

Transcontinentality versus Afrocentricity

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

by Wim M. J. van Binsbergen

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

Wim M.J. van Binsbergen's work, *Before the Presocratics* (2012), presents a kaleidoscopic

assessment of regional and global epistemic traditions and configurations before the advent of ancient Greek thought (see also 2011a–d; 2012b–f; 2013). He is concerned about interrogating worlds that relate to Afrocentricity, employing an impressive assemblage of specialties, namely, protohistory, archaeology, comparative ethnography, comparative mythology, comparative linguistics and genetics. His central thesis is that rather than viewing different regional epistemic formations as singular and distinct, it is more appropriate to understand them as being part of a global and historical continuum of knowledge traditions that are perpetually subject to migration and transformation – in short, all the elements of transplantation and dispersal. In this light, the strict separation between regional and ethnic knowledge becomes misguided and often preposterous.

Convincing as van Binsbergen's arguments are, the messy phenomenon of race can undermine their appeal within the contexts and scripts of subalternity. Racial violence is not merely the abuse and denigration of subject peoples. It means, more importantly, the total annihilation, and in most cases, transformation of consciousness, which of course touches on questions of the intellect. Racially abused peoples are never taken seriously intellectually. This is an angle completely absent from van Binsbergen's work as much as he attempts to advance a supposedly Afrocentric perspective.

Van Binsbergen calls into question the widespread perception held by many important philosophers – such as Heidegger and Gadamer – that the Presocratic thinkers started what is considered Western philosophy and that Empedocles initiated 'the system of four elements as immutable and irreducible parallel components of reality – and in doing so,... laid the foundation for Modern science and technology, and the Modern World System at Large' (p. 31). Afrocentrists attempt to establish the primacy of the African continent and African cosmologies, often in direct opposition to outright racist objection. Van Binsbergen's project seeks to overcome this age-long 'paradigm of oppositionality' for a broader outlook of interconnectedness between human knowledge and epistemic traditions. Thus globalization: as well as the rise of a vocal counter-hegemonic trend in scholarship all over the world, have ushered in a new era, where the transcontinental continuities of the present invite us to investigate transcontinental continuities of the past, and to overcome such divisiveness as hegemonic interests of earlier decades and centuries have imposed on our image of the world and of the cultural history of humankind, and to help free Africa from the isolated and peripheral

position that has been attributed to that continent in present-day World System (p.32).

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

On the Pelasgian Hypothesis

According to accepted paleoanthropology, archaic Homo sapiens evolved to anatomically modern human beings in sub-Saharan Africa as early as 200,000 years ago, and then dispersed to other continents. This view is termed the 'Out-of-Africa' (OOA) hypothesis or 'recent single-origin hypothesis' (RSOH), 'replacement hypothesis', or 'recent African origin model' (RAO) by experts in the field. There is also the 'Back-to-Africa' hypothesis, according to which human beings developed elsewhere, and then returned to Africa bearing new genes, religious and cultural practices, and new knowledge pertaining to science and technology. Van Binsbergen terms this migration back into Africa 'Pandora's Box'. He mentions some central hypotheses that he returns to frequently in his work, notably, the Borean hypothesis, as formulated by Harold C. Fleming (1987; 1991) and Sergei Starostin (1989; 1991), which, as described by van Binsbergen, holds: all languages spoken today retain, in their constructed language forms, substantial traces of a hypothetical, reconstructed language arbitrarily termed 'Borean' and supposed to have been spoken in Central Asia, perhaps near Lake Baikal, in the Upper Palaeolithic, (c. 25 ka BP) (p. 34). On the other hand, says van Binsbergen, Stephen Oppenheimer (2001) argues, using the Sunda hypothesis, which postulates: considerable demic effusion of cultural traits took place from South East Asia to Western Eurasia (and by implication to Africa) as the South Asian subcontinent was flooded (resulting in its present-day, insular nature) with the melting of polar ice at the onset of the Holocene (10 ka BP) (ibid.).

