Transcontinental versus Afrocentrity

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Before the Presocratics. Cyclicity, Transformation, and Element Cosmology: The Case of Transcontinental Pre- or Protohistoric Cosmological Substrates linking Africa, Eurasia, and North America

by Wim M. J. van Binsbergens


Karl Jaspers had propounded the notion of Achsenzeit (Axis Age: the period from 800 to 200 BCE), during which, according to him, similar new ways of thinking appeared in Persia, India, the Sinosphere, and the Western World (see Jaspers 2011). The notion, barring its overt Eurocentric connotations, as Van Binsbergen reminds us, is central for an understanding of the concept of transcontinental continuity entrenched in human thought after the convergence of writing, the state, organized religion, and the monetary economy as key factors in the organization of society. Due to different waves of proto-globalization, these crucial features of civilization found their way into different regions of the globe such as the Aegean way of Iran and China via Northern India. Those transformative bursts of proto-globalization were powered by chariot, horse-back, and water transport.

Van Binsbergen argues that certain cultural traits from the Upper Palaeolithic Age found their way across the African continent. He first became aware of this when conducting fieldwork in Francis town, Botswana, where geomancy, a supposedly indigenous divination system, displayed the same features as an Islamic astrologically-based divination system that was established in Iraq around 1000 CE that in the meantime spread not only to Southern Africa but also to the entire Indian Ocean region, West Africa, and even Medieval and Renaissance Europe (p. 44). Geomancy, and other similar diagnostic and therapeutic traditions all have a formal character that facilitates their transmission across social boundaries.

Similarly, it is possible to study the correlations between cultural features such as animal symbolism (such as the leopard and its spotted pelts), myths, and games belonging to the mancala (a board-game) as well as postcolonial theory, Afrocenrtism, Mediterranean Bronze Age Studies, and Egyptology. In this regard, the work of American sinologist, Martin Bernal, is central – especially the thesis he elucidated in Black Athena (1987–2006).

Van Binsbergen then defines ‘strong Afrocentrism as a theory that considers Africa the origin of crucial phenomena of cultural history’ (p. 46). This aspect immediately connects with Dani W. Nabudere’s notion of Afrikology, which essentially regards Africa as ‘the Cradle of Humankind’, and Afrocenrtic theorists such as Molefi Kete Asante, whose notion of Afrocentrism quite a number of arresting subtleties quite distinct from the usual ethnocentric affirmation of Africa’s cultural primacy.

Van Binsbergen is always anxious to affirm his Afrocenrtic, one of the ways in which he accomplishes this is by attempting to debunk ‘the Eurocentric and hegemonic myth that philosophy started in Europe in historical times’ (p. 47).

In honour of Professor Wim M. van Binsbergens, distinguished Dutch anthropologist, philosopher, poet and practitioner of the Sangoma form of spirituality, common to Southern Africa, who turns 70 in 2017 after decades of conducting research on the multiple cultures of Africa, notably in the Northern, Western and Southern regions of the continent.

transcontinental continuities of the past, and to overcome such divisiveness as hegemonic interests of earlier decades and centuries have imposed on our image of the world and of the cultural history of humankind, and to help free Africa from the isolated and peripheral position that has been attributed to that continent in present-day World System (p. 32).

Van Binsbergen also reminds us that he has conducted ‘counter-hegemonic, transcontinental research for over twenty years now’ (ibid.). This places his Afrocenrtic credentials to the fore even while interrogating the radicality of those same credentials, merely because he has taken up a project whose theoretical composition includes a far-reaching incorporation of genetic science, archaeology, linguistics, comparative mythology, comparative ethnography, and empiricism, in short, a range of radical methodologies that could end up signalling a whole new academic genre.

On the Penalagian Hypothesis

According to accepted paleoanthropological, archaic Homo sapiens evolved to anatomically modern human beings in sub-Saharan Africa as early as 200,000 years ago, and then dispersed to other continents. This view is termed the ‘Out-of-Afr’ hypothesis (OAA) or ‘replacement hypothesis’, ‘recent single-origin hypothesis’ (RSOH), or ‘common source model’ (RAO) by experts in the field.

