RETHINKING AFRICA’S CONTRIBUTION TO GLOBAL CULTURAL HISTORY

lessons from a comparative historical analysis of mankala board-games and geomantic divination

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1. Introduction

The Black Athena debate to which the present volume is a contribution,

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1Earlier versions of this paper were presented at: the International Colloquium ‘Board-games in Academia’, Leiden University, 9-13 April, 1995; at a seminar I gave at the Institute for the Study of Religion and Society, Municipal University of Amsterdam, 12 May, 1995; at the conference on ‘Black Athena: Africa’s contribution to global systems of knowledge’, African Studies Centre, Leiden, The Netherlands, 28 June, 1996; and at the Africa Research Centre, Catholic University Louvain, 8 November, 1996. I am indebted to the participants in the discussion on these occasions. I also register my indebtedness to: Alex de Voogd for introducing me to the literature on mankala; to Irving Finkel for invaluable suggestions and encouragement; to Martin Bernal, Josine Blok, Pieter Boele van Hensbroek, Filip de Boeck, Renaat Devisch, and Arno Egberts (alphabetical order) for useful comments towards the present paper; and to the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities and Social Sciences (NIAS), where the present argument was largely conceived and written while I was a member of the theme group on Magic and religion in the Ancient Near East (1994-95). For further theoretical discussion, cf. van Binsbergen, W.M.J., 1996, ‘Time, space and history in African divination and board-games’, in: Tiemersma, D., & Oosterling, H.A.F., eds., Time and temporality in intercultural perspective: Studies presented to Heinz Kimmerle, Amsterdam: Rodopi, pp. 105-125; and my extensive study: van Binsbergen, W.M.J., in press, ‘Board-games and divination in global cultural history: A theoretical, comparative and historical perspective on mankala and geomancy in Africa and Asia’, in: Finkel, I., ed., Ancient board-games, London: British Museum Press.

has made at least one thing clear: we require new modes of thinking about cultural dynamics and interdependence. Are 'continents' or 'races' viable units of analysis in this connection? It is scarcely likely, not even if these claims come from African and African American, 'Afrocentrist' authors seeking to overcome the the exclusion to which they and their ancestors have been subjected for the past few centuries, in North America and in the world system at large.\textsuperscript{3} We know that 'facts' of cultural distribution and history never speak for themselves, have no independent objective existence, but are to a large extent determined by the paradigmatic selectivity under which they have been produced. The Eurocentric and racialist bias which \textit{Black Athena} I has sought to expose and explode is unlikely to be absent from other products of North Atlantic scholarship besides classical studies. It probably left its marks, e.g., on African Studies,\textsuperscript{4} one of my own disciplines, which has provided much of the data for the present article. Meanwhile the counterpart of such Eurocentric racism, notably the \textit{extremist variant} of Afrocentrism which claims that European, North Atlantic, and increasingly global civilisation sprang uniquely from Africa, constitutes essentially the same sort of bias. In the sense that one cannot defeat one racism by invoking another, there is an awkward contradiction here, which has given rise to unnecessary confusion in the context of the \textit{Black Athena} debate.\textsuperscript{5}

In the context of critical, comparative empirical research involving a complex body of data (each of whose components may have been collected by a different researcher and for different purposes, under varying ideological, epistemological and methodological conditions), such biases may provisionally be hoped to become manifest, or to cancel out. Empirical research is not an alternative to theoretical, methodological and philosophical critique, but it may open up vistas and suggest new models and interrelations which otherwise would have remained outside our scope. However, such empirical exploration is not a final phase; after completion, its findings are to inspire further, more focused theoretical work.

Much of the identity discourse, in the hands of African and Afrocentrist philosophers, literary writers and politicians, as well as in the hands of

\textsuperscript{3}For a definition and an extensive bibliography on Afrocentrism, cf. Wim van Binsbergen \textit{Black Athena} Ten Years After: Towards a constructive re-assessment' (this volume); and extensive references cited in these publications.

\textsuperscript{4}Ibid., n. 37.

\textsuperscript{5}See Bernal's defence on this point in: Martin Bernal, 'Responses to \textit{Black Athena}: General and linguistic issues' (this volume); and my \textit{Black Athena: Ten Years After}, n. 3.
racialist or Eurocentric opponents of Afrocentrism, is of an aggregate and extremely abstract nature. It pays little attention to the details, the attending specific social practices and experiences, the specific dynamics and the range of variation between, and within, African countries and periods of African history. Today however it is no longer necessary to discuss matters of African cultural history in broadly sweeping terms. A century of specialised ethnographic and historical research on Africa, however teeming with biases, has allowed us to proceed to much greater precision, dividing up cultural heritages on the African continent into component strands and linking each of these strands specifically to global cultural history. What we lose in the process is an, ideologically attractive, blanket concept of mystical Africanness — focus of so much positive and negative bias. What we hope to gain is a more realistic view of the continental and intercontinental connections of the varieties of cultural achievements, borrowings and transformations — so that the African continent itself (whose name in the course of two millennia has inflated from the designation of a minor North African region to cover an entire continental land mass, and to entail a myth of racial identity encompassing a sizeable section of mankind) dissolves as a unit of study, to be relegated once more — together with all other continents — to the status of a culturally and politically indifferent land mass and nothing more.

What does an analysis of the type advocated suggest as to Africa’s place in long-term global cultural history? Is Africa the unique and universal matrix, the primal origin of civilisation, as claimed in extremist appropriations of Black Athena? Is it, on the contrary, the exclusively receptive, passive end station of imported culture produced by the genius of other continents, as in the Eurocentric myth? Do more subtle models of exchange and transformation present themselves?

2. Two case studies: geomantic divination and mankala board-games in Africa and elsewhere

2.1. Focus

In order to explore these questions, I will offer two — extremely truncated — case studies, tracing the trajectory of two famous genres of African cultural production widely attested across the continent since the sixteenth century CE, and featuring in many constructions of Africa as a continental cultural unit: geomantic divination, and mankala.

Geomantic divination consists in the systematic production, naming and (by reference to a fixed catalogue) interpretation of one randomly produced combination of lines, seeds, pebbles, or wooden or ivory tablets, from among the total set of $2^n$ possible combinations.

The term mankala refers to a family of board-games where, under elaborate rules, a fixed number of pebbles or seeds is repeatedly redistributed over a number of holes placed in 2 to 4 rows, and successively captured.

These two cultural systems are part and parcel of African life, cutting across the many cultural and linguistic boundaries which that continent exhibits. They feature prominently in many attempts to define Africa, African culture, Africanness. But are they unique to Africa? Do they have an African origin? Are they perhaps merely extensively localised forms, on the soil of the land mass we have chosen to call Africa, of cultural production which have a much wider distribution in the world, and which essentially originated outside that land mass? Does their Africanness lie in this localisation? Is that the reason why they are so dominant and ubiquitous in Africa? Or is the geographical claim in itself correct but is the very concept of Africa as a viable unit of cultural analysis, misleading?

