



QUEST

Philosophical Discussions

An International African Journal of Philosophy  
Revue Africaine Internationale de Philosophie

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**QUEST** includes materials on both current subjects related to Africa, and subjects of general philosophical interest, serving an international public of professional philosophers and intellectuals in other disciplines with philosophical interests. Original articles written in either English or French will be published, each with a summary in the other language.

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**Subscriptions:** US\$ 35.- (institutions); US\$ 25.- (individuals); Africa US\$ 20.- (institutions); US\$ 15.- (individuals). Payment by credit card or cash; cheques payments should always include \$9.- to cover bank charges.

**Quest, PO Box 9114, 9703 LC Groningen, The Netherlands**

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## Editorial

A notre grand regret nous devons commémorer le décès d'une des plus importantes personnes de la philosophie africaine, professeur Henry Odera Oruka. Oruka a été membre de notre conseil éditorial et il a fermement supporté notre revue, en l'honorant souvent de ses articles qui provoquent les pensées. Lui-même est honoré par cette publication. En même temps nous comparaisons avec sa femme et ses enfants, qui ont perdu un mari et père tellement fameux.

Un autre célèbre penseur africain, Nnamdi Azikiwe, a également décédé. Il faut le commémorer non pas seulement comme ancien président du Nigeria, mais aussi comme le grand inspirateur du nationalisme africain des décennies suivant la publication, en 1937, de son magnifique oeuvre "Renacent Africa".

L'actuelle édition double, pleine de contributions intéressantes, ramène *QUEST* au calendrier régulier de publication. Avec une abondance d'articles très variés et défiant les pensées, il nous a fait dur de ne pas dépasser les bornes de ce numéro. Nous espérons éviter de nouveaux retards de production de notre revue.

## Editorial

To our great regret we have to commemorate, the death of one of the leading men in African philosophy, professor Henry Odera Oruka. Oruka was a member of our editorial board and a strong supporter of the journal, honouring it often with his thought-provoking articles. This issue is a special tribute to him. At the same time we sympathize with his wife and children for losing their great husband and father.

And yet another prominent African thinker passed away, Nnamdi Azikiwe. He will be remembered not only as former president of Nigeria, but also as the great inspirator of African nationalism in the decades following the publication of his magnificent *Renacent Africa* in 1937.

This double issue, overflowing with interesting contributions, brings QUEST on publishing schedule again. In receiving an abundance and wide variety of thought-provoking articles, we had difficulty in keeping the bounds for this issue in check. We hope to avoid further delays in the production of the journal.

Colleagues having access to E-mail services can now subscribe to the discussion list "AFRI-PHIL". The managers of the list, Emmanuel Eze and Bruce B. Janz, announce the list in the following words:

*"The primary purpose of this list is to provide a forum for the exchange of views, experiences, techniques, and professional information pertaining to the teaching and study of the philosophical thought of African and African-diaspora cultures."*

The list is conceived as a companion to a forthcoming new journal tentatively entitled *Africana: Philosophical and Cultural Studies*.

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**BLACK ATHENA**  
**and**  
**Africa's contribution to global cultural history<sup>1</sup>**

**Wim van Binsbergen**

*1. Martin Bernal's project<sup>2</sup>*

Martin Bernal, sinologist and professor of government at Cornell University, U.S.A., is the son of a famous British chemist cum Marxist historian of science: being half Jewish half Irish, with childhood memories of World War II, meant that issues of identity and racism were built into his biography. So were anthropology and Africa; before marrying J.D. Bernal, his mother was betrothed to an anthropologist who died during field work in Melanesia - on the spur of this connection, young Martin Bernal, as a freshmen, lived for a year at the house of Meyer Fortes, the famous anthropologist. The family's tea plantation in Malawi, long ago converted into politically more acceptable assets, earned young Martin his first extensive stay in Africa and knowledge of his first African language, Chi-Nyanja.

These multifarious intellectual influences combined to make him turn, in mid-career, to a set of questions which were rather remote from his original academic field; at the same time they are crucial to the North Atlantic intellectual tradition since the eighteenth century C.E., and to the way in which this tradition has hegemonically claimed for itself a place as the allegedly unique centre, the original and unprecedented historical source, of the increasingly global production of knowledge in the world today. Is — as in the dominant Eurocentric view — modern global civilisation the product of an intellectual adventure that started, as from scratch, with the ancient Greeks — the unique result of the latter's unprecedented and history-less achievements? Or is the view of the Greek (read European) genius as the sole and oldest source of civilisation, merely a racialist myth, whose double aim has been

- to underpin delusions of European cultural superiority in the Age of European Expansion, especially the nineteenth century CE, and
- to free the history of European civilisation from any indebtedness to the (undoubtedly much older) civilisations of the Fertile Crescent extending from Egypt through Canaan and Phoenicia, to Syria, Anatolia, Mesopotamia, Iran and the Indus Valley.

Here Minoan, subsequently Mycenaean Crete occupies a pivotal position as either 'the first European civilisation in the Eastern Mediterranean'; or as a Semitic-speaking island outpost of more ancient West Asian and Egyptian cultures; or as both at the same time. The most likely view would stress — foreboding the equally dissimulated dependence of medieval European civilisation on Arab and Hebrew sources — a vital Semitic contribution to the very origins of a civilisation which has bred the most vicious antisemitism (both anti-Jew and anti-Arab/ Islam) in the course of the twentieth century.

Bernal's monumental *Black Athena*, projected as a tetralogy of which so far the first two volumes have been published, addresses these issues along two main lines of argument. The first volume, besides presenting an extremely ambitious outline and provisional (but as yet largely unsubstantiated) documentary, linguistic and archaeological results for the project as a whole, is mainly a fascinating exercise in the history and sociology of European academic knowledge. It traces the historical awareness, among European cultural producers, of ancient Europe's intellectual indebtedness to Africa and Asia, as well as the subsequent repression, since Romanticism, of such awareness with the invention of the ancient Greek miracle. The second line of argument presents the converging historical, archaeological, linguistic and mythological evidence for this indebtedness, which is then symbolised by Bernal's re-reading (taking Herodotus literally)<sup>3</sup> of Athena, apparently the most ostentatiously Hellenic of ancient Greek deities, as a peripheral Greek



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copy of the goddess Neith of the Egyptian western delta town Sais — as *Black Athena*.

## 2. Black Athena's reception in general and in Holland

Reception of the two volumes of *Black Athena* has been chequered. Established classics scholars entrenched in the Greek tradition have often been viciously dismissive, but far less so the specialists in e.g. archaeology, the Ancient Near East, and comparative religion. It is impossible not to be impressed with the extent and depth of Bernal's scholarship — he shows himself a *dilettante* in the best possible tradition of the *homo universalis*. At the same time, much of his argument is based on the alleged substantial traces of lexical and syntactic material from Afro-Asiatic (including Ancient Egyptian, and West-Semitic) languages in classical Greek; here one has reason to wonder whether his skills in theoretical and comparative linguistics do in fact sufficiently extend beyond the Sinic language family.

Where Bernal's central thesis was picked up most enthusiastically, immediately to be turned into an article of faith, was in the circles of African-American intellectuals. Here the great present-day significance of *Black Athena* was rightly recognised: not so much as an academic correction of remote, ancient history, but as *a revolutionary contribution to the global politics of knowledge in our own age and time*. The liberating potential of Bernal's thesis has been that it has accorded intellectuals from outside the politically and materially dominant North Atlantic, White tradition an independent, even senior, historical birth-right to full admission and participation under the global intellectual sun. Egypt is claimed to have civilised Greece, and from there it is only one step to the vision that Africa, the South, Black people, have civilised Europe, the North, White people; the ultimate answer to the imperialist (including cultural-imperialist) claims of the 'white man's burden'. Such a view clearly ties in with a host of current African-American and African publications making similar claims (e.g.

those of Karnak House publishers, London)<sup>4</sup> or with the dominant, Egyptocentric idioms among present-day African intellectuals in, e.g., Nigeria, Senegal and Zaire. But coming from an internationally respected academician who is socially and somatically an outsider to Black issues, the impact is truly enormous. Here *Black Athena* is built into the ongoing construction of a militant Black identity, offering as an option — not contemptuous rejection, nor parallel self-glorification as in the context of Senghor's and Césaire's *négritude*, in the face of the dominant, White, North Atlantic model, but — the explosion of that model. And this leads on to its replacement by a model of complex intercontinental intellectual interaction, in which Europe is affirmed to have been, for the better part of the last few millennia, merely a remote receptive periphery of the civilisations of the Fertile Crescent. With the exponential expansion of Ancient Near Eastern and Egyptological studies in the course of the twentieth century we hardly needed Bernal to formulate this insight in the first place. In fact, he soon had to admit that he had underestimated the extent to which views similar to his own were already in the air even among classics scholars. Yet *Black Athena* has done a lot to drive this insight home in circles thirsting for it while building and rebuilding their own identity.

