

# Comparability as a paradigmatic problem

key note address,

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*very rough first draft, not for publication or published comment*

## 0. 'Before the Presocratics' as an extreme comparativist exercise

My motivation to participate in the present conference and to present these reflections on comparison as a method, derives from the fact that less than a year ago I published a book entitled *Before the Presocratics: Cyclicity, transformation, and element cosmology: The case of transcontinental pre- or protohistoric cosmological substrates linking Africa, Eurasia and North America*. This work is the culmination of the author's research over a quarter of a century. It seeks to contribute to the study of the global history of human thought and philosophy. Written from an Attenuated Afrocentrist perspective, it revolves on state-of-the-art comparative methods and insights from linguistics, archaeology, ethnography, and mythology. It has a sound empirical basis (disclosed by full indexes) in its impressive bibliography and in its case studies of board games, geomantic divination, a South Central African clan system, East Asian correlative cosmologies (e.g. 易經 *I Ching*), cosmologies from Ancient Egypt, Africa, Native America and the Upper Palaeolithic, Greek philosophic texts (especially Empedocles), and linguistic continuities across Asia. It typologises modes of thought and traces their evolution since the Palaeolithic, claiming:

- we can reconstruct modes of thought of the remote past, in detail and reliably;
- such reconstruction is predicated on (and, in turn, *confirms*) two assumptions: (a) the fundamental unity of (Anatomically Modern) humankind, and (b) the porous nature, therefore, of geographical / political / identitary / cultural boundaries;
- this in particular means that sub-Saharan Africa has been part and parcel of global cultural history to a much greater extent than commonly admitted.

Applying this perspective to the Ancient Greek Presocratic philosophers who allegedly founded Western philosophy, we test *Working Hypothesis (1)*: 'a transformative cycle of elements (as attested in East Asia and Central Africa) has constituted a global substrate since the Upper Palaeolithic (over 12,000 years ago), informing – from a West Asian, "Pelagian", proposedly proto-African source –

Eurasian, African and N. American cosmologies'. *An Alternative Working Hypothesis* posits (2): 'the transformative cycle of elements only dates from the West Asian Bronze Age' (5,000-3,000 years ago). We also examine (3) 'the possibility of this system's transcontinental transmission in *historical* times'. Painstakingly, (2) and (3) are empirically vindicated, while much evidence of Upper Palaeolithic *element* cosmologies is found (but without cyclicity, transformation, and catalysis). This casts new light on Empedocles' originality. *Presocratic thought became a path to modern science because it constituted a backwater mutation away (especially in its reception) from the cyclic transformation dominating W.Asian / N.E. African Bronze Age cosmologies.*

In the present argument my focus is not on this book's content but on the theoretical and methodological prerogatives of the excessive comparison through space and time, on which it hinges.

## 1. Introduction

As the Biblical book of Proverbs says (9:10):

'The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom...'

The Protestant Free University, Amsterdam, the Netherlands (free in the sense of allegedly free from state intervention in its internal affairs) derives its motto from this text, and I often came across it when, nearly twenty years after I had relinquished the Christianity of my childhood, I took a PhD at that institution (1979) and a decade later became professor of anthropology there (1990-1998), charged with ethnic studies. Paraphrasing that text, and following the trend in Western culture over the past two millennia of secularising 'wisdom' into 'science', we might say:

'Comparison is the beginning of all science.'

Let us have a comparative (!) overture:

- when Mesopotamian science emerged – in the first place in the context of divination, now considered (because of its defective falsifiability; Popper 1935 / 1959) a mere pseudo-science but still on the European university curriculum in the 18<sup>th</sup> century CE – it was by the minute comparison of phenomena and binding them into the main instrument of proto-science, *lists*, that empirical generalisations however spurious could be formulated (Weidner 1941-1969; Bottéro 1974, 1992)
- when Aristotle (late 4<sup>th</sup> c. BCE / 1854-1883) and his successor Theophrastus (late 4<sup>th</sup> c. BCE / 1916) founded biology in the city of Athens in the late 4<sup>th</sup> c. BCE, it was by detailed comparison of the outer and inner phenomena of plants, animals and humans;
- when at the other end of Eurasia Chinese scholars were engaged in similar exercises at roughly the same time their approach was not different (Needham c.s. 1986)

- when, a century later, Hellenists philologists in the city of Alexandria founded comparative literature, Homeric criticism, and comparative mythology, it was by seeing both the communalities and the differences between texts, in other words by comparing.

But these references to essentially literate situations from the last few millennia do very far from exhaust the attested range of comparison as a major faculty of human thought. Linguists have since long agreed that the human use of language hinges on the distinctive features (Jakobson et al. 1952) of speech items – those by which (through *comparison*) they can be distinguished from other similar ones, so that classification as same, as belonging to one underlying category, goes hand in hand with distinction as different. Nineteenth-century CE anthropologists were captivated by what Durkheim and Mauss were to call ‘primitive classifications’ (Durkheim & Mauss 1901), many of which were to be studied, for every part of the world and for every historical period, under the heading of ‘totemism’. The older literature on this topic is very extensive (e.g. Hartland 1915; Durkheim 1912), but we are fortunate in having, in the work of Mauss’s student Claude Lévi-Strauss, what even after half a century still looks as the more inspiring, perhaps definitive treatment of the topic – which complements his similarly orientated explorations into ‘*undomesticated*’ thought (*La pensée sauvage*).<sup>1</sup> Intrigued by the ubiquitous association between human groups and selected items from the non-human world (animals, plants, other natural phenomena) with which these groups tend to have entered in a special relationship (naming, postulated descent, taboo on killing and eating), Lévi-Strauss (1962a, 1962b; cf. Needham 1967) argues (in typical rationalist / idealist, Durkheimian fashion; cf. Durkheim 1912) that there is nothing in the intrinsic qualities of each individual totem that predestines it to serve as a totem, they are not ‘good to eat’ – but that they are props for thought, ‘good to think’, the totemic association always comes in pairs, in such a way that the category which the totem pair share stresses the relationship between the two associated groups, with the specific difference between each totem bringing out the distinction between the associated groups. Sometimes this paired relation of difference and identity is transparent even across cultural and linguistic boundaries,

e.g. in North Africa local saints in their while, domed tombs have totemic associations, in such a way that Sidi Mḥammad (of the valley of that name, *homdat* °Ain Draham, *gouvernorat* Jendouba, Tunisia), the principal object of veneration of the valley’s now sedentary population, is associated with the figtree (*karmāt*), Sidi Bu-Ḥarūba (of the neighbouring valley of Saydiyya) with the carob tree (*ḥarūba*)<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Although the designation ‘savage’ was once part of the discourse of evolutionism and colonial racialism, it is clear that Lévi-Strauss does not intend to analyse the thinking of savages, but undomesticated modes of thought in which all humans engage unless disciplines by the formal procedures and language use of the sciences.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Demeerseman 1938-39, 1964; Dermenghem 1978; Jacques-Meunié 1951; Montet 1909; van Binsbergen 1971a, 1971b, 1980a, 1980b, 1985. The analysis become more complicated and more interesting once we realised that Bu-Ḥarūba / *ḥarūba*, through the tree’s numerous minute seeds, evoke a sense of speckledness / dispersal which in very many contexts in space and time has been expressed by reference to the speckled leopard skin, the star-spangled sky, and rain drops, – while most linguistic macrofamilies from all over the world use reflexes from a lexical root \**garob* / \**bVrVg* / \**pVrVg* /

both totems belonging to the near-universal category ‘tree’, which is also enshrined in North Atlantic / universalising natural science. But often the connection is far from transparent from the standpoint of North Atlantic culture, language or science

e.g. Sidi Mḥammad in the above example is also associated with the *partridge* (*hajla*), Sidi Bu-Ḥarūba with the bull (*ghrmūl*). These are both animals, but by no stretch of the imagination or application of universalising scientific classification can a Westerner suspect the underlying nature of this opposition. A local myth throws some light on the matter: before being recognised for the saint that he was, Sidi Mḥammad was a herdsman with another saint; being under special divine protection, Sidi Mḥammad could afford to sleep at work while his beasts would roam the mountains unharmed, and partridges (normally very shy, semi-terrestrial bird) would light on his shoulders – they are still sacred at the deserted hill that carries Sidi Mḥammad’s tomb and cannot be hunted. The key appears to be that for Sidi Mḥammad the bird evokes the saint’s *divine election by a sign from undomesticated non-human nature*, while for Sidi Bu-Ḥarūba the bull evokes *divine protection in the context of domesticated non-human nature*. The difference is so slight that the several minor shrines in the valley of Sidi Mḥammad but named after Sidi Bu-Ḥarūba make me suspect that both saints are manifestations of one identical saint venerated by one unified population engaging in transhumance animal husbandry over both valleys only a few centuries ago.<sup>3</sup>

But agreeing (on the basis of this flimsy introduction, admittedly) that comparison is at the root of all human thought and language and *a fortiori* of all science, is only the first step towards identifying comparison as a scientific endeavour, spelling out the rules of that endeavour, and identifying its pitfalls. This is what I intend to do in this keynote address. My central focus will be on the comparison in the fields of formal cultural systems (religion, myths, cosmologies, divination, games, writing systems, forms of social and political organisation), which indicates some of the fields in which I have been active as a comparativist in the course of my career. However, it is my hope that against this background, some of the things I have to say will also resonate with my fellow conference participants from the many other disciplines in the field of comparative sciences, e.g. biology, psychology, science of literature.