My aim is not to reduce the vital political and historical questions posed by Black Athena, to a neo-diffusionist analysis of two sets of cultural terms which, however charming and fascinating, would appear to be rather too harmless to create much of an impression in the context dominated by the burden of several centuries of North Atlantic cultural and racial domination. I have chosen them as exemplary, as a test case. It is my contention that the surprising patterns which such obviously African cultural items can be shown to exhibit on closer analysis, have heuristic value towards a more comprehensive and profound assessment of Africa's (and Europe's) place in the cultural history of mankind. Nonetheless, I am speaking of illustrations, not of a unique, all-encompassing model, let alone of proof and refutation.

Both material divination systems, and board-games, are formal systems, which can be fairly abstractly defined in terms of constituent
elements and rules *relatively* impervious to individual alteration. Both consist in a drastic modelling of reality, to the effect that the world of everyday experience is very highly condensed, in space and in time, in the game and the divination rite; and while the elements of the model mimic real life, events occurring between the model's elements have no direct and instantaneous real-life consequences. The unit of both types of events is the *session*, rarely extending beyond a few hours, and tied not only to the restricted space where the apparatus (e.g. a game-board, a divining board or set of tablets) is used but, more importantly, to the narrowly defined spatial configuration of the apparatus itself. The formal nature of divination and board-games lead them to be relatively a-historic (in the sense of being rather inert in the face of general social and cultural change) and to elude localisation (crossing cultural, linguistic etc. boundaries and, while allowing for local adaptation, diffusing in such a way that they can hardly ever be said to truly reflect the central orientation of a local culture). This makes divination systems and board-games very welcome guiding fossils in cultural history, but their own history (in the sense of movement in space and transformation over time under explained conditions) is far more difficult to write.

2.2. A Neolithic context

I have elsewhere argued a Neolithic context for the emergence of board-games and divination. These cultural forms are specific modellings of time and space, linked to agriculture and animal husbandry as man's most drastic redefinition of space and time before the rise of the modern

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7 This point was implied by Tylor, E.B., 1880, 'Remarks on the geographical distribution of games', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 9: 23-30. Remarkable examples of the mankala game's variants being persistent to change in the face of migration across vast areas and being surrounded by distinctly different variants, are e.g. given by: Townshend, P., 1979, 'Mankala in eastern and southern Africa: A distributional analysis', *Azania*, 14: 109-138, p. 127f.


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technology of communication and transport, and of electronic media. The Neolithic constitutes a base-line beyond which we need not seek for historical clues and geographical connections, at least not in the limited context of the present argument. The parcelling up of a local area in adjacent yet separately worked and administered fields, surrounding a localised community whose ritual unity is expressed by a shrine or temple, a cemetery, a megalithic structure, etc. — a community whose main raison d'être may well have been to pool resources not only against outside attack but also against internal food shortages, through redistribution —, fits the Neolithic archaeological record as well as the form and rules of mankala. It also has a link with the iconography of historical early agricultural communities, in whose representations a grid-like pattern not unlike a mankala board is a recurrent feature, even although we may not assume the correspondence to be as neat as in the earliest forms of Sumerian, Egyptian and Chinese writing, where such a pattern indeed means 'field'.

9 It is important to realise that the context of mankala-like artefacts characterised by two to four rows of cup-holes, is formed not so much by the set of all certified mankala boards (which could only lead to tautology), but by the set of all artefacts with cup-holes. The latter set is much larger, much more varied, has a much wider distribution in space and time, and is likely to include artefacts which, while not yet mankala boards themselves, constitute the non-ludic prototypes for such boards. Among Upper Palaeolithic and later rock art, cup-holes occur perhaps as frequently as grid marks (e.g. Capitan, L., & Peyrony, D., 1921, 'Découverte d'un sixième squelette moustérien à la Ferrassie, Dordogne', Revue Anthropologique, 31: 382f; Levy, G.R., 1948, The gate of horn: A study of the religious conceptions of the stone age, and their influence upon European thought, London: Faber & Faber, pp. 6, 65f, and p. 41, cf. 125, 146). Cup-holes are also a regular feature in Neolithic and Bronze Age ritual contexts, where they often appear on altars or 'libation stones'. The early alleged 'mankala boards' in stone, or 'gaming stones', from the Near East as discussed in the previous note, and from East Africa as referenced below, may belong to the same family of cupped stones, and may therefore be merely pre- or proto-ludic, rather than ludic. Calling them 'mankala boards' is begging the question. For an extensive discussion, see: van Binsbergen, in press.

10 In the most archaic Sumerian writing (c. 3000 BCE) the agricultural field was simply represented by a rectangle divided by vertical lines: the image of a field divided by irrigation ditches: In the subsequent archaic script (Borger, R., 1978, Assyrisch-babylonische Zeichenliste, Kevelaar/ Neukirchen-Vluyn: Butzon & Bercker/ Neukirchener Verlag, 12; character no. 105 I) this was only slightly transformed into: , which ultimately led to the standard character (no. 105 I (77); Borger, p. 87): . Similarly, in Chinese (Hàn Ying Cidian/ A Chinese English dictionary, 1988, Beijing), the character for field is: , which as a radical occurs in a great many combinations. In the combination signifying man
Looking for further corroboration I came across Gilbert’s work which explicitly links the layout of Egyptian board-games (though not mankala but znt) with the pattern of irrigation ditches in the Egyptian agricultural landscape. Here may be an important key to the layout of the mankala board.

2.3. Geomantic divination

Geomancy constitutes a ubiquitous and dominant family of divination systems, including such famous members as Ifa, F4, ‘Sixteen Cowries’ (Nigeria and West Africa in general), Sikidy (Madagascar and Comoro Isl.), Hakata (Southern Africa), Ilm al-raml or khatt al-raml (North Africa).

(agrarianist), later standardised as this representation of ‘field’ is already attested in the most archaic Chinese writing on seals and oracle bones (2nd mill. BCE),


In Egyptian hieroglyphic, the oblong grid: has the cognate meaning of ‘district’, ‘administered land area’ — which was translated in Greek as nomós; Faulkner, R.O., 1962, A concise dictionary of Middle Egyptian, Oxford: Griffith Institute, p. 54, 178 and passim; Gardiner, A.H., 1957, Egyptian Grammar, 3rd ed., Oxford: Oxford University Press, sign N24 p. 488.

11Gilbert, P., 1965, ‘Irrigation, jeux de damier et sens du rectangle dans l’art Égyptien’, Chronique d’Egypte, 40: 72-78; the Egyptologist Arno Eggerts however points out to me that Gilbert’s view has not been generally adopted among Egyptologists. Martin Bernal, however, draws my attention to the fact that the znt hieroglyphic sign (Gardiner number Y5; cf. Gardiner, Egyptian Grammar, p. 534) is also prominent in mnl, ‘moor, marshland’.

