

## BLACK ATHENA TEN YEARS AFTER

*towards a constructive re-assessment*<sup>1</sup>

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*1. Introduction*

This special issue of *TALANTA* is based on the proceedings of the one-day conference 'Black Athena: Africa's contribution to global systems of knowledge', held at the African Studies Centre, Leiden, The Netherlands, 28 June, 1996. That conference was conceived and initial preparations were made at the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities and Social Sciences (NIAS). Late 1995 I persuaded Dr. Rijk van Dijk, the African Studies Centre conference organiser, that a Dutch conference on the debate initiated by Martin Bernal's controversial two volumes of *Black Athena* would be timely considering the minimum extent to which Dutch scholarship had so far participated in the debate since its inception in the late 1980s.<sup>2</sup> The stakes of this debate include not only the

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<sup>1</sup>Earlier versions of this argument were presented at the conference on 'Black Athena: Africa's contribution to global systems of knowledge', African Studies Centre, Leiden, The Netherlands, 28 June, 1996; and at the Africa Research Centre, Catholic University Louvain, 8 November, 1996. I am indebted to Martin Bernal, Jan Best, Josine Blok, and Arno Egberts, for repeated and profound exchanges on the theoretical and empirical problems central to the present volume; to these colleagues, and to Pieter Boele van Hensbroek, Filip de Boeck, and Renaat Devisch, for useful comments; to the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities and Social Sciences (NIAS), Wassenaar, where the present argument was largely conceived when I spent a fruitful and exciting academic year 1994-95 at NIAS as a member of the theme group on 'Religion and Magic in the Ancient Near East'; and to my wife and children, without whose unconditional support this book project — modest in itself but glaringly ambitious in view of my academic background and skills, and unexpectedly difficult because of its ideological tangles — would never have been completed. For official acknowledgements see the main text.

<sup>2</sup>Bernal, M., 1987, *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic roots of classical civilization, Vol. I, The fabrication of Ancient Greece 1787-1987*, London: Free Association Books/ New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press; Bernal, M., 1991, *Black Athena: The*

rewriting of the history of the eastern Mediterranean in the third and second millennium BCE; and the Eurocentric denial — as from the eighteenth century CE — of intercontinental contributions to Western civilisation; but also the place of Africa in global cultural history, and today's re-assessment of that place especially by 'Afrocentric'<sup>3</sup> scholars — in majority Blacks holding appointments in the U.S.A. and in African universities.<sup>4</sup>

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*Afroasiatic roots of classical civilization, 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. The main collection of critical studies of *Black Athena* is: Lefkowitz, M.R., & MacLean Rogers, G., eds., 1996, *Black Athena revisited*, Chapel Hill & London: University of North Carolina Press.

<sup>3</sup> The term Afrocentrism was coined by M.K. Asante, cf. 1990, *Kemet, Afrocentricity, and knowledge*, Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press (on Bernal, see pp. 100-104 of that work). For clarity's sake we must distinguish between two essential variants of Afrocentrism: one which cherishes images of an original (or prospective) African home as a source of inspiration, identity and self-esteem; and the other variety, which claims that Africa possesses these qualities for the specific reason that all civilisation originates there. I personally identify with the former variant; it is the latter one I object to, for reasons of both historical evidence and rejection of all subordinative claims in the field of culture. Given the ambiguity of the term Afrocentrism it is understandable that Bernal's position in this respect has caused some confusion. Despite his great sympathy for the movement he has repeatedly distanced himself from its exclusivist, even racialist variants (e.g. *Black Athena II*, p. xxii). In his review of Lefkowitz, M., 1996, *Not out of Africa: How Afrocentrism became an excuse to teach myth as history*, New York, Basic Books, Bernal states (*Bryn Mawr Classical Review*, 1996, Internet journal, p. 3):

'the label 'Afrocentrist' has been attached to a number of intellectual positions ranging from (...) "Africa creates, Europe imitates" to those, among whom I see myself, who merely maintain that Africans or peoples of African descent have made many significant contributions to world progress and that for the past two centuries, these have been systematically played down by European and North American historians'.

<sup>4</sup>Cf. Diop, C.A., 1974, *The African origin of civilization: Myth or reality?* trans. M. Cook, Westport, Conn.: Lawrence Hill; Diop, C.A., 1987, *Precolonial Black Africa: A comparative study of the political and social systems of Europe and Black Africa, from Antiquity to the formation of modern states*, trans. H.J. Salemson, Westport, Conn.: Lawrence Hill; Diop, C.A., 1989, *The cultural unity of Black Africa: The domains of patriarchy and of matriarchy in classical antiquity*, London: Karnak House; James, G.G.M., 1973, *Stolen legacy: The Greeks were not the authors of Greek philosophy, but the people of North Africa, commonly called the Egyptians*, New York: Philosophical Library, reprinted, San Francisco: Julian Richardson Associates, first published 1954; Noguera, A., 1976, *How African was Egypt: A comparative study of Egyptian and Black African cultures*, New York: Vantage Press; Asante, Kemet; van Sertima, I., 1983, ed., *Blacks in science: Ancient and modern*, New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Books; van Sertima, I., 1984, *Black Women in Antiquity*, New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Books; van Sertima, I., 1985, ed., *African presence in early Europe*, New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Books (with Martin Bernal's contribution: 'Black

Operating from the national African Studies Centre, which is part of the Leiden University social science faculty, meant being aloof of the U.S.A. scene where the debate had concentrated. It also meant being separated, and by a considerable social, institutional and geographical distance, from scholars who at Leiden and elsewhere in the Netherlands pursue the disciplines which had so far dominated the *Black Athena* debate: classics, ancient history, archaeology, historical linguistics, Egyptology, the history of ideas and of science. From the beginning it was clear that crossing that distance would require such major efforts (also because such few Dutch responses to *Black Athena* as existed had been largely dismissive),<sup>5</sup> that the immediate result could only be eclectic and initiatory, at best.

If nonetheless the conference was a success and led to the present collection of papers, it was largely to the credit of others. Martin Bernal not only agreed to participate and did so with inspiring openness and charm, but also his three original contributions to the present volume<sup>6</sup> already lend it far greater relevance to the ongoing debate than I could have hoped for. Jan Best, the ancient historian, put his network, advice and enthusiasm at my disposal, besides contributing a stimulating paper of his own — examining Cretan seals from the early 2nd millennium BCE for signs of Egyptian influence.<sup>7</sup> The Egyptologist Arno Egberts' chance attendance at the conference led to an improvised intervention (on the historical linguistics relevant to Bernal's proposed derivation of the Greek name *Athena* from the Ancient Egyptian expression *Ht Nt*, 'House of the goddess Neith' i.e. the western Delta town of Saïs); Egberts' argument has

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Athena: The African and Levantine roots of Greece', pp. 66-82 — so the first published product of the *Black Athena* project, already with that controversial title firmly in place, appeared in an Afrocentrist context!); Rashidi, R., & I. van Sertima, eds., 1985, *African presence in early Asia*, special issue of *Journal of African Civilizations*; Rashidi, R., 1992, *Introduction to the study of African classical civilizations*, London: Karnak House; van Sertima, I., ed., 1986, *Great African thinkers, vol. I: Cheikh Anta Diop*, New Brunswick & Oxford: Transaction Books; Finch, C.S., 1990, *The African background to medical science*, London: Karnak House. For a sobering African critique, cf. Appiah, K.A., 1993, 'Europe upside down: Fallacies of the new Afrocentrism', *Times Literary Supplement* (London), 12 February, pp. 24-25. For a critique of Afrocentrism with special reference to Martin Bernal's Afrocentrist sympathies in *Black Athena*, cf. Palter, R., 1993, 'Black Athena, Afro-centrism, and the history of science', *History of Science*, 31, no. 3: 227-87, reprinted in: Lefkowitz & MacLean Rogers, o.c., pp. 209-266 (see also Bernal's response: Bernal, M., 1994, 'Response to Robert Palter', *History of Science*, 32, no. 4: 445-64, and Palter's rejoinder, *ibidem*, pp. 464-68); Snowden, F.M., Jr, 1996, 'Bernal's "Blacks" and the Afrocentrists', in: Lefkowitz & MacLean Rogers, o.c., pp. 112-127; and Lefkowitz, *Not out of Africa*.

<sup>5</sup>On the details of the Dutch reception, see extensive footnote 26 below.

<sup>6</sup>Martin Bernal, 'Responses to *Black Athena*: General and linguistic issues', 'Response to Arno Egberts', 'Response to Josine Blok' (all in this volume).

