

conference

Rethinking Africa's transcontinental continuities in pre- and protohistory

12-13 april 2012

Leiden

further to our Call for Papers (31-8-2011)

Scientific focus of this meeting

Recent decades have seen breath-taking genetic, linguistic and archaeological / palaeoanthropological, and comparative-mythological advances in our understanding of the remotest history of present-day humanity, i.e. Anatomically Modern Humans. Still, such a revision of remote prehistory as was brought about by these developments, did not immediately lead to the revision of the place attributed to Africa amidst the continents in regard of more recent centuries and millennia. Moreover, within African Studies, the tendency has been to explain things African by almost exclusive reference to Africa alone, and to underplay transcontinental continuities. Yet there is ample empirical evidence to highlight Africa's transcontinental continuities even in more recent millennia. Over the last decades, studies of *modern* Africa have driven home the fact that one cannot understand current African conditions unless from a transcontinental, global perspective – whether it comes to capital and demographic flows, development, formal education, statal political organisation, or the dynamics of world religions. This makes it all the more pressing to investigate the transcontinental continuities involving sub-Saharan Africa in pre- and protohistoric times.

- To what extent is it true (as is widely assumed) that the roots of contemporary African predicaments, and their possible solutions, lie primarily in the recent conditions and developments of the 19th-21st centuries CE?
- Or, alternatively, to what extent can we discern transcontinental relations, and dynamics, of a much longer time span, shaping and reshaping, in the course of pre- and proto-history, African cultures, polities, economies and religions in close relation with the other continents?
- And, lest we make the mistake of attributing self-evidence and global applicability to the dominant (but rapidly declining), potentially hegemonic North Atlantic perspective: what instruments do we need to develop in the theoretical, methodological and epistemological fields, in order to avoid the blinkers of regional self-interest and ethnocentricity, and to move effectively – with an ever increasing and ever more vocal African participation – towards valid, reliable and relevant global knowledge about Africa?

Purpose of the meeting

The purpose of the conference is in the first place to bring about an open, critical, stimulating and accumulative debate between representatives of the various disciplines that have made major recent contributions to our state-of-the-art view of Africa's remotest past (Lower, Middle and Upper Palaeolithic), in a bid to bring out more fully the implications of these recent findings for Africa's place among the continents in the more recent past: the later prehistory (from the Neolithic onward), and the protohistory as reflected in early, mainly non-African sources. The aim of this debate is to highlight a far greater amount of transcontinental continuities in Africa's post-Palaeolithic past than have been admitted by scholarship so far, and in that light understand present-day Africa better. The accumulative critical reflection on the conference papers will lead to a collective volume in which these results are presented

to international scholarship in such fields as African Studies, African history, cultural history, archaeology, linguistics, and religious studies.

Proposed structure and contents of the meeting

The conference will have the following thematic structure of sessions:

1. **THE PROBLEM:** the tendency towards essentialisation and continental isolation of Africa in African Studies, genetics, archaeology, linguistics, and comparative mythology, – and the philosophical and epistemological critique of this state of affairs; is Afrocentricity another example of this tendency, or is a force of counterhegemonic liberation? What time and age produces what kind of image of Africa, and what kind of image of Africa is most timely in our age of globalisation?
2. **THE CONTRIBUTIONS FROM AUXILIARY SCIENCES:** Here some of the recent empirical and methodological advances in the fields of genetics, linguistics, archaeology, palaeoanthropology, and comparative mythology are to be presented which, while largely informing our changing views of the remoter African past (throughout the Palaeolithic), yet set the background for the methods and findings to be addressed in Section 3.
3. **BEYOND CONTINENTALISM: CASE STUDIES OF AFRICAN TRANSCONTINENTAL CONTINUITIES IN PRE- AND PROTOHISTORY:** in this section a number of case studies will be presented of empirical African situations highlighting profound transcontinental continuities in later prehistory and protohistory; this studies will include, among others, a view of West Asian continuities in West Africa; a reassessment of the Egyptocentric thesis of the African past; West and Central African kingship and ritual as indications of South, South East and East Asian continuities; Asian and African continuities in the emergence of African language families (Berber, Bantu); South Asian / Southern African continuities in metallurgy and architecture.
4. **SYNTHESIS: TOWARDS A TRANSCONTINENTAL AFRICA:** in this section we will try to move towards a new, transcontinental view of the more recent African prehistory and protohistory, and seek to highlight how some of the most pressing problems of contemporary Africa may be illuminated, and better understood, from the transcontinental perspective now emerging.