Although Egypt is a part of North East Africa, there is a double blind spot here. An obvious sequel to the *Black Athena* thesis would be to explore the roots of Egyptian civilisation in its turn. Towards ancient Egyptian origins, people from elsewhere on the African continent, e.g. the once fertile central Sahara, made the principal contributions, albeit the decisive transition to an Egyptian civilisation tends to be attributed to the cultural hybridisation when this neolithic African stock was confronted, as indicated by the Naqada II archaeological finds, with a phenotypically different population often interpreted as militant invaders from West Asia.<sup>5</sup> What did the interior of Africa thus contribute to 'Black Athena'? Also one might expect the argument on Afro-Asiatic languages to be traced further inland into the African continent. These steps obviously Bernal could not yet take. He can hardly be blamed for this, not only in view of the enormity of this additional task

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and of the scope of his actual accomplishments, but also because Africanists have so far, with few exceptions,<sup>6</sup> let him down. They have refrained from exploring the implications of Bernal's view for the historical, political and intellectual images of Africa which Africanists professionally produce today, and which — perhaps more important — circulate incessantly in the hands of non-Africanists, in the media, public debate, and identity construction by both Whites and Blacks in the context of both local and global issues. The reasons for the Africanists' non-response are manifold and largely respectable:

- African pre-colonial history, the great discovery of the 1960s and early 1970s, has largely gone out of fashion as an academic topic, and so have, more in general, — until the recent emergence of the globalisation perspective — grand schemes claiming extensive interactions and continuities across vast expanses of time and space.
- Linguistic skill among Africanists has dwindled to the extent that they are prepared to accept without further proof the linguists' dismissive verdict on *Black Athena's* linguistics.
- Egyptocentric claims have been persistent in African Studies in the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>7</sup> In addition to avoiding the 'Egyptianising' scholarly studies by established Africanist anthropologists and archaeologists of an older generation, present-day Africanists are particularly concerned not to revive the cruder forms of Egyptocentric diffusionism as in the works by Elliot Smith and W. Perry (the *first* Manchester School in anthropology, before Max Gluckman founded his), who saw Egypt as the only global civilising force, whose seafarers presumably carried their sun cult throughout the Old World and beyond.<sup>8</sup> Another spectre to be left locked up in the cupboard is that of the civilising Egyptians (or Phoenicians, for that matter), invoked as the originators of any lasting physical sign of civilisation in sub-Saharan Africa, especially the Great Zimbabwe complex in the country of that name.<sup>9</sup> Somewhat more recently, Egyptocentrism has been so

vocally reiterated in Cheikh Anta Diop's work,<sup>10</sup> that excessive care is taken among many Africanists today to avoid that sort of issue.

- Quick to recognise the ideological element in the Africas as propounded by others, Africanists — most of which are North Atlantic Whites — are rather less accustomed to consider, self-consciously, the political and identity implications of the images of Africa they themselves produce.

One cannot, without much further consideration, rule out the possibility that, as a fruit of a similar inspiration to which Bernal attributes the emergence of the myth of the Greek genius, African Studies too have a built-in Eurocentrism that prevents it from seriously considering such a totally reversed view of intellectual world history. Here there is a tremendous critical task for African and African-American scholars today. In an earlier generation we have seen how African scholars like Okot p'Bitek and Archie Mafeje have sought to explode the Eurocentric implications of the then current work in the anthropology of African religion and ethnicity.<sup>11</sup> In the study of Asian societies and history, the critical reflection on the models imposed by North Atlantic scholarship has developed into a major industry, ever since the publication of Said's *Orientalism*.<sup>12</sup> But where are the Black scholars to do the same for Africa? The names of Appiah, Diouf, Mazrui, Mbembe, Mudimbe, could be cited here; but their most obvious intellectual peers, the exponents of 'African philosophy' today, seem more concerned with re-dreaming rural Africa along dated anthropological lines, than waking up to the realities of cultural imperialism and repressive tolerance in intercontinental academia. It is here that *Black Athena* is playing a most valuable role.

Finally, in The Netherlands reception of *Black Athena* has taken long to materialise, and is still minimal, either within or outside the (locally thriving) field of African Studies.<sup>13</sup> The situation in e.g. Great Britain does not seem to be substantially different.

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Thus three strands of argument come together around *Black Athena*:

- the detached scholarly evaluation of the historical evidence for Bernal's claims, both of Ancient Europe's indebtedness to West Asia and North East Africa, and of the construction, in recent centuries, of the Greek miracle as a Eurocentric, racialist myth;
- the appropriation and application of the Bernal thesis by African--American and African intellectuals in the process of identity construction and in the politics of global knowledge construction — as a counter-force against Eurocentrism and scholarly racism;
- the critical scholarly extrapolation of the Bernal thesis (and its popular reformulation at intercontinental scale) with regard to African material beyond ancient Egypt.

### *3. Ideology and cultural history*

*Black Athena's* potential role in identity formation today is complementary to the specialist (and no less heated) academic debate on Bernal's awe-inspiring *dilettante* contributions to ancient cultural and religious history and to the sociology of knowledge of North Atlantic classical studies since Romanticism.

At one level of analysis Bernal restates and popularises, with great display of synthetic scholarship, what many archaeologists, Assyriologists, Egyptologists, Semitists including Arabists, students of the history of science and the history of ideas, students of the history of magic, divination and astrology, students of Hermetic and Gnostic texts, or of comparative religion and mythology, have come to realise at least several decades ago on the basis of evidence so overwhelming and so comprehensive that it almost leaves Bernal's feats of scholarship in the shadow.<sup>14</sup> The roots of North Atlantic civilisation, including what used to be portrayed as the classical Greek genius — allegedly incom-

parable and without historical antecedents — , have been shown to lie to a considerable extent outside Europe, in North-eastern Africa (Egypt) as well as (to an extent less emphasised by Bernal) in the rest of the Ancient Near East: Ancient Mesopotamia, Iran, Syria, Anatolia, Canaan, Crete, probably even the Indus civilisation with which Mesopotamia had such extensive contacts. Of course this insight lends a most ironic commentary to North Atlantic cultural hegemony as enforced by military and economic dominance in the Late Modern era.

Will Bernal's specific thesis regarding the details of early Greek history ultimately stand up to the methodological and factual tests of linguistics, archaeology and comparative religion? Collections of critical reactions from classical scholars and ancient historians<sup>15</sup> may be read as suggesting that scholarly opinion is now converging to a negative overall assessment. One cannot rule out the possibility that part of this rejection is merely a chauvinistic reaction from classics scholars who see their sacrosanct discipline and its founding fathers unpleasantly accused, by Bernal, of built-in anti-Semitic and anti-Egyptian, or in general anti-non-European, racism. But can an entire discipline be so blinded as to its own founding fathers? New insights in the sociology of knowledge, the importance of paradigms as blinkers, the emergence of textuality as a new perspective on canonical texts including those of a scholarly nature, have created, in recent years, such an industry of re-reading and re-assessing as to make it highly improbable that only an outsider, Bernal, could identify whatever where the ideological agendas of the founding fathers; ancient historians and classicists, too, are increasingly picking up these issues,<sup>16</sup> and it is just possible that their inside view, if less critical or critical for different reasons from Bernal's, allows us to arrive at a more balanced view.

Originality is not necessarily the hallmark of truth. Bernal is simply right in reminding us of the consistent ancient record that claims Greece's extensive indebtedness to West-Africa and Egypt, and, for instance, extensive spells of travelling and studying in Egypt, Mesopotamia, perhaps even India, for such major Greek intellectuals as Plato, Pythagoras, Plutarch, and many others. Recent research<sup>17</sup> is ex-

ploring the Greek intellectual indebtedness to the very Achaemenid ('Persian') civilisation whose proud military confrontation, at Marathon and Salamis, virtually — and largely through the impact of Herodotus' long-winded interpretation of the Persian wars in his *History* — marks the beginning of European geopolitical consciousness as an ideological self-definition against 'the East'.

It is no accident that delusions about the pivotal place of Africa in the world's recent cultural history (meaning the latest few millennia) come at a time, the 1990s CE, when increasing processes of globalisation in the world at large do nothing but increasingly marginalise the African continent: an island of poverty and international debt, participating in no more than 1% of 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, etc.

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? Napoleon? Charlemagne? Prometheus? Athena? The Greek heritage? Minoan Crete, after all?