<sup>7</sup>Jan Best, 'The ancient toponyms of Mallia: A post-Eurocentric reading of Egyptianising Bronze Age documents' (this volume).

now been worked into fully-fledged, well documented critical paper.<sup>8</sup> The historian (both ancient and modern) Josine Blok in her paper insisted on historiographic method and intimate knowledge of early 19th-century CE classical scholarship as devastatingly criticised by Bernal; in this way she raises crucial problems: the requirement of examining all available factual data before passing judgement (notably, a verdict of anti-Semitism and racism) on historical actors; the relative weight of external (socio-political) and internal (new data and methods) in the history of science; and finally academic and political integrity in the context of such sensitive topics as identity, ethnicity, and especially race.<sup>9</sup> Wim van Binsbergen, Africanist and theoretician of ethnic and intercultural relations, explored some of the implications of the *Black Athena* thesis both from a theoretical point of view<sup>10</sup> and on the basis of a historical and comparative empirical analysis of two major African formal systems.<sup>11</sup> The latter leads him to conclude that the *Black Athena* thesis strikingly illuminates Africa's vital, initial contribution to global cultural history in Neolithic and (outside Africa) Bronze Age contexts, but fails to appreciate Africa's cultural achievements as well as involution in the more recent millennia; this allows him to identify substantial tasks for further research and rethinking.

Two other contributors who helped to make the conference a success could most regrettably not be incorporated in the present collection for personal and technical reasons: the historian of ideas Robert Young, who looked at the appropriation of Egyptological material in the 'scientific' discourse of racism in the U.S.A. South of the mid-19th century CE; and the linguist and ancient historian Fred Woudhuizen, who in an oral presentation assessed Bernal's Egyptocentric linguistic claims in the context of linguistic diversity and interaction in the eastern Mediterranean in the second millennium BCE.

Further indispensable contributions came from Rijk van Dijk who co-organised the conference with me. And from the African Studies Centre in general, which — not for the first time — trustfully endorsed my explorations beyond the standard topics of African Studies, and provided adequate financial, library and secretarial support without which the present volume would never have materialised. Fred Woudhuizen made it possible that the conference proceedings are now published as a special

<sup>8</sup> Arno Egberts, 'Consonants in collision: Neith and Athena reconsidered' (this volume).

<sup>9</sup> Josine H. Blok, 'Proof and persuasion in *Black Athena I*: The case of K.O. Müller' (this volume).

<sup>10</sup>In a paper now greatly revised and expanded so as to form the present argument.

<sup>11</sup> Wim van Binsbergen, 'Rethinking Africa's contribution to global cultural history: Lessons from a comparative historical analysis of mancala board-games and geomantic divination' (this volume).

issue of *TALANTA*, which is particularly fitting since this journal is a Netherlands-based international venue for ancient history and archaeology, specialising on the eastern Mediterranean. The editors of *TALANTA* (Dr. Jan Stronk and Dr. Maarten de Weerd, with their colleagues Dr. Jan de Boer and Dr. Roald Docter, and as archaeological artist Mr Olaf E. Borgers) have ensured that this volume meets professional standards, and facilitated its production in every possible way.

Here they now appear in very heavily edited, revised and expanded form, augmented with new contributions not only from Arno Egberts but also from Wim van Binsbergen (triggered by Jan Best's paper),<sup>12</sup> as well as two responses by Martin Bernal to the papers by Josine Blok and Arno Egberts. This collection at least marks the fact that in the Netherlands the reception of the *Black Athena* problematic has progressed beyond the initial stage. It constitutes an invitation to our national colleagues to contribute further critical and constructive work along these lines. If *Black Athena* has managed to generate comprehensive and complex, passionate interdisciplinary international debate over the past ten years, scholarship in the Netherlands can only benefit from being drawn into that debate, even if at a late stage.

It is certainly not *too* late, for despite unmistakable hopes to the contrary on the part of the editors of the recent collection of critical essays *Black Athena revisited*,<sup>13</sup> the issue is still alive and kicking. With understandable delay, more volumes of *Black Athena* and a defiant answer<sup>14</sup> to the dismissive *Black Athena revisited* have been projected by Martin Bernal. What is more important is that enough material, debate and reflection has now been generated for us to try and sort out whatever lasting contribution Bernal may have made, sifting such support and acclaim as he has received (not only in the form of Afrocentrist appropriation of his work but also from some of the most distinguished scholars in the relevant fields), — from his obvious errors and one-sidedness which the mass of critical writing on this issue since 1987 has brought to light.

Such a task cannot be fully accomplished within the 200-odd pages of the present collection. Yet its title *Black Athena: Ten Years After* has a significance beyond the flavour of atavistic chivalry, continuous skirmishes and ambushes, and the hopes of ultimate glory, as in A.

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<sup>12</sup>Wim van Binsbergen, 'Alternative models of intercontinental interaction towards the earliest Cretan script' (this volume).

<sup>13</sup>M.R. Lefkowitz & G. MacLean Rogers, eds., *Black Athena revisited*, Chapel Hill & London: University of North Caroline Press, 1996.

<sup>14</sup>Bernal, M., in preparation, *Black Athena writes back*, Durham: Duke University Press.

Dumas' *The Three Musketeers*, with Martin Bernal cast in the obvious role of d'Artagnan. It brings out that ours is not merely another instalment to the debate.

There is of course that element too, *vide* the exhaustive and, in my opinion, definitive critical essays by Blok and Egberts on two central issues of the *Black Athena* argument which hitherto have met with relatively little specialist treatment: Greek-Egyptian etymologies, and the methods and politics of Bernal's historiography of nineteenth-century classical studies.<sup>15</sup> Martin Bernal's response to Josine Blok is courteous and receptive. His admittance of having grossly misinterpreted, in *Black Athena I*, the limited material he had read on the pioneer classicist K.O. Müller is scholarly and sincere. Yet one can hardly believe that he (cf. p. 22X below) 'had' truly Blok's kind of devastating criticism 'in mind' when, at the end of *Black Athena I*, he expressed the hope that the book would 'open up new areas of research by women and men with far better qualifications than myself'; much as one regrets that he does not address what are clearly Blok's main points, on integrity, identity, race, and the role of internal and external factors in the history of science. If Martin Bernal's response to Egberts' paper is short, dismissive, and (in its long digression on Soviet linguistics, and his promise to write his memoirs at the age of 80 as his only concession) rather flippant, it is partly because in his own original paper for this collection,<sup>16</sup> he has covered much of the same etymological ground in considerable detail — notwithstanding his

<sup>15</sup>Yurco, F.J., 1996, 'Black Athena: An Egyptological review', in: Lefkowitz & MacLean Rogers, *o.c.*, pp. 62-100, p. 78, has one 11-line paragraph on the derivation of *Athena* from *Ht Nt*. Jasanoff, J.H., & Nussbaum, A., 1996, 'Word games: The linguistic evidence in *Black Athena*', in: Lefkowitz & MacLean Rogers, *o.c.*, pp. 177-205, present a dismissive assessment of the *Ht Nt-Athena* etymology which however is exclusively based on established Indo-European historical linguistics and has no grounding in Egyptology; Rendsburg, G.A., 1989, 'Black Athena: An etymological response', in: M. Myerowitz Levine & J. Peradotto, eds., *The Challenge of 'Black Athena'*, special issue, *Aretusa*, 22: 67-82, p. 72-73, also raises objections from a historical linguistic point; cf. *Black Athena I*, p. 452, n. 4 and M. Bernal, 'Responses to critical reviews of *Black Athena*, volume I', *Journal of Mediterranean Archaeology* 3, 1990, pp. 111-137. Egberts' paper 'Consonants in collision' cites and builds upon that earlier work but goes beyond it and is the first full-length Egyptological treatment. As far as Blok's article is concerned, Bernal's 18th-century CE historiography was first questioned in two articles which, like Jasanoff & Nussbaum's etymological attack, were especially commissioned for *Black Athena revisited*: Norton, R.E., 1996, 'The tyranny of Germany over Greece? Bernal, Herder, and the German appropriation of Greece', in: Lefkowitz & MacLean Rogers, *o.c.*, pp. 403-409, and: Palter, R., 1996, 'Eighteenth-century historiography in *Black Athena*', in: Lefkowitz & MacLean Rogers, *o.c.*, pp. 349-401. Blok's paper was first presented at the Leiden 1996 conference, when a shortened version was in the press with the *Journal of the History of Ideas*. By mutual agreement of all parties concerned the longer version is published in this volume.