## 2. Contrasting styles of comparison between cultures in space and time<sup>4</sup>

Against the background of my teachers’ almost obsessive contemplation of the micro

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\*pVrVd (here V = unspecified vowel) to denote these semantics. Cf. van Binsbergen 2004, and in preparation (c); Kammerzell 1994.

<sup>3</sup> North Africa is a region where apparently very ancient mythological material comes to the surface. Thus Kabyl myths (Algeria) speak (Cotterell 1989: 109) of the primordial solitary buffalo bull Itherther, chased by his son Achimi who mated with his mother and sister. Moreover, from the very beginning, the celestial cow was a major theme throughout Ancient Egyptian iconography. Hercules’ journey with the underworld cattle stolen from Geryon or Cacus takes him along both the Northern and the Southern shores of the Mediterranean. Throughout the Western part of the Old World (Africa, Europe and West Asia), underwater cattle characterises the world of death and the ancestors. In this light the analysis of the bull of Sidi Bu-Ḥarūba could still be carried somewhat further.

<sup>4</sup> I am indebted to Prof. Nikolay Popov for inviting me to this important and timely conference, and for extending to me the honour of delivering this key note. I am indebted to the African Studies Centre, Leiden, the Netherlands, for funding my participation in this conference, and for constituting a stimulating institutional base ever since 1977.

socio-politics of group formation and group management – cast in a structural-functionalist or transactional framework – , the mainstays of my training in anthropology and development sociology at Amsterdam University (1964-1971) were:

- (a) fieldwork ethnography within narrow horizons of space and time, and
- (b) the methodology (more than the results) of cross-cultural comparison.<sup>5</sup>

To these assets, the late Douwe Jongmans added, more or less extracurricularly, a structural-functionalist-embedded oral history / ethnohistory, in the context of his supervision of my M.A. fieldwork on popular Islam in the highlands of North-western Tunisia (cf. van Binsbergen 2011a).

After half a century, I still feel greatly indebted to my teachers, even though inevitably I have critically moved far beyond the foundations they laid. In the decade after Amsterdam University, the intellectual and political milieus of

- (a) the University of Zambia especially its Institute for African Studies,
- (b) the Manchester School of social anthropology, and
- (c) Terence Ranger's Ford-Foundation-sponsored network for the study of the history of African religious systems

brought me to reflect deeply on the ethical, knowledge-political and truth implications of the extremely objectifying and presentist stance on which the Amsterdam approaches hinged. I embarked on a life-long ethnohistorical and ethnographic project focusing on the Nkoya people of Western Zambia, of which the most recent product among many, a 700-page book *'Our Drums are Always on My Mind'*, is now in the press.

But while thus deeply and daily inspired by my personal intensive fieldwork among one small ethnic community in town and countryside in South Central Africa, learning their language and culture as a major resources for the next decades, and positioning myself more and more firmly in Nkoya village life and traditional leadership, yet the lure of the broad historical (largely precolonial) and comparative orientation of Ranger's network brought me to engage, for my first book *Religious Change in Zambia* (1981), and with the aid of the rich ethnographic and ethnohistorical literature and of archival resources, in extensive ethnographic comparisons all over the million km<sup>2</sup> of South Central Africa, and into a time depth of more than a millennium.

Although the Ranger network did include major anthropologists like Matthew Schoffeleers<sup>6</sup> and Michael Bourdillon, its core business was – to coin a phrase with

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<sup>5</sup> Köbben 1961, 1964a, 1964b, 1966, 1967a, 1967b, 1970; Jongmans & Gutkind 1967; Thoden van Velzen & van Wetering 1960. As a 2<sup>nd</sup>-year student, I was particularly impressed when one of our teaching assistants, in the context of a seminar cycle on highland cultures of New Guinea, introduced us to Swanson's structural-functional cross-cultural analysis of variables in the field of religion (Swanson 1960; cf. Peregrine 1995).

<sup>6</sup> Who in 1979 accepted *Religious Change in Zambia* as my PhD work, with Ranger on the committee;

which I have often characterised my own work of the subsequent decades – ‘to create history where previously there was none’: the hitherto unsung processes of state formation, forms of resistance, regional territorial cults, healing cults and population movements all over South Central, Southern and East Africa especially during the last half millennium, i.e. mainly in the precolonial period, when most of Africa was under illiterate conditions. The scanty data derived, in addition to travelogues and reports from Christian missions, archival and oral-historical in nature, augmented by archaeological results, and (following admonitions by the nestor of South Central African history, Jan Vansina (Vansina 1968, 1981; Keyes Adenaike & 1996) by the *comparison of ethnographic distributions as a clue to regional historical processes*.

It is instructive to compare (!) the Ranger / Vansina style of comparison with that of the Amsterdam School. Both start out with ethnographic data, but these are constructed in a very different way, on the basis of very different assumptions, and with a very different conception as to what constitutes the comparison’s *unit of study* or *unit of analysis*.

## 2.1. Comparative anthropology of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> c.

In line with cross-cultural approaches *en vogue* in the 1950s-1960s in the USA,<sup>7</sup> focusing on the HRAF (Human Relations Area Files; cf. Brown University Library, n.d.) ethnographic data base, the Amsterdam School takes as its unit of study ‘cultures’, ‘ethnic groups’, ‘peoples’ or ‘nations’ – entirely fixed to a particular place on the world map and to a particular point in time – which is when the principal available ethnography for that unit was written. By constructing data bases listing ‘cultures’  $C_1 \dots C_n$  against ethnographic traits conceived as variables  $V_1 \dots V_n$ , the significance (i.e. a numerical value for the risk that a found association may be attributed to mere chance) of any correlations between the incidence of  $V_a$  and  $V_b$  could be assessed statistically – usually with the aid for mathematically very simple tests such as chi-square. Reduced to a data point, the internal coherence and semantics of a historic culture was completely lost sight of. The distinctions between ‘cultures’ had to be reified and raised to an unrealistic, total a-historical dogma – admittance of historical associations between cultures of the same culture area, and of common origin between various cultures thus entered into the data base, would upset the statistical apple cart<sup>8</sup> and therefore had to be dissimulated. Each such ‘culture’ was to be conceived as a separate, independent unit. Moreover, it was not just the construction of the data points in space and time that was abstruse and devoid of contact with historical reality over time. Also the definition of the cultural variables to

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cf. van Binsbergen 2011b.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Brislin et al. 1973; Ember & Ember 2001; Coult & Habenstein 1965; Levinson 1988; Moore 1961; Murdock 1949, 1963, 1967, 1981; Murdock & White 1969; Naroll 1961, 1964a, 1964b; Naroll, & Cohen 1970 Naroll & d’Andrade 1963; Textor 1967; Van De Vijver & Leung 1997.

<sup>8</sup> In technical statistical language, would create insurmountable problems of multicollinearity: for if the association between ‘cultures’  $C_d \dots C_{d+i}$  was inherent to the entire culture area to which all of them belong, then that association would be spuriously counted in excess as many times as there were different ‘cultures’  $C_d \dots C_{d+i}$  in the sample.

be compared had to come entirely from the comparing analyst, for the mechanical, numerical approach left no room for any of the intercultural fine points of translatability and untranslatability that are at the core of the anthropological fieldworker's handwork. Whatever the complex, internally contradictory and varying practices the ethnographer might have rendered with great care in their ethnographies, on the basis of years of subtle participant observation, for the purpose of entry into the comparative data base firm decision had to be made:

regicide practiced?	yes (+) or no (-)
ancestor worship present?	yes (+) or no (-)
belief in incarnation?	yes (+) or no (-)
incest taboo temporarily lifted in times of demographic shortage of permitted partners?	yes (+) or no (-)

Singled out for entry in the ethnographic data based were only relatively full ethnographic accounts, based preferably on the ethnographer's prolonged stay in the area and command of the local language. Although this mode of cross-cultural comparison was a major industry in anthropology for nearly half a century, and although it did provide fuel for much internal theoretical and methodological debate e.g. on the nature of kinship arrangements and their association with cultures' religious aspects, violence, etc., in the end the extreme objectification inherent to this method had to be exposed as testifying to an obsolete, hegemonic form of transcultural (and transcontinental) knowledge formation, and although still studies are being published along this line, in fact it has died out as a recognised path to valid knowledge.

The gross statistical errors resulting from multicollinearity are an important methodological objection against the 'Amsterdam' form of comparison: by ignoring the historical relations between 'cultures' the same correlation between two variables may be given a much greater weight if counted as occurring independently in several 'cultures', yet it is the same correlation and the same culture complex.

## 2.2. *The structuralist-functionalist handicap*

*The principal shortcoming of the Amsterdam and American schools of cross-cultural comparison is their naïve, loyalist and presentist, utterly blinkered and a-historical assumption – in line with the structural-functionalist paradigm at the time – that the details of specific institutions e.g. cross-cousin marriage, segmentary socio-political organisation, belief in vengeance spirits or in witchcraft, spring directly from the present-day interaction between the structural traits of just that society. Comparative anthropologists working along such lines strive towards the distributional or otherwise statistical, empirical underpinning of propositions of the following form:*

- where cross-cousin marriage there vengeance spirits
- where access to transregional markets is (increasingly) restricted there

witchcraft beliefs exist (and are on the increase)

- where segmentary political organisation there the system of kinship terms is strongly classificatory

Anthropologists in the generation above my own have invested perhaps millions of years of serious work to pursue such daydreams, that had better been spend on an exploration of a less mechanical, more historical, regional, empathic and self-critical form of knowledge construction. Meanwhile the problem has sorted itself out in that the postmodern turn in the comparative sciences has exposed the Faustian, objectifying and othering implications of such an anthropology through timeless, placeless syllogisms as incredible, hegemonic, and – despite all its natural-science trappings – in the last analysis unscientific.