Van Binsbergen adds that to understand prehistorical and protohistorical philosophical thought, it is necessary to move beyond the philosophical enterprise conceived as a narrow academic discipline and instead take in the study of the language, culture, and the social context in which Presocratic thought evolved. Accordingly, this methodological imperative necessitates a multiplicity of disciplinary competencies. In relation to philosophy itself, he states that he does not offer a clear-cut argument per se, but instead presents a 'historical and transcontinental-comparative *prolegomena* to an ontological philosophical argument on cosmology and the structure of reality' (ibid., 41). Van Binsbergen labels his approach as 'counter-paradigmatic' inasmuch as it seeks to 'chart intellectual *terra incognita*' (p. 43).

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

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

Van Binsbergen argues that certain cultural traits from the Upper Palaeolithic Age found their way into the African continent. He first became aware of this when conducting fieldwork in Francistown, Botswana, where geomancy, a supposedly indigenous divination system, displayed strong similarities with 'an Islamic astrologically-based divination system that was established in Iraq around 1000 CE that in the meantime spread not only to Southern Africa but also to the entire Indian Ocean region, West Africa, and even Medieval and Renaissance Europe' (p. 44). Geomancy, and other similar diagnostic and therapeutic traditions all have a formal character that facilitates their transmission across several spacio-temporal contexts. Similarly, it is possible to study the correlations between cultural features – such as animal symbolism (such as the leopard and its spotted pelt), myths, and games belonging to the mancala (a board-game) variety – from a largely transcontinental perspective (see van Binsbergen 1995).

Transcontinental Studies, van Binsbergen points out, have led to significant shifts in anthropological research and the global politics of knowledge, fostering in the process the rise of disciplines such as postcolonial theory, Afrocentrism, Mediterranean Bronze Age Studies, and Egyptology. In this regard, the work of American sinologist, Martin Bernal, is central – especially the thesis he elucidated in *Black Athena* (1987–2006).

Van Binbergen then defines 'strong Afrocentrism as a theory that considers Africa the origin of crucial phenomena of cultural history' (p. 46). This aspect immediately connects with Dani W.Nabudere's notion of Afrikology, which essentially regards Africa as 'the Cradle of Humankind', and Afrocentric theorists such as Molefi Kete Asante, whose notion of Afrocentrism possesses quite a number of arresting subtleties quite distinct from the usual ethnocentric affirmation of Africa's cultural primacy. Van Binsbergen is always anxious to affirm his Afrocentricity; one of the ways in which he accomplishes this is by attempting to debunk 'the Eurocentric and hegemonic myth that philosophy started in Europe in historical times' (p. 47).

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

Contrary to the OOA hypothesis, the 'Back-to-Africa' hypothesis is claimed to have occurred 'in the last 15 ka' (ibid., 51), during which Asian peoples migrated to Africa carrying cultural attributes with them. These attributes pertained to kingship, ecstatic cults, divination systems, and language; for example, van Binsbergen claims that there are Austric similarities in Bantu. It

is suggested that the return to Africa most likely happened through (1) North Africa and the Sahara and (2) along the Indian Ocean from the Arabian peninsula or a more southern point of departure through the Swahili coast, Madagascar, or via the Cape of Good Hope through the Atlantic West coast ending up in the Bight of Benin and West Africa. As a result of this migration, an Indonesian/ South East Asian influence (including East and South Asian) – otherwise termed as the Sunda influence – can be discerned at a transcontinental level that includes Africa. Van Binsbergen argues that it is possible to trace the emergence of mancala board games in Africa to Asia, with world religions such as Buddhism and Islam serving as platforms for their dissemination. 'Sunda' traits such as agricultural crops, xylophones, ecstatic cults and kingship structures, it is argued, can also be observed in West Africa. Van Binsbergen further suggests that 'Sunda-associated, Buddhist-orientated states were established in Southern and South Central Africa around the turn of the second millennium (Mapungubwe and Great Zimbabwe are cases in point)' (ibid., 64).