<sup>16</sup>M. Bernal, 'Responses to *Black Athena*: General and linguistic issues'.

highly significant claim (to which I return below) that in the case of proper names and between languages from different families, the established sound laws of historical linguistics do not work anyway. In the same paper, he looks back at the *Black Athena* discussion over the past ten years, denounces *Black Athena revisited* in strong terms, engages in an enlightening discussion of some common misrepresentations of his work and views, and for the first time explicitly seeks to situate Africa linguistically and phenotypically (but hardly culturally) within the *Black Athena* context. Also for the first time he presents a more systematic treatment of the historical and interactive linguistics on which his views on the 'Afroasiatic<sup>17</sup> roots of classical civilization' are based. Jan Best argues for an Egyptianising reading of the Cretan seals, thus offering a specific example of how the *Black Athena* thesis could be fruitfully deployed in specific research contexts; meanwhile he calls attention to Syro-Palestinian and Anatolian, in addition to Egyptian influences.<sup>18</sup> Wim van Binsbergen,<sup>19</sup> in a contribution specifically written in response to Best's analysis, argues the complexities of the intercontinental cultural interaction which produced the earliest Cretan script; he stresses the argument of transformative localisation as a necessary complement of the argument of diffusion. His claim is that after two successive transformative localisations at focal points along the Levantine coast (Byblos and northern

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<sup>17</sup> *Black Athena*'s subtitle. The term 'Afroasiatic' designates a language group which includes Semitic — e.g. Phoenician, Ugaritic, Hebrew, Akkadian, Aramaic, as well as the South Arabian and Ethiopic languages — besides non-Semitic branches such as ancient Egyptian, Chadic, Beja, Berber, and three branches of Cushitic. Bernal uses the term (and its counterparts: the designations of other such language families including Indo-European) both in a narrowly linguistic sense and in order to denote the specific cultures of speakers of these languages, and occasionally to denote the large demographic clusters constituting the gene pool of people speaking such languages and having such cultures. Cf. Martin Bernal, 'Responses to *Black Athena*: General and linguistic issues', this volume, for illustrations of this usage. Such usage may not be totally unjustified considering the Whorf thesis which however is controversial; cf. Whorf, B. L., 1956, *Language, Thought, and Reality*, New York/ London: M.I.T. Press; Black, M., 1959, 'Linguistic relativity: the views of Benjamin Lee Whorf', *Philosophical Review*, LXVIII: 228-38. Also, culture including language is among other things a form of communication and distinction serving, in practice if not in the actors' conscious intention, to demarcate the gene pool of the local reproducing community. Even so the correspondences and correlations between language, culture and phenotype are merely statistical, very often spurious, and they never rise to the point of one to one relationships. Therefore Bernal's use of Afroasiatic and of other such terms introduces a lack of precision which has been one of the factors producing the emotional and occasionally vicious overtones of the *Black Athena* debate. It means an invitation to be appropriated by primordialist identity discourses from left and right, White and Black. See my discussion in section 4.3 below.

<sup>18</sup> J. Best, 'The ancient toponyms of Mallia'.

<sup>19</sup> Wim van Binsbergen, 'Alternative models of intercontinental interaction'.

Syria) any original Egyptian contribution would have been greatly eroded and conventionalised before it ever contributed to Cretan hieroglyphic. Like so many other participants in the *Black Athena* debate,<sup>20</sup> both contributing authors concur with Martin Bernal's stress on intercontinental exchanges in the eastern Mediterranean in the second and third millennium BCE, but they express concern about the — by and large probably unintended — suggestion of unidirectional Egyptocentrism in some of his work.

However, the present collection is also an attempt to go beyond a mere listing of pros and cons. It seeks to help define in what ways, on what grounds, and under which stringent methodological and epistemological conditions, Martin Bernal's crusade deserves to have a lasting impact on our perception of the ancient eastern Mediterranean; on our perception of the intercontinental antecedents of the European civilisation which is one of the principal contributors to the global cultural domain whose emergence we are witnessing today; and on our perception of Africa.

Apart from the African dimension, which is new to the debate, this is as in previous special issues of scholarly journals devoted to the *Black Athena* debate,<sup>21</sup> yet reveals almost the opposite aim from *Black Athena revisited*. I am very pleased that, contrary to that much more voluminous, comprehensive and prestigious book from which Martin Bernal was deliberately excluded and which was intended to render all further discussion of *Black Athena* a waste of time, he is the principal contributor to the present collection. In a way which does credit to that remarkable scholar, it will be clear to the careful reader that this state of affairs has enhanced, not diminished, the volume's potential for criticism — but of a constructive kind.

So far I have taken a basic knowledge of the *Black Athena* debate for granted, but for many readers some further introduction may be needed.

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<sup>20</sup>Cf. Bowersock, G.W., 1989, *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 19: 490-91; Konstan, D., 1988, *Research in African Literatures*, 4 (Winter): 551-554; Myerowitz Levine, M., 1990, 'Classical scholarship: Anti-Black anti-Semitic?' *Bible Review*, 6 (6/1990): 32-36 and 40-41; Malamud, M.A., 1989, *Criticism*, 1: 317-22; Rendsburg, G.A., 1989, 'Black Athena: An etymological response'; Trigger, B., 1992. 'Brown Athena: Postprocessual goddess?', *Current Anthropology*, 2/92: 121-123; Vickers, M., 1987, *Antiquity*, 61 (Nov.): 480-81; Whittaker, C.R., 1988, 'Dark ages of Greece', *British Medical Journal*, 296 (23/4): 1172-1173.

<sup>21</sup>Cf. Meyerowitz Levine & Peradotto, in: *Arethusa*, 22 (Fall), 1987; *Journal of Mediterranean Archaeology*, 3, 1 (1990); *Isis*, 83, 4 (1992); *Journal of Women's History*, 4, 3 (1993); *History of Science*, 32, 4 (1994); *VEST Tidskrift för Vetenskapsstudier*, 8, 4 (1995).

## 2. Martin Bernal's Black Athena project

British-born Martin Bernal (1937- ) is a Cambridge (U.K.)-trained Sinologist. His specialisation on the intellectual history of Chinese/Western exchanges around 1900 CE,<sup>22</sup> in combination with his — at the time — rather more topical articles on Vietnam in the *New York Review of Books*, earned him, in 1972, a professorship in the Department of Government at Cornell University, Ithaca (N.Y., U.S.A.). There he was soon to widen the geographical and historical scope of his research, as indicated by the fact that already in 1984 he was to combine this appointment with one as adjunct professor of Near Eastern Studies at the same university. Clearly, in mid-career he had turned<sup>23</sup> 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 CE, and to the way in which this tradition has hegemonically claimed for itself a place as the allegedly unique centre, the original 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. If the latter, its 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 region of Old World agricultural revolution, extending from the once fertile Sahara and from Ethiopia, through Egypt, Palestine and Phoenicia, to Syria, Anatolia, Mesopotamia, Iran — thus encompassing the narrower Fertile Crescent — 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 an 'Afroasiatic'-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 'Afroasiatic' contribution to the very origins of a civilisation (sc. the Greek, subsequently European, now North Atlantic one) which has bred the most vicious anti-Semitism, both anti-Jew and anti-Arab/ Islam, in the course of the twentieth century.

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<sup>22</sup>Bernal, M., 'Chinese socialism before 1913', Ph.D., Cambridge University.

<sup>23</sup>Cf. *Black Athena I*, p. xiiff.

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 but provisional and deliberately unsubstantiated outline of the promised findings of 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 of such awareness with the invention of the ancient Greek miracle since the 18th century CE. 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 seriously)<sup>24</sup> of Athena, apparently the most ostentatiously Hellenic of ancient Greek deities, as a peripheral Greek emulation of the goddess Neith of Saïs — as *Black Athena*.

Reception of the two volumes of *Black Athena* so far has been chequered. Classicists, who read the work not so much as a painstaking critique of North Atlantic Eurocentric intellectual culture as a whole but as a denunciation of their discipline by an unqualified outsider, have often been viciously dismissive; far less so — especially before the publication of Volume II — specialists in archaeology, the cultures and languages of the Ancient Near East, and comparative religion. Virtually every critic has been 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 allegedly substantial<sup>25</sup> traces of lexical and syntactic material from Afroasiatic (including Ancient Egyptian, and West-Semitic) languages in classical Greek; while there is no doubt that he has the required command of the main languages in this connexion (Egyptian, Hebrew, Greek), the question here is whether his insight in theoretical, historical and

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<sup>24</sup>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.

<sup>25</sup>Cf. *Black Athena* I, 484 n. 141:

'Naturally, I maintain that the reason it is so remarkably easy to find correspondences between Egyptian and Greek words is that between 20 and 25 percent of the Greek vocabulary does in fact derive from Egyptian!'

This precise statistical statement is often repeated in Bernal's work. Yet the numerical procedures underpinning it have so far not been made explicit by him. Meanwhile the sample of proposed Egyptian etymologies of Greek words as included in his 'Responses to *Black Athena*' (this volume) may convince the reader that, at least at the qualitative level, the claim is not without grounds.

comparative linguistics is adequate.