'Europe as a concept ought to be struck from the record of history',

Spengler boldly states in his *Untergang des Abendlandes*,<sup>18</sup> one of the earliest and most uncompromising attempts, among European scholars, to escape from Eurocentrism. His great admirer, Toynbee,<sup>19</sup> although in his later years more optimistic than Spengler as to mankind's chances of working out some sort of intercultural compromise, knew the civilisation of the West to be only one among a score of others, waxing

and waning at the tide of time. 'L'Occident est un accident', the French Marxist thinker Garaudy<sup>20</sup> reminds us half a century later, in a plea for a dialogue of civilisations. Recently, a new branch of intercultural philosophy has emerged (around the work of such authors as Kimmerle and Mall)<sup>21</sup> in order to explore the theoretical foundations for post-racial and post-hegemonic cultural exchange at a global scale. Meanwhile, a more pragmatic axiom of cultural relativism has been the main stock-in-trade of cultural anthropologists ever since the 1940s; it has guided individual field-workers through long periods of humble accommodation to local cultural conditions very different from their own, and on a more abstract level has battled for a theory of cultural equality, emphasis on culture in planned development interventions, etc. Much like all other civilisations, the West has developed an ideology of ethnocentrism, and in recent centuries it has had the military, ideological, technological and economic means of practising this ethnocentrism aggressively in almost every corner of the world; unlike many other civilisations, however, the West also has formed the cradle of intellectual movements (the sciences, technologicis, art, international law, philosophies, of the twentieth century) that in theory critique and surpass Western ethnocentrism, and that in practice observe a universalism that hopefully forebodes the emergence of a global world culture in which individual cultural traditions may merge and partly dissolve. Many would agree that (besides hunger, disease, infringement of human rights, war and environmental destruction) lies one of the most crucial problems for the future of mankind.

In my opinion — and this goes against popular appropriations of *Black Athena* — this universalism owes a specific original debt to the creativity of classical Greek culture, which means that the Greeks, like we all, did attempt to stand on the shoulders of their unmistakable predecessors in the Ancient Near East. Admittedly, much of the production systems, the language, the gods and shrines, the myths, the magic and astrology, the alphabet, the mathematics, the nautical and trading skills, of the ancient Greeks were scarcely their own invention but had clearly identifiable antecedents among their longer established



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cultural neighbours. Citing such eminent authorities as Cassirer, Cornford, Snell and Frankfort c.s.,<sup>22</sup> Peter Gay in his masterly reassessment of the Enlightenment (which was among other things a rekindling of the ideals of classical civilisation) points out that this is not true for 'sustained critical thinking', in other words philosophy as a deliberately distinct realm of human symbolic production.<sup>23</sup> This applies particularly to syllogistic logic, which could be argued to be one of the bases of universalism. Trigger's point appears to be well taken as far as Egypt-Greece cultural exchanges are concerned:<sup>24</sup>

'That the ancient Egyptians, like the peoples of other early civilizations, did not distinguish as we do between the natural, supernatural, and social realms renders improbable Martin Bernal's (1987, 1991) efforts to trace the origins of classical Greek religion and philosophy back to Egyptian sources.'

At the same time the development of philosophy was neither a Greek prerogative, nor a sufficient condition (although arguably a necessary one) for the development of modern global science. Schools of logic developed not only in Greece but also in ancient India and China. The examples of medicine, alchemy and engineering, both in the Ancient Near Eastern/ Hellenic/ Hellenistic / Late Antiquity / Arabic / European tradition, and in China, make clear that science does not spring just from logic but also from the systematic practical, trial-and-error-based knowledge accumulated for centuries at the interface between artisanal and intellectual pursuits. Whatever the subtle ramifications of the hitherto largely unfathomed long-distance impact across the Old World may have been, only by a radical re-reading of the historical evidence (which inevitably has an ethnocentric bias) could these connections be said to be at the root of the specific forms of modern science, technology and philosophy which made the West and subsequently the emerging global culture of today. Such a re-reading has been Joseph Needham's *Science and civilisation in China*.<sup>25</sup> This most impressive project (in a way complementary to *Science in history*<sup>26</sup> by J.D. Bernal Sr. -

who benefited from Needham's advice - must have appealed to that of the Sinologist Martin Bernal Jr., in scope, in anti-Eurocentric orientation, and as an exercise in universal scholarship. Repeatedly, and to my mind convincingly,<sup>27</sup> Needham stresses the possible, likely, or certain contributions of China to European intellectual and technological achievements; *Yellow Athena?* Nor was the West Asian and North African contribution to modern global science limited to some initial, pre-Greek formative period: Aristotelian logic, Aristotelianism, and most of Hellenic and Hellenistic science in general would never have been revived in the West in the early second millennium CE unless through the extensive mediation and elaboration of Arabic thinkers (Ibn Rushd and Ibn Sina, foremost), with Maimonides and other medieval Jewish scholars acting as intermediaries.

In the field of scholarship there are limits to the extent to which origins truly matter, truly illuminate the past and the present. This is particularly clear from the vantage point of anthropology, which Frazer once defined as a science of origins,<sup>28</sup> but which since the structural--functional revolution affecting that young discipline in the 1930s and '40s, (*until quite recently*) has lost all interest in origins, geographical distribution patterns, even in causes, instead largely limiting itself to a contemplation of synchronic interconnectivity of diverse socio-cultural phenomena within typically a narrow geographical horizon. And even a more properly historical approach to social and cultural phenomena and their changes would insist that *origin, provenance, is not to be equated with subsequent local transformation and performance in maturity.* Islam at its earliest stage was largely a creative peripheral reformulation of, already mutually interrelated, Jewish, Gnostic and Christian strands of religious thought and practice; but it soon grew into a world religion in its own right, up to the point where current anti-Islamist prejudice in the North Atlantic region among nominal Christians is scarcely mitigated by the sense of shared historical roots.

In all likelihood the link between the Greek goddess Athena, patron goddess of the capital city of Greek civilisation in its heyday, and her Egyptian counterpart Neith, did go much further than a mere

superficial likeness cast in terms of the *interpretatio graeca*. Bernal urges us once again<sup>29</sup> to take the testimony of such ancient writers as Herodotus seriously and literally, as evidence that the Greek Athena merely represented the grateful adoption, into some North-east Mediterranean backwater, of splendid and time-honoured Egyptian cultural models — perhaps even in the course of physical Egyptian colonisation, as Bernal maintains. In this respect Athena might be called 'black'— not so much as the name of a skin colour, but in the sense of representing a counter-current to the dominant civilisation — much like blacks, women, homosexuals, refugees and the urban poor were the 'blacks' of the 1970s and '80s CE.<sup>30</sup> The more important point is not only to acknowledge the Egyptian, or in general Ancient Near Eastern essential contributions, *but also to recognise that Athena outgrew her presumable Egyptian origin*, became a focus of increasingly distinctive unpredictable local cultural development on Greek soil, and (as the goddess of the mind, of mental processes), at best characterises *both* the indebtedness of Greek and ultimately Western civilisation to Egypt, *and* the Greeks' own independent developments at the same time.

There is something thoroughly disconcerting in the emphasis on origins, as attends the debate on *Black Athena* and many other discourses on charters of identities confronting each other, not so much in the distant past, but in the world today. Origins are almost by definition too humble than that they are clearly perceptible to empirical research. At best the question of origin reduces a given socio-cultural phenomenon to the transformative combination of a number of earlier such phenomena, while the examination of the latter's own origins is left for a subsequent project. In this sense, the scholarly literature abounds with titles on origins, and legitimately so. The quest for origins however implies that whoever undertakes it, is satisfied as to the preliminary question of the classification and the unit of study of his chosen subject; if different decisions are taken on these points, the quest will yield totally different results or will have to be called off altogether. Implicit refusal to admit this means that reification and the quest for origins

often go hand in hand. Often then the ostentatious search for origins is not truly historical but merely programmatic, and theoretical primordial constructs (which because of their lack of empirical grounding are prone to ideological one-sidedness anyway) pose as historical 'firsts'. This is one of the reasons why most anthropologists would no longer be enthusiastic about Frazer's definition of their discipline.