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

Van Binsbergen recalls the derision and resistance, which met his claim that similar geomantic systems exist outside West Africa at an Afrocentric discussion group. Van Binsbergen cites Robert Dick-Read, who asserts that there is evidence of Arab/Islamic influence in West African geomancy, especially *Ifa*, which employs the names of Islamic prophets within its corpus. So it is not inconceivable that *Ifa* 'may have an Indian Ocean, circum Cape background' (p. 72). Van Binsbergen concludes that West and South African practices of geomancy are directly indebted to Indian Ocean/ Sunda influence coming through the Cape of Good Hope. Also noteworthy is the fact that, in parts of Africa, there exist simple configurations of geomancy which are likely to be derivations of more intricate forms that possess a non-African origin, most probably Chinese. This view has not been welcomed by strong Afrocentrists. Van Binsbergen asserts that divination bowls from Venda and West Africa are likely to be variations of Chinese divination bowls or nautical instruments. The Sunda influence, we are informed, can be discerned in the Persian Gulf, the Mozambican-Angola corridor, the Bight of Benin, and the Austronesian population of Madagascar. On the other hand, when Africans surface in T'ang China, it is as slaves; so much so that the figure of the black trickster became a familiar literary trope. All of this would obviously meet with the disapproval of Afrocentrists.

Martin Bernal, who has gained the attention of Afrocentrists for mixed reasons, is viewed by van Binsbergen to be 'wrong for the wrong reasons' (p. 84). Bernal is also accused of imposing his subjective views as statements of fact and resorting to *ad hominem* tactics to assert his claims. In other words, van Binsbergen has much to fault about his work. Émile Durkheim is another Western intellectual that van Binsbergen exposes for shoddy work. Durkheim in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912) makes propositions regarding Australian Aboriginals and totemism without so much as a visit to the site of study. As such, he had theorized and hypothesized

about an entire group of people without any personally organized ethnographic evidence and without any acceptable implements of comparative analysis.

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

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

Of Theses and Hypotheses

Van Binsbergen's conclusions deny the essentializations of African identities, which are usually discussed as instances of extraordinary exception when they are, in fact, part of a much broader transcontinental history linking different cultures, regions, and millennia with Africa, often receiving foreign innovations in relation to knowledge and technology rather than inventing them, but all the same, being able to adapt and transform them to meet local specificities and requirements.

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

Van Binsbergen's deflation of Afrocentricity's credibility as a discourse affirming the cultural and civilizational primacy of the black subject does not appear wilful. In addition, he manages to marshal a staggering amount of evidence to corroborate most of his claims. It is now left to Afrocentrists to deploy an equally daunting academic arsenal to restore Afrocentricity's intellectual standing, thereby hoisting it up once again, as a discourse of radical critique at a safe distance from the shackles of marginality on the one hand, and providing a worthy discursive alternative to van Binsbergen's astonishing series of hypotheses, on the other. For Afrocentrists to accomplish this task, a mastery of several disciplines is necessary: comparative linguistics, comparative mythology, protohistory, and genetic science, among others. Indeed, much of Afrocentricity needs to rise above mere sloganeering and establish its much-needed foundations upon an array of discourses van Binsbergen has assembled in arriving at such unanticipated results and conclusions, which are contrary to his initial stance as an Afrocentric sympathizer and are, in fact, counter-argumentative.

This may not be easy to attain, as the Afrocentric agenda is marked by different accents and aims. Afrocentricity seeks to establish the full subjectivity, creativity, and resilience of the black

subject after the multiple traumas inflicted by slavery, colonization, and other forms of racial violence and subjugation, such as apartheid. It celebrates the freedom and agency of the black subject even in contexts of entrenched violence and negation. In critical terms, Afrocentricity operates beyond the simple proclamation of Africa being the Cradle of Humankind, as if this is all that is needed to soothe the injured psyche of the black subject.