Meanwhile in the Netherlands the echoes of the ongoing *Black Athena* debate has been, as said above, scarcely audible.<sup>26</sup>

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 a purely academic

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<sup>26</sup>This is best substantiated by the modest length and the often obscure venues of publication, of whatever Dutch literature existed on *Black Athena* up to the date of our 1996 conference: Best, J., 1992-93 (actually published 1994), 'Racism in classical archaeology', in: *Talanta: Proceedings of the Dutch Archaeological and Historical Society*, 24-25: 7-10; Sancisi-Weerdenburg, H., 1995, 'Was Athene zwart?', *Amsterdamse Boekengids Interdisciplinair*, p. 10-15; Derkx, H., 1995, *De koe van Troje: De mythe van de Griekse oudheid*, Hilversum: Verloren, p. 87, n.; Leezenberg, M., 1992, 'Waren de Grieken negers? *Black Athena* en het Afrocentrisme', *Cimedart*, Feb/Mar. Outside academia, in the context of drama production, and remarkably Afrocentrist: Ockhuyzen, R., 1991, 'Het verzinsel van de Griekse beschaving', in: Aischylos, *De smekelingen*, [Suppliants] trans. G. Komrij, Amsterdam: International Theatre & Film Books / Theater van het Oosten, pp. 11-13. I was unable to trace an article on *Black Athena* reputed to be published in the Dutch conservative weekly *Elsevier*, Spring 1996.

Of three subsequent Dutch contributions, two were directly related to our 1996 conference and appear in altered form in the present volume: Blok, J.H., 1996, 'Proof and persuasion in *Black Athena*: The case of K.O. Müller', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 57: 705-724; and: van Binsbergen, W.M.J., 1996, 'Black Athena and Africa's contribution to global cultural history', *Quest — Philosophical Discussions: An International African Journal of Philosophy*, 1996, 9, 2 / 10, 1: 100-137. The third contribution, smugly insisting on the primal originality of Anaximander as the first scientific astronomer while ignoring any pre-existing astronomy in the Ancient Near East, is: Couperie, D.L., 1996, 'The concept of space and the "Out of Africa" discussion', paper read at The SSIPS [Society for the Study of Islamic Philosophy and Science] / SAGP [Society of Ancient Greek Philosophy] 1996, 15th Annual Conference: 'Global and Multicultural Dimensions of Ancient and Medieval Philosophy and Social Thought: Africana, Christian, Greek, Islamic, Jewish, Indigenous and Asian Traditions,' Binghamton University, Department of Philosophy/ Center for Medieval and Renaissance studies (CEMERS), Binghamton (N.Y.), U.S.A.

In his main contribution to the present volume, Martin Bernal bitterly signals a widespread conviction that the publication of *Black Athena revisited* has put paid to the entire debate; this effect is also noticeable in: Bommeljé, B., 'Waren de Grieken afronauten?', *NRC-Handelsblad*, book review section, 2/5/1997, p. 37. Egberts in the title of his critique (this volume) puns on the title of the pseudo-scientist I. Velikovski's *Worlds in collision*, London: Gollancz, 1950; fortunately, Egberts does not try to support his psychoanalytical suggestions as to Bernal's motives by a reference to I. Velikovski's *Oedipus and Akhnaton: Myth and history*, London: Sidgwick, 1960, which claims that even the Oedipus myth — the one achievement of classical Greek civilisation to become a household word throughout North Atlantic culture today — originated in pharaonic court intrigue. For Bernal on Velikovski, cf. *Black Athena I*, p. 6. With his choice of title, the science journalist Bommeljé chooses to highlight what he thinks is a parallel with another pseudo-scientist, E. von Däniken, *Waren de goden astronaute?*, Deventer: Ankh-Hermes, 1970, originally German, published in English as *Chariots of the gods* (the pun only works for the title of the Dutch edition).

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 Afrocentrist publications making similar claims or with the Egyptocentric idioms among present-day African intellectuals in, e.g., Nigeria, Senegal and Zaire. But coming from a White upper-class 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 intercontinental intellectual indebtedness, in which Europe is affirmed to have been, until as recently as the first millennium BCE, a receptive periphery of the civilisations of the region of Old World agricultural revolution; classical Greek civilisation, whatever its achievements, no longer can be taken to have been original and autonomous, but was building on this intercultural indebtedness.

Given the phenomenal expansion of Ancient Near Eastern and Egyptological studies in the course of the twentieth century, we should not have needed Bernal to broadcast this insight in the first place. *Ex oriente lux*, 'light comes from the east', not only sums up the daily subjective experience of sunrise anywhere on earth, but has also been the slogan of an increasing number of students of the Ancient Near East since the beginning of the twentieth century.<sup>27</sup> The message however was scarcely

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<sup>27</sup>Scholarly studies outside the context of the *Black Athena* debate yet insisting on the essential continuity between the civilisations of the Ancient Near East, include e.g., Kramer, S.N., 1958, *History begins at Sumer*, London; Neugebauer, O., 1969, *The exact sciences in Antiquity*, New York: Dover, 2nd edition; first published 1957; Gordon, C., 1962, *Before the Bible: The common background of Greek and Hebrew Civilizations*, New York: Harper & Row; Gordon, C.H., 1966, *Evidence for the Minoan language*, Ventnor (NJ): Ventnor Publishers; Saunders, J.B. de C.M., 1963, *The Transitions from ancient Egyptian to Greek medicine*, Lawrence: University of Kansas Press; Astour, M.C., 1967, *Hellenosemitica: An ethnic and cultural study in West Semitic impact on Mycenean Greece*, 2d ed., Leiden: Brill; Fontenrose, J., 1980,

welcome when it was first formulated, and imaginative Semitist scholars like Gordon and Astour found themselves under siege when they published their significant contributions in the 1960s. *Black Athena* has done a lot to drive this insight home and to popularise it, making it available to circles thirsting for it while building and rebuilding their own identity. Meanwhile Bernal himself does not claim excessive originality:

'...it should be clear to any reader that my books are based on modern scholarship. The ideas and information I use, do not always come from the champions of conventional wisdom, but very few of the historical hypotheses put forward in *Black Athena* are original. The series' originality comes from bringing together and making central, information that has previously been scattered and peripheral'.<sup>28</sup>

### 3. *Into Africa?*

'Der Kulturmorphologie wird also vor der Frage gestellt, ob die Räume jenseits der ägyptisch-babylonischen Kultur völkerkundliches Material zu bieten vermögen, das zum Verständnis der Entfaltung der ägyptischen und babylonischen Kultur raum-, zeit- und sinngemäß Entscheidenes beitragen kann.' (Leo Frobenius, 1931)<sup>29</sup>

Although Egypt is a part of North East Africa, *Black Athena* displays a double blind spot where Africa is concerned. An obvious implication of Bernal's 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 Upper Nile valley and the once fertile central

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*Python: A study of Delphic myth and its origins*, Berkeley etc.: University of California Press; paperback edition, reprint of the 1959 first edition. *Ex Oriente Lux* of course has also been, for decades, the name of the Dutch society for the study of the Ancient Near East, and of its journal. Also cf. Bernal's rather telling admission of initially overlooking the significance of this rallying cry, *Black Athena II*, p. 66. M. Liverani (1996, 'The bathwater and the baby', in: Lefkowitz & MacLean Rogers, o.c., pp. 421-427) meanwhile calls our attention to the essential Eurocentrism implied in the slogan, which he therefore refuses to accept as a valid guideline for ancient history today:

'The shift of cultural primacy from the Near East to Greece (the one dealt with in Bernal's book) was interpreted in line with two slogans: *Ex Oriente Lux* (...) mostly used by Orientalists) and 'The Greek miracle' (mostly used by classicists). These slogans appeared to represent opposing ideas but in fact were one and the same notion: the Western appropriation of ancient Near Eastern culture for the sake of its own development' (p. 423).

<sup>28</sup>Bernal, M., in press, 'Review of "Word games: The linguistic evidence in *Black Athena*"', Jay H. Jasanoff & Alan Nussbaum', forthcoming in Bernal's *Black Athena writes back*, o.c.

<sup>29</sup>Leo Frobenius, 1931, *Erythräa: Länder und Zeiten des heiligen Königsmordes*, Berlin/ Zürich: Atlantis-Verlag, 1931, p. 347.