12A caveat is in order on this point. The grid-like pattern is extremely simple and hence has a ubiquity — in rock art (e.g. Breuil, H., H. Lothe & le Col. Brenans, 1954, Les roches peintes du Tassili-n’Ajjer, Paris: Arts et Métiers graphiques), vessel decoration, tattooing patterns (e.g. Marcy, G., 1931, ‘Origine et significations des tatouages de tribus berbères’, in: Revue de l’Histoire des Religions, 51, tome 102: 13-66), textile decoration etc. — which may well defy any convincing systematic and converging interpretation by reference to productive and community patterns. Grid patterns abound in pre-Neolithic rock art, where they are usually interpreted by archaeologists as representing traps or nets in which to capture animals. Also Upper Palaeolithic techniques like weaving and basket-making suppose or produce grid-like patterns which are likely to persist in iconography. In the Chinese context, the interpretation of the simple grid sign as ‘field’ appears to be superimposed on an earlier reading of the sign as animal foot-prints, again in a hunting context; Wang Hongyan, 1993, The origins of Chinese characters, Beijing: Sinolingua.

13The literature, both scholarly and practical/ esoteric, on geomantic divination is fairly voluminous, and much of it is of excellent standards; I can only present the barest
Africa is often presented as the continent in which divination is still part of everyday life, and these prominent divination systems tend to be presented as incorporating the very spirit of African life today and in the past. The material apparatus in all these regions is very different, ranging from divination chains, or shells cast in a square, rimmed wooded board covered with sand in West-Africa, or four tablets in Southern Africa; to piles of grain or pebbles in the Indian Ocean area, and — in North and North East Africa — the forceful ‘hitting of the sand’ (darb al-raml) with a stick, in order to produce a chance number of indentures which number can then be scored as either odd or even.

Also in geomancy, therefore, one is justified to see the many variations of the ‘art of drawing lines in the sand’ (Arab. khatt al raml) as primarily an evocation of the several transformations of space through which the environment is turned into a productive field: through demarcation, clearing, ploughing, irrigation perhaps, and harvesting. Whatever

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14These patterns are so widespread in the Old World, that e.g. Arabian divination practices might be better understood in the light of customs in South East Asia; cf. Granet, M., 1988, La pensée chinoise, Paris: Albin Michel, nouvelle édition, p. 486 n.
departure from more original forms of divination we encounter, there is always the link with the ground: if the divination no longer takes place on the actual ground but in a miniature representation such as the square West African divining-board, then at least its bottom has to be filled with sand; if the soil imagery has been almost entirely abandoned and the system reduced to the fall of four tablets, these are at least cast upon the soil — typically a soil which is transformed and demarcated by covering it with a sacred cloth or sacrificial animal skin. I think it is highly significant that at the beginning of the divination session the Southern African diviner usually smacks down, with great relish, onto the soil the bag containing his tablets — thus awakening the spirits of the soil (his ancestors, notably).

When in an above note I compared Arabian geomancy with South East Asian agricultural practices, I was merely pointing out a parallel which is historically conceivable in the light of the east-bound Old World diffusion of agriculture as a human invention. The last thing I want to suggest is that the Arabian symbolism derives from South East Asian agricultural practices. The link is far more indirect, and even the Chinese I Ching system, which via Chinese/Arab trade on the port of Baṣra in the late

86 (earlier ed. Paris: La Renaissance du Livre, 1934):‘La tradition des rois cloche-pied s’est conservée au Siam et au Cambodge jusqu’au XIXe siècle. Après avoir tracé un sillon (désacralisation du sol par le chef au début d’une campagne agricole), ils devaient aller s’appuyer contre un arbre et se tenir debout sur un seul pied (le pied droit placé sur le genou gauche).’ (italics added — WvB).

Of course, ritual ploughing was one of the important duties of the archaic Chinese king; Maspero, H., 1978, China in antiquity, tr. F.A. Kierman, Folkestone: Dawson, of La Chine antique, revised edition, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France; first published 1927.


I Ching may not even be Chinese in origin, as is suggested by its binary nature (as against the five elements of Chinese cosmology), and by the puzzling non-Chinese

(Tocharian?) etymology of such key concepts as kun, 坤, I Ching symbol , the receptive earth-like principle, which the Sinologist E. Pulleyblank claimed to be a cognate of Greek khthōn; also cf. Needham c.s.; I owe this reminder to Martin Bernal as Sinologist. However, by the time it spread to the world of early Islam, I Ching — as a result of transformative localisation — had been a pivotal part of Chinese culture for several millennia.
first millennium CE is only one of several formative influences that produced *ilm al-raml.

Meanwhile, it is only correct to point out that *many* layers are piled up in the geomantic symbolism, making for a multi-referential coding system whose co-ordinates in space and time are typically complex and confused.\(^{17}\) There is, as above, the maternal (and psychoanalytically oedipal), nurturative, agriculture-related symbolism of unfathomable and ungraspable earth as the source of life. But there is also the symbolism of fragmented and tangible earth, dust, dirt, pebbles, as the lowly (psychoanalytically anal) origins of man and of life in general. There is the combination of these two themes in the ‘black and red’, the fertile alluvial soil and the barren desert, which was how the ancient Egyptians conceptualised their country. There is earth as the time-less repository of the dead, as the underworld, the alternative source of power and knowledge. And, particularly relevant in the Arabian context with its heritage of magical, demonological and astrological ideas from the Ancient Near East and Graeco-Roman-Judaean-Christian civilisation, there is earth as the opposite of heaven, so that geomancy is divination not by the stars but by the earth, while the earth is the typical place where magicians, by hitting the very ground with a stick or a wand,\(^{18}\) assert their autonomous right to divine status and power and by implication their kinship with Satan, as in the following Coptic formula for love magic (first millennium CE):

‘...Shurin, Shuran, Shutaban, Shutaben, Ibonese, Sharsaben,... Satan the devil, who beat with his staff upon the earth saying: “I am a god also”...’ \(^{19}\)

There can be no doubt that the *darb al-raml* procedure as described below implicitly emulates these magical themes.

With the exception of the Southern African variant of geomancy (where the tablets’ fall is interpreted directly, i.e. without the construction of a

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\(^{17}\) Cf. van Binsbergen, W.M.J., in preparation, *Four tablets: A Southern African divination system in its transregional and historical context.*

\(^{18}\) E.g. Exodus 7: 8-12 on Aaron’s rod, and Exodus 17 on water from the rock. In the context of the *Black Athena* debate with its Egyptocentric overtones, one is tempted to consider the iconographic theme of the pharaoh slaying his enemies with a mace — a constant of Egyptian representation which first appears on the Narmer palette c. 3000 BCE. There is also a conceivable link with Herakles and his formidable club, an iconographic and mythical theme which Bernal (*Black Athena II*, pp. 106ff) identifies as very ancient on the basis of being pre-sword, and which he links not only, in line with conventional wisdom, to the Sumero-Akkadian kingship (cf. Gilgamesh) but also to pharaonic kingship.

standard geomantic symbol) the result produced by the geomantic apparatus is interpreted, through a process of transformation and elimination, as contributing one horizontal line, of one or two dots (one for odd, two for even), to a four-line geomantic symbol, of which there are of course sixteen (2⁴):

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ług, węg, węg,ǘł, węg, węg,ǘł, węg, węg,ǘł, węg, węg,ǘł, węg, węg,ǘł, węg, węg,ǘł
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or, in the Arabian notation:

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ências, êncies, êncies, êncies, êncies, êncies, êncies, êncies, êncies, êncies, êncies, êncies, êncies, êncies, êncies, êncies
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More complex procedures may raise this number to any higher power of 2. A written or memorised key (the catalogue) provides the interpretation of each geomantic symbol, and of their combinations.