We can understand why the generation of comparativists that came of age in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century needed to fall back on such a restricted, scientific conception of their field of research. Anthropology was still in the process of establishing itself as an academic field in its own right in many countries (including the Netherlands, where the first professorial chairs with that designation dated from around World War II); and in countries where it could boast a longer history, such as the USA, it was nonetheless involved in a hard struggle for professionalisation – erecting needlessly strong and high boundaries vis-à-vis the fields of knowledge that were closest to it and in principle had most to offer to it, such as history, the classics, linguistics and philosophy – and, within anthropology, it was particularly keen to establish once for all a professional distance for older, now bitterly rejected approaches such as evolutionism and diffusionism. The latter shift is important for comparative studies, for especially diffusionism had concentrated (albeit, without the aid of a structural-functionalist theory of integrated culture, or any other theory to speak of) on the movement of people, artefacts and ideas across space and time – whereas the new, soon classic anthropology came to concentrate on studying the integration of local cultures through personal fieldwork within extremely narrow confines of space and time. The people that were launched on academic careers in social anthropology were (and to a considerable extent, still are) mostly not scholars in the established sense, with overflowing libraries and classical Greek quotations pervading even their dreams, but exponents of European expansion could in the thrill of remote otherness: traders, colonial civil servants and missionaries, or their children or other close associates. By adopting a scientific model that otherness could be captured and exploited without posing all the existential and ethical questions that would have been suggested by closer continuity with history, the classics, linguistics and philosophy. Without the continued inspiration from those fields, comparative anthropology was destined to be moribund. But with such inspiration, the structural-functionalist presentist and localist orientation had to be given up, and new more flexible, historical, and emically sensitive approaches had to be developed.

### *2.3 Comparison in the hands of historians and philologists*

By contrast, the construction of data, definition of the unit of analysis, and the handling of historical connections were all totally different in the historicising Ranger



approach. Cultures were not reduced to a data point in a fixed, a-historical grid, but as ramifying and meaning-saturated complexes, waxing and waning, over long periods of times, in which they would also coalesce or dissociate from one another, grow away from whatever common origins they may have had, and retaining, foremost in the repository of their languages and their overarching language families, fundamental repertoire of meaning and custom that would often prove to be fairly resistant to rapid change, but that on the other hand would be vital and adventurous enough to cross established social, political and economic boundaries and despite processes of local adaptation, transformation and innovation, would still tend to retain some recognisable characteristics in space and time. Dealing with a largely or wholly illiterate pre- or protohistory, data would by definition be scarce and fragmentary, and the Faustian pretence of entering all data in a matrix and letting statistics do the actual creative work of analysis, never came up in this kind of comparison. Inevitably, such historical reconstruction would proceed from the painstaking discovery and thinking through of similarity and difference, in other words on comparison, but it would be a creative form of comparison, in which the social, political and religious imagination of the analyst (in close personal contact with present-day regional ethnography, language use, and patterns of ethnic self-definition and ethnic contestation) would carefully pick her way or his way – against the background of constant critical feedback, not from a computer spitting out significance tests, but from peers specialising in the same region and the same topic. The unit of study in this approach (cf. van Binsbergen 1981, 1985) would not be some administratively or analytically defined artificial unit instrumentally operationalised – from a distance – by the availability of useful data or the imposition of colonial administrative boundaries, but a living social community which the analysts studies *in situ*, in collaboration and critical dialogue with its local members. This does not allow for the imposition of some external handbook definition of institutions and other cultural features as if these could be meaningfully rendered in some neutral and empty analytical space. Instead, the available ethnographic, linguistic, archival and archaeological knowledge, however unavoidably fragmentary, has to be brought to life through a process of transcultural understanding (yes, the Weberian / Diltheyan *Verstehen*, in more recent approaches a.k.a. the *emic* approach as distinct from the distant analytical impositions of the *etic* approach; cf. Headland et al. 1990; van Binsbergen 2003: [ **add pages** ]), an operation that takes as its point of departure the local participants' specific categories and language use, against the background of the local life world and cosmology, – and that only secondarily proceeds to the formulation of more comprehensive, comparative concepts in which the local specificities may be carefully and reticently rendered without being reduced to that analytical reduction.

*emic* and *etic* express the distinction between an internal structuring of a cultural orientation such as is found in the consciousness of its bearers, on the one hand, and, on the other, a structuring that is imposed from the outside. *Etic* has nothing to do with ethics in the sense of the philosophy of the judgement of human action in terms of good and evil. Pike's terminology is based on a linguistic analogy. In linguistics one approaches the description of speech sounds from two complementary perspectives: that of phonetics (hence *-etic*), which furnishes a purely external description, informed by anatomical and physical parameters, revolving on the air vibrations of which the speech sounds consist; and the perspective of phonology, whose basic unit of study is the phoneme (adjective: 'phonemic', hence *-emics*): the smallest unit of speech sound that is effectively distinguished by language users competent

in a particular language, basing themselves on the distinctive features of that speech sound. (...) Pike thus codified the two-stage analytical stance (both *etic* and *emic*) of the classic anthropology that had emerged in the second quarter of the twentieth century with such proponents as Malinowski, Evans-Pritchard, Fortes, Griaule and Leiris.' (van Binsbergen 2003: 22 f.)

This is the main point of criticism of the Amsterdam approach that emergence from a close look at the Rangerian alternative: while the latter freezes institutions and the associated groups in space and time and therefore does nothing but produce research artefacts within a closed academic discourse, the former acknowledges that the nature and meaning of the products of human cultural and symbolic action (institutions, and the social relations and groups surrounding and carrying them in space and time) are not immutable and timeless, nor are the social relations and groups around them immutable and timeless, but all have their proper history even if we do not know that history yet – and the central purpose of comparison is to bring out that history, painstakingly and by methodologically sound reference to all the empirical data at our disposal.

But while the Rangerian approach thus appears, not only much more difficult (apart from the sham problems of sample construction and the underlying mathematics of statistical testing) but also incomparably superior, and while it did manage (at least in the perception of those partial to it, like myself) to dramatically enrich and deepen our insight into historical processes and underlying continuities in South Central, Southern and Eastern sub-Saharan Africa, also that comparative approach is subject to severe limitations. Some of these may be overcome, e.g. in order to use literally all available data a researcher should become more conversant with comparative linguistics, archaeology, genetics, ecological science, astronomy, than most participants in the Ranger network were in the high time of its functioning. Meanwhile, the rise of the Internet has led to a dramatic increase of the interdisciplinary accessibility of academic knowledge, and has greatly intensified the rate and speed of communication between researchers worldwide. Another series of shortcomings however are inherent to comparative research as such. This will take us, finally, to the matter of comparability as a paradigmatic problem, but after the detour of a somewhat extensive discussion of an exercise in comparison I have just completed with the publication, earlier this year, of my book *Before the Presocratics: transformation, and element cosmology: The case of transcontinental pre- or protohistoric cosmological substrates linking Africa, Eurasia and North America*, – where, several decades after the two comparative styles just discussed, a form of arch-comparativism comes to the fore that throws the underlying methodological and comparative problems in illuminating relief.

### **3. Comparability as a paradigmatic problem**

#### *3.1. The problem of aggregation*

The problem of aggregation may be illustrated by an example from state-of-the-art comparative mythology. One of the great recent assets of this field is the global

mythological data base which the Leningrad (Russia) professor of African anthropology, Yuri Berezkin, compiled over the years on the basis of a painstaking perusal of all available published sources of myths etc. Berezkin works with a high-resolution classification system, where most known mythical motifs are cut up in several constituent parts before being entered into the database: a fictitious example just for illustration, ‘the ogre’ would be cut up in such entries as ‘the ogre is human’, ‘the ogre is defeated by the son of a virgin woman’, ‘the ogre inhabits a confined subterranean space’, ‘the ogre is given to shape-shifting’, etc. As a result about 2000 motifs are discerned and entered into distribution analysis (yielding exquisite global maps, e.g. Berezkin 2010), and statistical analysis. In passing we note that this method owes much to the tradition of cross-cultural research in anthropology, discussed above as the ‘Amsterdam School’. By contrast, today’s dean of comparative mythology, the prominent Sanskritist Michael Witzel (2001, 2012), in his path-breaking work of the past decade distinguishes a far smaller number of motifs (less than 100), and discusses their identity, similarity or difference not with the mechanical methods of the data base, but with the *Verstehen* methodology of philological and text-critical analysis. This brings Witzel close to the method described above for the Ranger network, but with substantial differences in Witzel’s advantage: his scope is global instead of regional, he personally knows many of the languages and cultures that he deals with and as a result can bring to bear upon his analysis the intimate semantic analysis that comes with such intimate familiarity, and he makes extensive use of such ancillary fields of science as state-of-the-arts population genetics in order to ground his analysis in a solid scientific context of the prehistory of Anatomically Modern Humans. My own position has been even more restricted and low-resolution: brutally and tentatively reducing the corpus of world mythology to only a few dozen (say, 40) ‘Narrative Complexes’ of very wide scope in other words a high level of aggregation, I have presented (van Binsbergen 2006a, 2006b, 2010, 2012) an argued if daring reconstruction (against the background of the reconstructed prehistory of linguistic macrofamilies and modes of production) of the emergence of most of these Narrative Complexes in the course of the last two score of ka mainly in the Asian continent, on which basis I have then proceeded, by various methods of close reading and triangulation, to reconstruct the small, original mythological package, ‘Pandora’s Box’, which Anatomically Modern Humans developed inside the African continent prior to the ‘Out-of-Africa’ migration from 80–60 ka BP.<sup>9 10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> ka = kilo year, one millennium, 1,000 years; BP = Before Present; CE = Common Era; BCE = Before the Common Era. If CE or BCE is not specified, CE is implied.

