque country (-X)         | Ions 1980: 147  | a   |
| 69 | Ancient Lombards, N. Italy (V)                             | Anonymous, 'skull cup'  | c   |
| 37 | Luzon, Philippines   | MacCulloch 1908-1921  | a   |
| 38 | Maori (XVIII-XIX)  | MacCulloch 1908-1921; Anonymous, 'head-hunting' [ 2013] ,                                   | b   |
| 39 | Melanesia, cf. Solomons Islands, New Guinea, etc.          | van der Kroef 1952; Rivers 1922   | a   |
| 40 | Ancient Meso America, cf. Mexico (X)                       | Ortiz de Montellano 1983; Miller & Taube 1993   | a   |
| 41 | Ancient Mexico   | MacCulloch 1908-1921  | b   |
| 42 | Ancient Mongolians   | MacCulloch 1908-1921  | b   |
| 43 | Mushkogeas, S.E. Woodlands USA                             | MacCulloch 1908-1921  | c   |
| 44 | Naga, N.E. India   | Hastings 1908-1921: IX, 124; von Fürer-Haimendorf 1939                                      | a   |
| 45 | New Caledonia  | MacCulloch 1908-1921 [ 'Head' ]   | a   |
| 46 | New Guinea (XIX-XX)  | Hastings 1908-1921: IX, 340-341, 349, 352; van der Kroef 1952; MacCulloch 1908-1921         | a; b  |
| 47 | Nias, Indonesia  | Modigliani 1890   | a   |
| 48 | Nigeria, Bight of Benin (Ibo, Kagoro) (XIX-XX)             | Hutton 1946, 1961; Tremearne 1912; Anonymous, 'head-hunting' [ 2013] ; Wilson-Haffende 1930 | a<br>Hutton 1946, 1961 'strongly suggests Indonesian culture': associated with crops, marriage, victim's service in afterlife |
| 49 | Nkoya, Zambia (XIX-  | Samson 1972   | c   |

|    |  |  |                 |
|----|--|--|-----------------|
|    | XX)  |  |                 |
| 50 | Polynesians (XIX)  | MacCulloch 1908-1921   | b               |
| 51 | Quecha Lamistas, Peru                                      | Anonymous, 'head-hunting' [ 2013]  | a               |
| 52 | Scots (W Highlands)  | MacCulloch 1908-1921   | c: of suicide   |
| 53 | Scythians (V)  | MacCulloch 1908-1921; Herodotus, <i>Historiae</i> , IV                   | b , c           |
| 54 | Shuar people, Ecuador / Peru                               | Anonymous, 'head-hunting' [ 2013]  | a               |
| 55 | Solomon Islands (XVIII-XIX)                                | MacCulloch 1908-1921; Hastings 1908-1921: XI, 684                        | a; b            |
| 56 | South America, <i>cf.</i> Shuar, Abipones, Quecha Lamistas | MacCulloch 1908-1921   | a               |
| 57 | Sumatra  | MacCulloch 1908-1921   | b ( head dried) |
| 58 | Sumba Isl., Indonesia                                      | Hoskins 1993   | a               |
| 59 | Tahiti   | MacCulloch 1908-1921   | b               |
| 60 | Taiwan / Formosa (XVIII-XIX)                               | MacCulloch 1908-1921; Anonymous, 'head-hunting' [ 2013] ; Pickering 1898 | a; also: b      |
| 61 | Timor, Indonesia   | Middelkoop 1963  | a               |
| 62 | Torres Strait  | MacCulloch 1908-1921; Haddon 1901: 394                                   | a               |
| 63 | Ancient Turks  | MacCulloch 1908-1921   | b               |
| 64 | Uganda   | MacCulloch 1908-1921   | c               |
| 65 | USA soldiers, World War II (XX)                            | Anonymous, 'head-hunting' [ 2013]  | a               |
| 70 | Uzbekistan   | Anonymous, 'skull cup'   | c               |
| 66 | Wa people, Upper Burma / China (XIX)                       | Hastings 1908-1921: III, 27; MacCulloch 1908-1921                        | a; b            |

Table 1. Distribution of head-hunting according to type, location, ethnic group, and period



1. head-hunting – emphasis on (violent) acquisition; 2. (1) but uncertain; 3. skull complex: skull-related ritual practices; 4. drinking from skulls as a form of (3)

Fig. 4. The global distribution of head-hunting and related traits.



## ***Theoretical background: From global distribution to conjectural world history with the aid of specific hypotheses***

Over the years, I have built up some experience with the (nonetheless extremely risky) attempt of building up a historical reconstruction of the origin and spread of an ethnographic trait on the basis of distributional data. Here I have learn to apply several rules of thumb, whose shaky validity is based – for whatever that is worth – on a wider theoretical and analytical framework set out and developed in my work on comparative mythology since the mid-2000s. These ‘rules’ in fact amount to basic underlying hypotheses, and may be summarised as follows:

1. the ‘Out-of-Africa’ Hypothesis (Forster 2004, with extensive references): *if a trait has the appearance of a universal of the culture of Anatomically Modern Humans (e.g. marriage, kinship, divination; cf. Brown 1991), or at least occurs in sub-Saharan Africa, New Guinea and Australia, it is likely to have belonged to the original cultural heritage (‘Pandora’s Box’) of Anatomically Modern Humans, as initiated and developed within Africa between c. 200 and 80 ka BP.*
2. the ‘Back-into-Africa’ Hypothesis: from c. 15 ka BP, when traits from Pandora Box had been extensively transmitted to Asia and subsequently developed, differentiated and innovated there, the perceptible population movement back into Africa (and skirting Europe) brought about the *demic diffusion*<sup>4</sup> of such new Asian traits into sub-Saharan Africa<sup>5</sup>
3. the Oppenheimer–Tauchmann–Dick-Read ‘Sunda’ Hypothesis:<sup>6</sup> traits richly developed in the easily accessible, not-yet-insular subcontinent (‘Sunda’) of South East Asia, but at the massive flooding of that region resulting from the rapid melting of the polar caps at the end of the Holocene, these traits (and the populations that carried them) were transmitted through demic diffusion both to other parts of South East Asia and Oceania, and Westward along the Indian Ocean shore, e.g. to the Indus Valley, the Persian Gulf, perhaps indirectly to the Mediterranean, and at a much later stage and very well attested, to Madagascar and the Comoro Islands – and most probably also into continental sub-Saharan Africa, not only along the Indian Ocean shores, but even beyond the Cape of Good Hope, along the Atlantic Ocean shores – *possibly even all the way to the Strait of Gibraltar, into the Western Mediterranean, and the shores of Western and North-western Europe. The tell-tale distributional indications of a Sunda diffusion would be: considerable attestations in South East Asia, ramifying into East Asia and Oceania, and / or into the shores of the Indian and Atlantic Ocean, possibly spilling over into the Mediterranean, the North Sea and the Baltic.*

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<sup>4</sup> ‘Demic diffusion’ takes place when cultural traits including language are transmitted by the geographical movement of populations owning those traits; the alternative is ‘cultural diffusion’, where traits are transmitted through a social communication process between different populations.

