

Chapter 1. Introduction and theoretico-methodological orientation

This argument seeks to contribute to the study of the global history of human thought and philosophy. It calls in question the popular, common perception (*cf.* Heidegger 1979; Gadamer 1968, 1996, 1999) of the Presocratic philosophers as having initiated Western philosophy, and particularly of Empedocles as having initiated the system of four elements as immutable and irreducible parallel components of reality – and in doing so, as having effectively laid the foundation for Modern science and technology, and the Modern World System at large. Our point of departure is the puzzling clan system of the Nkoya people of South Central Africa, which turns out to evoke a cosmology of six basic dimensions, each of which consists of a destructor, something that is being destroyed, and a third, catalytic agent. This is strongly reminiscent of the East Asian correlative systems as in the *Yi Jing* cosmological system of changes based on the 64 combinations of the eight trigrams two taken at a time; and *a fortiori* of the five-element cosmology of Taoism in general, in which the basic relations between elements are defined as an unending cycle of transformations by which each element is either destructive or productive of the next.

The central theme of my argument is not the elucidation of the East Asian correlative systems as such – for which I lack the knowledge and the authority – but the contextualisation of the African system as found among the Nkoya, and to probe, on that basis, into ancient modes of thought going back to the Palaeolithic – in the process subjecting the hegemonic Eurocentric view of the Presocratics to transcontinental criticism.

Before we set out on our long and arduous journey, a methodological,

theoretical and knowledge-political point needs to be made – and it should be made much more elaborately than space allows here. Modern scholarship is predicated on the division between regional specialties and between disciplines. The study of Empedocles’ four-element system could blissfully remain the privileged domain of historians of Western philosophy and science, as long as diffusionism remained in the discredited state it had entered with the rise of classic, fieldwork-centred anthropology in the second quarter of the 20th century CE, and as long as the divisive colonial-imperialist geopolitics survived that had assigned a separate, and usually subordinate, cultural history to each continent, creed, nation, and language phylum. Globalisation of the Modern world through new technologies of information and communication (which have also greatly facilitated trans-disciplinary and trans-regional exchanges of scientific knowledge), as well as the rise of a vocal counter-hegemonic trend in scholarship all over the world,¹³ have ushered in a new era, where the transcontinental continuities of the present invite us to investigate transcontinental continuities in 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. In a quest to empirically assert the fundamental unity of humankind, and to help free Africa from the isolated and peripheral position that has been attributed to that continent in the present-day World System, I have engaged in such counter-hegemonic, transcontinental research for over twenty years now, long enough to realise some of its pitfalls (*e.g.* the fact that interdisciplinary and interregional research inevitably means that one blunders into the specialist domains of others, and risks to make a fool of oneself there – with a tendency to reduce the other discipline to its obsolete positions of a generation ago; no doubt all these shortcomings also adhere the present book), but perhaps also long enough to begin to produce heuristically meaningful if in themselves still ephemeral results.

The extensive genetic, archaeological, linguistic, comparative ethnographic and comparative mythological empirical, methodological and theoretical background for such a view¹⁴ I have extensively discussed

¹³ *E.g.* Asad 1973; Copans 1975; Bernal 1987-2006; Said 1978; Diop 1948 / 1996, 1967; Mudimbe 1987; Fanon 1952; Bhabha 1994; Spivak 1987.

¹⁴ This view is indebted to the work of Martin Bernal and Michael Witzel, among

elsewhere;¹⁵ that background cannot be set out in any detail here for limitations of space, but includes the following empirically-supported theoretical perspectives:

1. the 'Out-of-Africa' Hypothesis (Forster 2004, with references), according to which Anatomically Modern Humans (the sub-species to which all humans living today belong) emerged in sub-Saharan Africa c. 200,000 year BP, and subsequently spread to other continents in the Out-of-Africa Exodus, 80-60 ka BP.