<sup>10</sup> At the Fourth Annual Meeting of the International Association for Comparative Mythology, Cambridge (MA, USA), 2010, a debate between Boris Oguibénine, Yuri Berezkin and myself specifically addressed the problem of aggregation, Oguibénine reproaching (seconded by me) Berezkin for the violent imposition of analytical categories that did not attempt to reflect the historical actor’s own *emic* distinctions. Berezkin’s unconvincing defence was that he was merely doing what was scientifically right, i.e. engaging in a job of compilation and comparison – as a scientist, as distinct from a scholar, he felt justified to leave the *emic* approach to others.

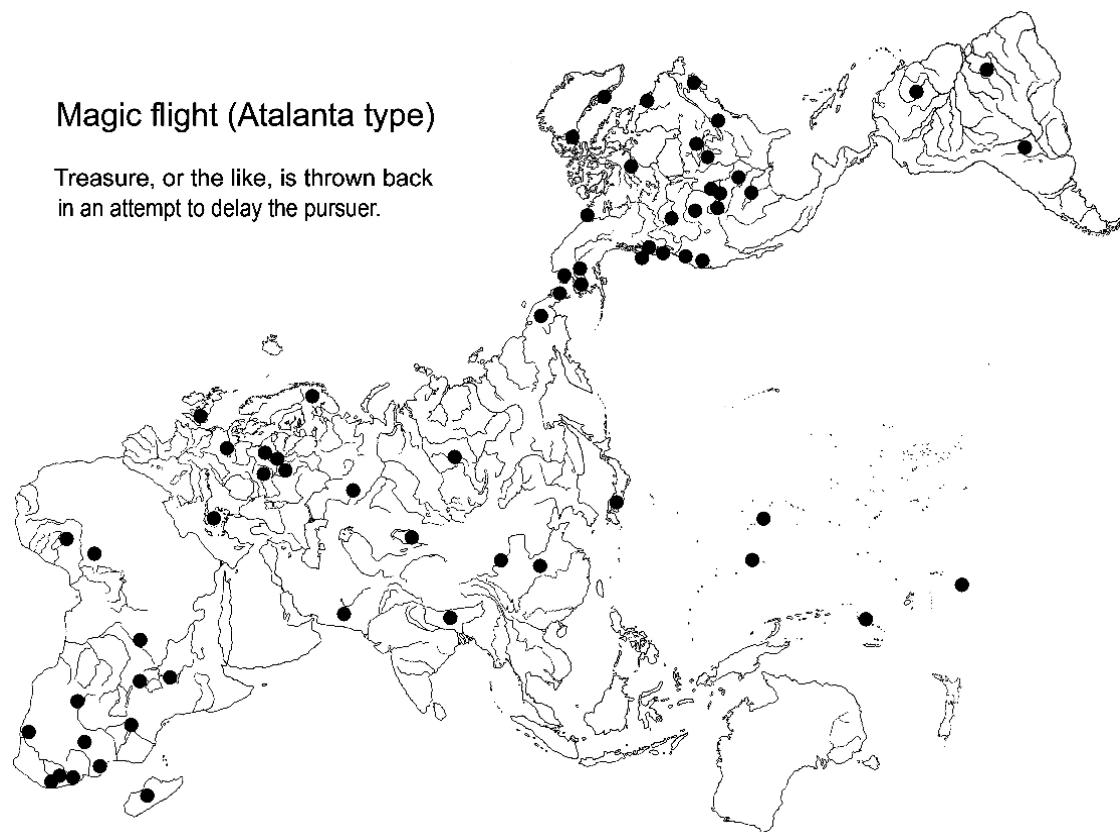


Fig. 3.1. The global distribution of the *Atalanta* type version of *Magic flight* according to Berezkin (2010: 122, Fig. 7.7)

While these examples deal with the problem of aggregation at the level of data definition and categorisation, aggregation of course is also a problem at the level of the definition of the historical population from which the data derive. We have seen that the cross-cultural school whose main tool is a systematic matrix of data with as few empty cells as possible, make for extreme fragmentation of the historical populations from which the data derive, and in principle ignores all historical and regional interrelations between such populations. Concentrating on real-life historical population and conversant with their political, cultural and linguistic interrelations, the populations handled in the emically-orientated Ranger and Witzel approaches largely escape the violence of such imposed fragmentation, and even in the comparative analysis continue to feature dynamically more or less as they are, or used to be, conceived by the historical actors, reflecting the changes in the latter's perceptions over time.

However, also in the emically-orientated approach the historical actors do not form the only constituency to which the analyst is answerable. The analyst tends to be a representative of her or his gender, generation, profession, class, position within the world system, position within the global political economy of knowledge, and this also influences how the historical populations are conceived in the comparative exercise.

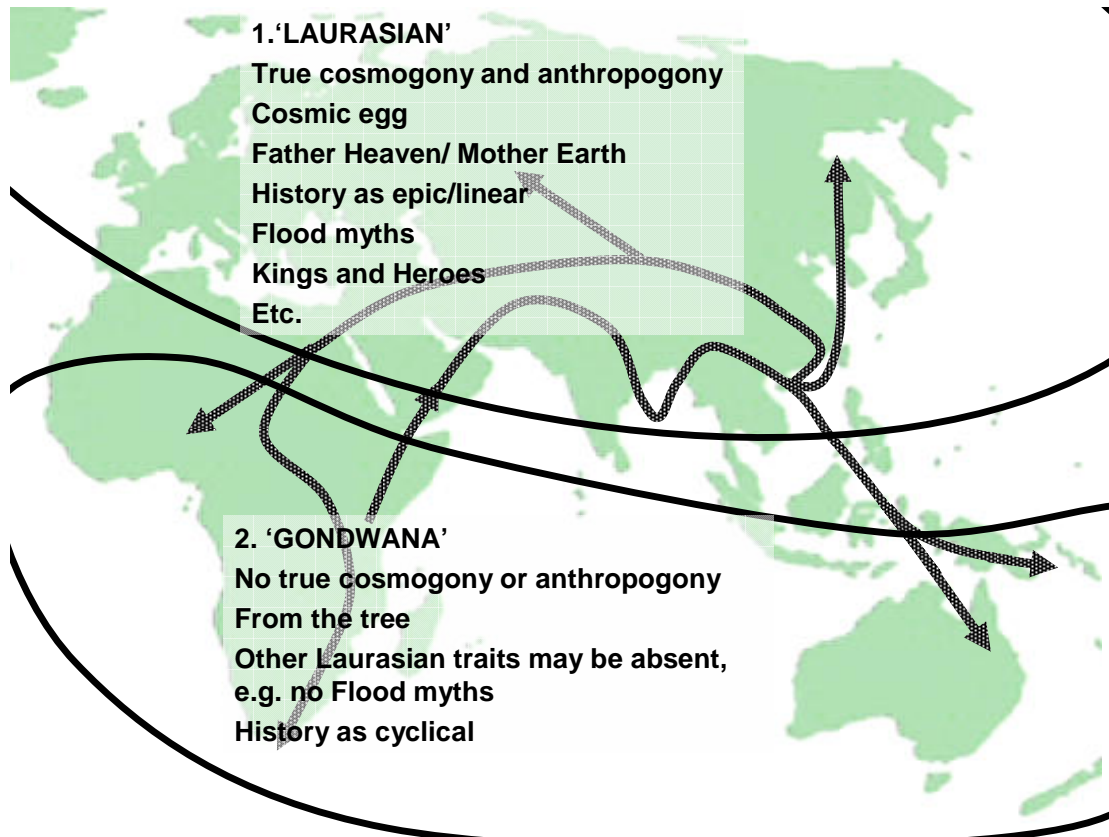


Fig. 3.2. Michael Witzel's proposal for absolute discontinuity in comparative world mythology between (1) Laurasian and (2) Gondwana, projected here by me onto a simplified model of the Out-of-Africa migration (c. 80-60 ka BP) and the Into-Africa return migration (from c. 15,000 BP) (which however is suggestive of considerable continuity)<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> My 2006a summary ended thus:

'While predicated on Witzel's seminal long-range approach to world mythology, his Laurasian / Gondwana dichotomy is replaced by a systematically argued combination of continuity, transformation, interaction, and feedback.' (van Binsbergen 2006a: 319; a diagrammatic representation of Witzel's Laurasian / Gondwana distinction, radically separating Eurasian and African mythologies, appears on my p. 2006a: 321).