Sahara, made the principal contributions. What did the interior of Africa thus contribute to Egypt, and via Egypt, to classical Greek, European, North Atlantic, global, civilisation? Bernal has remained largely silent on this point. Also one might expect the argument on Afroasiatic languages to be traced further inland into the African continent. These steps Bernal obviously could not yet take.<sup>30</sup> He can hardly be blamed for this, not only in view of the enormity of this additional task and of the scope of his actual accomplishments, but also because Africanists have so far, with few exceptions,<sup>31</sup> ignored him. They have refrained from exploring the

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<sup>30</sup>Cf. J. Baines, 1996, 'On the aims and methods of Black Athena', in: Lefkowitz & MacLean Rogers, *o.c.*, pp. 27-48, p. 32. However, cf. Bernal, 'Responses to *Black Athena*: General and linguistic issues' (this volume). In fact, Bernal explored Afroasiatic and Semitic language origins in one of his first papers the *Black Athena* project was to yield: Bernal, M., 1980, 'Speculations on the disintegration of Afroasiatic', paper presented at the 8th Conference of the North American Conference of Afroasiatic Linguistics, San Francisco, April 1980, and to the 1st international Conference of Somali Studies, Mogadishu, July 1980. The paper was never published but is currently attracting revived interest.

<sup>31</sup>Africanist discussions of *Black Athena* are few and far between. Understandably in the light of the emphatically anti-colonial and anti-racialist orientation of Basil Davidson's work in general, he immediately showed his sympathy in a long if rambling review: Davidson, B., 'The ancient world and Africa: Whose roots?' [Review of M. Bernal, *Black Athena I*], *Race and Class: A Journal for Black and Third World Liberation*, 29, 2: 1-15, 1987, reprinted in: Davidson, B., 1994, *The search for Africa: History, culture, politics*, New York: Times Books/ London: James Currey, pp. 318-333. A sympathetic reference also in: Jewsiewicki, B., 1991, 'Le primitivisme, le postcolonialisme, les antiquités "nègres" et la question nationale', *Cahiers d'études africaines*, 31, 121/ 122: 191-213. Jonathan Friedman, a prominent writer on globalisation issues, makes a passing reference to Bernal: Friedman, J., 1992, 'The Past in the Future: History and the Politics of Identity', *American Anthropologist*, 94, 4: 837-59, p. 840. A non-Africanist contribution in an Africanist environment has been: Young, R., 1994, 'The postcolonial construction of Africa', paper read at the conference 'African research futures', University of Manchester, April 1994. Also cf. van Binsbergen in *Quest*, 1996, *o.c.* The Africanists' aloofness and part of its background is well voiced by Preston Blier, S., 1993, 'Truth and seeing: Magic, custom, and fetish in art history', in: Robert H. Bates, V.Y. Mudimbe & Jean O'Barr, eds., *Africa and the disciplines: The contributions of research in Africa to the social sciences and humanities*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp. 139-166 (the only reference to Bernal in that authoritative Africanist book), p. 161f, n. 23:

'One can cite an issue of importance to both Africanists and Europeanists. It is already so deeply embroiled in a "hornet's nest" of feelings and scholarly discord, that rational academic interchange is virtually impossible. I am speaking, of course, of Martin Bernal's query into the philosophical links between Egypt and Europe in his controversial book *Black Athena*. I will not enter into the thick of the fray by discussing the relative merits or demerits of the work, but suffice it so say that I have heard amply and angrily from both sides. And even if I did have the expertise in both Egyptian and Classics to be able to give an informed opinion, my observations would be far more important at this point in time for their assumed political worth than for their scholarly merit. My past field work experience with

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, a rapidly growing field in the 1960s and early 1970s, has gone out of fashion as an academic topic, and so have, more in general, — at least, 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, perhaps even eager, to accept without further proof some linguists' dismissive verdict on *Black Athena*'s linguistics.
- Egyptocentric claims were conspicuous in African Studies in the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>32</sup> Besides these 'Egyptianising' scholarly

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issues of art, belief, and societal change suggests that because of the vitriolic tenor of the associated debates, *Black Athena* clearly must deal with a subject of vital scholarly importance...'.

Nor is the harvest much greater from cosmopolitan, non-Afrocentrist African philosophers. Mudimbe wrote a rather positive review: Mudimbe, V.Y. 1992, 'African Athena?', *Transition*, 58: 114-123. But although appearing five years after *Black Athena I*, K.A. Appiah's influential *In my father's house: Africa in the philosophy of culture*, New York & London: Oxford University Press, 1992, devotes only one line in a footnote to Bernal, merely as a source on the lack of racialism among the ancient Greeks; later, when expounding the dangers of Afrocentrism, Appiah is more elaborate, identifies Bernal as a non-Afrocentrist hero of Afrocentrists, but continues to be only mildly interested: Appiah, 'Europe Upside Down', *o.c.*

<sup>32</sup>Cf. Breuil, H., 1951, 'Further details of rock-paintings and other discoveries. 1. The painted rock 'Chez Tae', Lericé, 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; Shinnie however believes it to be a recent intrusion: Shinnie, P.L., 1971, 'The legacy to Africa', in J.R. Harris, ed., *The legacy of Egypt*, 2nd ed., Oxford: Clarendon Press, pp. 434-55, p. 438); 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: 115-127, 159-170; 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; Wainwright, G.A., 1949, 'Pharaonic survivals, Lake Chad to the west coast', *Journal of Egyptian*

studies by established Africanist anthropologists and archaeologists, present-day Africanists are particularly concerned not to revive the cruder forms of Egyptocentric diffusionism as in the works by Elliot Smith and 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>33</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>34</sup> More recently, Egyptocentrism has been so vocally reiterated in Cheikh Anta Diop's work and his Afrocentric followers in Africa and the U.S.A.,<sup>35</sup> that excessive care is taken among many Africanists today not to become entangled in 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, with notable exceptions,<sup>36</sup> rather less accustomed to consider, self-consciously, the political and identity implications of the images of Africa they themselves produce.

To put it mildly, one cannot 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<sup>37</sup> have a built-in Eurocentrism that

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*Archaeology*, 35: 167 -75. Further see my 'Rethinking Africa's contribution' (this volume).

<sup>33</sup>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.

<sup>34</sup>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.

<sup>35</sup>Diop, *The cultural unity*; Diop, *The African origin of civilization*; Diop, *Precolonial Black Africa*.

<sup>36</sup>See next footnote.

<sup>37</sup>This has been an old discussion in anthropology which however has never really

prevents it from seriously considering such a totally reversed view of intellectual world history as Bernal is offering. Here lies 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>38</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>39</sup> But where are the Black scholars to do the same for Africa? The names of Appiah, Mbembe, Mudimbe, could be cited here;<sup>40</sup> 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 the anti-Eurocentrism of the *Black Athena* project could play a most valuable role (especially Volume I; Bernal's study on the Phoenician and Egyptian contributions to Greek notions of democracy and law;<sup>41</sup> and his responses on the history

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caught on: Cf. Asad, T., 1973, ed., *Anthropology and the colonial encounter*, London: Ithaca Press; Leclerc, G., 1972, *Anthropologie et colonialisme*, Paris: Fayard; Copans, J., 1975, ed., *Anthropologie et impérialisme*, Paris: Maspero; Fabian, J., 1983, *Time and the other: How anthropology makes its object*, New York: Columbia University Press; Asad, T., 1986, 'The concept of cultural translation in British social anthropology', in: Clifford, J., & Marcus, G., eds., 1986, *Writing culture: The poetics and politics of ethnography*, Berkeley: University of California Press — and many other contributions to that important collection; Pels, P. & O. Salemkir, 1994, 'Introduction: five theses on ethnography as colonial practice', *History and Anthropology*, 8, 1-4: 1-34; Mudimbe, V.Y., 1988, *The invention of Africa: Gnosis, philosophy, and the order of knowledge*, Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press/ London: Currey; Mudimbe, V.Y., 1994, *The idea of Africa*, Bloomington/ London: Indiana University Press/ James Currey; Appiah, *In my father's house*.

<sup>38</sup>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.

<sup>39</sup>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.

<sup>40</sup>Appiah, *In my father's house*; Mudimbe, *The invention of Africa*; Mudimbe, *The idea of Africa*; Mbembe, A., 1988, *Afriques indociles: Christianisme, pouvoir et Etat en société postcoloniale*, Paris: Karthala; Mbembe, A., 1992, 'Provisional notes on the post-colony', *Africa*, 62, 1: 3-37.

<sup>41</sup>Bernal, M., 1993, 'Phoenician politics and Egyptian justice in Ancient Greece', in: Raflaub, K., ed., *Anfänge politischen Denkens in der Antike: Die nah-östlichen Kulturen und die Griechen*, Munich: Oldenbourg, pp. 241-61.

of science and on Afrocentrism, now to be collected in *Black Athena writes back*; while his splendid contribution to the early history of the alphabet<sup>42</sup> provides an inspiring model for the complex, multicentred inter-continental interactions at work in and around the eastern Mediterranean in the formative millennia of classical Greek civilisation.