The available evidence allows us to map the global geographical distribution of the geomantic family as in Figure 1, as a basis for the reconstruction of its geographical diffusion in Figure 2.²⁰

According to the current state of historical reconstructions, the Hellenic, Hellenistic, Hermetic, Jewish, Persian, African, Indian and Chinese borrowings²¹ into the Arabic literate corpus of geomancy point to a drafting (after unsystematic earlier forms) of the classic, strongly astrological geomantic system in Southern Mesopotamia in an Isma'ili context in the tenth century CE. Subsequently, the system's rapid and successful spread over the Islamic and Jewish intellectual world, and hence into Europe, Africa and the Indian Ocean region, was largely due to its being enshrined in widely circulated treatises. Of these, perhaps the most famous and successful has been the Kitab al-faṣl fi usul ḫilm al-ra'ml) by the Berber shaykh Muhammad al-Zanati (c. 1200 CE).

An early, original North West African input into the system is suggested by al-Zanati's origin, by the early circulation of Berber names for the sixteen basic geomantic configurations,²² and by the prominence of

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²⁰van Binsbergen 1996, 'Transregional'; van Binsbergen, in prep.
proto-mankala and proto-geomancy in the latter-day North West African material. Yet the latter-day Ifa, Fa, and ‘Sixteen Cowries’, the most prominent divination systems of West Africa, derive directly from the Arabian prototype. A careful examination of the binary mathematical structure of both the Southern African four-tablet divination system, and the more directly Arabian-derived forms of geomancy found in the Indian


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Ocean region led me to hypothesise historical connections. These could subsequently be ascertained when I found identical terms and concepts in the interpretative catalogues attending the divination system in these two more or less adjacent regions. The four horizontal lines of the standard geomantic symbols, where each line can take two values (uneven or even, one dot or two), turned out to be transformed into four tablets, where each tablet can take two values (obverse or reverse); in the process, the attending interpretative catalogue was partly maintained, partly localised.\textsuperscript{24}

Let us now discuss the mankala family of board games in some detail.

![Figure 2. Probable diffusion pattern of geomantic divination.](image)

\textsuperscript{24}Van Binsbergen, ‘Transregional and historical connections’.
2.4. Mankala

The pioneer in this field, the late nineteenth-century American museum anthropologist Culin,²⁵ claims the mankala game to constitute ‘Africa’s national game’ — a claim since repeated many times and still upheld by some major authors in this field, Townshend²⁶ and Russ.²⁷ Of the five families of board-games into which the principal authority in this field of scholarship, Murray²⁸ classifies all known historic types, Africa is claimed to exhibit only one, for which he employs the generic, Arabic name of mankala. This type of game was first attested²⁹ in the Kitab al-Aghani by the Arab author Abu’l Faradi (897-967 CE). Mankala is found all over sub-Saharan Africa. In accordance with Murray’s claim, it is that continent’s only board-game outside clearly Arabianised contexts (where the checkers-like dara game appears, with a distribution as diverse as Islamic influence in Africa) or Europeanised contexts.

Figure 3 summarises the global distribution of mankala, and suggests the underlying pattern of diffusion as shown in Figure 4.³⁰

Townshend has extensively argued against the central role Murray had attributed to Asia and to Islam in the spread of mankala, and in favour of a uniquely African origin and transformation of the mankala family of board-games. So much so that in his opinion even their distribution in Asia should be directly derived from African models alleged to be recently imported to South Asia by black slaves — whose presence there regrettably cannot be denied. Already twenty years ago Townshend complained³¹ that everyone (except the archaeologist/ palaeontologist Louis Leakey³²) seemed to be utterly determined to find by all means a non-African origin for this family of board-games. In 1979 this point was


³⁰On the basis of Murray’s detailed data: pp. 178, 240f; with additional input from Townshend (1979, 1979, 1980), as well as from the other references on mankala cited in this article.

³¹Townshend, 1976-77, p. 95.

repeated even more forcefully, when Townshend concluded a painstaking
distributional analysis of mankala on the African continent with the words:

"The conclusions I personally draw from all this are:
(i) that 4-row Mankala is of black-African origin;
(ii) that there is a better prima-facie case for 2-row Mankala being of African than of
Asian origin;

(iii) that there is a distinct possibility of Mankala having been introduced whether
by slaves or returned travellers from Africa to Asia (Leakey's conclusion of 40 years
ago); and
(iv) that the 'ki-Arabu' forms of 4-row Mankala may have been brought to the East
African coast from the interior (e.g. the Lake Malawi region) by Arabs or their
African employees or possibly by some earlier current of cultural diffusion.\textsuperscript{33}

Townshend's view, although tying in with the Afrocentrist point of view,

\textsuperscript{33}Townshend, 1979, 'Mankala', p. 127.
is misleading. It actually forces him to manipulate the data.\textsuperscript{34} It would be much better to use the considerable archaeological evidence, from various sites in East and Central Africa, of mankala-like rock art.\textsuperscript{35} These

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{34}He has to close his eyes for the evidence (cf. Murray, 1952, p. 36; Piggott, S., 1961, \textit{Prehistoric India: To 1000 B.C.}, Harmondsworth: Penguin, first publ. 1950, p. 190) on four-row mankala outside Africa:

'In the case of four-row Mankala the evidence is clear: not one such game has been recorded outside Africa.' (Townshend, 1982, p. 186)

Moreover he has to deny that the Ancient Egyptian examples (e.g. Parker, H., 1909, \textit{Ancient Ceylon}, London: Luzac & Co., pp. 587-603; Petrie, F., 1927, \textit{Objects of daily use}, London, p. 55, plate 47) are mankala boards. He bases such denial not on the grounds that context and information on the attending ludic practices is lacking (that would be an excellent point to make; see above, my note 8), but simply because they are too early to fit his Afrocentrist hypothesis; and he has to propose an unrealistically late date for the Ceylon artefacts (Parker, \textit{ibid.}), which he does accept as being genuine mankala.

mankala-like patterns (if that is what they are, despite their vertical placement, which defies their being used for actually playing mankalas) have not been convincingly dated, and might be as recent as the East African Iron Age. However I would prefer, with Townshend and Leakey, to interpret them as Neolithic.

The geographical parameters of the Fertile Crescent were formulated prior to two major developments in our perception of Old World post-Mesolithic history: the discovery of the Indus civilisation, and the discovery that in Africa independent Neolithic domestication of crops and livestock had taken place: in the once fertile central Sahara, in the Ethiopian highlands, but also outside these centres, in the ecotones between savanna and forest. Combining this with the evidence on Neolithic (pre- or proto-) mankalas from Egypt, Jordan and Cyprus, the conclusion suggests itself that any strict distinction between Africa and Asia may be irrelevant and misleading. The Neolithic transformation processes leading (among so many other components of civilisation) to mankalas occurred fairly independently in parts of both continents. Thus mankalas may have sprung from Africa probably as much as it sprung from Asia: the crucial characteristic of the locus of its emergence was its being the scene of Old World agricultural revolution — a kind of greatly extended Fertile Crescent, redefined so as to stretch deeply into North West and North East Africa, and straddling both continents.