This message has taken a while to register. Although there has been considerable approachment on individual points, *grosso modo* Michael Witzel has continued to rely on his Gondwana / Laurasian dichotomy right up to his contribution in the present volume (Witzel 2010) – in the tradition of African othering and African-Eurasian discontinuity. Michael Witzel's conceptual apparatus on this point is somewhat unfortunate. Gondwana and Laurasian are geological terms to designate phases and sections of the postulated original land mass from which, ever since Wegener (1912), modern geo-physics has claimed that present-day continents were formed, on a time scale measured, not in tens of millennia like the cultural (including mythological) history of Anatomically Modern Humans), but in hundreds of millions of years! By its play on such utter primordiality, Witzel's distinction confusingly suggests a fundamental and perennial separation of African / Australian / New Guinean mythologies on the one hand, and Eurasian / Oceanian / American mythologies on the other. Such an approach claims that there are, basically and inevitably, two main branches of mythologising humankind: the primitive southern section with high levels of skin pigmentation, and the more advanced northern one with lesser levels. However, my difference with Michael Witzel (while acknowledging the enormous inspiration which his work and person have been for me in recent years), however, concerns. not in the first place

Witzel is not alone in his belief that ‘South’ cultures and languages are constituted on a radically different footing than their ‘North’ counterparts. Inspired by Trombetti’s work of a century ago,<sup>12</sup> the prominent linguist Roger Blench (2006) holds a similar belief. However, the idea of such a fundamental and early bifurcation of Anatomically Modern Humans is offensive to me,

- not only in the light of the global politics of knowledge (where anti-hegemonic approaches such as Afrocentricity and Postcolonial Theory militate lest our academic work continues to replicate the White racist, colonial world image upheld in the North Atlantic a century ago; cf. Mudimbe 1988; Asante 1987, 1990; van Binsbergen 2003, 2011; Bernal 1987)
- but also in the light of the overwhelming genetic,<sup>13</sup> linguistic<sup>14</sup> and comparative mythological (see below) evidence to the effect that demic diffusion from Asia over the past 15 ka has massively fed back genes, as well as linguistic, mythological and other cultural elements (van Binsbergen 2010, 2013) back into Africa after they had developed, ramified and transformed, ever since the Out-of-Africa migration, inside Asia in the course of one or two dozens of ka.

Inspired by the mythology I encountered during forty years of association with the Nkoya people of South Central Africa, which though situated in sub-Saharan Africa shows many of Witzel’s Laurasian traits, I have argued the continuity of African and African mythologies on several occasions, cf. van Binsbergen (2007, 2010). For the sake of the present argument, Fig. XX and Table XX provisionally present the distribution of the mytheme of the Cosmic Egg, which Witzel singles out as specifically Laurasian i.e. Northern and un-African.

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ideology or the transcontinental politics of knowledge, but empirical facts: given the combined, state-of-the-art genetic paradigms of the Out-of-Africa migration and the Back-into-Africa migration, ‘Laurasian’ and ‘Gondwana’ mythologies can only be relative and connected ideal-types, inevitably continuous and interpenetrating – with ‘Laurasian’ mythology developing out of ‘Gondwana’ in Asia during the Middle and Upper Palaeolithic ever after the Second Out-of-Africa Sally (from ca. 60 ka BP; for a provisional reconstruction of the specific steps see Table 9.2), while subsequently ‘Laurasian’-type mythologies percolated into Africa, overlaying and often – like in the Nkoya case – nearly obscuring the Palaeo-African ‘Gondwana’ heritage, as a result, in general, of the Back-into-Africa movement (from ca. 15 ka BP), and more recently, and in particular, the southward expansion, into sub-Saharan Africa, of the ‘Pelagian realm’ from the Late Bronze Age onward.

<sup>12</sup> Which I however read in the opposite way, notably as a plea for situating the origin of Bantu in Asia; cf. Trombetti [ **add refs** ]

<sup>13</sup> Hammer et al. 1998; Cruciani et al. 2002; Underhill 2004; Coia et al. 2005.

<sup>14</sup> The linguistic evidence is not generally agreed on, but it includes the demonstrable affinity of sub-Saharan Africa’s most numerous linguistic macrophylum, Niger-Congo, with the reconstructed proto-phylum \*Borean (postulated for Central Asia, c. 25 ka BP), and with the Austric phylum. I have a hunch (based, among other reasons, on the fact that the oldest attestations of Bantu derive not from Africa but from West Asia; van Binsbergen & Woudhuizen 2011: 81 *f.*) that Bantu emerged under considerable Asian notably Austric influence, perhaps outside Africa, where it was immensely successful over just the past 2 ka.

### 3.2. Methodological and theoretical lessons to be learned from the mytheme of the Cosmic Egg

#### (a) The comparative variable as paradigm

Let us try to bring out some of the important theoretical and methodological aspects of the act of comparison, by concentrating closely on this mytheme and its distribution in space and time.

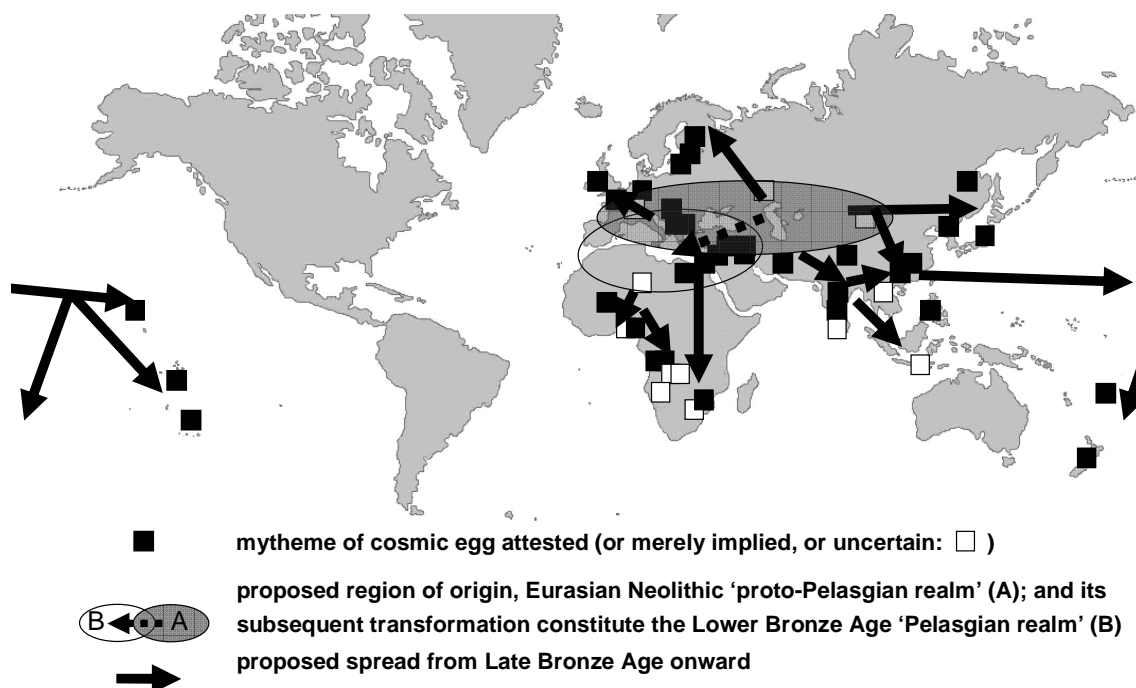


Fig. 3.3. The Cosmic Egg in World mythology: Distribution and proposed historical transmission

for details see: van Binsbergen 2011b<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Although the proposed historical reconstruction appears to me the most plausible, and tallies with that of scores of other supposedly Pelasgian traits (*cf.* van Binsbergen 2010a, and in press (a); van Binsbergen & Woudhuizen 2011: 372 *f.*), it is only fair to indicate an alternative interpretation, in terms of Oppenheimer's (1998) Sunda Hypothesis – situating the origin of the mytheme of the Cosmic Egg in South East Asia, and assuming it to have spread, not only north and east into East Asia and Oceania, but also west, on the wings of the postulated Sunda maritime expansion in the course of the first half of the Holocene. Oppenheimer claims that the core mythologies of the Ancient Near East including the Bible thus have a prehistoric Sunda origin. I have elsewhere argued why specifically in regard of Ancient Near Eastern myths this is very implausible (van Binsbergen with Isaak 2008), although as a general hypothesis of transcontinental influence Oppenheimer's model has, as admitted above, considerable value especially for the study of Africa – so much so that in the context of the 2012 Leiden conference I presented (2012e) a paper setting out the genetic, comparative religious, archaeological and ethnographic evidence in favour of what I have come to designate as the '*Oppenheimer—Tauchmann—Dick-Read Hypothesis*'; *cf.* van Binsbergen 2012b, and in press (b) 2013: ch. 12).

Location and period	Reference	Remarks
[Dahomey (Benin) ]	Van der Sluijs 2004	
[NW Europe , early modern ]	Ashliman 1998-2005	Grimm / Aarne type 302, The Giant Whose Heart Was in an Egg,
[Xhosa (Rep. South Africa)]	Van der Sluijs 2004	
[Yaka , Congo ]	Devisch 1988	
[Angola, Sub-Saharan Africa, modern]	Rodrigues de Areia 1985	Egg in divinatory set represented
[Bali, modern]	Brinkgreve 1997	Implied in sacrifice
Buddhism	Newall 1967	
China, Ancient	Christie 1968; Cottrell 1989 : 98 ; Willis 1994 : 90 ; Girardot 1976, 1977, 1978; Yu, David C., 1981; Liu 1991; Neville 1985 ; Johnson, David., 1981,	Phan-ku 盤古 [ cf. Tiamat, Leviathan ] out of whose dead and fragmented body the world was formed , still venerated among Chinese minorities Miao, Yao and Li
Dogon, Mali	Van der Sluijs 2004; Fernandez 1967; Griaule & Dieterlen 1965; van Beek 1992; Zuesse 1975; Horton 1967;	
Druids, Ancient	Moorehead 1885	
Egypt, Ancient	Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1994; Cottrell 1989: 168; Gardiner 1994; Devitt 2005,	Great Cackler; Thoth hatching; 467: 'In Dyn XIX or before F51 [but 180 degrees rotated] changes into the egg H8 and subsequently X01+H8 becomes a generic det. for goddesses.'; egg especially Hermopolis [ = Thoth , Ogdoad, not Nine] ;
Eurasia, Upper Palaeolithic	Rappenglueck 1999; Gimbutas 1982, 1991; Eliade 1976	shamanistische connotaties van Zwaan, Ei, Dioscuren, Leda, Zeus
Fang (Gabon)	Van der Sluijs 2004;	
Finland, Ancient	Cottrell 1989: 217; Puhvel 1971,	217: egg: also Finnish mythology: Luonnotar, daughter of the creation god, mated with bird, produced egg; from this egg: heaven, earth, sun, moon
Greece, Ancient	Chevalier & Gheerbrant 1994; Cottrell 1989: 168; Fontenrose 1980; Minar 1963; Kerényi, apud Robinson 1948; Pollard 1948; Cornford 1934	Dioscuri, Helena, Hera [ fertilised egg from Kronos ] ; and from pre-Socratic philosophers onwards
[Hawaii]		The god Paka'a, inventor of the sail? Cf. Cretan Minos
India, Ancient	Cottrell 1989: 186 ; Penner 1966; Newall 1967; Vayu Purana	186: Vinata, mother of Aruna (dawn) lays two eggs, Aruna comes from the broken egg, hence is only half (Luwé)
Iran, Ancient	Russell 1993; Zaehner 1940	Mithras (emerging from an egg), Zervan
[Japan, modern]		This is an uncertain attestation, however, often implied or mentioned in passing in literature on East Asia and Buddhism; also