Will Bernal's thesis on the European history of ideas concerning Egypt, and his stress on the role of Egypt in the context of actual cultural exchanges in the eastern Mediterranean in the third and second millennium BCE, stand up to the methodological and factual tests of the various disciplines concerned? Before turning to the *Black Athena* debate I propose to deal, in the following two sections, with two issues which help to bring that debate in proper perspective: the ideological component in cultural history; and Martin Bernal's position *vis-à-vis* the sociology of knowledge.

#### *4. Ideology and cultural history*

##### *4.1. intercontinental interaction*

*Black Athena*'s exposure of Eurocentrism is based on his work concerning the ancient cultural and religious history in the eastern Mediterranean, and concerning the perception of the Ancient Near East in the European intellectual tradition since Antiquity (more in particular the history of ideas and sociology of knowledge of North Atlantic classical studies since Romanticism).

At one level of analysis Bernal restates and popularises, with 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, of comparative religion and mythology, have begun to realise in the course of the twentieth century on the basis of increasingly overwhelming and comprehensive evidence. The roots of North Atlantic civilisation, including what used to be portrayed as the classical Greek genius — allegedly incomparable and without historical antecedents — have long been shown to lie to a considerable extent outside Europe, in north-eastern Africa (Egypt) as well as in the rest of the Ancient Near East: Ancient Mesopotamia, Iran, Syria, Anatolia, Palestine, Crete, the Indus civilisation with which Mesopotamia had such extensive contacts. Of course this insight adds a most ironic commentary to North Atlantic cultural hegemony as enforced by military and economic

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<sup>42</sup>Bernal, *Cadmean letters*; cf. my assessment of this book in 'Alternative models' (this volume).

dominance in the Late Modern era: it reduces Western European civilisation to upstart status.

Even if Europe's great cultural indebtedness to the Ancient Near East (Southwest Asia and Northeast Africa) is no longer the rather carefully constructed secret it was a hundred years ago, given the hostile reception this insight received right up to the 1980s (and perhaps even still, as far as language and the classics are concerned) Bernal can only be admired for the courage and persistence with which he emphasised and popularised this crucial insight. Although his analytical attention is focused on the third and second instead of the first millennium BCE, he is simply right in reminding us of the consistent first millennium record that claims 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>43</sup> is beginning to explore the Greek intellectual indebtedness to the very Achaemenid 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'.

#### *4.2. Afroasiatic roots granted — but must we reduce classical Greek thought to the flotsam of intercontinental diffusion?*

Spengler boldly states in his *Untergang des Abendlandes*,<sup>44</sup> one of the earliest and most uncompromising attempts, among European scholars, to escape from Eurocentrism:

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

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<sup>43</sup>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* (London); Kingsley, P., 1994, 'Greeks, shamans and magic', *Studia Iranica*, 23: 187-198.

<sup>44</sup>Spengler, O., 1993, *Der Untergang des Abendlandes: Umrisse einer Morphologie der Weltgeschichte*, Munchen: DTV; first published 1923, Munchen: Beck; p. 22 n. 1:

'Das Wort Europa sollte aus der Geschichte gestrichen werden.'

And he goes on in the same footnote:

'"Europa" ist leerer Schall. Alles, was die Antike an großen Schöpfungen hervorbrachte, entstand unter Negation jeder kontinentalen Grenze zwischen Rom und Cypern, 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, when the final sections of Greek territory had only just been wrestled from the Ottoman Empire — WvB] nicht mehr dort.'

His great admirer, Toynbee,<sup>45</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>46</sup> reminds us half a century later, in a plea for a dialogue of civilisations. Recently, intercultural philosophy has emerged (around the work of such authors as Kimmerle and Mall)<sup>47</sup> in order to explore the theoretical foundations for a 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 chauvinist 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 has also produced intellectual movements — I mean: the science, technology, art, international law, philosophy, of the twentieth century CE — *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 meet and partly merge. Many would agree that there (besides hunger, disease, infringement of human rights, war and environmental destruction) lies one of the most crucial problems of the future of mankind.

In my opinion this universalism owes a specific original debt to the creativity of classical Greek culture.

The problematic of cultural creativity in a context of diffusion is far

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<sup>45</sup>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.

<sup>46</sup>Garaudy, R., 1977, *Pour un dialogue des civilisations: L'Occident est un accident*, Paris: Denoël.

<sup>47</sup>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: Quimran; Mall, R.A., 1995, *Philosophie im Vergleich der Kulturen: Interkulturelle Philosophie, eine neue Orientierung*, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft.

from lost on Martin Bernal,<sup>48</sup> whose self-identification as a 'modified diffusionist' precisely seeks to capture the difference between the obsolete model of mechanical transmission and wholesale adoption of unaltered cultural elements from distant provenance, and the far more attractive model that insists on a local, creative transformation of the diffused material once it has arrived at the destination area:

'In the early part of this century, scholars like Eduard Meyer, Oscar Montelius, Sir John Myres and Gordon Childe<sup>49</sup> maintained the two principles of modified diffusion and *ex oriente lux*. In the first case, they rejected the beliefs of the extreme diffusionists, who maintained that 'master races' simply transposed their superior civilizations to other places and less developed peoples. They argued instead, that unless there was a rapid genocide, diffusion was a complicated process of interaction between the outside influences and the indigenous culture and that this process itself produced something qualitatively new.'<sup>50</sup>

Here we encounter, once again and not for the last time in this volume,<sup>51</sup> the argument of transformative localisation as a necessary complement of the argument of diffusion. Despite his occasional Egyptocentric lapses into a view of diffusion as automatic and one-way, Bernal often shows that he is aware of the tensions between diffusion and transformative localisation:

'While I am convinced that the vast majority of Greek mythological themes came from Egypt or Phoenicia, it is equally clear that their selection and treatment was characteristically Greek, and to that extent they did reflect Greek society.'<sup>52</sup>

Even the most implacable critics of Martin Bernal (and I shall discuss them at length below) can rest assured: despite their indignant allegations to the contrary, there is no indication that he tries to reduce Greek culture to the flotsam of intercontinental diffusion.

As far as the development of critical, universalist thought is concerning, admittance of the innovative creativity of the destination area simply means that the Greeks, like we all, did attempt to stand on the shoulders of their unmistakable predecessors in the Ancient Near East. Admittedly, part 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

<sup>48</sup> Also see the 'third distortion' of his work as identified in: Bernal, 'Responses to *Black Athena*: General and linguistic issues'.

<sup>49</sup> In *Black Athena II*, p. 21, 527, Bernal would also identify Arthur Evans, J.D.S. Pendlebury, and S. Marinatos, as modified diffusionists — like himself.

<sup>50</sup> Bernal, 'Phoenician politics and Egyptian justice', 241. Cf. *Black Athena II*, pp. 523f.

<sup>51</sup> Cf. Wim van Binsbergen, 'Alternative models of intercontinental interaction'.

<sup>52</sup> *Black Athena I*, p. 489, n. 59.

their longer established cultural neighbours. However, citing such eminent authorities as Cassirer, Cornford, Snell and Frankfort c.s.,<sup>53</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 indebtedness to the Ancient Near East does not seem to apply for 'sustained critical thinking', in other words philosophy as a deliberately distinct realm of human symbolic production.<sup>54</sup> This particularly includes syllogistic logic, which could be argued to be one basis of universalism.<sup>55</sup> The point made by the Egyptological archaeologist Trigger appears to be

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<sup>53</sup>Cassirer, E., 1941, 'Logos, Dike, Kosmos in der Entwicklung der griechischen Philosophie', *Göteborgs Högskolas Arsskrift*, XLVII, 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, espec. 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. These studies do suggest possible continuity between the Ancient Near East and later Greek rationality such as also been stressed by G.S Kirk (1960, 'Popper on science and the Presocratics', *Mind*, NS, 60: 318-39) with regard to the Presocratics; but they scarcely warrant the claim (as in James, *Stolen legacy, o.c.*) that the highest developments of Greek philosophy (Plato and Aristotle) were not a predominantly local and original, Greek achievement.

<sup>54</sup>Gay, P., 1973, *The Enlightenment: An interpretation, vol. I. The rise of modern paganism*, London: Wildwood House; first published 1964; p. 464.

<sup>55</sup>It is only one among several bases for universalism. E.g., if the Gilgamesh epic continues to move us emotionally across a stretch of nearly five thousand years, this implies another kind of universalism — one catered for by literary, not logical, techniques, evoking not the capability of specialised thought to encompass the whole of mankind, but implicitly addressing the communality of mankind as sharing in the experience of the human body and its vulnerable and ephemeral nature, of human society, and man's capability of language.

well taken as far as Egypt-Greece cultural exchanges are concerned.<sup>56</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 (...) efforts to trace the origins of classical Greek religion and philosophy back to Egyptian sources.'