<sup>5</sup> Hammer *et al.* 1998; Cruciani *et al.* 2002; Coia *et al.* 2005; Underhill 2004; van Binsbergen 2011b, 2012b.

<sup>6</sup> van Binsbergen 2012b with references; Oppenheimer 1998; Dick-Read 2005.

4. my own ‘Pelasgian’ Hypothesis:<sup>7</sup> on the basis of thinking through the remarkable distribution of such traits as mankala (a board game), geomantic divination, the spiked wheel trap (a hunting device), and the belief in a unilateral mythical being with only one side to its body, I have proposed a cultural complex that is supposed to have emerged and developed in South West Asia in the Neolithic, and from there to have selectively diffused into the Mediterranean in the Bronze Age, after which its traits have further spread through both demic and cultural diffusion in all four directions, following a pattern which I have called the ‘cross model’:
- West throughout the Mediterranean and Western Europe (and possibly across the Atlantic)
  - North into Central and Northern Europe
  - East into Central, South and East Asia, with extensions into South East Asia, Oceania, and possibly the New World
  - South into sub-Saharan Africa.

*Again, the tell-tale indication of a Pelasgian effect is that its data points show the remarkable, and otherwise counter-paradigmatic, diversity of these four groups of locations.*

Throughout this exercise we must realise that the origins of our three skull-related institutions are lost in the mist of prehistory, and that often we shall be unable to tell the difference between relatively recent transmission along our familiar two models of the Pelasgian and the Sunda / Tauchmann–Oppenheimer–Dick-Read Hypotheses – and a far more ancient substrate going back to 20 ka BP or more. The intricate intermeshing between the Pelasgian and the ‘Sunda’ effect is one of the most striking outcomes of the present analysis of the restrictive trait of head-hunting in the narrower sense, and one that lends that analysis a theoretical and methodological relevance beyond this one mere ethnographic trait.

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<sup>7</sup> van Binsbergen 2010a, 2011b, 2012, and in press (b). A complicating factor in the naming of this mechanism is that Ancient writers and modern linguists (e.g. Kretschmer 1911; van Windekens 1954, 1960; Neumann 1979; Myres 1907; Woudhuizen’s individual contributions in van Binsbergen & Woudhuizen 2011; Lochner-Hüttenbach 1960; Lepsius 1842; Karst 1930, 1931; Hester 1965; Georgiev 1950-1951; Cosmopoulos 1999; Cooper 2000; Briquel 1984; Benloew 1877; Atkinson 1961; Abel 1966) usually depart from the assumption that ‘Pelasgoi’, ‘Pelasgikos’ (in a way that would deviate from nearly all other Ancient toponyms and ethnonyms; cf. van Binsbergen & Woudhuizen 2011: ch. 2, where the analytical problems of ancient ethnonymy and toponymy are extensively discussed) have been meaningful, unequivocal concepts consistently utilised by Ancient historical actors in the Aegean and wider Ancient Mediterranean region – whereas for me it is merely the nominal designation of a postulated historical cultural complex that I have constructed myself for analytical purposes, and that is only partially and inconsistently perceived by the Ancient actors.



Fig. 5. Representation of the first Japanese emperor gloating over the collection of enemy skulls mounted in his garden (source: Hall 1992: 264)

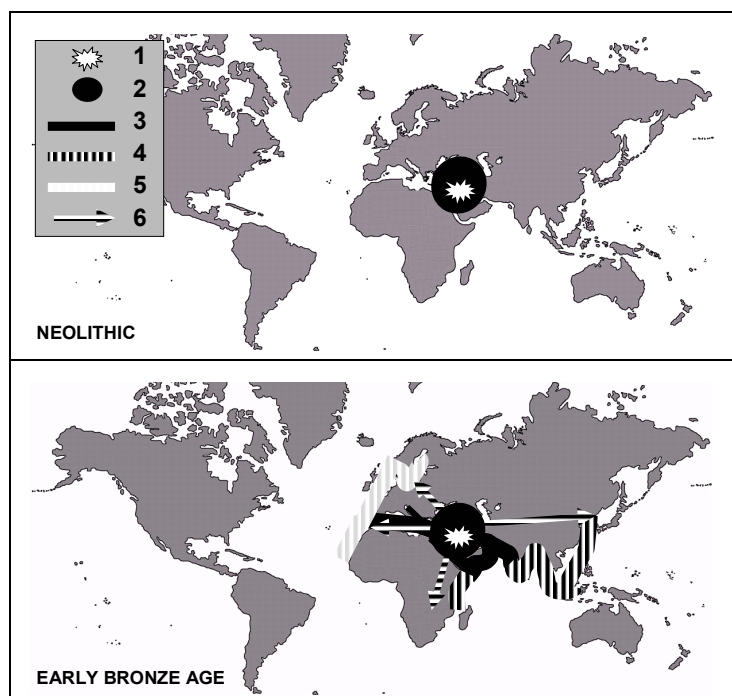
Meanwhile, the proposed long-range historical analysis is predicated on a few further assumptions or rules of thumb, which remain largely implied and which I cannot argue in detail in the present context. Even though they are counter-paradigmatic from the point of view of classic and post-classic, modern anthropology, they yet sit rather more comfortably with modern archaeology and comparative linguistics, while they are more recently borne out by the postmodern, neo-diffusionist approaches that have emerged, since the 1980s, in the context of globalisation studies.<sup>8</sup> These points are the following:

1. Without denying the tendency for individual cultural traits to be integrated in, and adapted, in form and content / meaning, to, the local and regional socio-cultural context in which they are attested in space and time (I am referring here to the structuralist-functionalist hobby horse of classic anthropology and sociology of the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century CE), yet such traits are often originating from outside that specific local and regional socio-cultural context, and, once consolidated, have a tendency to spill beyond the narrower local and regional spatial boundaries and to be transmitted to the near and remote future. In other words, we need to appreciate a continuous oscillation between translocal transmission and integrative *localising transformation*. In the course of the latter side of the process, a trait is likely to reshaped and transformed in accordance, more or less, with the local socio-cultural context in which it is about to be received – yet remains recognisable as belonging to the larger, spatially more extended family of traits.
2. The extreme fragmentation of the classic ethnographic view of the world as a patchwork quilt of separate ethnic groups, each with their own distinctive, integrated culture, is therefore largely an artefact of anthropological and administrative conceptual impositions, which subsequently have tended to be appropriated by local

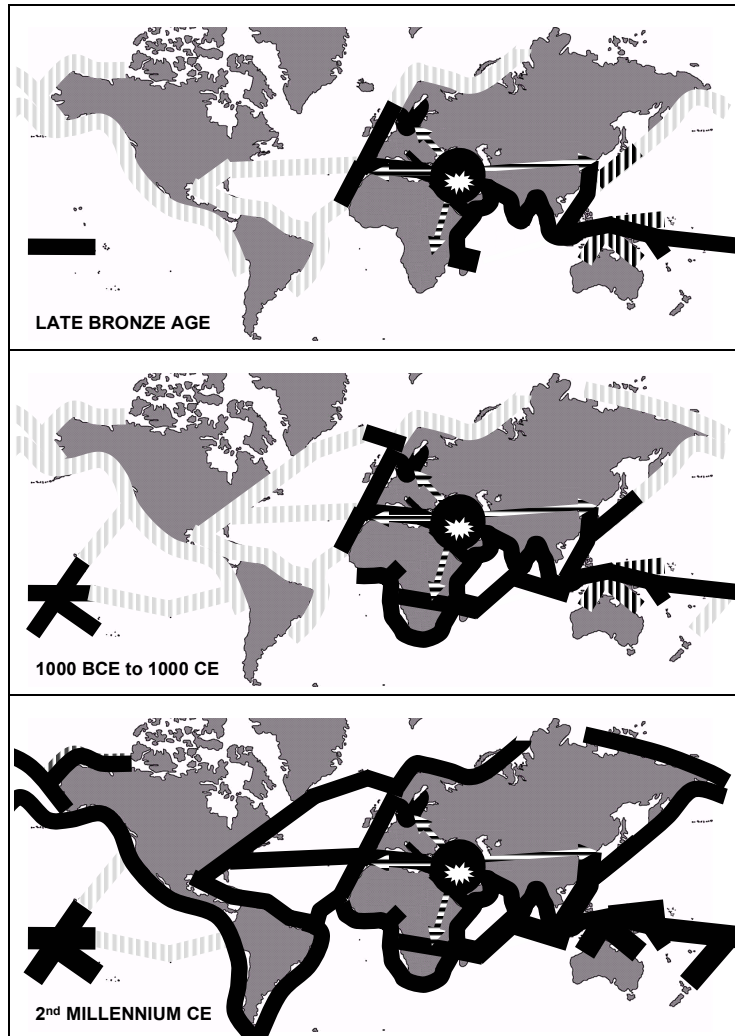
<sup>8</sup> E.g. Amselle 2001; Fardon *et al.* 1999; van Binsbergen & van Dijk 2003; with references to the vast literature.

actors so as to be build in their own self-construction and ethnicisation (van Binsbergen 2003, 2008, with extensive references).

3. Ethnographic traits, therefore, need to be considered, in the first place, within a long-range perspective of cultural complexes extending widely in space and time
4. Therefore, geographical distributions of traits may be read as manifestations of frozen cultural history: if the same trait occurs in geographical adjacent areas, we may assume that these areas belong to a historically continuous cultural region; and if the same trait occupies a more or less continuous extended belt on the map, we may assume that it has been transmitted along that belt.
5. Technological conditions for such transmission are provided both by humankind's ubiquitous tendency to geographical displacement, in the first place on foot, but soon aided by such technological means as navigation, horse riding and the chariot. Although anthropologist, blinkered by their dominant paradigm of separate, bounded local cultures, have tended to underestimate such technological factors, archaeology (especially the work by Bednarik)<sup>9</sup> has established beyond doubt that maritime navigation across considerable distances of open sea has been a factuality since the Middle Palaeolithic (when New Guinea and Australia were thus populated), while horse and chariot were the great locomotion-instigating achievements of Neolithic and Bronze Age Central Asia. As a result, I have proposed (*e.g.* 2012: 78, Fig. 2.17; in press (a) with extensive references) that in fact since the Bronze Age a multcentred, multidirectional, transcontinental maritime network has effectively connected all continental shores of the world, while the Old World has been internally opened up by relatively easy and relatively rapid communications using hippic technologies.



<sup>9</sup> Bednarik 1997a, 1997b, 1997c, 1999a, 1999b, 2003.



1. Proposed origin; 2. Initial expansion of 1; 3. Extent of (semi-)maritime network; 4. *idem*, putative; 5. *idem*, highly conjectural; 6. The 'cross-model': expansion of Pelasgian traits (largely overland)

**Fig. 6.** Proposed emergence of a global maritime network since the Neolithic

6. The multicentred, multidirectional nature of this postulated global maritime network means that the unidirectional vector arrows we tend to attach to diffusion processes, should be taken with a pinch of salt: in fact the direction of transmission is seldom completely unidirectional, except perhaps when spread from an epicentre is involved
  
7. Constituting the dominant paradigm of an earlier, pre-classic phase of anthropology in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century CE, diffusion (usually only acknowledged as a despicable and obsolete ideology: 'diffusionism') has become counter-paradigmatic with the rise, from c. 1930 onwards, of the classic, structural-functional model of integrated, bounded, distinct individual cultures, each culture being the distinctive characteristic of a distinct ethnic groups (van Binsbergen 2003). This has led to a situation where mainstream classic and post-classic anthropology has tended to interpret obvious parallels between traits widely distributed in space and time, in terms of *parallel invention* (under implicit reference to the postulated converging tendencies build into the equally – but rightly – postulated universal identity of the human mind, or at least of the mind of Anatomically Modern Humans who have existed since 200 ka BP and have been the exclusive form of humankind for the past

20 ka). What emerges from the above set of postulates is a totally different picture: *not parallel invention but diffusion through cultural or demic transmission*<sup>10</sup> becomes the default explanation for parallels between traits through space and time, and only when there is explicit documentary evidence of parallel invention, or proven technological impossibility of historic contact, may we reach for the alternative explanation of parallel invention.