		Bon continuity
Korea	Song, Sun-hee., 1974,	
Lithuania	Straiþys & Klimka 1971,	
Mandaeans, Ancient (Southern Iraq)	Kraeling 1933,	
Nanai people, Amur, Eastern Siberia	Sem –n.d.	
[New Zealand]		Uncertain attestation
NW Europe, ME and Early modern	Bacon, Roger., 1969, ; Jung, C.G., 1987: 214, 291 n 25; Zetterberg, J. Peter, 1979,	Philosopher’s egg, alchemy
Pangwe (Gabon),	Van der Sluijs 2004;	
Philippines, modern	Demetrio, Francisco ., 1968, 1969,	
Post-Neolithic great civilisations of the Mediterranean, South and East Asia, and Africa	Loeb 1956, Baumann 1955; von Sicard 1956	
[Sahara, Neolithic fertile ]	Lhote, H., 1959: Fig. 47	Strong suggestion of Primordial Egg depicted
Sri Lanka, modern	Feddema, J.P., 1995,	Egg in sacrifice
Syro-Palestine, Ancient	Cottrell 1989: 223, 143; West 1994; Magness 2001; Schmidt 1921,	223: Mot (Canaan) lord of death, born from primal egg from Air and Chaos; Baal is invited by Mot, dies in the underworld; Anat brings him back, killing Mot; ogre motif; [ perhaps Og, riding the Ark, is a variant of the cosmic egg ] ; Enoch text as mediated through Ancient Slavic
Tahiti, Oceania	Cottrell 1989: 164	Taároa
[Thailand]	Heinze 1977	Implied in sacrifice
Tibet, Ancient	Richardson 1968, Snellgrove 19XX	
Yoruba (Nigeria, Benin)	Lowie 1937	
Zulu (Rep. South Africa)]	Van der Sluijs 2004 (doubtful attestation); Schlosser 1992 (certain), cf. van Binsbergen 2012 [ Presocratics ]	

Table. 3.1. Data points to Fig. 3.3.

Before we allow ourselves to be carried away by the clarity of the distribution map and by the plausibility of the historical connections suggested there (a distribution can suggest such connections but cannot really by itself determine what the historical sequence underlying the connection has been: from data point A to B or the other way around), a close look at the entries in Table XX remind us of the aggregate and

constructed nature of the category of the ‘Cosmic Egg’.

The notion of the ‘Cosmic Egg’ simply cannot be a universal<sup>16</sup> of human thought but necessarily has a far more restricted distribution in time and space. Eggs have constituted the dominant reproductive format of all macroscopic animal life forms with the exception mainly of mammals (which are viviparous), and therefore the *concept* of the egg may be said to have been universal and perennial ever since the appearance of human life on earth, some four million years ago. Of the reconstructed \*Borean roots with the semantics ‘egg’, \*LVNV has reflexes in the present-day linguistic macrophyla Austric and Sino-Caucasian; and \*TVLV in Eurasiatic (including Indo-European and most other language groups of the Northern half of the Old World as well as Alaska and Greenland) and Sino-Caucasian (Starostin & Starostin 1998-2008, ‘long-range etymology’. However, the concept of ‘cosmic’ in the sense of ‘belonging to the universe, the entire world as knowable to humans; heaven and earth’ is not universal and, in Western thought, strictly speaking has not been attested before the Presocratics.<sup>17</sup> Recent comparative mythology suggests that, replacing the Cosmogony of the Separation of Water and Land, the Separation of Heaven and Earth became a central mythical motif in the outgoing Upper Palaeolithic, less than 20 ka BP, and subsequently became the dominant cosmology of Anatomically Modern Humans in most parts of the world.

What then is the idea of the ‘Cosmic Egg’? It consist in a Gestalt-like concept, model or ideal type which a subset of humanity (defined as classifying and interpreting analysts belonging to a North Atlantic intellectual undertaking called ‘comparative research’) use to characterise and categorise the cosmogonic notions of historical participants in hundreds of settings in time and space, some of which may appear close to the analytical concept of the ‘cosmic egg’, while others may be relatively far removed from that concept and have to be actively interpreted before they can be classified as ‘cosmic egg’. E.g., The Nkoya of Western Zambia, South Central Africa, are not even included in Table XX, but by a stretch of the imagination they might be, for their traditions have it that the creator was a bird, and that the creator’s child (gender is unmarked in the Nkoya language) is also a bird (*Likota lya Bankoya* XXX: XXX; van Binsbergen 1988, 1992) – birds are without exceptions (Blackburn & Evans 1986) born from eggs, so by implication the Nkoya have a two-tiered egg-centred cosmogony; they have now been added to the distribution map accordingly. We may make this claim all the more confidently, since the distribution map Fig. XX shows that the Cosmic Egg motif may be claimed for several other South Central and Southern African settings – although not unequivocally.

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<sup>16</sup> To avoid misunderstanding: I am saying this for the sake of the argument only. I am not implying that Witzel presents the Cosmic Egg as a universal of human thought. His claim is explicitly more restricted: for him, the motif of the Cosmic Egg is a distinctive feature of Laurasian, i.e. North, ‘civilised’, usually literate, mythologies.

<sup>17</sup> Gatzemeier 2001, Mercier 1957; cf. Dasgupta 1922 / 1992 for South Asian; Needham 1975, Allan 1991, for China; and Blacker & Loewe 1975, Eliade 1971, Middleton 1967 / 1975, King 1986, Zuesse 1979, for other cultures. Many studies in the anthropology of religion and in comparative religion have employed the term ‘cosmos’ as an analytical term to denote the historical participant’s conception of the world, but such use of the term amounts to a form of etic imposition.

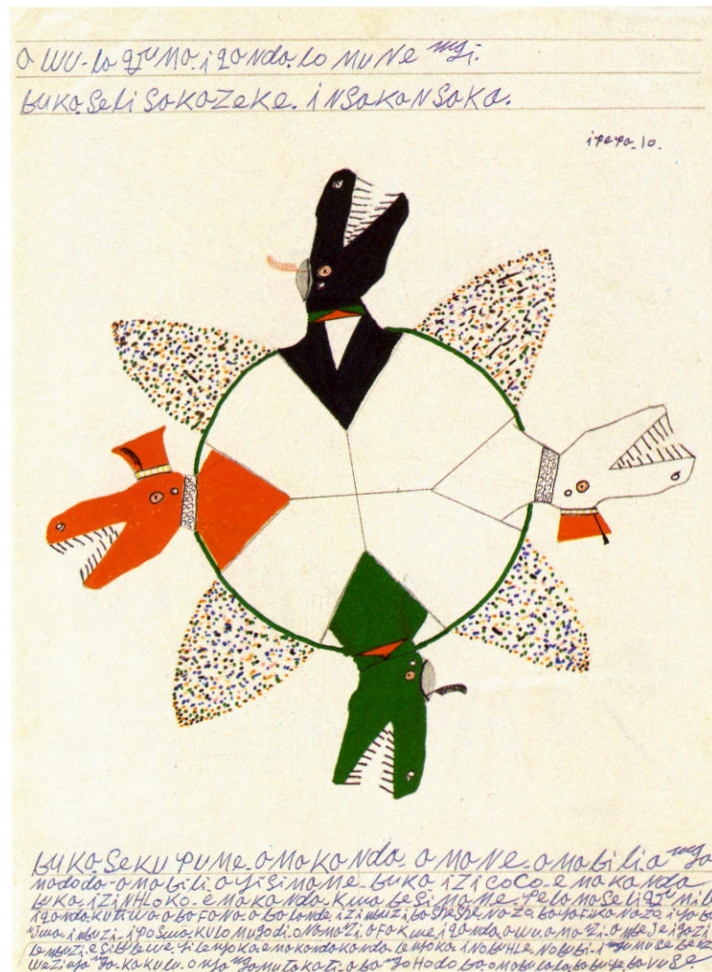


Fig. 3.4. The Cosmic Egg in the rendering by the Zulu lightning wizard Madela (Schlosser 1992)

Looking through the dozens of entries of Table XX, we will realise that whenever the analyst decides to enter an attestation (defined by time, place, and designation of the historical participants) into the Table, this is as a result of a complex operation of documentation, perception, assessment in the light of an operational definition of ‘Cosmic Egg’, checking against doubles, etc. No entry is totally self-evident, although it is likely that the analyst has a few ‘type cases’ in mind omission of which from the database would make the exercise futile and meaningless. The Finnish attestation would qualify as such a type case:

Luonnotar, daughter of the creation god, mated with a bird, and produced an egg; from this egg emerged heaven, earth, sun, and moon.