2.5. The special position of North West Africa

North West Africa stands out as an interesting area for a further exploration of a possible African contribution to the two cultural systems we have examined. Here ritual and divination offer many converging


examples of grid-based procedures. One instance is jackal divination, where in the evening the soil is divided in a rectangular grid in order to be able to inspect, in the morning, if and how a jackal has disturbed the surface in that grid. Another example concerns the harvest ritual as described in Viviane Pâques’s classic book L’Arbre cosmique dans la pensée populaire et dans la via quotidienne du Nord-Ouest africain; this ritual is locally conceptualised and represented exactly as if it were a three-row mankala board, with small piles of grain deposited as sacrificial offerings in the middle of each square cell, i.e. each field (figure 5). In addition to an actual description of a mankala-type game, Pâques also presents intriguing diagrams of patterns of irrigation in arid circum-Saharan communities, which almost read as descriptions of mankala (figure 6). As far as hints of possible formative influences upon both mankala and geomancy are concerned, the North West African material is of such abundance and consistence, and presents the imagery of these two formal systems with such clarity, that a historical contribution from this region to their initial formulation must be considered quite likely.

![Diagram](https://example.com/diagram.png)

Figure 5. A harvest ritual in North West Africa

'Mali: threefold snake representing the cultivated field in the [western] Sudan, with a pile of sorghum in each section cut after the sacrifice' (from left to right the three vertical series are marked 'red', 'black' and 'white')

But here again we should add, to the argument of origins and diffusion, the argument of subsequent transformative localisation after arrival at the new destination — an aspect on which diffusionist approaches have always been rather silent. If part of the cultural material

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38 Griaule, ‘Note sur la divination par le chacal’; Paulme, o.c.
39 Pâques, o.c.
40 Pâques, p. 91.
41 Pâques, p. 83.
42 Pâques, p. 157.
43 Cf. Wim van Binsbergen, ‘Black Athena Ten Years After’; Wim van Binsbergen, ‘Alternative models of intercontinental interaction towards the earliest Cretan script’ (both this volume).
that went into the making of both geomancy and mankala originally derived from cultures situated on the African land mass, it is clear that both systems owe at least as much of their final ramifications and success to the Islamic connexion: by decisively re-formulating this material in terms of the fully-fledged, astrologically-oriented divination system of 力争 or khatt al-raml, and by putting the effective and (through its access to very elaborate magical arts) pervasive vehicle of Islam and Islam-oriented trading at the disposal of both geomancy and mankala as a main vehicle of spread.

Figure 6. An irrigation pattern in North West Africa

44For the idea that it was access to the magical arts of Islam, more than the latter's lapidary monotheism, which attracted Africans to this world religion, cf. Becker, C.H., 1913, 'Neue Literatur zur Geschichte Afrikas', Der Islam, 4: 303-312; cf. Becker, C.H., 1911, 'Materialien zur Kenntnis des Islam in Deutsch-Ostafrika', Der Islam, 1: 1-48; this idea was more recently revived by Brenner, L., n.d. [1985], Reflexions sur le savoir islamique en Afrique de l'Ouest, Bordeaux: Centre d'Etude d'Afrique Noire, Université de Bordeaux I.

45Source: Pâques, o.c.
2.6. The general convergence of geomantic divination and mankala

What strikes us is the similarity between the distribution and diffusion patterns of mankala and geomancy. Although their earliest histories differ, both took root, diversified and transformed in Africa, and both spread from there the New World. The differences concern the periphery of their geographical distributions. Contrary to geomancy, which from the early second millennium CE spread to Europe across the Mediterranean to become a mainstay of Renaissance magic, mankala never made it to Western Europe before the toy manufacturing industry along with the African airport art industry seized on the idea. In the Far East, mankala was a bit more successful than its esoteric distant cousin, geomancy, in penetrating Indonesia and the Philippines. But whereas geomancy, in the form of I Ching, has been a very old and central part of the culture of China as a whole and hence even spread to neighbouring countries e.g. Tibet, it is only in regional pockets of Southern China that we encounter mankala.

In general, these diffusion patterns show that Africa is not merely a passive importer of culture but also a place of active production, transformation, and export of culture for global use.

Within the African continent, this convergence between geomancy and mankala is also to be found at the regional level. As a detailed study of the iconography of the four tablets indicates, geomantic divination has reached Southern Africa via a corridor linking Tanzanian and Mozambican groups like the Konde to the Shona-speaking groups on the highlands of Zimbabwe; from there again links have existed with Sotho/Tswana speaking groups to the south and west of Zimbabwe. For many centuries the corridor constituted an important trade route, along which travelled Asian trade goods against gold and cattle, notions of more or less divine kingship, and Indonesian as well as — much later — Islamic cultural influences. For students of mankala this must ring a bell: in this part of South East Africa, the pattern of spread of four-tablet divination coincides with that of four-row mankala, whose virtual confinement to East and Southern Africa almost certainly shows it to be an African development. It is a tantalising question for further research to decide whether

- four-row mankala caused the apparatus of geomancy to be altered towards a four-tablet system, or
- four-tablet geomancy caused the incomparably more complex four-row

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46Cf. Herodotus, Hist. ii.122, where the subterranean board-game the Egyptian king plays with Demeter/Isis confirms not only the funerary connotations of board games like znt, but therefore also their chthonic or subterranean connotations which they share with geomancy as divination by the powers inside/below the earth.
variety of mankala to be produced out of the pre-existing two- and three-row variants.

3. Patterns of intercontinental cultural interaction

My overview of two major classes of pan-African cultural phenomena, mankala board-games and geomantic divination, has revealed fascinating generic and formal interrelations and distribution patterns, both within each genre and between these two genres.

At least these two significant cultural items of latter-day African culture suggest that it is a typical pattern of African cultural history to see

- active early participation in global cultural origins and flows (central in the case of early mankala, more peripheral and hypothetical in the case of early geomancy), followed by
- local and regional processes of cultural and political creativity, producing splendid civilisations which however did not have a direct impact on global cultural processes as well as
- entrenchment — 'cultural involution' is perhaps the word\textsuperscript{47} — so that later, newer global trends are no longer picked up and locally fed back into the earlier models; instead the latter localise to the extreme, taking up residence in the very texture of local cultures and absorbing the latter's symbolism and cosmology so effectively that the result is recognised as something uniquely local i.e. 'African', having lost all explicit references to, in fact virtually all traces of, an earlier intercontinental exchange.