There is also the ‘Back-to-Africa’ hypothesis, according to which human beings evolved elsewhere, and then returned to Africa bearing new genes, religious and cultural practices, and new knowledge pertaining to science and technology. Van Binsbergen terms this migration back into Africa ‘Pandora’s Box’. He mentions some central hypotheses that he returns to frequently in his work, notably, the Borean hypothesis, as formulated by Harold C. Fleming (1987; 1991) and Sergei Starostin (1989; 1991), which, as described by van Binsbergen, holds:

all languages spoken today retain, in their constructed language forms, substantial traces of a hypothetical, reconstructed language arbitrarily termed ‘Borean’ and supposed to have been spoken in Central Asia, perhaps near Lake Baikal, in the Upper Palaeolithic, (c. 25 ka BP) (p. 34).

On the other hand, says Van Binsbergen, Stephen Oppenheimer (2001) argues, using the Sunda hypothesis, which postulates

considerable demographic effusion of cultural traits took place from South East Asia to Western Eurasia (and by implication to Africa) as the South Asian subcontinent was flooded (resulting in its present-day insular nature) with the melting of polar ice at the onset of the Holocene (10 ka BP) (ibid.).

Van Binsbergen adds that to understand prehistorical and protohistorical philosophical thought, it is necessary to move beyond the philosophical enterprise conceived as a narrow academic discipline and instead take in the study of the language, culture, and the social context in which Presocratic thought evolved. Accordingly, this methodological imperative necessitates a multiplicity of disciplinary competencies. In relation to philosophy itself, he notes that he does not offer a clear-cut argument per se, but instead presents a ‘historical and transcontinental-comparative prolegomena to an ontological philosophical argument on cosmology and the structure of reality’ (ibid., 41).

Van Binsbergen labels his approach as ‘counter-paradigmatic’ inasmuch as it seeks to ‘chart intellectual terra incognita’ (p. 43).

While conventional Global Studies deal with specific cultures, Van Binsbergen’s approach is very much concerned with entire continents and the concept of globality itself. Thus, he begins from the Upper Palaeolithic Age as a spatial construct while at the same time tracing ‘a particular intellectual cultural complex characterized by such features as cyclicity, transformation and element cosmology’ (ibid.), thereby bypassing ‘the highly presentist and localist perspectives prevailing in social anthropology ever since the classic, fieldwork-centred tradition in that field was established in the 1930s–1940s’ (ibid.). In addition, he learned that, within a given social context, cultural meaning is not only produced by social, political, and economic factors alone – he considers this a largely reductionist perspective – but also by symbols capable of retaining meaning and relevance across several cultural and geographical divides.

Similarly, it is possible to study the correlations between cultural features such as animal symbolism (such as the leopard and its spotted pelts), myths, and games belonging to the mancala (a board-game) as well as postcolonial theory, Afrocenrtism, Mediterranean Bronze Age Studies, and Egyptology. In this regard, the work of American sinologist, Martin Bernal, is central – especially the thesis he elucidated in Black Athena (1987–2006).

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In advancing what he terms the Pelasgian hypothesis, Van Binsbergen argues that as a result of the OOA exodus, Africans settled all over the world, bearing along with them specific sociocultural features such as marriage, kinship systems, and divination practices. In addition, during this global dispersal, myths and other products of the collective subconscious from Africa found their way into the minds of others who operate outside of Africa. Once out of Africa, these cultural manifestations became embedded in what he terms ‘Contexts of Intensified Transformation and Innovation’, which led to ‘new modes of production (both within and beyond the African continent)’ and of ‘new linguistic macrophylla’ (ibid., 49).