With their ideological overtones and their invitation to conjecture, quests for origins are particularly cherished in the context of the identity formation of social groups, classes, racial groups, ethnic groups, nations. The very language of identity (as in ethnic and religious attempts at self-definition) tends to succumb to the *essentialistic* suggestion that it is some primordially established, fixed quality or nature at the beginning of time, which determines present-day qualities and performance — instead of seeing the latter as being realised in a dialectical, contradictory, and largely unpredictable *historical process*: a process, not of *remaining an essence*, but of *becoming* — usually becoming more than one thing at the same time, switching from one identity to the other, and being conscious of the arbitrary nature of all socially upheld identity. Thus the pursuit of 'origins', however legitimate as an academic activity under certain conditions,<sup>31</sup> ultimately even risks to be co-opted into the camp of *Blut und Boden* — not necessarily with Naziist overtones, but at least of a frame of mind brooding on tangible essences about which one does not argue lest one is forced to admit the *historically constructed and optional* nature, of an identity one hoped could pass for primordial, unalterable, God-given, intransigent. It is the frame of mind in which people feel justified to kill over ideas.

These attempts at greater historical and analytical subtlety would probably be lost on those who have already proceeded to blow up Bernal's original thesis beyond recognition: to the grotesque claim (never of course made by Bernal himself) that ultimately global cultural history had its roots primarily in Africa — not just in the Africa of the remotest Palaeolithic (where that continent has consistently yielded the oldest vestiges of fossil humanity; there is a case not only for 'Black

Athena' but even for 'Black mankind' as a whole...) but in the recent, post-Neolithic context.

Such sweeping claims at the continental level belong to the realm not of empirical research, but of ideology in identity formation. Their predilection for the notion of 'origin' betrays as much. Yet they acquire such vehemence as liberating and mobilising truths, and attract such enmity in that capacity, that detached historical and comparative enquiry may yet serve as a useful antidote, demarcating the domain which should be reserved for empirical knowledge production even in the face of the rising hopes and ambitions of a minority whose birth-right has been denied for too long on the international scene.

The fundamental question then is how to do justice to these honourable culture-historical ambitions without falling into the trap of spurious historical claims of precedence and seniority. What is required is a different mode 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 authors seeking to overcome the frustrations inherent to their social and historical position in the world system. 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 are produced. The racist bias which *Black Athena* seeks to explode is unlikely to be totally absent from other products of North Atlantic scholarship besides classical studies, e.g. from African Studies; and its counterpart, unjustified Afrocentrism, constitutes essentially the same sort of bias.

It is here that empirical research may come to the assistance of philosophy. In the context of critical, comparative empirical research, involving a complex body of data (whose components have each been collected for different purposes, under varying ideological conditions often including blatant methodological naivety), such biases can be hoped to be become manifest, or to cancel out. Empirical research is not an alternative to analytical and ideological critique, but it may open

up vistas and suggest new models and interrelations which otherwise would have remained outside our theoretical scope. Much of the identity discourse in the hands of African philosophers, literary writers and politicians is of an aggregate and extremely abstract nature, and pays insufficient attention to the details, the attending specific social practices and experiences, the specific dynamics and the range of variation of cultural history between, and within, African countries and periods of African history. Moreover these discourses have strictly confined themselves to the African continent, as if intercontinental cultural exchange began only yesterday, with the Maxim gun and airport art. Today however it is no longer necessary to discuss these matters 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 continent itself (which in the course of two millennia has inflated from the designation of a minor North African region to become a myth of racial identity encompassing a sizeable section of mankind) can be relegated once more to 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 of origins as in Afrocentric popular appropriations of *Black Athena*? Is it the mere receptive, passive end station of imported culture produced by the genius of other continents, as in racist myths? Do more subtle models of exchange and transformation present themselves?

4. *Two case studies: geomantic divination and mancala board-games in Africa and elsewhere*<sup>32</sup>

In order to explore these alternatives, 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 *mancala*. Geomantic divination is based on the systematic production, distinction, and interpretation of 2<sup>n</sup> combinations of lines, seeds, pebbles, or wooden or ivory tablets. The term *mancala* 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 captured.

These two cultural systems are part and parcel of African life, cutting across the many cultural and linguistic boundaries which that continent exhibits. 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 African-ness 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?

4.1. *A Neolithic context*

I have elsewhere argued a Neolithic context for the emergence of board-games and divination.<sup>33</sup> 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 modern communication and transport technology. This sets a base-line

beyond which I for one do not feel compelled to seek for historical clues and geographical connections. 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 pooling and redistribution —, fits the Neolithic archaeological record (and the form and rules of mancala) fairly well. It also has a link with the iconography of historical early agricultural communities, in whose representations a grid-like pattern not unlike a mancala 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'. Here may be the key to the layout of the mancala board.<sup>34</sup>

Also in geomancy one would see the many variations of the 'art of drawing lines in the sand' 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. Significantly, whatever departure from more original forms 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 by covering it with a sacred cloth or skin. I think it is highly significant that at the beginning of the 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).



4.2. Geomantic divination

Geomancy constitutes a ubiquitous and dominant family of divination systems, including such famous members as *Ifa, Fa*, 'Sixteen Cowries' (Nigeria and West Africa in general), *Sikidy* (Madagascar and Comoro Isl.), *Hakata* (Southern Africa), *Ilm al-raml* (North Africa).<sup>35</sup> 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 the

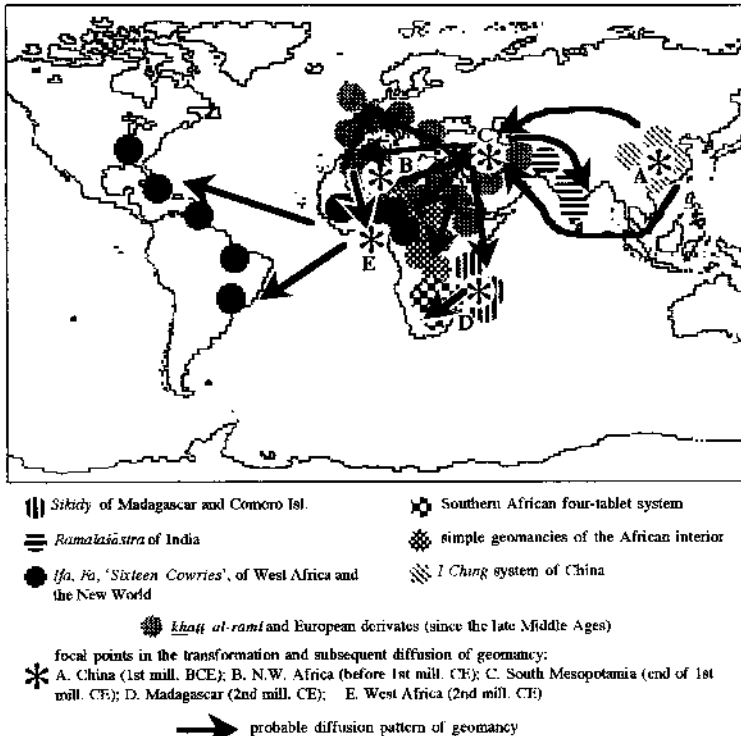


Fig. 1. Geographical distribution and probable diffusion pattern of geomantic divination.

forceful 'hitting of the sand' (*darb al-raml*) with a stick, in the North and North East Africa. With the exception of the Southern African variant (where the tablets' fall is interpreted directly, i.e. without the construction of a standard geomantic symbol) the result produced by the apparatus is interpreted, through a process of transformation and elimination, as contributing one horizontal line, of one or two dots, to a four-line geomantic symbol, of which there are of course sixteen. 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 geographical distribution of the geomantic family as in Figure 1, as a basis for the reconstruction of its geographical diffusion.<sup>36</sup>

According to the current state of historical reconstructions, the Hellenic, Hellenistic, Hermetic, Jewish, Persian, African, Indian and Chinese borrowings 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 (probably Basra) in an Isma'ili context in the tenth century CE. Subsequently, the system's rapid and successful spread over the Arabic and Jewish intellectual world, and hence into Europe, Africa and the Indian Ocean region, was largely due to its re-formulation (in a famous and much circulated treatise known, among other titles, as *Kitab al-fasl fi usul ilm al-raml*) 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, and by the prominence of proto-mancala and proto-geomancy in the latter-day North West African material.<sup>37</sup> Yet the latter-day *Ifa*, *Fa*, and 'Sixteen Cowries' in West Africa derive directly from the Arabian prototypes. 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 Ocean region led me to hypothesise historical connections which could subsequently be ascertained when I found identical items in the interpretative cata-

logues 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.

#### 4.3. *Mancala*

The term *mancala* 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 captured. The pioneer in this field, the late nineteenth-century American museum anthropologist Culin,<sup>38</sup> claims the *mancala* game to constitute 'Africa's national game' — a claim since repeated many times and still upheld by some major authors in this field, Townshend<sup>39</sup> and Russ.<sup>40</sup> Of the five families of board-games into which Murray<sup>41</sup> classifies all known historic types, Africa is claimed to exhibit only one, for which he employs the generic, Arabic name of *mancala*. This type of game was first attested<sup>42</sup> in the *Kitab al-Aghani* by the Arab author Abu'l Faradj (897-967 CE). *Mancala* is found all over sub-Saharan Africa; this game appears to have been that continent's only board-game outside clearly Arabianised or Europeanised contexts.