For instance, in the context of divination in West Africa and Southern Africa practitioners and clients are no longer aware of the Arabian provenance of their geomantic divination. For Southern Africa, until recently, scholarship shared this ignorance. Inward-looking localisation, severance of intercontinental cultural ties and conscious references, the relativity yet of continental boundaries, and the general quality of having become a backwater in the world system of economic and cultural exchange — these are aspects of African cultural involution as suggested by my case studies. Admittedly, also in the last one or two millennia Africa turns out to be capable of cultural export and transmission (to wit, the export of both mankala and geomancy to the New World). But the cultural items it contributed to other continents in recent times have tended to

remain culturally peripheral in the destination continent, limited to immigrant groups who define their particular transcontinental identity by reference to these imports.

If this tripartite model of (a) initial global participation (b) splendid regional creativity and (c) cultural involution, peculiar to Africa? Not really so, since many of its features remind one of ancient Northwestern Europe until well into the second millennium CE, and even of China. Much further research is needed before the model can be considered sufficiently sophisticated. It is only then that the much more difficult task can begin, of explaining the features of cultural dynamics on the African land mass as highlighted by this model. Is there something about the physical geography of Africa (e.g. desertification in recent millennia; the paucity of navigable river systems and sea arms cutting deep into the land; the relatively impenetrable rain forest) that has impeded its continued participation in global culture? Is there something about African cultures (e.g. kinship systems, sorcery beliefs, reliance on non-verbal and non-representational cultural production in music, dance and ritual, the relative absence of a production of intercontinentally coveted petty commodities but instead a reliance — which has persisted to the present times — on raw materials) that entrenches the social communities which carry these cultures, closes their horizons, makes them less penetrable for intercontinental influences? Could not the same factors be shown to be at work in other continents, if only we could break the spell of implicitly racist and colonialist stereotypes about what is ‘typically African’?

It has been Basil Davidson’s life’s work, through a long series of books and television productions meant for the non-specialist, to correct the Eurocentric stereotypes of Africa as passively receptive and as incapable of major achievements of culture and civilisation, drawing attention to the splendour of ancient kingdoms as well as Africa’s place in ancient intercontinental networks of exchange. But negative stereotypes that apparently fit so well, and apparently explain, the contemporary media image of Africa are difficult to eradicate.

The distribution and history of writing in Africa is a case in point. Its

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pattern strongly reminds us of that of geomancy and mankala. Of the few oldest writing systems of mankind, one (Egyptian hieroglyphic script) was invented in Africa — with the authorities increasingly tending to play down the possibility of a ‘stimulus invention’ factor from Mesopotamian Sumer and Elam. In Antiquity, Nubia, Meroe, Ethiopia, Carthage and its African possessions, and Berber groups throughout North Africa had writing systems of their own. These derived in part from Egyptian non-alphabetic hieroglyphic writing and its hieratic and demotic derivates, but mostly from (probably hieroglyphic-inspired) alphabetic scripts, whose earliest, even pre-Phoenician forms spread rapidly across great distances. Greek and Latin writing established itself throughout North Africa from the first millennium BCE, towards the end of the first millennium CE to be supplanted (with the exception of Greek-derived Coptic script) by Aramaic-derived Arabic script. By the same time, Islam brought writing to Africa’s Indian Ocean coast and the Sudanic belt, and in the next half millennium this expansion continued slowly, via Muslim scribes at many royal courts from Zimbabwe to Senegal. In the next centuries these were, initially in small part and again very slowly, supplanted by Christians (mainly missionaries and Portuguese agents), — a movement to be greatly accelerated by the 19th century, and converging with the imposition of effective European colonial rule. That century also saw the intensified conversion of West African and Sudanic masses to Islam, lending them direct access to Islamic writing. Several African initiatives at the creation of local writing systems have also been recorded since the nineteenth century. The two world religions, Islam and Christianity, and modern statehood have been the main factors of massive literacy (however, still very unevenly spread across the African countries) as a recent phenomenon, after millennia of writing being concentrated in specific regions, outside of which it was a sporadic prerogative of a professional outsider class.

This is a rather different story than one would expect on the basis of the persistent stereotype of Africa as a composite of cultures without writing


— an image to which anthropology has greatly contributed. And give or take a few centuries and substitute the names of other world religions and agents of expansion, but including the pattern of widespread and virtually total popular illiteracy until relatively recently, it is not a strikingly different story from that of writing in Europe and Asia — apart from the fact that contrary to Africa Europe so far has not been recognised as one of the cradles of writing.

One thing will be clear: within that land mass, different dynamics will have to be distinguished according to region, historical period, and strand of cultural tradition — the model will not yield generalisations about Africa, let alone Africans, as a whole.

Whatever the outcome of much needed further research on continental and intercontinental patterns of African cultural history, what I have formulated here is already highly pertinent to the Black Athena thesis. Partial but significant support for that thesis is offered by my argument in that it allows us to trace how the earliest civilisations in the Neolithic context were situated in, and derived from, among other places, Africa. In other ways however, looking at the last two or three millennia, my argument with its two cases illustrating African cultural involution, offers an indication of the severe limitations of a model of ‘Africa civilising the rest of the world’. In the extremist Afrocentric distortions or appropriations of the Black Athena thesis, interaction is replaced by one-way traffic, Asia is swept under the carpet, and ancient Egypt is, through pars pro toto (and without further analysis as to its place among the many and diverse cultures of Africa), equated with the African continent as a


‘The Germans who conquered Rome during the 5th century AD (...) were illiterate and attached little value to literacy. Literacy was eradicated to such an extent that by the year 1000, probably only 1 or 2 percent of Europe’s population was literate. (...) After 1000, literacy slowly began to reemerge and spread through Europe. (...) By 1700, Europe’s literacy rate ranged from 30 to 40 percent; by 1850, 50 to 55 percent; and by 1930, 90 percent.’

In 1995 the literacy rate for sub-Saharan Africa was 54%, ranging between 85% for Zimbabwe and 14% for Niger (source: Information and Policy Analysis Statistics Division, 1996, United Nations Statistical Yearbook, 41st ed., New York: United Nations Publications, table 11, pp. 74-75; with thanks to my colleague Henk Meilink). Literacy is defined here in UNESCO terms as the percentage of the population age 15 and above capable of understanding and producing a simple written statement on everyday life.

52Despite persistent claims of a Balkan neolithic script contemporaneous to or predating scripts from the Ancient Near East; e.g. Gimbutas, M.A., 1991, The civilization of the Goddess: The world of Old Europe, San Francisco: Harper ch. 8, ‘The sacred script'.

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whole. Thus the illuminating *Black Athena* thesis of multiplex intercultural interaction risks being reduced to a myth of mechanical and exclusive one-way dependence. The latter is more than anything else a projection back into the past of an exact mirror image of Eurocentric racialist images of Africa as passive, primitive and dependent. *Both* myths are all the more dangerous if endowed with the insignia of scientific respectability.

My proposed model of

- Africa's important early contributions to global civilisation, in the most recent millennia followed by
- Africa's local and regional cultural and political creativity but also and increasingly by
- Africa's entrenched cultural involution

does not of course apply to all instances of recent cultural interrelations involving Africa, as the case of jazz music clearly shows. It does not contradict the *Black Athena* thesis in its sophisticated form, since there the unit of analysis is not land masses, but civilisations. In that light it is perhaps more significant that ancient Egypt, along with the central Sahara and Ethiopia, belonged to a chain of early civilisations in the greatly extended Fertile Crescent, than that some these early civilisations were situated on or outside the African land mass. Yet for the popular perception of 'Africa' in the world today an awareness in terms of the *Black Athena* thesis must be a healthy corrective to sweeping, often racialist- and colonalist-inspired, generalisations about that continent's place in global cultural history.