Afrocentricity operates beyond the reclamation of ancient Egypt as the original site of black civilization, even though this is central to the Afrocentric agenda, as it seeks to wrest meaning, dignity, and redemption amidst the fundamental violence of slavery, colonization, and racism. Afrocentricity, in the midst of these multiple forms of elemental violence, seeks to create an inimitable buttress of pathos to soothe broken communal psyches as well as embrace the future with renewed courage.

The reach and implications of van Binsbergen's work are too immense to attempt to arrive at a definitive conclusion quickly. It deserves to be read and analyzed diligently in order to do justice to its daunting scope, scholarship, and depth. But as mentioned earlier, what is of immediate concern is its discomfort with the general and specific aspects of the Afrocentric project. Van Binsbergen hopes his work would assuage Africa's doubts regarding its participation in transcontinental passages of global knowledge production. This hope may be cold comfort for ultra-Afrocentrists, who may choose to abide by their view of Africa as the Cradle of Civilization and then proceed to point out that Africa, once again, has been relegated to the peripheries of culture in a ruthless gesture of racialized and epistemic violence.

At a deeper level, the Afrocentric agenda seeks to come to terms with centuries of racial abuse, in which slavery is its most potent expression. The process of coming to terms with the horror of this enormous injustice and then discovering the resources by which to transcend it inflects Afrocentricity with a quite specific complexion as well as trajectory, which non-victims may never fully understand in spite of innumerable well-intentioned attempts. There is a chasm of mourning that must be crossed; there is a necessity to acknowledge an immense sense of loss; there exists a sense of collective physical as well as psychic dispossession with which to contend. When Afrocentricity operates at these kinds of levels, these are the conundrums it grapples; they are what shape its aims and structure its relationship with its abiding burden of loss and finally direct its continual conversation with a past that inevitably lingers and is impossible to forget.

If approached more critically, the formidable protohistorical accomplishments of van Binsbergen's work indeed pose serious questions to theories of blackness regarding the origins of humanity, especially if they choose to prioritize a reductionist agenda couched in a (pseudo) triumphalist proposition, in which Africa is cast as the Cradle of Civilization. This agenda would, in van Binsbergen's morally significant terms, be the replacement of one form of racial and cultural hegemony with another. But when Afrocentricity moves beyond such narrow conceptual objectives in order to grasp the haunting as well as transformative effects of the multiple horrors inflicted on the black race, that is, when it transcends its historic traumas while at the same time managing to enlarge its creative potentialities, then it succeeds in re-formulating the conceptual singularity of its mission and its moral validity.

Indeed, van Binsbergen intends (and largely succeeds) to establish a series of continuities across different continents, regions, races, and epochs. In other words, his project re-evaluates the conventional perceptions and assumptions regarding global history, in which unities rather than ruptures become significant. In Afrocentric terms, the project is likely to appear too general, depriving Afrocentricity of much-needed ammunition. Nonetheless, its overall academic deportment is admirable even when staunch Afrocentrists would tend to flinch from it. The black subject in antiquity often constitutes an anomalous and marginal presence, be it in the form of

the black Irish and similar instances in the Western extremity of Eurasia, or the Dallit, labeled 'Untouchables', in South Asia. So the black figure, contrary to Clyde Winters' (1980) assertion that the Xia and Shang Yin dynasties were established by blacks, has repeatedly appeared as an intruder, an unwelcome presence, according to van Binsbergen's findings and other similar archaeological and anthropological discoveries, that stand in opposition to dominant cultural, linguistic, and theoretical paradigms, thus making the 'outsider' designation fit a specific radicalized pattern of reception and perception. The characteristics that define the black presence in the Bronze Age East Mediterranean include proto-Bantu-speaking features, elongated labia, round house architecture, spiked wheel trap, mancala board games, and the worship of a single supreme deity, all of which represent a counter-paradigmatic cultural and linguistic presence.

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

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