Figure 2 summarises the world distribution of *mancala*, and suggests the underlying pattern of diffusion.<sup>43</sup>

Townshend has extensively argued against the central role Murray had attributed to Asia and to Islam in the spread of *mancala*, and in favour of a uniquely African origin and transformation of the *mancala* family of board-games, so much so that even their distribution in Asia should be directly derived from African models alleged to be recently imported to South Asia by black slaves. Already twenty years ago Townshend<sup>44</sup> complained that everyone (except Leakey<sup>45</sup>) seemed to be utterly determined to find by all means a non-African origin for this family of board-games.

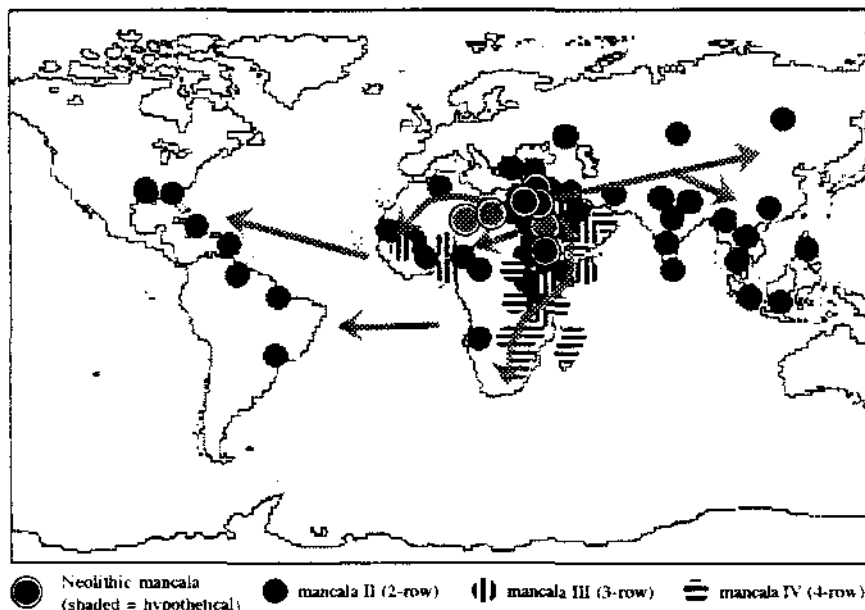


Figure 2. Geographical distribution and probable diffusion of mancala

In 1979 this point was repeated even more forcefully:

'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

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Malawi region) by Arabs or their African employees or possibly by some earlier current of cultural diffusion.<sup>46</sup>

Townshend's view, although politically correct, is misleading. It actually forces him to manipulate the data.<sup>47</sup> It would be much better to use the considerable archaeological evidence, from various sites in East and Central Africa, of mancala-like rock art.<sup>48</sup> These mancala patterns (if that is what they are, despite their vertical placement, which defies their being used for actually *playing* mancala) 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<sup>49</sup> before it was generally realised that in Africa, both in the once fertile central Sahara and in the Ethiopian highlands, independent neolithic domestication of crops and livestock had taken place. Combining this with the evidence on neolithic mancala from Egypt, Jordan and Cyprus, any strict distinction between Africa and Asia becomes irrelevant and misleading: the neolithic transformation process producing mancala touched parts of both continents, as did the attending linguistic processes which were to lead to the rise of the Afro-Asiatic language family. Thus mancala did not spring from Africa any more than it sprung from Asia: it was produced in the Fertile Crescent, redefined so as to stretch deeply into North West and North East Africa, and straddling both continents. But here again — like when we compared Athens with Sais — we should add, to the argument of origins, the argument of subsequent maturation. If part of the cultural material that went into the making of both geomancy and mancala 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, strongly astrological divination system of *khatt al-raml*, and by putting the effective and pervasive vehicle of Islam and Islam-oriented trading at the disposal of both geomancy and mancala as a main vehicle of spread.

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#### 4.4. *The convergence of geomantic divination and mancala*

What strikes us is the similarity between the distribution and diffusion patterns of mancala and geomancy. Although their earliest history differed, 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, mancala 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 mancala 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 (although not necessarily indigenous) part of the culture of China as a whole, it is only in Southern China that we encounter mancala. In general, these patterns of diffusion show that Africa is not merely a passive importer of culture but also a place of active transformation and subsequent export of culture for global use.

Within the African continent, this convergence 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 (for many centuries an important trade route, along which notions of more or less divine kingship, Asian trade goods against gold and cattle, and Indonesian as well as — much later — Islamic cultural influences travelled) linking Tanzanian and Mozambican groups like the Konde to the Shona-speaking groups on the highlands of Zimbabwe, and from there on to Sotho/ Tswana speaking groups to the south and west of Zimbabwe. For students of mancala 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 mancala, 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

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- four-row mancala caused the apparatus of geomancy to be altered towards a four-tablet system, or
  - four-tablet geomancy caused the incomparably more complex four-row variety of mancala to be produced out of the existing two- and three-row variants, or finally
  - it was the classic four-line geomancy (*Ilm al-raml*) which produced both the four-tablet geomancy and the four-row mancala.

### 5. Conclusion

My overview of two major classes of pan-African cultural phenomena, mancala board-games and geomantic divination, has revealed fascinating generic and formal interrelations and distribution patterns, both within each genre and between these two genres. 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 mancala, more peripheral and hypothetical in the case of early geomancy), followed by
- subsequent entrenchment — ‘cultural involution’ is perhaps the word — so that later, newer global trends are no longer picked up and locally fed back into the earlier models; instead the latter localise themselves 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 something uniquely local, i.e. ‘African’, having lost all explicit references to, in fact virtually all traces of, an earlier intercontinental exchange.

In West Africa and Southern Africa practitioners and clients, for instance, 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

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continental boundaries, and the general quality of being a backwater (much like Northwestern Europe before the second millennium CE) — these are some of the features of the model of African cultural dynamics suggested by my case studies. Admittedly, Africa turns out to be capable of cultural export and transmission (e.g. to the New World), but the cultural items it exports tend to remain peripheral in the destination continent, limited to immigrant groups who define their identity by reference to these imports. This is in many ways the opposite of the model of 'Africa civilising the rest of the world' as in the grotesque popularisations of the Bernal thesis. It is not a model that applies to all instances of cultural interrelations involving Africa, as the case of jazz music clearly shows. It does not contradict the Bernal thesis in its original form, since the unit of analysis is not land masses, but civilisations; and in that light it is rather more significant that ancient Egypt, along with the central Sahara and Ethiopia, belonged to a chain of early civilisations in the extended Fertile Crescent, than that these early civilisations were situated on the African land mass.

Two swallows do not make summer, yet I submit that the underlying model explicitised in these two cases, has rather general applicability when it comes to assessing Africa's place in the world's cultural history during the latest few millennia. Thus Africa can claim both the initial glorious contributions, and the subsequent stagnation and involution. This will only come as a disappointment to those who think (rather racialistically) that, despite the universally acclaimed quality of culture as something which is acquired, learned, not in-born, yet it is only primordial roots in a remote past viewed essentialistically, which qualify us for entry to the global scene. Meanwhile the more important message is that 'Africa' is the wrong unit of analysis.

My argument suggests that regions of cultural initiative are not fixed rigidly and once for all on the map, but show considerable dynamism, influencing each other, now taking precedence, then sinking into relative stagnation as compared to near and far neighbours. Such regions are typically the size of states, a few hundred kilometres across, not of continents. It is the monstrous blowing up of the Black Athena



paradigm — in the hands of enthusiasts trying to define a collective identity — to the scale of entire continents interacting, which deprives the model of all scientific value and reduces it to a mere geopolitical and ultimately racist 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 conducive to human interaction, than that they can function as viable units of analysis in cultural and social history — *unless, under modern conditions of technology, organisational structure and international ideology, political actors themselves set out to define their interactions in geopolitical terms by explicit reference to the map.* 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 then deserves closer attention from present-day scholarship as to its impact on cultural continuities today.<sup>50</sup> Instead, historians, linguists, anthropologists, writers, politicians and most recently African philosophers have dreamed up — partly in response to myths of Europeaness, partly as a specific focus on the construction of 'otherness' — myths to define a distinct cultural Africaness 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 set a trend from which Western thought still has not distanced itself sufficiently:

'Jencs 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 selbstbewußten 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.<sup>51</sup>

As a proud answer to European racism projected onto Africa, the Black American and African attempts at ideological self-assurance are as understandable as they are tragic: all these dreams of *Africanité*, *négritude*, tracing pharaonic and Ethiopian images all across the surface of that large continent, letting Black Athena and her African human followers sally forth from the African continent on their way to civilise Europe.<sup>52</sup> In another way they are also a new phase in a recurrent phenomenon in North Atlantic thought: the cyclical infatuation with Egypt.<sup>53</sup> The future of Africa and of Black people living in or originating from that continent, should not be projected as lying with these half-truths, but 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.