Armed with these explicit hypotheses and rules of thumb, let us now proceed to systematically analyse the distributional date of Table 1.

## ***Drinking from skulls***

Let us first consider the distribution of the trait ‘drinking from human skulls’. Although occurring in rather different parts of the world over time, this trait is remarkably rare. This suggests that the idea of using a human skull for a drinking cup may not so obvious as to be reinvented time and again throughout global history. We may not be unjustified to treat the distribution as if it were reflecting one coherent historical process. The distribution of this trait is largely confined to the Western part of the Old World, and it is possible to satisfactorily account for the recorded occurrences with a Pelasgian model that does not involve Sunda transmission but instead assumes a West Asian, Neolithic epicentre. Also in the fields of mythology and comparative religion there is ample evidence of a ‘skull complex’ stretching from West Asia to East Asia across the Eurasian Steppe, with extensions into the Ancient Mediterranean – as I found out when investigating the transcontinental ramifications of the Nkoya myth of *Mwene Kayambila* ‘Who Thatches with Skulls’ (van Binsbergen 2010: 193 *f.*). In Fig. 7 the only outlying cases out are the woodlands of South-East North America, and the Western Pacific. In both cases a distant and indirect West Eurasian provenance might be suspected. This would be a moot point for the American case (trans-Atlantic crossings notably by the Vikings have been attested, but much more to in the North-eastern part of the American Atlantic seaboard – whereas the many claims of other Old World, especially Phoenician, intrusions into the New World have by and large not received the benefit of the doubt from mainstream scholarship.<sup>11</sup> The suggestion of specific continuity between Western Eurasia and the Maori along the Pelasgian transmission lines seems less preposterous, given for instance the parallels between Maori and European Bronze-Age spiral ornaments and offensive weapons, and the Maori’s general somatic appearance. However, let us admit that the limited number of attestations of the ‘drinking from skulls’ trait render all historical interpretation highly conjectural.

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<sup>10</sup> Including, probably in many cases, the possibility of ‘stimulus invention’, i.e. when not a particular trait has been transmitted in itself, but merely the knowledge or rumour that such a trait exists elsewhere, which local people then seek to emulate on the basis of their own technological and cultural resources (Kroeber 1940).

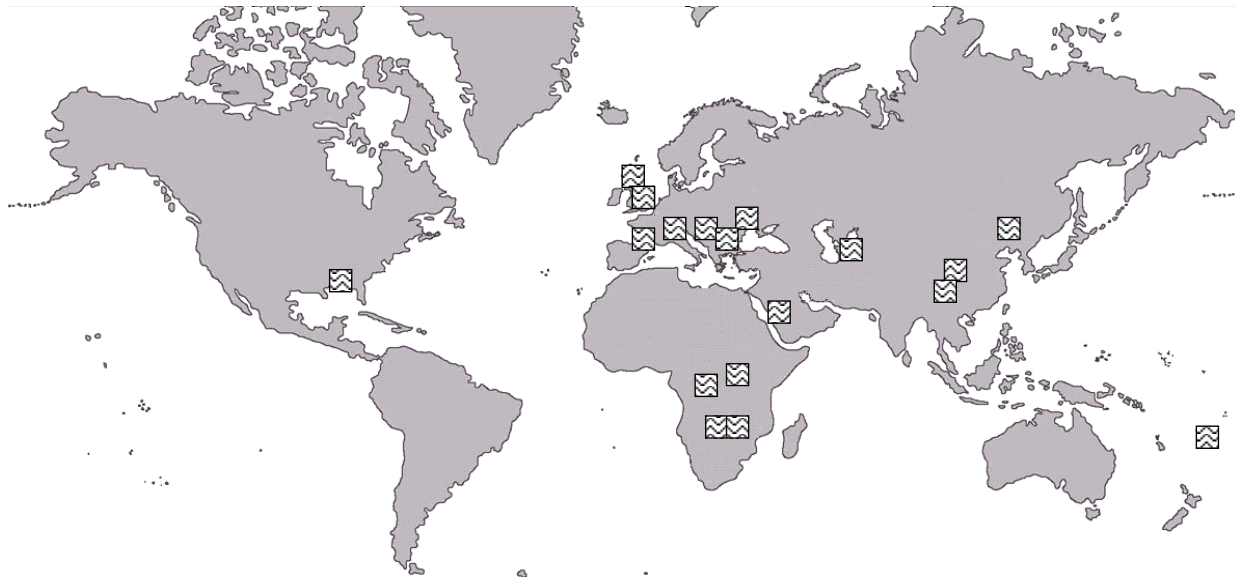
<sup>11</sup> For a review of the data, see van Binsbergen, in press (a).



Fig. 7. The Nkoya king Chief Mwene Kahare Kabambi, preparing to drink from beer contained in a Chinese enamel bowl sunk into the ground at the foot of a temporary royal ancestral shrine at the Kazanga Annual Festival, Kaoma District, Zambia, 1992

The bowl replaces the occiput of a slave killed for the purpose at the Kazanga harvest, as was the custom up to around 1900 CE. Note the shaped of the axe blade, which has Indonesian and Scandinavian parallels and, in Oppenheimer's non-specialist opinion (1998), suggests Sunda influence. Also note the sacrifice in the form of paper money – with East Asian parallels.

A good example of a distribution that largely conforms with the Pelasgian Hypothesis, is that of the restricted trait 'drinking from skulls' – as implied aspect of the head-hunting complex. The distribution is given in Fig. 8.