Contrary to the OOA hypothesis, the ‘Back-to-Africa’ hypothesis is claimed to have occurred ‘in the last 15 ka’ (ibid., 51), during which Asian peoples migrated to Africa carrying cultural attributes with them. These attributes pertaining to kingship, ecstatic cults, divination, and technology (for example, Van Binsbergen claims that there are Austric similarities in Bantu. It is suggested that the return to Africa most likely happened through (1) North Africa and (2) along the Indian Ocean from the Arabian peninsula or a more southern point of departure through the Swahili coast, Madagascar, or via the Cape of Good Hope through the Atlantic West coast ending up in the Bight of Benin and West Africa. As a result of this migration, an Indonesian, South East Asian influence (including East and South Asia) – otherwise termed as the Sundan influence – can be discerned at a transcontinental level that includes Africa. Van Binsbergen argues that it is possible to trace the emergence of mancala board games in Africa to Asia, with world religions such as Buddhism and Islam serving as platforms for their dissemination. Similar traits such as agricultural crops, xylophones, ecstatic cults and kingship structures, it is argued, can also be observed in West Africa. Van Binsbergen further suggests that ‘Sunda-associated, Buddhist-orientated states’ developed in eastern and southwestern and South Central Africa around the turn of the second millennium (Mapungubwe and Great Zimbabwe are cases in point)’ (ibid., 64).

It is also possible to trace the history and movement of geomancy at the transcontinental level. One of the oldest telltale signs of the existence of geomantic representational apparatus is of Chinese origin. Another ancient geomantic attestation springs from the African context. It is claimed that these two geomantic systems in fact share ‘symbolic systems and representational correspondences’ and hence ‘a common cultural environment’ (ibid., 68). Apart from Sino-Tibetan and Arabian geomancy (divination by the earth) which bears a mark of singularity, is with each other, there is also the same family of systems to be found in ancient Greek and Latin, Hebrew, Indian and pre-modern African contexts. In Africa in particular, other systems of divination include the Malagasy n’ko, West African Ifa, and the Arabian ‘ilm al-raml. While many scholars have affirmed the influence of Arabian geomantic practices across the coast of the Indian Ocean, many Afrocentric scholars have in turn rejected the Arabian origins of the West African geomantic system.

Van Binsbergen recalls the derision and resistance, which met his claim that ‘two geomantic systems that are encountered in West Africa at an Afrocentric discussion group. Van Binsbergen cites Richard Dick-Read, who asserts that there is evidence of Arab/Islamic influence in West African geomancy, especially Ifa, which is rooted in the ‘names of Islam’ and transported within its corpus. So it is not inexcusable that Ifa ‘may have an Indian Ocean, circumpole background’ (p. 72). Van Binsbergen concludes that West and South African practices of geomancy are directly indebted to Indian Ocean/ Sunda influence coming through the Cape of Good Hope. Also noteworthy is the fact that, in parts of Africa, there exist simple configurations of geomancy and divination which are likely to be descended from more intricate forms that possess a non-African origin, most probably Chinese. This view has not been welcomed by strong Afrocentrists. Van Binsbergen asserts that “Taoist geomancy includes bowls that enable him to read the past and future,” which is likely to be a SF. In his thesis, he shows how it has been ‘reinvented’ and then proceeds to point out that Africa, once again, has been relegated to the peripheries of culture in a ruthless gesture of racialized and epistemic violence.

At a deeper level, the Afrocentric agenda seeks to come to terms with the centralization of power and knowledge in race and racial violence, and in the domain of race, this has shown itself, if not a whole new discipline. This hope may be cold comfort for ultra-Afrocentrists, who may choose to abide by their view of Africa as the Cradle of Civilization and then proceed to point out that Africa, of extraordinary exception when they are, essentializations of African identities, which must be crossed; there is a necessity for Afrocentricity with a quite specific resources by which to transcend it itself, if not a whole new discipline. This must be admitted about his unique project.

Martin Bernal, who has gained the attention of Afrocentrists for mixed reasons, is viewed by van Binsbergen to be ‘wrong for the wrong reasons’ (p. 84). Bernal is also accused of imposing his subjective views as statements of fact, noting to ad hominem attacks to assert his claims. In other words, Van Binsbergen has much to fault about his work. EmileDurkheim is another Western intellectual that van Binsbergen exposes for shoddy work. Durkheim in The Elementary Forms of Religious Life (1912) makes propositions regarding Australian Aborigines and totemism without so much as a visit to the site of study. As such, he had theorized and hypothesized about the entire group of people without any personally organized ethnographic evidence and without any acceptable implements of comparative analysis.