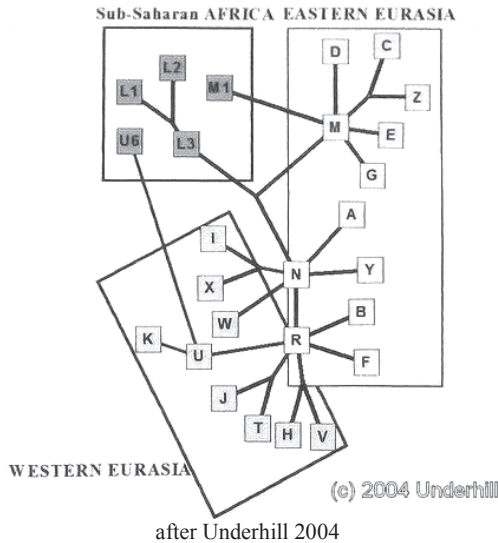


Fig. 1.1. 'Back-to-Africa' movement of specific mtDNA¹⁶ haplo groups.

2. The 'Back-to-Africa' Hypothesis¹⁷ according to which there has

others; Bernal 1987; Witzel 2001, 2012.

¹⁵ van Binsbergen 2003, 2010a, 2011a; van Binsbergen & Woudhuizen 2011.

¹⁶ mtDNA: specific mitochondrial hereditary protein constitutive of the human genome and situated in the cell's *mitochondria*, which results in intergenerational transmission in the female line only. Its analysis is an important tool in genetics today. The major groups found among Anatomically Modern Humans are identified by the letters of the alphabet.

¹⁷ Hammer *et al.* 1998; Cruciani *et al.* 2002; Coia *et al.* 2005; Underhill 2004; also *cf.*

been a substantial return migration from Asia into Africa from c. 15 ka BP – bringing to Africa not only genes evolved in Asia since the Out-of-Africa Exodus, but also the cultural and religious transformations and innovations that – on the basis of the common pre-Out of Africa heritage (what I have called ‘Pandora’s Box’) – had developed inside Asia, since the Out-of-Africa Exodus.

3. Starostin’s and Fleming’s *Borean Hypothesis, claiming that nearly all languages spoken today retain, in their reconstructed proto-forms, substantial traces of a hypothetical, reconstructed language arbitrarily named ‘*Borean’ and supposed to have been spoken in Central Asia, perhaps near Lake Baikal, in the Upper Palaeolithic (c. 25 ka BP).¹⁸
4. Stephen Oppenheimer ‘Sunda’ Hypothesis,¹⁹ according to which considerable demic diffusion of cultural traits took place from South East Asia to Western Eurasia (and by implication to Africa) as the South East 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). Oppenheimer has not explicitly considered the implications of his hypothesis for the African continent, but here his hypothesis is seconded by that of the history writer Dick-Read (2005, 2012) and the anthropologist Tauchmann (2010), a South East Asia specialist. In Tauchmann’s opinion, prior to the Bantu expansion in East and South-East Africa, pre- and proto-historic migrations from South East Asia (such as have long been recognised to have populated Madagascar and given it its distinction cultural and linguistic characteristics) had given rise to a considerable Austronesian genetic and linguistic presence in those parts of Africa.

haplogroups M1 and U6 in my Fig. 1.1).

¹⁸ Starostin 1999; Starostin & Starostin 1998-2008; Fleming 1991, 2002. Dolgopolsky 1998 shows the heuristic value of Illich-Svitych’s Nostratic / Eurasiatic Hypothesis, of lesser scope than the *Borean Hypothesis and confined to the Old World; Kaiser & Sheveroshkin (1988) count Niger-Congo as a branch of ‘Super-Nostratic’

¹⁹ Oppenheimer 1998; Tauchmann, personal communication, *cf.* van Binsbergen 2012e, and also 2012c and 2012d.