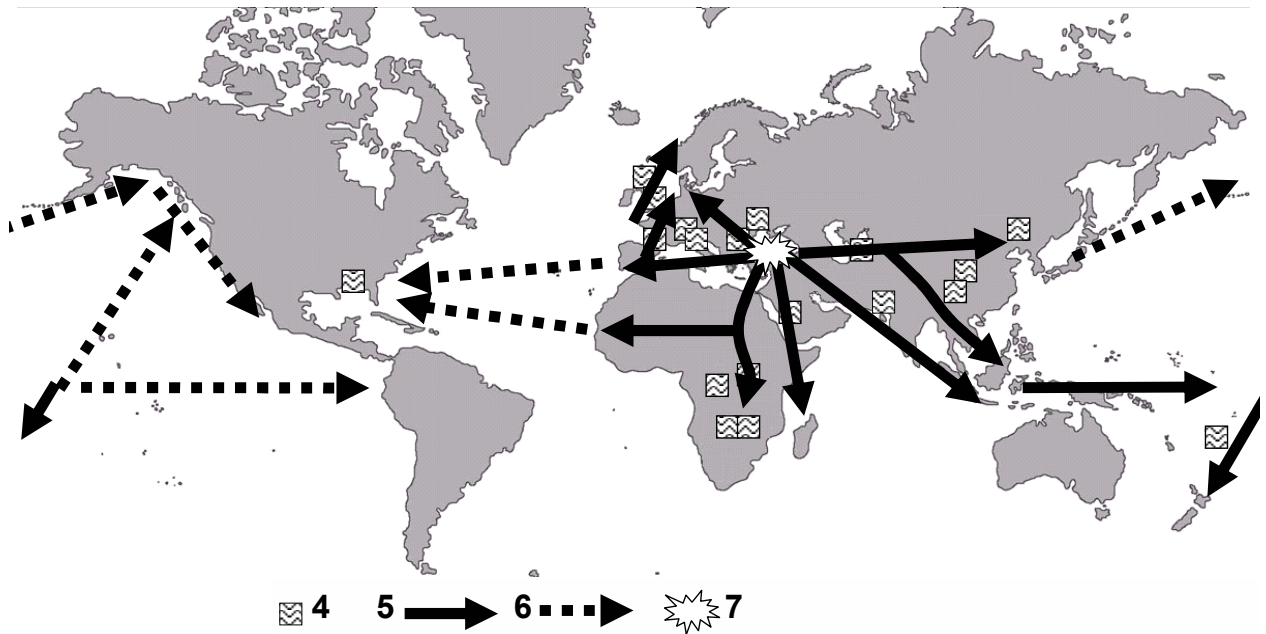


▨ 4

Legend as in Fig. 4

Fig. 8. Distribution of the restricted trait 'drinking from skulls'.

*Applying the Pelasgian Hypothesis in the case of Fig. 8, Fig. 9 emerges as a plausible historical interpretation of this distribution:*



Legend as in Fig. 7; to which is to be added: 5. proposed spread; 6. highly conjectural proposed spread; 7. proposed epicentre of origin

Fig. 9. Historical interpretation of the distribution of the restricted trait 'drinking from skulls'



## The skull complex



Fig. 10. Worked skull from Neolithic Jericho (source: Hall 1992: 25)

For Early Modern times on, Africa and Africans have been subjected to essentialising ‘othering’ on the part of inhabitants of the North Atlantic region, including scientists. This tendency has been noticeable, for instance, in the field of comparative religion, where already Frazer (1918) put Africa in an exceptional position by claiming that the, otherwise ubiquitous, flood myths did not occur in Africa; and the statement was frequently copied until quite recently, including the work of the *doyen* of present-day comparative mythology, the otherwise immensely inspiring Sanskritist Michael Witzel. Frazer was wrong of course, as I maintained on several occasions – flood myths do occur in Africa, some even remarkably close to the elaborate format familiar from the Ancient Near East. Being unwilling to invoke the notorious, hegemonic / racist ‘Hamitic hypothesis’<sup>12</sup> as an explanation, I have been occupied with the attempt to understand the peculiarities of the African distribution of flood myths until recently.<sup>13</sup> In this context I undertook an ambitious attempt, in the late years 2000, to trace as much as possible the transcontinental correspondences and resonances of the mythemes I had found, over the decades, in the myths of the Nkoya people and their neighbours in Western Zambia (van Binsbergen 2010). This made me explore the many attestations and the vast literature what I then called ‘the skull complex’ – constituting mainly

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. Aaron 1995; Seligman 1913; Sanders 1969; Sharp 2004; Zachernuk 1994.

<sup>13</sup> When I was finally able to clinch the argument with the aid of Dierk Lange’s discovery – empirically well grounded (Lange 2004, 2009, 2012) – to the effect that massive demic and cultural diffusion had taken place between the Ancient Near East and West Africa. See: van Binsbergen 2012: 71 *f.*, Fig. 2.16, with mapped distribution, data points, and references.

a belt – which the inventions of horse-riding and the spoked-wheel chariot has unified into one extensive cultural<sup>14</sup> area – stretching from the Celts in Westernmost Eurasia, via the Scyths, Mongols, and the entire Eurasian Steppe belt, to the Pacific, where it is found in Japan and Taiwan – further ramifying into the well-known head-hunting practices of especially insular South East Asia (*e.g.* Borneo and the Philippines). An early attestation of the skull complex is the plastering of human skulls in the archaeological context of Neolithic Jericho (Syro-Palestine).<sup>15</sup>

The skull complex may be said to encompass all skull related practices (including skull deformation, trepanation, display of ancestral or enemy skulls, etc.), short of drinking from skulls, and acquisitive head-hunting. By the data listed in Table 1 and mapped in Fig. 4, the distribution of the skull complex is as in Fig. 11:

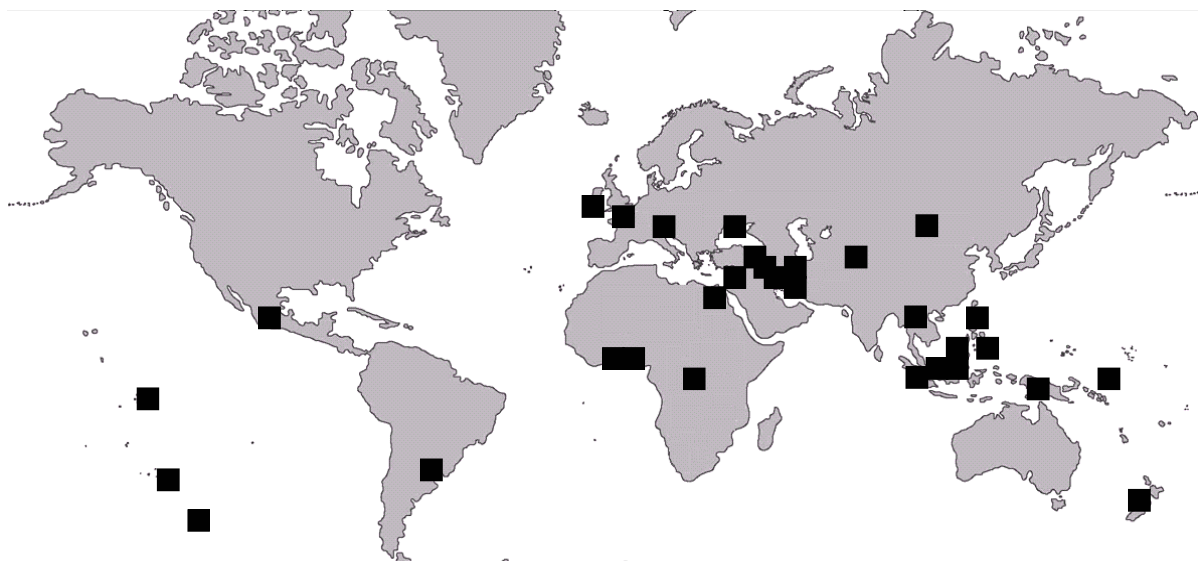


Fig. 11. Distribution of the restricted trait ‘skull complex’