Van Binsbergen stresses he is more concerned about establishing the linkages, continuities, and connections between different continents of the world; hence, more eloquent an understanding of the notion of transcontingency. Movement, migration and exchange, he points out, have for millennia been part of the currency of human transactions. If such is the case, not only goods and people but also ideas have been transported and wide. And so it is possible to trace the intellectual history of the world as scenes of interlinkages between diverse systems of knowledge of which mancala and geomancy are major examples. In addition, this absorbing history can be tracked employing genetic, linguistic, archeological, comparative-ethnographic and comparative-mythological modes of analysis.

Employing these given modes of analysis, it can be argued that inventions were not really the inventors of element cosmology as credited by the officials of history and philosophy but were merely clumsy and less inventive recipients of a handed down knowledge. Hence, the names of Islam, in van Binsbergen’s view, from ancient Asia and Africa. His thesis therefore seeks to affirm ‘the transcontinental complementarity of the intellectual achievements of Anatomically Modern Humans in the course of millennia’ (p. 86).

Of Theses and Hypotheses

Van Binsbergen’s conclusions deny the essentializations of African identities, which are usually discussed as instances of ‘otherness’ or ‘exceptionality’. He allows for a multiplicity of indigenous identities, and technological skills, without inventing them, but all the same, being able to adapt and transform them to meet local specificities and requirements.

If, as van Binsbergen correctly suspects, strong Afrocentrists would have misgivings as to the Afrocentric potentials and intent of his project, most however, would applaud the counter-paradigmatic turn of his approach in striking out for an area so vast and so intriguing in its possibilities as to seek to constitute an entire genre onto itself, if not a whole new discipline. This is a statement that must be admitted about his unique project.

Van Binsbergen’s deflation of Afrocentricity’s credibility as a discourse affirming the cultural and civilizational primacy of the black subject does not appear willful. In addition, he manages to elude the charge of being a ‘bogus paradigmatic turn of his approach in striking out for an area so vast and so intriguing in its possibilities as to seek to constitute an entire genre onto itself, if not a whole new discipline. This much must be admitted about his unique project. At a deeper level, the Afrocentric agenda seeks to come to terms with the centralization of power and knowledge in race and racial violence, and in the domain of race, this has shown itself, if not a whole new discipline. This hope may be cold comfort for ultra-Afrocentrists, who may choose to abide by their view of Africa as the Cradle of Civilization and then proceed to point out that Africa, once again, has been relegated to the peripheries of culture in a ruthless gesture of racialized and epistemic violence.

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The characteristics that define the black presence in the Bronze Age East Mediterranean include proto-Bantu-speaking features, elongated labia, round house architecture, spiked wheel trap, mancala board games, and the worship of a single supreme deity, all of which represent a counter-paradigmatic cultural and linguistic presence.

In tracing transcontinental continuities encompassing board games, geomatic practices and traditions, shamanic manifestations, linguistic revolutions, global migratory patterns, technological innovations, leopard-skin symbolism, astronomical schemas, divinatory systems, clan structures, and toponymical systems across millennia, van Binsbergen has attempted to construct a global intellectual history of gargantuan proportions. Writing a global history of this nature cannot be a straightforward affair. This is especially the case if there are numerous earlier hypotheses to be either proved or debunked; theoretical models to be tested and cross-checked; paradigms to be re-evaluated in accordance with historical specificities; schools of thought to be reassessed; various contestations with leading authorities in different academic fields and disciplines; attempts at resolving the intractable dilemmas of one’s untested hypotheses; intellectual contradictions within one’s own traditions; open anxieties about, and obvious gaps in, aspects of the project; and myriad other concerns of both personal and professional dimensions. All these problems and challenges are reflected in van Binsbergen’s work. Nonetheless, he has made a noteworthy attempt to advance a series of hypotheses that deserve painstaking attention for their sheer boldness, breadth, and versatility.

References


———, 2012, Before the Presecratics. Cyclicality, Transformation, and Element Cosmology: The Case of Transcontinental Pre- or Protohistorical Cosmological Substrates Linking Africa, Eurasia, and North America, Leiden: African Studies Centre (This volume has an excellent bibliography of other works by Wim van Binsbergen regarding this and related topics).