## Notes

- 1 An earlier version of this paper was presented at the conference on *Black Athena: Africa's contribution to global systems of knowledge*, African Studies Centre, Leiden, The Netherlands, 28 June, 1996. I am indebted to Rijk van Dijk for co-organising the conference with me; to the African Studies Centre for funding it; to Jan Best for useful advice towards its realisation; to Martín Bernal, Josine Blok and Pieter Boele van Hensbroek 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).
- 2 Bernal, M., 1991, *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic roots of classical civilisation, I. The fabrication of Ancient Greece, 1785-1985*, London etc.: Vintage, reprint of the original 1987 edition with Free Association Books; Bernal, M., 1991, *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic roots of classical civilisation, II. The archaeological and documentary evidence*, New Brunswick (N.J.): Rutgers University Press; also cf. Bernal, M., 1990, *Cadmean letters: The transmission of the alphabet to the Aegean and further west before 1400 B.C.*, Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns.
  - 3 On Egyptian Athena: *Hist. II* 28, 59, 83 etc., and in general on the Greeks' religious indebtedness to Egypt: *Hist. II* 50ff. The identification of Neith with Athena was not limited to Herodotus but was a generally held view in Graeco-Roman Antiquity.
  - 4 Finch, C.S., 1990, *The African background to medical science*, London: Karnak House; Rashidi, R., 1992, *Introduction to the study of African classical civilizations*, London: Karnak House.
  - 5 Cf. Baumgartel, E.J., 1986, '(a) Predynastic Egypt', in: Edwards, I.E.S., C.J. Gadd & N.G.L. Hammond, eds., 1986, *The Cambridge Ancient History*, vol. 1 part 1: *Prolegomena and prehistory*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 3rd ed., first ed. 1970, pp. 463-498. We shall come back to this point.
  - 6 E.g. Jewsiewicki, B., 1991, 'Le primitivisme, le postcolonialisme, les antiquités "nègres" et la question nationale', *Cahiers d'Études Africaines*, 31, 121/ 122: 191-213; Young, R., 1994, 'The postcolonial construction of Africa', paper read at the conference 'African research futures', University of Manchester, April 1994.
  - 7 Cf. Breuil, H., 1951, 'Further details of rock-paintings and other discoveries. 1. The painted rock 'Chez Tac', Leribe, Basutoland, 2. A new type of rock-painting from the region of Aroab, South-West Africa, 3. Egyptian bronze found in Central Congo', *South African Archaeological Bulletin*, 4: 46-50 (which establishes for a fact the occasional penetration of items of ancient Egyptian material culture far into sub-Saharan Africa); Meyerowitz, E.L.R., 1960, *The divine kingship in Ghana and in Ancient Egypt*, London: Faber & Faber; Petrie, W.M.F., 1915, 'Egypt in Africa', *Ancient Egypt*, 1915, 3-4; Schmidl, M., 1928, 'Ancient Egyptian techniques in African spirally-woven baskets', in: Koppers, W., ed., *Festschrift / Publication d'hommage offerte au P. W. Schmidt*, Vienna: Mechitaristen-Congregations-Buchdruckerei, pp. 282-302; Seligman, C.G., 1934, *Egypt and Negro Africa: A study in divine kingship*, London: Routledge; Seligman, C.G., 1913, 'Some aspects of the Hamitic problem

- in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, 43: 593-705.
- 8 Smith, G.E., 1929, *The migrations of early culture: A study of the significance of the geographical distribution of the practice of mummification as evidence of the migration of peoples and the spread of certain customs and beliefs*, 2nd ed., Manchester: Manchester University Press, first published 1915; Smith, G.E., 1933, *The diffusion of culture*, London; Perry, W.J., 1918, *The megalithic culture of Indonesia*, Manchester: Manchester University Press; Perry, W.J., 1923, *The children of the sun: A study in the early history of civilization*, London: Methuen; Perry, W.J., 1935, *The primordial ocean*, London: Methuen.
  - 9 Caton-Thompson, G., 1931, *The Zimbabwe culture: Ruins and reactions*, Oxford: Clarendon Press; facsimile reprint, 1970, New York: Negro Universities Press; MacIver, D. Randall, 1906, *Mediaeval Rhodesia*, London: Macmillan; Beach, D.N., 1980, *The Shona and Zimbabwe, 900-1850: An outline of Shona history*, Gwelo: Mambo Press; Bent, J.T., 1969, *The ruined cities of Mashonaland*, Bulawayo: Books of Rhodesia, Rhodesiana Reprint Library, volume 5, facsimile reproduction of the third edition, Longmans, Green & Co., London/New York/Bombay, 1896, first published 1892.
  - 10 Diop, C.A., 1989, *The cultural unity of Black Africa: The domains of patriarchy and of matriarchy in classical antiquity*, London: Karnak House; Diop, C.A., 1974, *The African origin of civilization*, Westport: Lawrence Hill.
  - 11 Mafeje, A., 1971, 'The ideology of tribalism', *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 9: 253-61; Okot p'Bitek, 1970, *African religion in Western Scholarship*, Kampala: East African Literature Bureau.
  - 12 Said, E.W., 1979, *Orientalism*, New York: Random House, Vintage Books; Turner, B.S., 1994, *Orientalism, postmodernism and globalism*, London/ New York: Routledge; C. Breckenridge & P. van der Veer, 1993, eds., *Orientalism and the postcolonial predicament: Perspectives from South Asia*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
  - 13 This is best substantiated by the modest length and the relatively obscure venues of publication, of whatever Dutch literature exists on *Black Athena*: Best, J., 1995, 'Racism in classical archaeology', in: *Talanta: Proceedings of the Dutch Archaeological and Historical Society*; Sancisi-Weerdenburg, H., 1995, 'Was Athene zwart?', *Amsterdamse Boekengids Interdisciplinair*; Derks, H., 1995, *De koe van Troje: De mythe van de Griekse oudheid*, Hilversum: Verloren, p. 86; Leezenberg, M., 1992, 'Waren de Grieken negers? Black Athena en het Afrocentrisme', *Cimedart*, Feb/ Mar. And outside academia, in the context of drama

- production: Ockhuyzen, R., 1991, 'Het verzinsel van de Griekse beschaving', in: Aischylos, *De smekelingen*, transl. G. Komrij, Amsterdam: International Theatre & Film Books / Theater van het Oosten, pp. 11-13.
- 14 Cf. Childe, V.G., 1929, *The most ancient East: The oriental prelude to European prehistory*, London; Kramer, S.N., 1958, *History begins at Sumer*, London; Ncubebauer, O., 1969, *The exact sciences in Antiquity*, New York: Dover, 2nd edition; first published 1957; Saunders, J.B. de C.M., 1963, *The transitions from ancient Egyptian to Greek medicine*, Lawrence: University of Kansas Press; van Binsbergen, W.M.J., & Wiggermann, F.A.M., in press, 'Magic in history: A theoretical perspective and its application to Ancient Mesopotamia', in: T. Abusch & K. van der Toorn, eds., *Magic in the Ancient Near East*, Groningen: Styx, and extensive references cited there; Quispel, G., ed., 1992, *De Hermetische gnosis in de loop der eeuwen*, Baarn: Tirion; van den Broek, R., & Vermaseren, M.J., 1981, eds., *Studies in Gnosticism and Hellenistic religion: Presented to Gilles Quispel on the occasion of his 65th birthday, Etudes préliminaires aux religions orientales dans l'empire romain*, vol. 91, Leiden: Brill; Fontenrose, J., 1980, *Python: A study of Delphic myth and its origins*, Berkeley etc.: University of California Press; reprint of the 1959 first edition.
- 15 Peradotto, J., & Mycowitz Levine, M., 1989, eds., *The challenge of 'Black Athena'*, special issue of *Arethusa*, Buffalo, N.Y.: Department of Classics, State University of New York, 1989; and especially the recent anthology of reviews, from which however all positive reviews have been omitted: Lefkowitz, M.R., & MacLean Rogers, G., 1996, eds., *Black Athena revisited*, Chapel Hill etc.: University of North Carolina Press.
- 16 E.g. Blok, J.H., 1994, 'Quests for a scientific mythology: F. Creuzer and K.O. Müller on history and myth', *History and Theory*, theme issue on *Proof and persuasion in history*, pp. 26-52.
- 17 Cf. Kingsley, P., 1996, 'Meetings with Magi: Iranian themes among the Greeks, from Xanthus of Lydia to Plato's Academy', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*; Kingsley, P., 1994, 'Greeks, shamans and magic', *Studia Iranica*, 23: 187-198.
- 18 Spengler, O., 1993, *Der Untergang des Abendlandes: Umriss einer Morphologie der Weltgeschichte*, Munich: DTV; first published 1923, Munich: Beck; p. 22 n. 1: 'Das Wort Europa sollte aus der Geschichte gestrichen werden.' And he goes on in the same footnote:  
' "Europa" is leerer Schall. Alles, was die Antike an großen Schöpfungen hervorbrachte, entstand unter Negation jeder kontinentalen Grenze zwischen Rom und Cypem, Byzanz und Alexandria. Alles, was europäische Kultur heißt, entstand zwischen Weichsel, Adria und Guadalquivir [