Also for Fig. 11, the attestations concentrate in the Western part of the Old World, although they are not absent in South East Asia and Oceania. This distribution pattern could very well be explained with the Pelasgian model – so much so that I do not even see the need to try out the alternative, Sunda model for this distribution. However, given most scholars’ reluctance to accept Transatlantic pre-Columbian contacts the South American attestation may be considered a case of independent parallel invention; and so could be the Meso-American (Aztec) case – despite the many indications (colour symbolism, board games, pyramids,

<sup>14</sup> And even linguistic area: much of this region is characterized by the Altaic linguistic phylum, comprising such linguistic families as Turkic, Mongolian, Korean and Japanese. With such linguistic phyla as Uralic, Indo-European, Kartvelian, Dravidian, Chukchee-Kamchatkan and Eskimo, Altaic constitutes the Eurasian macro-phylum, extending from Bretagne throughout Eurasia via North America to Greenland.

<sup>15</sup> References to the Eurasian Steppe and cross-Steppe manifestations of the ‘skull complex’ are given in my 2010a paper, and briefly reiterated in van Binsbergen & Woudhuizen 2011: 373. The point also plays a considerable role in the modern scholarly commentaries on Herodotus, notably his account of Scythian life and society (*e.g.* Asheri et al. 2007).

circular calendar, purple snail utilisation – as already stressed over a century ago by Tylor<sup>16</sup> and by Nuttall – of direct trans-Atlantic transmission from the Ancient Near East via the Mediterranean.

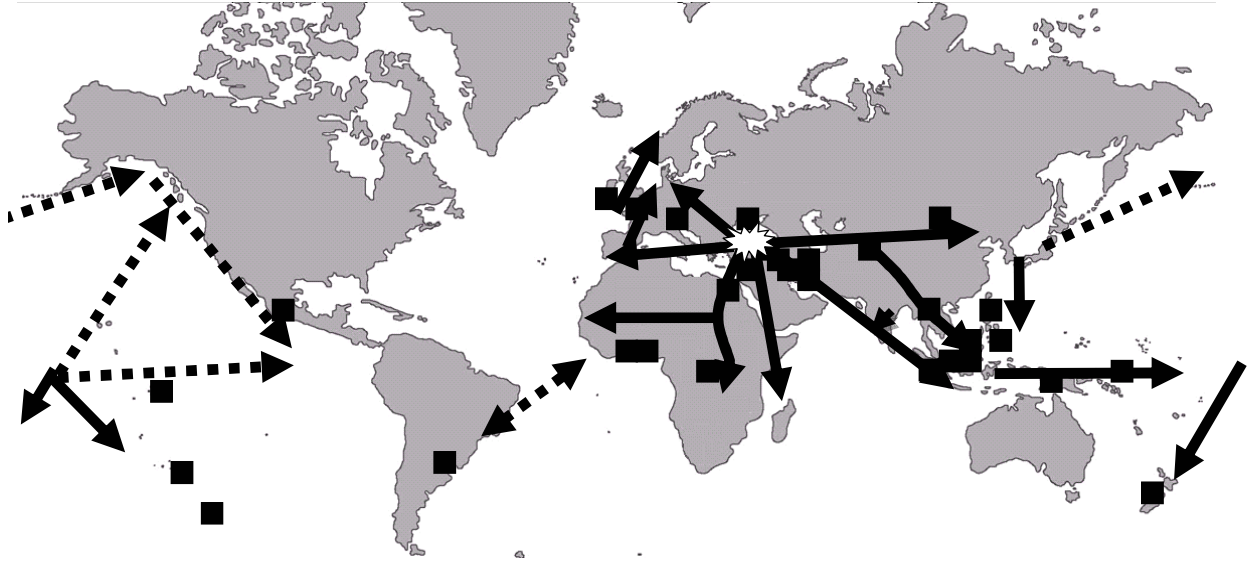


Fig. 12. Proposed historical interpretation of the distribution of the restricted trait 'skull complex'

### ***Head-hunting in the narrower sense***

The Sunda model however needs to be invoked for the distribution of the most frequently attested trait within our data set, notably 'head-hunting'