Such Asian presence on African soil is a moot point. Of course, Dick-Read's and Tauchmann's cultural claims match nicely the geneticists' recent discovery of the Back-to-Africa migration, although the geneticists' time scale not only displays very extensive error distributions, but also is rather longer (up to 15 ka) than the typical time span of comparative ethnographic research. The historian Kent (1970) who claimed extensive Sunda kingdoms on the East African coast was not taken seriously. In recent years African-Asian transcontinental continuities have dominated my research, and despite my dismissal of Oppenheimer's claims specifically in the field of comparative mythology (his 'Special Sunda Hypothesis'; van Binsbergen with Isaak 2008) I am yet finding his General Sunda Hypothesis to be of considerable heuristic value for an understanding of Africa's pre- and protohistory. There is also some linguistic support. A presumed Sunda presence in Africa would have to be detectable in the form of an Austronesian (< Austric) substrate in Eastern and Southern Bantu languages: a phenomenon already suggested – albeit for only a few East and South-eastern African languages, notably Makuwa, and the Sotho-Tswana cluster – by the sometime Leiden Professor of African Linguistics Thilo Schadeberg (personal communication 1994). Moreover, as I will set out in detail in Table 6.2, below, the eponymical root *-ntu*, 'human' of the widespread Bantu-speaking sub-phylum is virtually identical with proto-Austronesian **taw*, 'human' (Adelaar 1995) and both belong to a worldwide etymological ramification of a very old, **Borean* root **TVHV* (V = unspecified vowel), whose semantics hinges on 'earth, bottom, human'. The statistical lexical affinity between the protoforms of Austric and Niger-Congo (and Amerind!) which I established through cluster analysis²⁰ and which I attribute to the disintegration of **Borean* in the Asian Upper Palaeolithic, might also be attributed to an Austric substrate influence on Niger-Congo exerted within

²⁰ van Binsbergen 2011a and in press (b); van Binsbergen & Woudhuizen 2011: 77 f.; Fig. 8.2, below.

the African continent.²¹

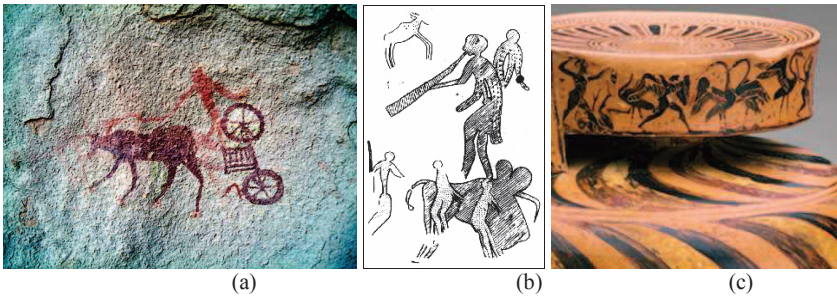
5. My '*Diachronic Aggregative Model*' of the world history of mythology, according to which Pandora's Box contained a limited number of more or less discernible basic mythemes ('Narrative Complexes'), which after the Out-of-Africa Exodus were transformed and innovated, especially inside Asia, and in further ramifications and transformations spread world-wide so as to produce the dazzling complexity and variation of today's global mythology. Some of these Asian themes (*e.g.* the unilateral mythical being, the Cosmic Egg,²² the separation of Heaven and Earth – the latter now being the dominant pre-Modern cosmology throughout the present world) subsequently entered Africa on the wings of the 'Back-to-Africa' migration and made for the considerable continuity between Eurasian and African mythologies.
6. My hypothesis of a succession, in the Eurasiatic Upper Palaeolithic, of two rival cosmogonies: one hinging on the Separation of Water and Land (hence: Flood myths as a cataclysmic mythical return to the pre-cosmogonic state), largely supplanted by one hinging on the Separation of Heaven and Earth.
7. My *Pelasgian Hypothesis* (see Fig. 2.1, below),
according to which a significant package of cultural traits and achievements²³ (arbitrarily, and I admit confusingly, la-

²¹ On these important transcontinental questions, an International Conference was held at the occasion of my retirement from the African Studies Centre, Leiden; my views on these matters were provisionally presented there and are now being finalised for publication (van Binsbergen, 2012c, 2012d, 2012e, in preparation (a) and (d)).

²² In earlier formulations of my Aggregative Diachronic Model of Global Mythology – *i.e.* an attempt to systematically identify humankind's oldest common heritage of mythology before the Out-of-Africa Exodus (c. 80-60 ka BP) and to account for its subsequent development until historical times – I still equated the mytheme of the Cosmic Egg with that of the Lightning Bird and included both in Pandora's Box. A more detailed re-analysis (van Binsbergen 2011b, see Fig. 5.4, below) now has convinced me that the Cosmic Egg is a much more recent idea which rather belongs to the Pelasgian complex – probably originally so, or perhaps (Oppenheimer 1998; but *cf.* van Binsbergen with Isaak 2008) as a result of cultural expansion ('Sunda') from Early Holocene South East Asia having penetrated the Pelasgian realm.