- in other words, way outside Greece ] . Und gesetzt, daß Griechenland zur Zeit des Perikles "in Europa lag", so liegt es heute [ early 1920s, recently reconstituted from the Ottoman Empire ... WvB ] nicht mehr dort.'
- 19 Toynbee, A., 1988, *A study of history: A new edition revised and abridged by the author and Jane Caplan*, London: Thames & Hudson; this edition first published 1972.
- 20 Garaudy, R., 1977, *Pour un dialogue des civilisations: L'Occident est un accident*, Paris: Denoël
- 21 Kimmerle, H., 1983, *Entwurf einer Philosophie des Wir: Schule des alternativen Denkens*, Bochum: Germinal; Kimmerle, H., 1991, ed., *Philosophie in Afrika: Afrikanische Philosophie: Annäherungen an einen interkulturellen Philosophiebegriff*, Frankfurt am Main: Qumran; Mall, R.A., 1995, *Philosophie im Vergleich der Kulturen: Interkulturelle Philosophie, eine neue Orientierung*, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft.
- 22 Cassirer, E., 1941, 'Logos, Dike, Kosmos in der Entwicklung der griechischen Philosophie', *Göteborgs Högskolas Årsskrift*, 47, 6, Göteborg; Cassirer, E., 1953-7, *The philosophy of symbolic forms*, 3 vols., New Haven: Yale University Press, English translation by R. Mannheim of *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen*, Berlin, 1923-9; Cornford, F.M., 1957, *From religion to philosophy: A study in the origins of Western speculation*, New York: Harper and Row; first published 1912, London; Cornford, F. M., 1952, *Principium Sapientiae: The origins of Greek philosophical thought*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Snell, B., 1955, *Die Entdeckung des Geistes: Studien zur Entstehung des europäischen Denkens bei den Griechen*, Hamburg: Claassen & Goverts; Eng. tr. *The discovery of the mind: The Greek origins of European thought*, New York: Harper & Row; cf. Onians, R.B., 1951, *The origins of European thought: About the body, the mind, the soul, the world, time, and fate: New interpretations of Greek, Roman and kindred evidence also of some basic Jewish and Christian beliefs*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Frankfort, H., Frankfort, H.A., Wilson, J.A., Jacobsen, T., & Irwin, W.A., 1957, *Before philosophy: The intellectual adventure of Ancient Man: An essay on speculative thought in the Ancient Near East*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, first published 1946. More recently, the work of Jean Bottéro has been remarkably penetrating on the point of Ancient Near Eastern rationality, e.g. Bottéro, J., 1974, 'Symptômes, signes, écritures: En Mésopotamie ancienne', in: *Divination et rationalité*, Paris: Seuil, pp. 70-195; Bottéro, J., 1992, *Mesopotamia: Writing, reasoning, and the Gods*, Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, esp. ch. 8: 'Divination and the scientific spirit', pp. 125-137. Also cf.

- Larsen, M.T., 1987, 'The Mesopotamian lukewarm mind: Reflection on science, divination and literacy', in: Rochberg-Halton, F., ed., *Language, Literature and history: Philological and historical studies presented to Erica Reiner*, New Haven (Conn.): American Oriental Society, p. 203-225.
- 23 Gay, P., 1973, *The Enlightenment: An interpretation*, vol. I. *The rise of modern paganism*, London: Wildwood House; first published 1964; p. 464.
- 24 Trigger, B.C., 1995, *Early civilizations: Ancient Egypt in context*, Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, first published 1993; p. 93.
- 25 Especially: Needham, J., with Wing Ling, 1961, *Science and civilization in China*, vol. 1. *Introductory orientations*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; first edition 1954; Needham, J., with Wing Ling, 1956, *Science and civilization in China*, vol. 2. *History of scientific thought*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; many more volumes have meanwhile been published.
- 26 Bernal, J.D., 1969, *Science in history*, 4 vols., Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- 27 Cf. his magnificent discussion of Taoism, or of Chinese influence on Leibniz's binary mathematics; Needham c.s., vol.#2, o.c.
- 28 Frazer, J.G., 1922, 'The scope and method of mental anthropology', *Science Progress*, 64, April 1922, p. 586.
- 29 For a recent refutation of the 'liar' thesis which has haunted the image of Herodotus in the European classical tradition, cf. Pritchett, W.K., 1993, *The liar school of Herodotus*, Amsterdam: Gieben.
- 30 Ironically, we note that even in that respect 'black' would be a misnomer since Egypt has such socially 'black' connotations only from a present-day North Atlantic perspective, whereas it must have been a thoroughly superior ('white') civilisation in the second and early first millennium BCE --- so that from an Egyptian perspective it would be the peripheral Greek Athena, not the Saitic Neith, who could be 'black'. Such contradiction and oscillation of terms is characteristic of any, inherently contradictory, discourse of identity. The skin colour, and by implication, the phenotypic 'Africanness' of the ancient Egyptians has been subject to heated debate, echoes of which reverberate in the context of the reception of *Black Athena*. Iconographic conventions attributed differential pigmentation according to class and gender, which in itself is proof that the phenotypic situation on the ground must have been complex and variegated --- as it is in Egypt today. Only a few clearly identified, late dynasties of Egyptian royals are certified to have had a black skin. Black soldiers, emissaries and slaves are abundantly attested in ancient Egyptian iconography, but not as the dominant endemic

physical type but as foreigners, whose influx was at times controlled by legislation; cf. Darlington, C.D., 1969, *The evolution of man and society*, London: Allen & Unwin, ch.7. The dominant interpretation, referred to above, of ancient Egyptian civilisation as rising from a hybridisation involving a West Asian, non-African element may in itself be yet another version of the racist myth which the *Black Athena* thesis seeks to explode; then again, it may be a correct reading of the archaeological evidence.

- 31 I have myself been engaged for several years now in discovering 'the origins of Islamic geomancy' — and, I believe, legitimately and successfully so.
- 32 An earlier version of this section was presented at the International Colloquium 'Board-games in Academia', Leiden University, 9-13 April, 1995; as well as at a seminar I gave at the Institute for the Study of Religion and Society, Municipal University of Amsterdam, 12 May, 1995. I am indebted to the participants in the discussion on these two occasions. I also register my indebtedness to Alex de Voogd for introducing me to the literature on mancala, and to Irving Finkel for invaluable suggestions and encouragement. 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 Kimmmerle*, Amsterdam: Rodopi.
- 33 Van Binsbergen 1996 'Time', o.c. Cf. Anonymous, 1990, 'Playing board games in the Stone Age', *Geographica*, *National Geographic Magazine*, 177, 2; Rollefson, G.O., 1992, 'A Neolithic game board from Ain Ghazal, Jordan', *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*, 286, May 1992: 1-5. Considerably later are the Bronze Age mancala 'gaming stones' (boards cut in stone) found elsewhere in the Eastern Mediterranean basin: Lee, J., 1982, 'Early Bronze Age game stones from Bab edh-Dhra, Jordan', *Levant: Journal of the British School of Archaeology in Jerusalem*, 14: 171-174 (with 3x10 cups a three-row mancala); Swiny, S., 1980, 'Bronze Age gaming stones from Cyprus', *Report of the Department of Antiquities of Cyprus*, 54-78. Similarly, Deledicq & Popova, who wrote a brilliant study of the finite mathematics of the mancala game, claim that mancala originates in Mesopotamia: Deledicq, A., & Popova, A., 1977, *Wari et solo: Le jeu de calculs africain*, Paris: CEDIC.
- 34 Gilbert, P., 1965, 'Irrigation, jeux de damier et sens du rectangle dans l'art égyptien', *Chronique d'Égypte*, 40: 72-78.