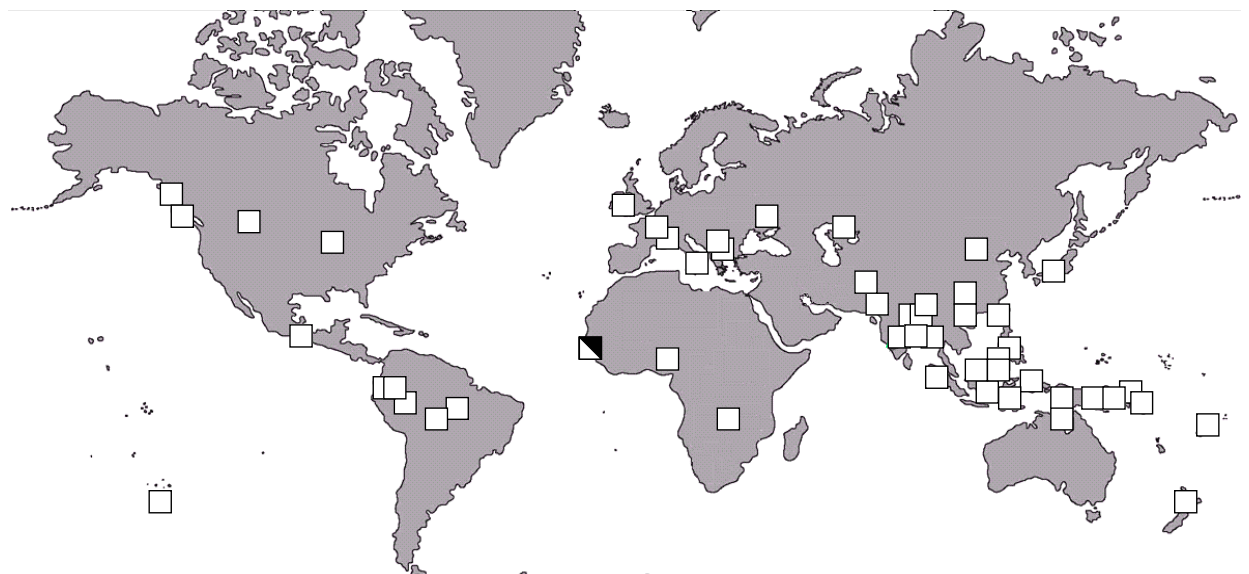


Fig. 13. Distribution of the restricted trait 'head-hunting'

<sup>16</sup> Tylor 1879, 1880, 1896, 1948; Nuttall 1901, 1909.

Despite its obvious connections, in symbolism and ritual practice, with the other two traits ('drinking from skulls', and 'skull complex'), for the restricted trait 'head-hunting' the attestations in the Eastern part of the Old World are so overwhelmingly numerous that the Pelasgian model does not satisfy here. I submit that 'head-hunting' is best regarded as having emerged in South East Asia and having spread from there on the wings of Sunda expansion (Fig. 14). A strong advocate of this view has been Hutton (1946, 1961), who not only pinpoints the three essential traits among Nigerian head-hunting among the Kagoro and Moroa 'strongly suggests Indonesian culture': (a) the practice is associated with crops, (b) it is a prerequisite for marriage (on which especially the young women insist), and (c) the victim is supposed to be reduced to service in afterlife.<sup>17</sup>

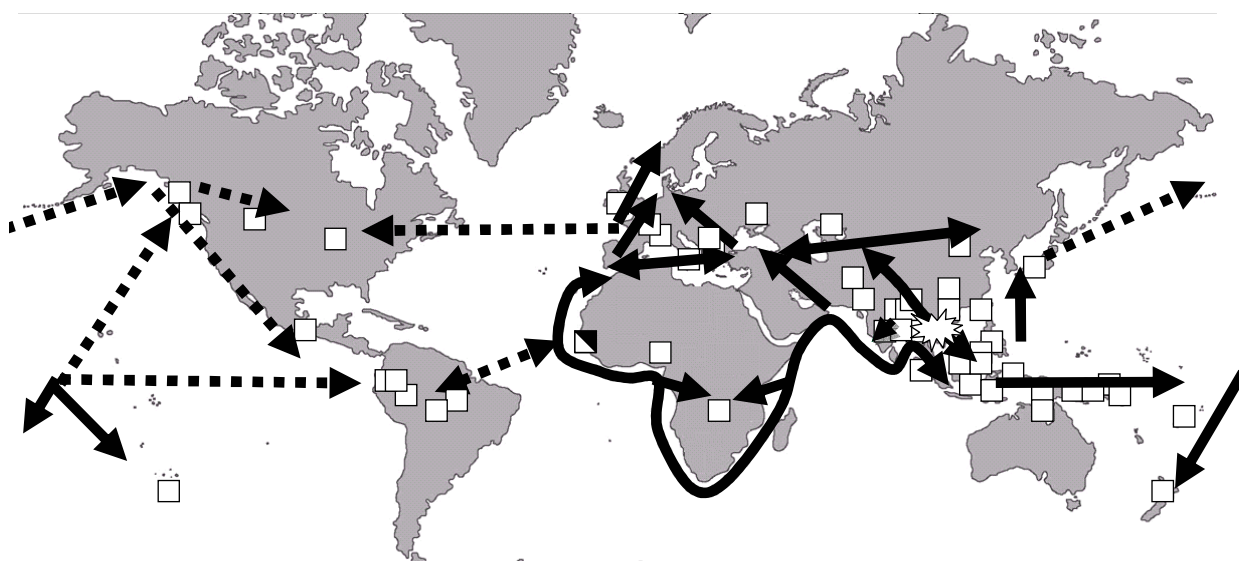


Fig. 14. Historical interpretation of the distribution of the trait 'head-hunting': Sunda model

However, as the alternative model shows (Fig. 15), the same distribution could also be interpreted with a Pelasgian model, and in that case the many attestations in South East Asia would appear as mere transformations of the 'skull complex'.

<sup>17</sup> Incidentally, also in the case of the Zambian Ila these three points seem to apply; Muntemba 1977.

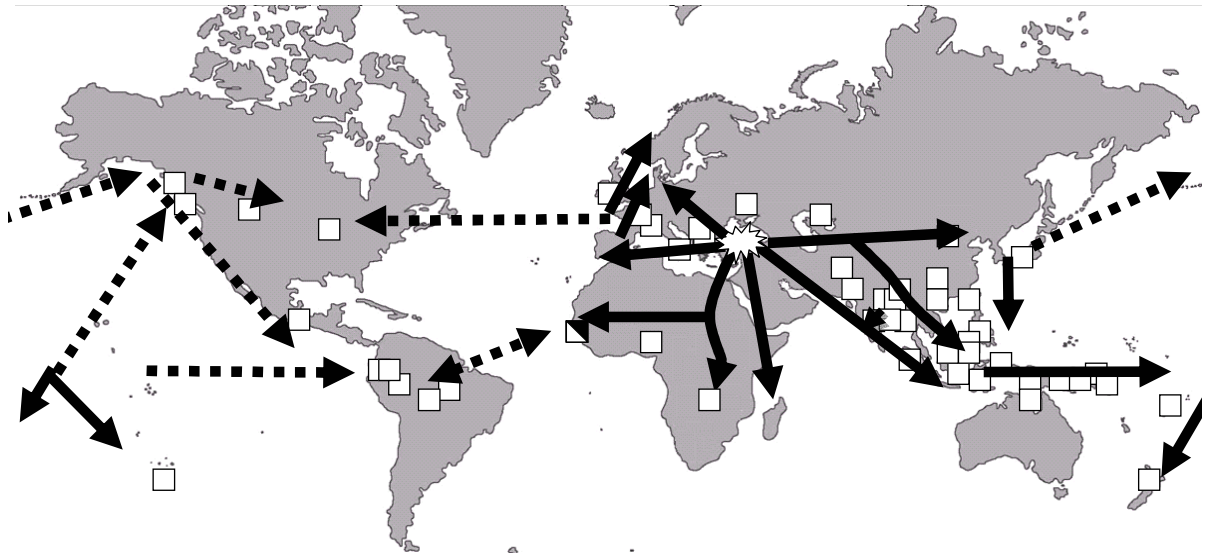


Fig. 15. Historical interpretation of the distribution of the restrictive trait 'head-hunting': Pelasgian model