²³ Including (overlapping with the above list): Sun worship; sea and boat symbolism;

belled ‘Pelasgian’ by me) emerged in Neolithic West Asia, spread West towards the Mediterranean during the Bronze Age (largely on the wings of horse-riding and chariot technology invented in Central Asia 2000 BCE), and from the Late Bronze Age spread further in all four directions along what I have called the *cross-model*: easterly along the Steppe belt all the way to Korea, Japan, South and South East Asia,²⁴ and Oceania; westerly into the Mediterranean and Western Europe; northerly into the Uralic area; and finally southerly into sub-Saharan Africa along various routes (the



(a) One of the many chariot depictions in Saharan rock art since the Late Bronze Age; (b) Pardivesture (wearing of leopard skins) at Neolithic Tassili n’Ajjer (Breuil *et al.* 1954); (c) Pygmies fighting cranes on the Greek Aryballos crater, 570 BCE.

Fig. 1.1a. Examples of Pelasgian links between the Mediterranean and sub-Saharan Africa.

the amphiktyonic socio-political organisation form of a league of a dozen or so more or less acephalic (= without formal leaders) socio-political units; male genital mutilation; the skull complex particularly the drinking from slain enemies’ skulls; the literary / mythical theme of deadly rivalry between a ruler and that ruler’s sibling of the opposite gender; the cognate theme of an artificial woman constructed to inflict harm, and deployed as a weapon in such rivalry; the cosmogonic theme of a world origin in an original reed clump; the simple hunting implement known as the spiked wheel trap; the mythical unilateral being; the mythical Cosmic Egg; mankala board games; geomantic divination. But many more examples could be given. A list of 80 items, with rough indications of their distribution, is presented by van Binsbergen & Woudhuizen (2011: 372*f.*). These continuities in space and time are no longer fantasies of diffusionists or New Age adepts, but solid empirical facts.

²⁴ As Witzel (2009) amply demonstrates, comparative mythology is an excellent way to demonstrate trans-Steppe continuities between West Asia (the Indo-Iranian world), South Asia (the Vedic scriptures), and Japan.

Western Sahara, the Nile valley, and the Indian Ocean). From the Late 1st mill. BCE to modern times, the Silk Road ensured that these transregional connections were sustained and constantly renewed. The Ancients' use of the term *Πελασγοί* / *Pelasgi* / Pelasgians is, like all ethnonyms, protean and inconsistent,²⁵ and it can only serve to name the 'Pelasgian Hypothesis' if we redefine 'Pelasgian' analytically, allowing for overlap, but not identity, with the muddled Ancient use. Even so it is significant that Herodotus (*Historiae*, I, 56-58) considers the Ionians Pelasgians, and if a protohistorical transformation cycle of elements has been attested among them and among their direct intellectual heirs in Graecia Magna, I submit this is because such a cosmology was in the first place Pelasgian, originating in West Asia in the Neolithic or Early Bronze Age, and subsequently distributed widely into the Mediterranean, Asia, and Africa.

Tracing the history of philosophical thought is an empirical study, based on the methodologically-underpinned and theoretically informed examination of philosophical expressions against the background of an overall understanding of the language, culture and society in which they emerged and circulated. In principle the same applies to the reconstruction of pre- and protohistoric thought, as in the present argument. Most historians of such forms of philosophy as were produced in historical periods, belong to philosophical faculties, and write for philosophers in a predominantly philosophical discourse. Dealing with historical philosophers and their writings, *e.g.* the Presocratics and their commentators including Aristotle and Plato up to the present day, our argument will partly remain in this familiar vein. However, since we insist on going back *Before the Presocratics*, we also have to use the exploratory and often conjectural methods of pre- and protohistory and its many ancillary sciences (genetics, archaeology, comparative ethnography), resulting in a text that is not only critical of certain time-honoured claims in the history of philosophy, but whose style and methods also differ considerably from the discourse habitually used among historians of philosophy.

²⁵ van Binsbergen & Woudhuizen 2011: 372 *f.* and *passim*; van Binsbergen, in press (a).