- 35 The literature, both scholarly and practical, on geomantic divination is fairly voluminous, and much of it is of excellent standards; I can only present the barest selection here. For a recent review by the author of one of the most original contributions in this field, cf.: Jaulin, R., 1991, *Géomancie et islam*, Paris: Christian Bourgeois. On the West African material, cf.: Cf. Kassibo, B., 1992, 'La géomancie ouest-africaine: Formes endogènes et emprunts extérieurs', *Cahiers d'Études Africaines*, 32, 4, no. 128: 541-596; Traoré, M.L., 1979, 'Vers une pensée originelle africaine: Exposé géomantique, critiques de la négritude et du conscientisme', Thèse de 3<sup>e</sup> cycle, Paris-IV, unpublished; Abimbola, 'W.', 1976, *Ifa: An exposition of the Ifa literary corpus*, New York: Nok. For a more popular overview, also dealing with the spread of geomancy to late medieval Europe, where it became a standard and increasingly popularised form of divination as from Renaissance times, cf.: Skinner, S., 1980, *Terrestrial astrology: Divination by geomancy*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, which however should be used with caution when it comes to the early history of geomancy. On geomancy (*Sikidy*) on Madagascar in relation to the general African material, cf.: Trautmann, R., 1939-1940, *La divination à la Côte des Esclaves et à la Madagascar: Le Vôdoù Fa — le Sikidy*, Mémoires de l'Institut Français d'Afrique Noire, no. 1, Paris: Larose; Hébert, J.C., 1961, 'Analyse structurale des géomancies comoriennes, malgaches et africaines', *Journal de la Société des Africanistes*, 31, 2: 115-208. Merely for the sake of brevity, may I further refer to my own recent writings for extensive references on geomancy in Africa, the Islamic world, Asia and Europe: van Binsbergen, W.M.J., 1994, 'Divinatie met vier tabletten: Medische technologie in Zuidelijk Afrika', in: S. van der Geest, P. ten Have, G. Nijhoff & P. Verbeek-Heida, eds., *De macht der dingen: Medische technologie in cultureel perspectief*, Amsterdam: Spinhuis, pp. 61-110; van Binsbergen, W.M.J., 1995, 'Four-tablet divination as trans-regional medical technology in Southern Africa', *Journal of Religion in Africa* 25, 2: 114-140; van Binsbergen, W.M.J., 1996, 'Transregional and historical connections of four-tablet divination in Southern Africa', *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 26, 1: 2-29; all in preparation for my forthcoming monograph: *Four tablets: A Southern African divination system in its transregional and historical context*.
- 36 van Binsbergen 1996, 'Transregional', o.c.; van Binsbergen, in preparation, o.c.
- 37 Griaule, M., 1937, 'Note sur la divination par le chacal (Population dogon de Sanga)', *Bulletin du Comité d'Études Historiques et Scientifiques de l'Afrique Occidentale Française*, 20, 1-2: 113-141; Paulme, D., 1937, 'La divination par les chacals chez les Dogon de Sanga', *Journal*

- de la Société des Africanistes*, 7, 1: 1-14; Pâques, V., 1964, *L'Arbre cosmique dans la pensée populaire et dans la vie quotidienne du Nord-Ouest africain*, Travaux et Mémoires de l'Institut d'Ethnologie de l'Université de Paris, no. 70.
- 38 Culin, S., 1896, 'Mankala, the national game of Africa', *US National Museum Annual Report*, Washington, pp. 595-607.
- 39 Townshend, P., 1976-1977, 'The SWA game of || hus (das Lochspiel) in the wider context of African Mankala', *Journal SWA Wissenschaftliche Gesellschaft* (Windhoek), 31: 85-98; Townshend, P., 1979, 'Mankala in eastern and southern Africa: A distributional analysis', *Azania*, 14: 109-138; Townshend, P., 1979, 'Games of strategy: A new look at correlates and cross-cultural methods', in: Schwartzman, H.B., ed., *Play and culture*, New York: West Point, pp. 217-225; Townshend, P., 1982, 'Bao (Mankala): The Swahili ethic in African idiom', *Paideuma*, 28: 175-191.
- 40 Russ, L., 1984, *Mancala games*, Algonac (Michigan): Reference Publications.
- 41 Murray, H.J.R., 1952, *A history of board-games other than chess*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- 42 Murray, o.c., p. 165.
- 43 On the basis of Murray's detailed data: o.c. pp. 178, 240f; with additional input from Townshend (1979, 1979, 1980, o.c.), as well as from the other references on mancala quoted in this paper.
- 44 Townshend, 1976-77, o.c., p. 95.
- 45 Leakey, L.S.B., 1937, *White African*, London, pp. 165-173.
- 46 Townshend, 1979, 'Mankala', o.c., p. 127.
- 47 The mancala literature's pet reference to Egypt goes back to a non-specialist source on Ceylon: Parker, H., 1909, *Ancient Ceylon*, London: Luzac & Co., pp. 587-603. There the Egyptian material merely appears in passing in the discussion of mancala on Ceylon — for which Townshend feels compelled to suggest an unrealistically recent date; but there are also serious Egyptological sources, e.g.: Petrie, F., 1927, *Objects of daily use*, London, p. 55, plate 47. Contrary to Townshend's suggestion, there can be little doubt that we are dealing with mancala boards here: a three-row lime-stone mancala board, with separate bank for the accumulation of gaming pieces.
- 48 Costermans, le Dr., 1949, 'Relevé des stations préhistoriques dans les territoires de Watsa-Gomabri et de Dungu', *Zaire*, iii, 2: 154-166; Viereck, A., 1973, *Die Felsbilder von Twyselfontein*, Windhoek, picture 21, p. 45; Cole, S., 1954, *The prehistory of East Africa*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, p. 265; Jensen, A.E., 1936, *Im Lande des Gada*, Stuttgart:

- Strecker & Schröder (as quoted in: Zaslavsky, C., 1990, *Africa counts: Number and pattern in African culture*, Brooklyn (N.Y.): Lawrence Hill, second paperback edition; first published 1973, Boston: Prindle, Weber & Schmidt, p. 126, fig. 11-6); Anfray, F., 1970, 'Notes archéologiques', *Annales d'Éthiopie*, 8: 35. Townshend is well aware of this material, cf. Townshend 1976-77, o.c., p. 91 n. 1, p. 92.
- 49 Breasted, J.H., 1935, *Ancient times: A history of the Ancient World*, New York: Harper & Brother, first published 1926.
- 50 Cf. Edwards, I.E.S., C.J. Gadd & N.G.L. Hammond, eds., 1986, *The Cambridge Ancient History*, vol. 1 part 1: *Prolegomena and prehistory*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 3rd ed., first ed. 1970, notably: Garrod, D.A.E., 1986, 'Primitive man in Egypt, Western Asia and Europe in palaeolithic times', pp. 70-89; Clark, J.G.D., 1986, '[ Primitive man in Egypt, Western Asia and Europe ] in mesolithic times', pp. 89-121; Hughes, D.R., & Brothwell, D.R., 1986, 'The earliest populations of man in Europe, Western Asia and Northern Africa', pp. 156-172.
- 51 Hegel, G.W.F., 1992, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte*, *Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel Werke 12*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1st Suhrkamp edition 1986, pp. 120-122; posthumously published on the basis of his lecture notes 1822-1831; cf. Kimmerle, H., 1993, 'Hegel und Afrika: Das Glas zerspringt', *Hegel-Studien*, 28: 303-325.
- 52 van Sertima, I., ed., 1985, *African presence in early Europe*, New Brunswick: Transaction. One is intrigued to see, for instance, an academic sociological study like Blakely's embellished by the assertion (p. 290; allegedly made on Bernal's authority) to the effect that 'the denial of the African origins of Western civilisation is a result of scholarship dating only from the eighteenth century...'
- 53 Cf. Curl, J.S., 1982, *The Egyptian revival: An introductory study of a recurring theme in the history of taste*, London: Allen & Unwin.

### **Résumé**

*L'examen par John Mbiti du concept d'événement dans les ontologies africaines peut être récusé pour des raisons conceptuelles et axiologiques. En ce qui concerne les raisons conceptuelles nous montrerons que le compte rendu de Mbiti est illogique, et pour ce qui relève des problèmes axiologiques qu'il est en désaccord avec les pratiques des sociétés africaines.*