Two swallows do not make summer, yet I submit that the underlying model explicitised in these two cases, has rather wide applicability when it comes to assessing 'Africa's' place in the world's cultural history, both in the Neolithic and during the latest few millennia. We have found that 'Africa' might claim both the initial and the later glorious contributions, and the subsequent stagnation and involution.

4. 'Africa' not a viable unit of scientific analysis but a welcome concept in identity formation

*Might* — for the more important message is that 'Africa' is the wrong unit of analysis altogether. My argument suggests that regions of cultural initiative are not fixed rigidly and once for all on the map, but show considerable dynamics, influencing each other, now taking precedence, then sinking into relative stagnation as compared to near and not so near neighbours. Such regions are typically the size of large states, a few hundred kilometres across, not of continents. It is the temptation of blowing up of the *Black Athena* thesis to the scale of entire continents
interacting (and then only two, Africa and Europe; and only in the form of one-way traffic), which threatens to deprive it of scientific value and to reduce it to a mere geopolitical (ultimately even racialist) myth. Continents are far too large, too heterogeneous and too capriciously shaped, and their natural boundaries (oceans, seas, deserts, a narrow isthmus in the case of Africa’s boundary with Asia) far too porous and too much an interface for human interaction coming from all directions, than that they can define viable units of analysis in cultural and social history.

However, for the same reasons continents provide excellent raw material for an intellectual process that at all costs needs to be distinguished from detached scholarship: identity formation. Under the conditions of technology, political and bureaucratic organisation, and international ideology, which together define (as an increasingly obsolescent) Modernity, political actors themselves set out to define their interactions in geopolitical terms by explicit reference to the map. This is nowhere better demonstrated than in the case of Europe, not only intercontinentally in the formative years of imperialism and colonialism, and continentally during the birth of nation states as from early Modern times, but also today, in the birth pangs of the European Union.

It is no accident that delusions about the pivotal place of Africa in the world’s recent cultural history (meaning the latest few millennia) should occur now, in the 1990s CE. The internal social contradictions within the U.S.A. after the Cold War put a new premium on whiteness and blackness as social categories. In the world at large, processes of globalisation today do nothing but increasingly marginalise the African continent: an island of poverty and international debt; participating for no more than 1% (!) in the world’s trade flow; getting less and less income out of even a lightly increasing production of crops such as cocoa, coffee and groundnuts; on the verge of being given up by development agencies, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund; torn by ethnic and civil war, with more than a dozen postcolonial states having effectively ceased functioning; yet more than ever open (through electronic media, education, world religions, intercontinental travel) to the images and aspirations of Late Modernity.53 Just as it is no accident that we are forced to discuss these issues today, in a context where — with the unification of ‘Europe’ gradually taking political and economic shape — geopolitical ideologues are desperately looking for a binding symbol to define Europeanness as against the rest of the world: Is it to be Christianity? The Celtic heritage of Hallstatt and La

Tène? Charlemagne? Prometheus? The Greek heritage? Minoan Crete, after all? Athena?! The relative lack of resonance of the Black Athena debate in continual Europe may indicate widespread apathy caused by the current confusion as to what role we as intellectuals are to play in the continual identity game. 'Should we retreat to a superior deconstruction of such messy identity engineering as illusory, manipulative, and inherently Eurocentrist?' ('Yes!') 'Should we give up our academic distance and rush to the assistance of opinion leaders of our choice?' ('No!') 'Should we leave the choice to outsiders, so that Europe simply becomes, culturally and phenotypically, a model of the world at large: multicultural but under North Atlantic cultural hegemony, phenotypically mixed but with White/Caucasian as the norm, religiously diverse and with Islam as the second largest world religion, but under the implied hegemony of Christianity?' ('Disconnected')

This is the context in which we must radically reject continents as appropriate scientific units of cultural analysis. Before the self-conscious political exploitation of the concept of Africa on a truly continental scale, map in hand, in the nineteenth century CE, Africa only existed as a land mass, not as a self-conscious cultural, social or linguistic unit. None of its many cultures, societies and languages ever encompassed the entire land mass, and each tended to share many traits with similar units outside that land mass, in what we now call Asia and Europe. These continental distinctions did not make much sense in the Palaeolithic and Mesolithic past, up to scarcely 10,000 years ago, and the instructive pattern of intercontinental continuity prevailing then, deserves closer attention from present-day scholarship as to its impact on cultural continuities today.54

Instead, historians, linguists, anthropologists, writers, politicians, and most recently Afrocentrists, have dreamed up — partly in polemic response to Eurocentric myths, partly as a specific contribution to the continuous social and political construction of 'otherness' which goes on in all societies and at all times — myths to define a distinct cultural Africanness which was to be coterminous with the land mass or with the dominant somatic human type inhabiting it — characterised by considerable pigmentation of the outer skin. Here Hegel, who continues to be considered as one of the founding fathers of contemporary North

Atlantic thought, set a trend from which Western thought still has not distanced itself sufficiently:

‘Jenes eigentliche Afrika ist, soweit die Geschichte zurückgeht, für den Zusammenhang mit der übrigen Welt verschlossen geblieben; es ist das in sich gedrungene Goldland, das Kinderland, das jenseits des Tages der selbtsbewußten Geschichte in die schwarze Farbe der Nacht gehüllt ist. Seine Verschlossenheit liegt nicht nur in seiner tropischen Natur, sondern wesentlich in seiner geographischen Beschaffenheit. (...) Der eigentümlich afrikanische Charakter ist darum schwer zu fassen, weil wir dabei ganz auf das Verzicht leisten müssen, was bei uns in jeder Vorstellung mit unterläuft, die Kategorie der Allgemeinheit. Bei den Negern ist nämlich das Charakterische gerade, daß ihr Bewußtsein noch nicht zur Anschauung irgendeiner festen Objektivität gekommen ist’.55

Of course, any Africanist today (and most other people) would be horrified by this Hegel quotation, and could cogently argue how African Studies has entirely and consistently constituted one sustained crusade again this sort of blatant racialism, which fortunately lies almost two centuries behind us. However, this is putting the matter far too simply. True enough, Africanists today can safely leave the public production of sweeping Eurocentric stereotypes about Africa to the electronic media and the press, who often oblige. Meanwhile the construction of images and formulae of, still, a compound and unitary Africanness has continued to be one of the conspicuous products56 of African Studies so far — as a result of the pressures of professionalisation and institutional competition in academia, and also as an implicit reflection, largely unintended, of North Atlantic hegemony in the world system today.

5. Conclusion: Three tasks ahead of us

Our argument has taken us from across the entire Old World and a bit of the New World, and across an expanse of several millennia. It is time to face the here and now, and to draw lessons for the future, in the context of the ongoing Black Athena debate.