Let one, in the present context highly pertinent, example suffice to indicate the orientation of the overambitious *tour de force* that constitutes the present argument – highlighting the kind of transcontinental continuities the above theoretical perspectives allow us to perceive and take seriously:

MYTHICAL WAGTAILS AT TWO ENDS OF THE OLD WORLD. In a Western Zambian myth (Jacottet 1899-1901: II, 116 *f.*; Bouchet 1922: 22 *f.*; Mackintosh 1922: 367 *f.*; van Binsbergen 2010a: 180) the creator god Nyambi (with widespread West African counterparts and near-namesakes), when still walking on earth, feels threatened by the First Man, named Kamunu ('Man Person'), and flees to heaven. (Incidentally, according to the Jacottet version²⁶ Nyambi, and in that case not the creator god but a demiurge, had been thrown out of heaven to begin with – which makes him (with his spider / solar connotations), in this respect at least, akin to Hephaestus,²⁷ to the Finnish Iron god,²⁸ and to the South Asian war god Skanda who was too hot to grow up in a normal way but had to be hatched by Ganga and nurtured by the Pleiades or Krittika²⁹ – also *cf.* カグツチ Kagutsuchi, the Japanese god of Fire, to whose destructive force even the birth channel of his mother イザナミ Izanami was not safe). In his flight to heaven Nyambi is attended to not only by a spider (which has remained Nyambi's implicit animal identity) but also by a wagtail bird (*Motacilla capensis*). This opens up an interesting comparative angle. In the main Japanese creation myth virtually the same bird (*Motacilla grandis*) showed the first creatures Izanami and イザナギ Izanagi how to engage in sexual intercourse by the suggestive, incessant up and down movements of its tail, after which it is named 'wagtail' (古事記 *Kojiki*, *cf.* Philippi 1968; van Binsbergen 2009 and forthcoming). It is as if the wagtail in the Western Zambia story signals that, implicitly, we are in the presence of the invention of sexuality – as if not the First Man's insolent attitude towards Nyambi, but his sexual discovery of his own wife, chases God from earth. And in fact, many Flood stories

²⁶ And also according to a myth I collected among the Nkoya in 1973 from the prophet / witch hunter / headman Lubumba, Njonjolo valley, Kaoma district, Zambia. Here the demiurge is kicked out of heaven for the invention of sorcery, but his name is not disclosed. Since missionary influence from the early 20th century CE has led to the adoption of the name Nyambi for the Christian creator High God, it would have been difficult for Lubumba to implicate a mythical character by the name of Nyambi in such a diabolical capacity.

²⁷ Homer, *Iliad*, I, 568 *f.*, 18, 136 *f.*; *Homeric Hymn to Pythian Apollo*, 310 *f.*; Quintus Smyrnaeus, *Posthomerica*, II, 549 *f.*; Plato, *Republic*, 378 d; Apollodorus, *Bibliotheca*, I, 19; *cf.* Atsma 2000-2008, s.v. 'Hephaestus'.

²⁸ Note that, in the *Kalevala*, the parallel revolves on the birth, not of Fire but of the conceptually related Iron (Lönnrot 1866; Tamminen 1928). Also in Yoruba religion, West Africa, the God of Iron, Ogun, is considered the first to come to Earth from Heaven, but in that context the move is not a punitive expulsion.

²⁹ Dowson 1928 s.v. 'Skanda', pp. 152, 300 and *passim*; Keith 1917; Willis 1994: 84.

world-wide³⁰ reiterate the theme of the Flood being caused by the discovery of sexuality – or they reverse the account and introduce the discovery of sexuality (often of an incestuous or bestial nature, even the mating with plants is recorded) as the only solution to repopulate the earth.

We hit here upon a controversial but logical, and crucial, implication of the idea of transcontinental continuities: *if the latter can be taken for a fact, then in principle well-attested, studied and understood symbolic relationships in one location and period may be used to illuminate less explicit similar relationships in another location and period belonging to the same complex, even though in another continent - not just on the basis of a formal analysis and a generalised appeal to inherent convergent properties of the mind of Anatomically Modern Humans, but on the basis of real historical cognateship.* This methodological principle is basic to my work in the field of comparative mythology, geomantic divination, transformation cycles of elements, astronomical nomenclature etc. It will guide us in the following Chapters.

We will now further prepare out conceptual and methodological tools for our complex and ambitious argument in this book. Therefore we will turn to Case Study I, on the pre- and protohistory of two widespread formal cultural systems, notably the mankala board-games and the form of divination known as geomancy.

³⁰ Isaak 2006; van Binsbergen with Isaak 2008; van Binsbergen 2010a, 2010e.