This is almost literally the formulation of the *Vayu Purana* (4.74-75) – which confirms the close affinity between Scandinavian (even when Uralic) and Indian mythology. Yet even the most famous example of a Cosmic Egg in the European tradition, that of Leda mating with Zeus in the shape of a swan,<sup>18</sup> keeps a considerable

<sup>18</sup> [ the following footnote was taken from van Binsbergen & Woudhuizen 2011: 363, see also

distance from that type case can only be entered into the database as the result of a complex act of reasoning and interpretation. For even though important gods and goddesses – later transformed and demoted into heroes heroines in the Troy saga – emerged from Leda's egg, but not the world and humankind as a whole.

*I am not spelling out these analytical details in order to cast doubt upon comparative mythology or any other comparative science, but in order to bring out my contention that the operation of comparison always consists in the application of a model invented by the analyst and external to the data – or let us say, of a paradigm. By implication, comparability (as, in this case, the comparability of various mythological and religious attestations suggestive of an egg-inspired cosmogonic notion) is not, in the first place, a given inherent in the data involved, but is the result of the analyst's judgment as to the extent to which any individual case comes close to the type case, ideal type, model or paradigm. Comparability is in the eyes of the beholder.*

One would have wished that on this point a world of difference could be claimed to exist between the manifestly blinkered analytical impositions of the Amsterdam / USA school of comparative mythology, and the more subtle and emically-orientated historical and philological approaches of Ranger and Witzel. However, this is not the case. Admittedly, the former is entrenched in a stance of alienated, emic imposition, whereas the latter on the basis of linguistic, cultural and historical understanding within a well-known, more or less limited region does take into account the historical participants' own perception and signification to a much greater extent. Yet even on the Ranger / Witzel side we cannot escape the fact that the selection and definition of items to be compared, in the last analysis, is entirely in the hands of the analysts, using a cosmopolitan language and the set of categories and theoretical concerns of a cosmopolitan field of knowledge construction (the own discipline, and academia at large) that is very far removed from the historical participants' own life world and own conceptualisations. In addition to the motif of the Cosmic Egg, let us consider a few further examples.

(a) *Flood myths* have played a prominent role in the recent debates on Comparative Mythology (e.g. Witzel 2010, van Binsbergen 2010, 2012 [ Presocratics, water destroys fire ] ; van Binsbergen & Woudhuizen 2011; van Binsbergen & Isaak 2008). Despite the fact that at least half of the world's recorded myths about a great

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**there for the bibliography ]** Leda with Zeus as swan: Ovid *Heroides* XVII. 55; Pausanias, *Guide to Greece* III, 16, § 1; Horace, *The 'Ars Poetica' = The Epistle to the Pisones* 147. (*gemino ... ab ovo*); Athenaeus, *The Learned Banqueters* II, 57d; IX 373; Lucianus, *Dialogi Deorum* 24.2 = 79.4.2; 2 (?) = 79.6.1 (?); 26.2 = 79.25.2; Virgil, *Ciris* 489; Lycophronis, *Alexandra*, ed. Scheer 1958: II, 48-49 (88); with thanks to Atsma, 2010, 'Leda', and to Fred Woudhuizen for checking and completing these references. The respective divinity of the siblings Clytaemnestra, Helen, Castor and Pollux, their respective fatherhood, and their division over two eggs constitute points of disagreement among the ancient mythographers. Much more could and should be said about Leda's rape by Zeus. I read this myth as follows: it recounts an important phase in the succession of cosmologies and worldviews in Western Eurasia in the course of the Bronze Age, when male sky gods representing the cosmogony of the separation of Heaven and Earth as associated with invading, violent Indo-European speakers, came to supplant (or relegate to subaltern status), in other words *rape*, goddesses that were derivatives or variants of the Mother of the Waters, on which the ancient Cosmogony of the Separation of Water and Land hinged, and whose main symbols consisted in white aquatic bird, especially the swan. Cf. van Binsbergen & Woudhuizen 2011: 140 and *passim*.

inundation wiping out humanity and animal life in general, derive from North America, the type case of flood myth is Noah's Biblical flood and its antecedents and ramifications in the Ancient Near East. Throughout the Old World, from Iceland to the Philippines, we may discern the model of the 'Elaborate Flood Myth', which goes through the following phases (van Binsbergen 2010: 181):

1. 'The cosmic order is provisionally established, including humans, but Heaven and Earth still merge, or are at least still connected through a tower, ladder, pole, thongs, ropes, *etc.*
2. humans commit a transgression (sorcery, murder, eating from forbidding fruit, discovery of sexuality in general, more specifically incest, *etc.*)
3. the connection between Heaven and Earth is severed, and humankind is destroyed by a flood
4. usually by the intercession of a (or the) divine being, there are one or more flood survivors, whose main task is to repopulate the earth; a typical mytheme here is that of the twin siblings who survive the flood and repopulate the world incestuously (*cf.* Katete and Luhamba; *cf.* Egyptian Shu and Tefnut, Greek Apollo and Artemis, and Dogon Nommo among the West African Dogon) – note the parallel with the discovery of sexuality, murder and incest (2)
5. renewed humankind attempts to reconnect to Heaven with the various natural, personal and ritual devices listed above – especially a tower
6. in the process the confusion of nations occurs – a multitude of ethnic and language groups emerge.'

I cannot go here into all the extremely interesting aspects of flood myths, their relation with an elemental cycle of transformations and with an older cosmogony according to which not the Separation of Heaven and Earth, but that of Water and Land (which the Flood upsets and relegates to a pre-cosmogonic state) is the true beginning of human history. Just like the Cosmic Egg, also flood myths were (on the basis of Frazer's assertions a century ago) supposed to be the privilege of North, Laurasian mythologies, and to be absent from Africa – a claim that is manifestly wrong.<sup>19</sup> We will come in a moment to what this means for the theory and methodology of comparability. My main point at this juncture is that flood myths occur so frequently over virtually the entire globe, and that the forms they take vary immensely, that all comparison of such myths depends on considerable sleight of hand on the part of the analyst – in other words, on a very high degree of aggregation.<sup>20</sup> Is the Biblical story of Lot and his daughters (which has the elements of total destruction, depopulation and repopulation, and incest, but lacks the watery element and only obliquely touches on the confusion of nations (the story has an ethnic implication by relegating the Israelites' hated neighbours the Moabites and the Ammonites to the fruits of incest; Genesis 19:30 f. ). Are the whimsical North American stories where a divine trickster both elicits and escapes a deluge, proper Flood Stories that belong in the same bracket of classification? Is the well-known Grimm story about the Bean, the Straw and the Fiery Coal, perishing the water they try to cross? Is the story (recorded both from the Zambezi area and from Indonesia) of a stranger old woman asking assistance in a village and when this is denied here, destroying the village with a flood – a flood story at a par with the others? which is it

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<sup>19</sup> See the distribution map, with fully referenced data points, in van Binsbergen 2012 [ **prescoratics** ] : 72 f. :

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Isaak 2005; Dundes 1988; Frazer 1918; for an initial inventarisation.

enough to have a tale about destructive water (in any transformative cycle of elements, in many parts of the world, water would be a destructor of fire regardless of any of the elements of the 'Standard Elaborate' model cited above. We cannot ask the historical actors from the many hundreds of provenances from which we have what looks like flood stories. It is the analyst herself or himself who makes the selection and, with the powers of persuasion constructed in his scholarly language use, conjures the apparently very different material together in one scholarly argument.

This process of concept construction, operationalisation, classification of data into the relative straightjacket of variables to be scored and measured, does not just affect the relatively abstruse and text-based domain of comparative mythology, but also the often more concrete and tangible comparative study of institutions in the history of a period or a region. Much of the work of the Ranger network was aimed at the documentation, classification and periodisation of *witchcraft* against the background of the evolution of South Central African village society between the 19<sup>th</sup> and the 21<sup>st</sup> centuries CE. Colonial witchcraft trials formed an important source of data, even though these were patently biased by the fact that under the law in force, legal action was targeted not at the practitioner of witchcraft (which was considered a mere symbolic act, however threatening, but without tangible material effects) but at the accuser of witchcraft. Ranger brought an enormous energy, great scientific leadership and impressive charisma, substantial funds, and a genuine identification with the lasting liberation of African people to this kind of research, yet his handicaps for such witchcraft research was obvious. In a region with more than a hundred different languages, the only language he commanded was English; not villages and urban squatter compounds, but universities, churches, mission stations and archives – the formal-sector centres *par excellence* of hegemonic redefinition of the African experience in past and present – were about the only contexts in which he interacted with Africans. Finally his enormous stylistic powers enabled him to gloss over the many lacunae and contradictions in his data, and to conceal lack of emic inside understanding under a thick blanket of dextrous formulations academic and passionate at the same time. The witchcraft accusations and trials he knew of, were mostly those committed to writing by expatriate civil servants decades ago in distant places whose life worlds could only fragmentarily be reconstructed by the modern historian, if at all. In such a context, we cannot expect a profound and rich, emic discourse analysis that situates the many different and internally layered South Central African expressions for mystical evil directed at fellow-humans, before projecting these concepts in their evolution in time and their distribution in space. 'Witchcraft, after all, although a topic of British legislation since the Middle Ages, was no longer a living reality in British society in the mid-1900s, nor could the etic expression 'witchcraft' be expected to correspond in detail with any of the similar concepts circulating in South Central Africa from the late 19<sup>th</sup> to the late 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Perhaps the real problem was that the people engaged in this kind of research genuinely believed that with the concept of 'witchcraft', they were handling an authentic, self-evident emic logical concept, that required no further emic discourse analysis. 'Witchcraft' is one of those hybrid concepts, like 'chief' in former British colonial Africa, or 'caste' in former French colonial Africa, that under the pretence of