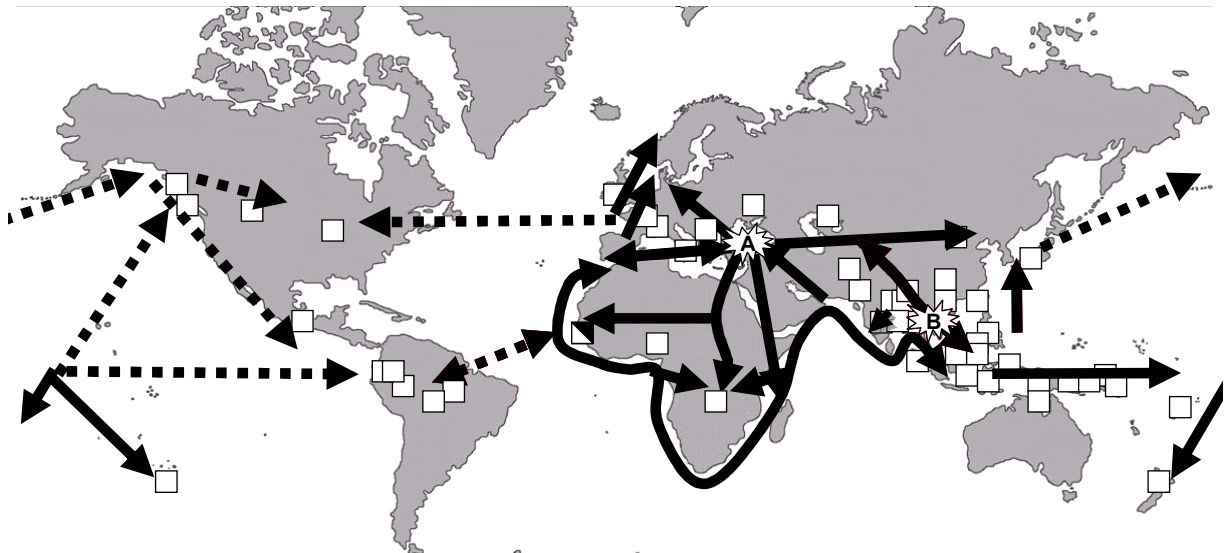


Fig. 16. Historical interpretation of the distribution of the restrictive trait 'head-hunting' – Pelasgian (A) and Sunda (B) models combined

In the last analysis (Fig. 16), probably the most convincing model for 'head-hunting' is a hybrid one, in which

- the Pelasgian 'skull complex' (A)
- after emerging in West Asia in the Upper Palaeolithic to Neolithic,
- and after having been transmitted to South East Asia and elsewhere (both by
  - maritime means (I am postulating, on extensive empirical data and literature, the existence of transcontinental, global maritime network from the Early Bronze Age onward; *cf.* van Binsbergen 2012: 78, Fig. 2.17)
  - via the overland route made available by the invention of the spoked-wheel

chariot, in Kazakhstan, 4 ka BP,<sup>18</sup>

- undergoes a transformation in South East Asia (B), producing the ‘head-hunting’ complex
- which subsequently spreads on the wings of Sunda expansion.

Probably the transformation of A into B took place in or near Taiwan, which is generally recognised (Oppenheimer 2004; Sanchez-Mazas *et al.* 2008) as a major epicentre for late prehistoric transmission of genes, languages and culture from East Asia into South East Asia and Oceania.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper I have examined the distribution of head-hunting and other cultural practices relating to the human skull. After setting out the reasons to revive this apparently obsolete and antiquarian topic and pointing out its heuristic value for the construction of long-range cultural pre-and proto-history, I have presented the worldwide distributional data and their bibliographical background, arranging the data into three major categories: head-hunting (purposeful violent acquisition of human skulls), the skull complex (practices after acquisition), and (as significant subset of the latter) drinking from skulls. The transition from distribution to conjectural world history of these traits is informed by a number of explicit underlying hypotheses, whose bibliographical background is briefly outlined and which are, in turn, also secondarily underpinned by the outcomes of the present analysis. These hypotheses are: (a) Out-of-Africa; (b) Back to Africa; (c) the Oppenheimer–Tauchmann–Dick-Read ‘Sunda’ Hypothesis, stressing widespread demic and cultural diffusion from the flooding of South East Asia at the onset of the Holocene; (d) the Pelasgian Hypothesis, stipulating a South West Asian Neolithic origin, subsequent westbound spread and transformation into the Mediterranean during the Bronze Age, to be followed by transmission into the four directions (Mediterranean and Western Europe, possibly with trans-Atlantic extensions; northbound to Central and Northern Europe; Eastbound across the Steppe Belt to East and South Asia and beyond, to South East Asia, Oceania, perhaps even the New World; and southbound into Africa) from the Late Bronze Age on. Next I set out a set of seven rules of thumb that are to govern the transition from global distribution to conjectural world history; the most important among these are: the dominance of diffusion over parallel invention, the technological feasibility of global diffusion since Middle Palaeolithic times, and the multicentred, multidirectional nature of that process. On this basis, the three distributions of our skull-related traits may be convincingly understood as sustained historic processes. The Pelasgian Hypothesis is shown to account fairly well for the distribution of ‘drinking from skulls’ and the ‘skull complex’ in general – as it has been shown to account for a great many other trait distributions discussed in detail elsewhere. For head-hunting in the narrower sense the Pelasgian Hypothesis might be invoked as well, but in fact a more satisfactory model turns out a combination of a Pelasgian and a Sunda model. Thus, beyond the specifics of skull-related practices (which despite the recent reviving of decapitation in

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<sup>18</sup> Cf. van Binsbergen & Woudhuizen 2011: 382 *f.*, Fig. 28.17, with references.

the context of militant Islamism could be considered to be of only limited specialist interest) the present argument is particularly interesting as a theoretical and methodological exercise towards the construction of long-range cultural pre- and proto-history, i.e. on a global scale.

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