In his (generally very positive) review of *Black Athena I & II*, Trigger makes a similar point:

'...Bernal, along with a growing number of anthropologists, expresses opposition to an evolutionary view of human history. He traces the origins of Greek religion and philosophy to Egyptian sources. It is probable that some schools of Greek philosophy were influenced by Egyptian ideas much as modern Western philosophy is by Hindu and Buddhist thought. Yet it is impossible to find in the surviving corpus of ancient Egyptian writings evidence of the divergent basis postulates, scepticism, materialism, and human-centeredness that characterize post-Ionian Greek philosophy.'<sup>57</sup>

The evidence from the Ancient Near East, however, has also been read to support the opposite view, and polemics concerning the Afroasiatic roots of Greek philosophy and science have gained prominence in the *Black Athena* debate.<sup>58</sup>

Much further research needs to be undertaken before this question can transcend the phase of excited, identity-boosting claims and counterclaims, and develop into a valuable branch of historical intercultural philosophy. Meanwhile Bernal's caveat should be born in mind: Dodds' famous study of the *Greeks and the irrational*, as well as more recent work by von Staden,<sup>59</sup> have called our attention to the massive *irrational* dimensions of ancient Greek civilisation.

'Mary Lefkowitz's conviction that there is a categorical distinction between a rational Greece and an irrational Egypt only holds if you believe that reason only began with Aristotle's formal binary logic<sup>60</sup> and Euclid's axiomatic geometry,

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<sup>56</sup>Trigger, B.C., 1995, *Early civilizations: Ancient Egypt in context*, Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, first published 1993; p. 93.

<sup>57</sup>Trigger, 'Brown Athena', p. 123; emphasis added.

<sup>58</sup>Cf. *Black Athena I*, p. 216, 477, n. 95; Preus, A., 1992, *Greek Philosophy: Egyptian origins*, Binghamton: Institute of Global Cultural Studies, Research Papers on the Humanities and Social Sciences; Lefkowitz, *Not out of Africa*. The claims affirming Afroasiatic provenance partly go back to the Afrocentric James, *Stolen legacy*. Outside Afrocentrism, cf. West, M.L., 1971, *Early Greek Philosophy and the Orient*, Oxford, Clarendon Press.

<sup>59</sup>Dodds, E.R., 1951, *The Greeks and the irrational*, Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press; von Staden, H. 1992, 'Affinities and Elisions: Helen and Hellenocentrism', *Isis*, 83: 578-95.

<sup>60</sup>Sic; the credit for this variety of logic should rather go to George Boole (1815-1864 CE), which however leaves the status of Aristotle's syllogistic logic unaffected in this connection.

neither of which existed — as far as we know — in Ancient Egypt.<sup>61</sup>

The development of philosophy was neither a Greek prerogative, nor a sufficient condition (although arguably a necessary one) for the development of modern science as a global concern. Schools of logic have 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. A radical re-reading of the historical evidence (which inevitably has an ethnocentric bias) concerning the subtle ramifications of long-distance contacts across the Old World since the Neolithic, will help us understand the intercontinental contributions leading to the emergence of modern science, technology and philosophy in the West and subsequently on a global scale. One such a radical re-reading has been Joseph Needham's *Science and civilisation in China*.<sup>62</sup> Although this most impressive project<sup>63</sup> scarcely features on the pages of *Black Athena*,<sup>64</sup> it greatly appealed to young Martin Bernal, in scope, in anti-Eurocentric orientation, and as an exercise in universal scholarship — and it may even have tilted the scales for him to read Sinology rather than African Studies or History of Science. Repeatedly, and to my mind convincingly,<sup>65</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 world-wide science limited to some initial, pre-Greek formative period: Aristotelian logic, Aristotelianism, the subsequent Hellenistic philosophy including Stoicism and Neo-Platonism, and most of Hellenic and Hellenistic science (projects, incidentally, to which Egyptian and Levantine scholars made important contributions at the time) in general would never have been revived in the West in the early second millennium CE unless through the

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<sup>61</sup> Bernal, M., Review of *Not out of Africa*.

<sup>62</sup> 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 been published.

<sup>63</sup> Although even more ambitious, profound and scholarly, it was in a way similar, and complementary, to the project to which Martin Bernal's father, originally a crystallographer, devoted his later years; cf. J.D. Bernal's *Science in history*, 4 vols., Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969.

<sup>64</sup> *Black Athena II*, pp. 312, 313.

<sup>65</sup> Cf. his magnificent discussion of Taoism, or of the Chinese influence on Leibniz's binary mathematics; Needham c.s., *Science and civilization*.

extensive mediation and elaboration of Arabic thinkers (Ibn Rushd and Ibn Sina, foremost), with Maimonides and other medieval Jewish scholars acting as intermediaries.

#### *4.3. diffusion, subsequent transformative localisation, and the questionable search for origins*

This brief and inconclusive discussion of the contested origins of Greek thought should not obscure the fact that 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>66</sup> but which since the structural-functional revolution affecting that young discipline in the 1930s and '40s, (*until quite recently*) had 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 and diffusion is not to be equated with subsequent transformative localisation, leading to performance in maturity.*

Let me give one example. Islam at its earliest stage was largely a creative peripheral reformulation of, already mutually interrelated, Jewish, Samaritan, 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.

The same reasoning applies to Bernal's central show-piece, the Greek goddess Athena herself. Considering the wealth of iconographic and semantic detail which Bernal adduces (even regardless of the contentious *Ht Nt-Athena* etymology itself, which receives ample discussion in this volume), it is quite conceivable that the link between the Greek goddess Athena, patron goddess of the major city of Greek civilisation in its heyday, and her Egyptian counterpart Neith, did go rather further than a mere superficial likeness cast in terms of the *interpretatio graeca*. Bernal urges us once again<sup>67</sup> to take the testimony of such ancient writers as Herodotus seriously, as evidence of the possibility that the Greek Athena

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<sup>66</sup>Frazer, J.G., 1922, 'The scope and method of mental anthropology', *Science Progress*, 64, April 1922: 586.

<sup>67</sup>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.

merely represented the grateful adoption, into some Northern Mediterranean backwater, of splendid and time-honoured Egyptian cultural models — adoption as a result of colonisation and military campaigns, of Hyksos penetration, or of trade. The extensive arguments back and forth, in the *Black Athena* discussion, over the blackness of 'Black' Athena, the Africanness of blackness, the Africanness of Egyptians, the blackness or whiteness of Egyptians and Greeks, form its least inspiring and, frankly, rather embarrassing part, wholly determined as they are by the ideological and political connotations — so restricted and specific in time and space — of the concept 'black' in North American multicultural discourse of the 1980s and 1990s CE, four millennia after the point in time when the Egyptian/ Greek cultural exchanges in question are to have taken place. The important point is both to acknowledge the Egyptian, or in general Ancient Near Eastern, essential contributions to Greek classical civilisation (the argument of diffusion), *and to recognise at the same time that Athena outgrew her presumable Egyptian origin*, increasingly severing such Egyptian ties (in the form of actual cultic and social interaction with Egyptian) as she may once have had, integrating in the emergent local culture, and transforming in the process (the argument of subsequent localisation). She ended up as an important cultic focus and identity symbol of local cultural achievements which were, in the end, distinctively Greek. For an understanding of Greek Athena we need to know both her presumable Egyptian background and her local history in Greece.<sup>68</sup> Especially as the goddess of the mind, of mental processes, Athena at best characterises *both* the indebtedness of Greek and ultimately Western civilisation to the Ancient Near East, *and*, on that basis, the Greeks' subsequent own achievements; as the patron of weaving and warfare she is particularly appropriate to preside over scholarly arguments ('yarns') claiming and contesting both intercultural dependence and subsequent emancipation from such dependence.

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 (although that is where the actors project them), 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 later project. In this sense, the scholarly literature abounds with book titles on origins, and

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<sup>68</sup>Cf. the final, long footnote in: Wim van Binsbergen, 'Alternative models of intercontinental interaction'.

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. A case in point is the quest for the origin of the Amazons: as long as these were classified as an ethnic group, all sort of likely candidates for identification were produced, especially in extreme south-eastern Europe; once it was realised that perhaps the most likely candidates for the Amazons are the females *within*, imaginarily threatening Greek males from inside the repressive confines of classical Greek society itself, the quest could be abandoned.<sup>69</sup> Another, even more pertinent example is that in terms of phenotype: much of the meta-scholarly excitement of the *Black Athena* debate is due to an anachronistic classification, smuggling in a late twentieth century CE folk classification in terms of Black and White, of race, into the analysis of cultural phenomena among ancient actors who employed very different classifications.<sup>70</sup> Implicit refusal to admit the essential role classification plays in defining origins, 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 exclusivist, racist variant of Afrocentrism is a good example of how 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, fostering multiple identities while constantly switching from one identity to the other, and being conscious of the arbitrary nature of all socially upheld identity anyway.