rendering authentic African exotic 'emic' content, in fact merely projects a European, etic concept onto African situations. Nor were these obvious limitations peculiar to Ranger's person and intellectual stance. He realised that in order to make sense of his widely comparative data from all over the former Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland (now Zimbabwe, Zambia and Malawi) and adjacent territories, over the better part of a century, and place them in a meaningful causal sequence, he badly needed (in addition to better emic data, but that need scarcely registered with the documentary historian that he always remained) more, and more systematic, theory than most historians would be prepared to utilise, then as now. Eagerly he embraced the neo-Marxism then *en vogue*, and he became the most authoritative champion of my own Marxist attempts – more abstract-theoretical than properly historical – to make sense (van Binsbergen 1981) of South Central African religious history since c. 1500 CE, and to situate witchcraft, and the move away from witchcraft, within that historical process. Yet, probably significantly, his edited collection on the *Problem of Evil in Central Africa, 1500-2000* never materialised, nor did the published version of his Wiles lectures, Belfast 1978, on *Witchcraft Belief in Three Continents*.<sup>21</sup> The problems of comparative work on the history of witchcraft seemed to big for him, and probably for anyone. In the end, his masterly piece on the witch finder Tomo Nyirenda / Mwana Lesa [ 'God's Son' ] remains one of the few tangible and lasting results of his many years of endeavour.

**(b) *The unity or fragmentation of humankind as a paradigmatic position***

There is another paradigmatic problem that comes to light in Witzel's claims concerning the 'Laurasian' nature of the motifs of the Cosmic Egg and of the Flood myth. Here the point is not that the analytical concept we use as the focus of our comparison, turns out to be far removed from the complex and heterogeneous social and cultural reality on the ground. The point is now to realise that also the definition of the human community (in terms of its extent in time and space, and in terms of the name we attach to it) is an analytical construct – indispensable again, but unavoidably distortive.

The readiness to bifurcate present-day humanity in two parts, one with 'civilised' Northern forms of thought, the other with 'primitive' Southern forms, rests on a paradigm that doubts the *fundamental underlying unity of all present-day humankind, i.e. of all Anatomically Modern Humans*. The rejection of that bifurcation rests on the alternative paradigm affirming such unity. Empirical and theoretical scientific

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<sup>21</sup> To avoid misunderstanding: I am utilising Ranger's work, which has always been a source of immense inspiration and admiration for me, not in order to commit some intellectual parricide, but to bring out some inevitable pitfalls of comparative work. An abundance of similar examples could be picked up all over the literature. For instance, 'states', 'shrines', 'chiefs', 'kings', 'village', 'marriage', 'initiation', 'slave' – all these vital keywords of the historiography (and ethnography) of South Central Africa, create a mere illusion of understanding, because on the ground, in the actual historical situations to which they refer, and in the historical actors' (not necessarily consensual!) signification of these situations, they refer to something very complex, floating, internally contradictory, and subject to change. Comparisons using these concepts can only exist at the cost of ignoring these dynamics – yet without such concepts all comparison would be impossible.

arguments can help to make either paradigm plausible and attractive, but in the last analysis it is the institutional, knowledge-political, and general philosophical position of the analyst that decides. Paradigms come and go, like other scientific fashions, they are not about demonstrable truth but about persuasive self-evidence within a restricted social milieu – e.g. the leading members of a scientific discipline within a particular decade. Essentially irrational and arbitrary, once a paradigm is established it is the task of the academic establishment to manage and protect it – as it is the task of the academic bohemian, poetic, dare-devil or visionary fringe, to challenge such a paradigm and to propose alternatives.

When, unburdened by the politically correct intercultural politeness that has set the tone in transcontinental comparative studies since the decolonisation of South and South East Asia (late 1940s), and sub-Saharan Africa (early 1960s), Michael Witzel maintained for years that African do not have flood myths nor the cosmogony of the Cosmic Egg, he did more than advertise the limitations of his Africanist knowledge or assert his independence in the face of potentially trivialising political correctness – after all, he is undisputedly one of the world’s leading Asianists. In doing so, he implicitly defines the range of comparability of socio-cultural phenomena to encompass less than total humanity. Instead, he proposes a subset of half of humanity (a subset to which he himself belongs by birth, language and national identity – Germany – , by academic field – the textual study of South Asia – and by *Wahlverwantschaft* (with Japan, in many ways), excluding the other half from a number of cultural achievements that may easily pass as signs of accomplishment in civilisation, thought and historical awareness. It is the worldview that reflects the administrative organisation of European universities in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, more than the actual history of the world. Movement of people, genes, artefacts, languages and ideas, not the reification of boundaries between continents, has been the reality of human cultural history throughout, and especially ever since the Middle Palaeolithic, when despite the solid geological evidence of 70 kms of open sea separating Timor from New Guinea and Australia, Anatomically Modern Humans yet reached the latter two land masses (60 ka BP; cf. (Bednarik 1997a, 1997b, 1997c, 1999a, 1999b, 2003). The implication of state-of-the-art genetics discovering the ‘Back-into-Africa’ movement is that, with reference to recent millennia, we can no longer maintain the illusion of pure conceptual types applying to just one subset of humanity; and if we insist on pure types for the very remote past, e.g. at the time of the Out of Africa migration, there is a considerable risk that we merely, ethnocentrically, project our own self-evidences of today, onto that remote past.

Exactly the same risk is involved when we take the fundamental unity of humankind as our guiding principle in comparative studies. If it were not for today’s experience of globalisation in communication, travel, international politics and economics, we might be unable to project such globalisation onto the remote past, and there already discern the unity that we see spasmodically growing all around is today.

Either position, therefore, may be grounded in ideology more than in empirical scientific argument. It is the classic paradigmatic choice between lumpers and splitters – the one that has prevented most linguists over the past few centuries to see the fundamental communalities that unite (nearly) all linguistic macrophyla spoken today,



and that, in the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> c. CE, has gradually been brought out by the succession of the Austric, Dene-Sino-Caucasian, Nostratic and eventually \*Borean *Hypotheses*. In genetics we are already beyond that point – deciphering of the human genome in the last few decades has left little doubt as to the genetic unity of all Anatomically Modern Humans. These splendid and inspiring results (with immense political implications for our present-day, politically and religiously painfully divided world), let us not forget it, have been the results of painstaking comparative research by tens of thousands of research workers. I think that also other comparative sciences should take these lessons at heart. Due to the paradigmatic, i.e. essentially preconceived, simplifying and distortive, nature of the definition of our research variables for comparison, let us at least cast our net as widely as possible when it comes to defining the populations exhibiting these variables. Such a position would console us for the inevitable distance implied in any definition of a variable for comparative research. We may be unavoidably, etically, remote from the many different emic positions of the many different historical actors involved in our comparison. But if we take the fundamental unity of humankind as our point of departure, we are admitting that, in the last analysis, we have no choice but remaining on familiar ground – that of kindred cultures which, like those to which we ourselves belong, are all descendants (transformed, innovated, beyond easy recognition, no doubt) of the cultural package which our pre-Out-of-Africa ancestors developed inside Africa. However much we may err in defining and understanding the cultural items we are comparing, we still bring to that comparison our own humanity which we share with the historical participants, and which means that, complementing the myriad surface differences, there will be underlying communalities and continuities.

In addition with the argument of Before the Presocratics, with which I started out today, my recent comparative work focussing on Africa's transcontinental continuities with the other continents brings out many other examples:

- The amazing rapprochements between the mythology of Western Eurasia and that of Oceania (with an excursion into West Africa), concerning such mythemes as Land being fished up from the Sea; Delayed Cosmogony as a result of Incessant Mating between Heaven and Earth as Primordial Gods; the Invention of the Sail.
- The reduction to junior status of a chain of Neolithic goddesses from West Africa to West Asia, with the rise of male celestial gods in the Bronze Age (van Binsbergen & Woudhuizen 2011: Table 6.4, p. 142)
- the amazing continuity between random generators including tablets in divination in three continents (van Binsbergen 2012: Fig. 8.6, p. 276, and Table 2.3, p. 66)
- the globally converging symbolism of the speckled leopard-skin, and the even more amazing convergence of its lexical expressions across the world's linguistic phyla and macrophyla (van Binsbergen 2004 and in preparation (c))
- the amazing continuity between female puberty rights in sub-Saharan Africa and North America
- the evidence for a transcontinental cosmology, hinging on a transformative cycle of elements, and found throughout literate Bronze Age Eurasia (resonating in the Presocratics), with ramifications to sub-Saharan Africa and to North America (van Binsbergen 2012X; a summary / postscript of this book will be circulated during the conference.

In the face of the apparently insurmountable paradigmatic difficulties I have outlined in this paper, one would be inclined to say 'the proof of the pudding is in the eating'.

As comparativists, we are Anatomically Modern Humans, engaging – to the extent to our fields are social, cultural and linguistic– in the comparative analysis of the achievements of Anatomically Modern Humans. However abstrusely we may define our variables for comparison, and however crudely we may force the underlying historically lived reality of our data into the straightjacket of these variables, we would still not be comparing totally unrelated phenomena (‘apples with pears’), because in the last analysis what is involved is all fruits from the same tree – that of the cultural history of a fundamentally one humanity. Let us be tempted to take our results somewhat seriously – even if our comparisons cannot take into account the local details of the historical actors original conceptualisations and expression, a spirit of communality links them and us.

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