As a first task, the kind of anti-racialist anti-Eurocentric critique of

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scholarship which *Black Athena* I has so brilliantly and largely successfully undertaken for classics as a discipline, could and should also be undertaken for African Studies and anthropology.\(^{57}\)

Such a task would have to be completed before even we can set out to perform the second task: tracing the concrete implications of the *Black Athena* thesis further on to ancient African cultures as the most likely main sources of ancient Egyptian culture.\(^{58}\)

Only after these two tasks have been completed can we come to terms with a third task: A fair assessment of the Afrocentrist claims — extremist as well as moderate and plausible ones — which *Black Athena* has reinforced, much to the dismay of many of its critics.\(^{59}\)

If the latter task cannot yet be fully undertaken now, that does not mean that we cannot outline its parameters. I see these in the following terms. The future of Africa and of Black people living in or originating from that continent, and of mankind as a whole for that matter, lies in a radical rejection of racialist claims to a *particularistic* birth right, in favour of models stressing the common heritage of universal humanity, in the light of a common future. Precisely one such model has been offered in *Black Athena*, with its exposure of the a-historical Eurocentric myth suppressing from consciousness the facts of multiplex interaction, interdependence and indebtedness straddling three continents. It rightly claims such initial contributions of Africans, people living in Africa, to global cultural history as have been filtered through the intermediary of Ancient Egypt. Yet it fails to analyse the wider African inputs into Ancient Egyptian culture, and the ways these must have been subjected to transformative localisation within Egypt before being handed on to the rest of the world, including the Levant and (probably largely via the latter) to Greece and thus further into Europe, finally to reach global distribution. The formal geographical location of the civilisation of Ancient Egypt inside the African land mass is

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\(^{58}\)Cf. Wim van Binsbergen, *Black Athena Ten Years After: Towards a constructive re-assessment* (this volume), section 'Into Africa?'.

which by and large await thorough scholarly assessment in the light of up-to-date data and of adequate interdisciplinary methodologies.

Moreover, for a responsible, non-Eurocentrist reassessment of Africa’s place in global cultural history we clearly need even a larger framework than the Black Athena thesis, however stimulating and timely, can provide. It is certainly not enough to promote Africa to a status comparable to that attributed to Atlantis in Plato’s Timaeus and Critias: producer of a superb culture which, however, unfortunately has long ago ceased to exist. Africa’s global cultural birth-right was racialistically denied for centuries, but it is not going to be restored in popular global consciousness by simply pointing out that it once carried, and probably largely engendered, several millennia ago, the civilisation of Ancient Egypt. We also need to address the theme of more recent stagnation. And equally important, we need to situate Ancient Egypt within the full range of great African civilisations, from that of Kush which (although virtually absent from Bernal’s work) was contemporary to Ancient Egypt and whose independent originality is now being more and more appreciated, to the great civilisations of West, East and Southern Africa throughout history right up to the present times.

Here the disappointment of that great Africanist Basil Davidson needs to be appreciated, who at the end of his jubilant review of Black Athena I yet had to write:

‘...the Hamites and their Caucasoid quick wits [as depicted by Seligman, not Davidson, of course] have in any case vanished from the scientific scene. So have other stereotypes of the racist model. The scholarship of the last thirty years and more has simply tipped them into the dustbin of exploded fantasies. This was not achieved easily or without a lot of stubborn effort; but it has now been achieved beyond any possibility of reversion to those aforesaid fantasies. It may even be claimed that this achievement is among the most significant intellectual advances of the twentieth century. Yet Bernal’s treatment of this important aspect of his own subject is disappointingly deficient, being little more than an afterthought at the end of his book. No doubt he has it in mind to put this right in a later volume. As it is, reading his pages in this respect must leave one without the slightest indication of the fact that the study of African history and humanity, in many disciplines, has become the concern of manifold colleges and universities in all the continents, not least in Africa itself. (...) Valiantly toppling the Aryan Model for Europe, this sympathetic writer has not yet had time to notice that its partner for Africa has meanwhile bitten the dust.’


And finally a point which has been made repeatedly by critics of Martin Bernal: culture should be appreciated in their own right as manifestations of the variety of human achievement and creativity, not merely according to the extent to which they can be demonstrated to have contributed to the culture of latter-day Western Europe. The great African civilisations are among the lasting triumphs of Mankind, even regardless of whether Arabs and Europeans came along to admire them and be inspired by them. Here however Bernal’s appeal to the specific global context of cultural exchanges and identity discourse in our age and time (in other words, the contemporary dominance of Western European culture happens to be an empirical political fact, and it is in the light of this dominance that intercultural comparisons are made, if not at the level of scholarly analysis then certainly at the level of political praxis), in my view fully exonerates him from the ironic charges of Eurocentrism as laid against him:

‘...it is certain that Western European culture is dominant in the world today, there is also no doubt that — directly or indirectly — the civilization of Ancient Greece has been central to the formation of this culture. Furthermore, Europeans holding the gamut of political views from fascist, to liberal, to communist have all agreed that Ancient Greece created philosophy, art, science and democracy. This myth of origin has been widely used to give Western European and their descendants elsewhere, the exclusive possession of such desirable cultural artifacts. This monopoly has been used to bolster and justify European military and political power in other continents.

If it can be shown that the greatness of Ancient Greek civilization came from its eclecticism, that it was not a purely European culture and had strong African and Asian components and that many crucial elements of ‘Greek’ philosophy, art, science and democracy had been introduced from the Near East, this would have a fundamental and to my mind beneficial effect on peoples (...) not merely those of South West Asia and North East Africa but also those of the rest of the world including Europe.’

Afrocentrism is not primarily a scientific theory; above all it is an indication of Black people’s determination to regain once more a place


‘And it is surely his aim also to do what he must know he cannot quite manage: to give African-Americans a share of the credit for Egyptian civilization ([Black Athena] I: 242). But is this project not Eurocentric? (...) it is because blacks are, seemingly, outside the traditional European story that Bernal wants to find them a place in that sun; and however well-meaning this aim, it can hardly help being patronizing. And there is another consideration which ought to weigh against Bernal: that he is encouraging blacks to enter an invidious competition.’

among the ranks of those taking globally significant cultural and political initiatives — not as a condescending concession grudgingly made by others, but as a birth-right. It is crucial to realise that we have this birth-right by virtue of being human, not by virtue of any past or present glory or misery of that section of humanity situated, now or in the distant past, on the African land mass. Intellectual support for Afrocentrism as primarily an orientation to the future requires placing Afrocentrist-related research issues involved (including a rigorous assessment of Ancient Egypt’s place among African cultures as advocated above) at the heart of current empirical and theoretical debate, and applying to them the same high standards of data and method that obtain in other fields of research today.

The alternative, of tolerating — even flirting with — a pseudo-scientific identity discourse in the periphery of academia and allowing it the trappings of scientific authority, means that one is utterly cynical about the academic profession and its responsibilities; about what the great physical anthropologist Ashley Montagu has called ‘Man’s most dangerous myth’, race;⁶⁴ and about our common future, that of Mankind as a whole.

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