

REVIEW

Binsbergen, Wim M.J. van 2012: Before the Presocratics. Cyclicity, Transformation, and Element Cosmology: The Case of Transcontinental Pre- or protohistoric Cosmological Substrates linking Africa, Eurasia and North America; special issue of *QUEST: An African Journal of Philosophy/Revue Africaine de Philosophie*, Vol. 23-24, No. 1-2, 2009-2010, Haarlem: Shikanda, ISBN/EAN 978-90-78382-15-7; 398 pp, 58 figures, 17 tables, bibliography, index of authors. Price 80 EURO.

This publication, a special issue of QUEST in honour of the 65th birthday of the author, is without doubt based on a set of very controversial ideas. The author, Wim M.J. van Binsbergen (henceforth B), in a postscript, delivered with the review volume, himself already acknowledges that he expects a dismissive reception of the book in most scholarly circles. Unluckily, as the reviewer established after a quick search on the internet, there hardly are any reviews available at all on this book. That is to be regretted, because in spite of the controversial contents of this volume, it deserves a serious review. B, who is well known for his anti-Eurocentric and (however critical) Afrocentric worldview, tries in this publication to trace the evolution of thought from the Upper Palaeolithic onwards. He denies the originality of western philosophy, especially the system of Presocratics like Empedocles of four elements as immutable and irreducible parallel components of reality.

B claims that we can reconstruct modes of thought of the remote past predicated on the fundamental unity of Palaeolithic Anatomically Modern Humans (AMH). The rise of philosophy in Ancient Greece was an aberration of an ancient and widespread cosmological model, which was developed in Eurasia, Africa, and N. America from the Upper Palaeolithic onwards (9-10). Two alternatives (“working hypotheses”) are presented. Firstly, that a transformative cycle of elements could have been originated only from the West Asian Bronze Age or secondly, that its transcontinental transmission may be even more recent. B. tries to prove his points with two case studies, sc. case 1 (Chapter 2) “The pre- and protohistory of mankala board-games and geomantic divination” and case 2 (Chapter 3) “The puzzling clan system of the Nkoya people of South Central Africa: A triadic, catalytic transformation cycle of elements in disguise?”, in which B compares their cosmology of six basic dimensions with the East Asian *yì jīng* elements and the

five elements of Taoism. This transformative cycle of elements could possibly be dated to Upper Palaeolithic.

The remaining chapters are concerned with ““Long-range, transcontinental manifestations of a transformation cycle of elements” (Chapter 4), “The Presocratics in Western Eurasia: Four immutable elemental categories as the norm throughout Western Eurasia for the last two millennia” (Chapter 5), “Exploring the long-range pre- and protohistory of element cosmologies: Steps in the unfolding of human thought faculties” (Chapter 6), “*Yi Jing* and West Asia: A partial vindication of Terrien de Lacouperie” (Chapter 7), “Further discussion of transcontinental relationships with a view of assessing our overall Working Hypothesis” (Chapter 8) and “Conclusions: Diachronic varieties of the transformation cycle of elements and their global distribution” (Chapter 9). A large bibliography and an index of authors cited conclude this publication.

The best part of the book are the two case studies in which B shows his excellent expertise in sub-Saharan Africa. Some further remarks of B are very interesting, for instance regarding Shamanism in early Greek poetry (111), which can also be found in the very early fragments of the Arimaspea of Aristeas of Proconessus. However, the rest of this very interesting and provocative book is unluckily hampered by the fact that B, although a well-known and respected anthropologist, is not a specialist in all the fields presented in this study (a fact that he himself acknowledges on p. 20). His lack of knowledge in archaeology, palaeontology, and climate science painfully surfaces on several places. For instance, his claim that south-eastern Europe in the Bronze Age was an economic and cultural backwater (175) is contradicted by the fact that the earliest recovered metallurgy in the world was practised at the site of Varna, already in the preceding Chalcolithic period and exactly in this region.

In several chapters, B adduces Upper Palaeolithic, Neolithic, and Bronze Age direct transatlantic contacts between Africa and North/South America (100, note 59; 142; 267-268; 274; and 292), for which there is no archaeological evidence at all and which is mostly based on the popular ideas of Thor Heyerdahl (225) and other more or less controversial authors like John Sorenson and Carl Johannessen, all of them authors who do not take into account that if something is possible in principle, this alone does not mean that it did happen in reality. To prove that something really happened requires sound historical or archaeological, but at least scientific evidence, like a possible contact between Eurasia and America in the Upper Palaeolithic (Hamilton/Buchanan 2010, 8). Achilles was never a sea god in the Black Sea area (153), but was a god of the Milesian Greek colonists in this area taken from their home city. The Neolithic period did not start in 14 ka BP (183) but 4000 years later. Regarding the flood myths all over the world, these probably originated from distant memories of climatic changes in the Pleistocene and have nothing to do with the proto-elements of water, land, heaven, and earth (182). The Bronze Age is treated as one unchanging period (232),

disregarding the subdivision of this period with its many cultural changes and migrations. The megalithic structures in Europe from the Neolithic age have nothing to do with those in the Iron Age, which are separated by a period of thousands of years and had a completely different function (264). Symbolic thinking was probably not an invention of the Anatomically Modern Humans from the Upper Palaeolithic, but can already be traced back to the Neanderthals from the Middle Palaeolithic (Neves/Serra 2012, 8). Some more ideas of B are hardly supported by any evidence, for instance the existence of Black Africans in the West Asian Bronze age (232), a connection between the Black Sea and Africa in the Neolithic period (247), and the connection of Basque with Chinese.

Moreover, accusations of racism in early 20th century publications, like the title of the periodical *Ex Oriente Lux* (175), are a little bit farfetched. Disturbing is the fact that not all subjects treated in the introduction found their way, in some form or another, in the conclusion. Finally, the reviewer has the impression that B sometimes uses a lot of outdated literature, moreover sometimes very controversial at that. It may seem that all these remarks indicate an extremely negative opinion of this book. However, its central thesis is sufficiently interesting to deserve to be further developed, but equally deserves a (much) better archaeological and historical foundation. Maybe B should, to that end, collaborate with specialists in specific fields, like in his earlier collaboration with F. Woudhuizen (Binsbergen/Woudhuizen 2011).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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Jan G. de Boer
Donderslaan 34-13
9728KP Groningen
The Netherlands
jan.g.deboer@kpnplanet.nl