Thus the pursuit of 'origins', however legitimate as an academic

<sup>69</sup>Blok, J.H., 1995, *The early Amazons: Modern and ancient perspectives on a persistent myth*, Leiden: Brill.

<sup>70</sup>Cf. Snowden, 'Bernal's Blacks', o.c.

activity under certain conditions, ultimately even risks to be co-opted into the camp of *Blut und Boden* — not necessarily with Nazi 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, uncompromising. It is ultimately the frame of mind in which people feel justified to kill over ideas.

One of the ironies of *Black Athena* is that Martin Bernal, seeking to explode the Eurocentrist myth of origin ('the Greek miracle'), was tempted to extend his analysis beyond a mere critique of classicist scholarship since the 18th century CE, and felt compelled to produce his own account of the origins of Greek/ European civilisation — with the obvious danger of producing merely another myth of origin. What enables him to construct for himself an analytical meta-plane from which to observe and interpret the historical actors that fill his historiography? How does he descend from that meta-plane in order to become himself a producer of historical knowledge, launching his 'Revised Ancient Model' stipulating massive Afroasiatic, or more specifically Egyptian, cultural and linguistic influence upon the genesis of classical Greek civilisation — in addition for allowance (hence 'Revised') for immigration of Indo-European speakers from the north? How does he avoid (or does he?) the methodological and ideological pitfalls into which he claims his historical actors have fallen? These are crucial questions in any assessment of *Black Athena*, and they lead us to consider, in the following sections, Bernal's sociology of knowledge, the debate his books have generated, and his epistemology.

##### *5. Martin Bernal and the sociology of knowledge*

In order to contrast between rival theories and between their producers, Martin Bernal frequently deploys two conceptual tools forged in the 20th century CE: Kuhn's notion of the succession of scientific paradigms;<sup>71</sup> and what Bernal insists on calling 'the sociology of knowledge' as if there were only one — in his case essentially Mannheim's<sup>72</sup> perceptive elaboration of Marx's awareness of the class determinants in the production of scientific and other knowledge.

Bernal uses these tools with enviable economy. 'The' sociology of

<sup>71</sup>Kuhn, T.S., 1970, *The structure of scientific revolutions*, *International Encyclopaedia of Unified Science*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2nd ed., first ed. 1962.

<sup>72</sup>Mannheim, K., 1936, *Ideology and Utopia*, trans. L. Wirth and E. Shils, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul. A similar trend is also manifest in the work J.D. Bernal produced in the field of the history of science.

knowledge is claimed to enable us to understand why scholars propounding wrong, obsolete or ethically undesirable (e.g. racialist) theories should do so, by revealing the interest groups to which these scholars belong in terms of class, gender, race, education, generation, academic discipline, academic establishment versus academic periphery, specific institutions and academic schools at rivalry with each other in the national and international scene, etc. The notion of the succession of paradigms, on the other hand, is invoked — reticently in *Black Athena I*, more confidently in *Black Athena II* — in order to highlight the revolutionary and irreversible nature of the breakthrough produced by the *Black Athena* thesis, as well as to justify that such a breakthrough could or should come from someone like Bernal, by professional training an outsider to the ancient history of the eastern Mediterranean. Below, when discussing the *Black Athena* debate, I shall come back to Bernal's claims concerning paradigms.

The one-sidedness of Bernal's position with regard to any sociology of knowledge becomes clear once we realise that, with all the personal detail concerning the circumstances of the author's embarking on the *Black Athena* project,<sup>73</sup> the two *Black Athena* volumes are silent as to whatever systematic 'sociology of knowledge' their own author might find *himself* to be determined by — and what (in the face of the oppressive influence such a sociology of knowledge is claimed to have had on the authors he faults) he has done himself to transcend that determination.

Significantly, Martin Bernal presents his autobiographical details as 'a study in the sociology of knowledge' but he fails to raise them above the anecdotal level. Clearly he is under the impression that with the anecdotal account he gives of himself and his *Werdegang*, against the setting of the 1970s and '80s in the introductions to both *Black Athena I* and *II*, he has given us all we need in this respect. However, a proper sociology of knowledge is of course more than a programme, and more than a scenario of good guys and bad guys. It should investigate the *contradictions* inherent in the production of academic knowledge under relevant social conditions. For contemporary knowledge production such conditions include: state patronage; organisational structures and institutional rivalry; personal career insecurity; a partly immaterial and in general disintegrating and declining reward structure in terms of income and social prestige; class aspirations; the problems of recruitment and socialisation involved in perpetuating an academic discipline which (contrary to an ethnic group, a class, a village etc.) is not demographically a self-reproducing unit; intra-generational and inter-generational control over resources and rewards;

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<sup>73</sup> *Black Athena I*, p. xiiff.

pressures towards conformity; yet scope for individual freedom, transgression, and innovation; the leverage offered by new ideologies and social movements from outside the discipline (e.g. feminism, anti-imperialism, anti-racism); and patterns of 'dropping out' through routinisation, absenteeism, career shifts etc. Bernal has a sharp intuition for such themes, and interesting material towards the sociology of knowledge of ancient history and related disciplines in the twentieth century CE is presented throughout *Black Athena I*, the preface to *Black Athena II*, and in his contributions to the present volume. Yet the sociological analysis itself remains to be written. Unfortunately, the more the *Black Athena* project has allowed the Sinologist Bernal to insert himself in the scholarly circles where ancient history is being produced, rapidly<sup>74</sup> shedding the outsidership that characterised his initial position in the late 1970s, the less likely he becomes as the future author of such an analysis.

Bernal is obviously unique as an intellectual producer. This is borne out by his successful expansion, after his initial training in Sinology and modern, intercontinental intellectual history, into a totally new set of disciplines in mid-career, and by the phenomenal if often conflictive response he gained as a result. Likewise, Bernal's ancestry is rather more unique even than that of other social actors in that it contains several intellectual giants and was rather more than average conducive to marginality:

Martin Bernal grew up as the son of J.D. Bernal, a famous British crystallographer cum Marxist historian of science. His maternal grandfather was Sir Alan Gardiner, millionaire and the greatest British Egyptologist of his generation. Growing up in the Bohemian fringe of the British upper-class, his father's Irish background, his maternal grandmother's half-Jewish background, and his milieu's general preoccupation with intellectual excellence left their traces in Martin Bernal's biography. So did anthropology and Africa: before marrying J.D. Bernal, Margaret Gardiner had a relationship with the anthropologist Bernard Deacon, who however died during field-work in Melanesia; much later young Martin as a freshman lived for a year at the house of Meyer Fortes, the leading Africanist anthropologist of his generation. The family's tea plantation in Malawi earned young Martin an extensive stay in Africa and introduction to an African language, Chi-Nyanja, in 1957. His father was a close friend of the biologist and historian of Chinese science Joseph Needham, and took his son to visit this universal scholar.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>74</sup>Cf. his adjunct professorship in Near Eastern studies as early as 1984, three years before even *Black Athena I* had been published.

<sup>75</sup>Cf. Gardiner, A. H., 1986, *My early years*, ed. J. Gardiner, reprint, Isle of Man: Andreas, originally published 1945-55; Gardiner, A. H., n.d., *My working years*, London: Coronet Press; M. Gardiner, *Footprints on Malekula: A memoir of Bernard Deacon*; M. Gardiner, 1988, *A scatter of memories*, London: Free Association Books; relevant passages in M. Bernal, *Black Athena I and II*, and *Cadmean letters*; M. Bernal, 'Afroasiatic loan words in Greek', oral presentation, conference on *Black Athena*:

Sociology, also sociology of knowledge, consists in the subsuming of individual actors under broader social categories, their dynamics and interactions. As such a sociology of knowledge of the individual Martin Bernal would be a contradiction in terms. Yet one might pursue a number of directions towards the sociological framing of Bernal as an academic actor. I can see a number of strands which I shall identify by italicised paragraph headings.

*The upper-class symbolic veiling and subjective transcendence of exploitation.* While material appropriation and exploitation (both domestic and in a North-South, colonial context) constituted the economic base for the British upper classes, the symbolic veiling and subjective transcendence of such material relations under a cloak of indirectness, expertise, respectability and sublimation has been a major incentive in the production of culture including scholarship. Of course, such a project can only work if its class nature and psychological strategy remains hidden from the consciousness of the actors involved. Its scope can only be understood on the basis of an assumption of these actors' integrity as cultural, including intellectual, producers taking on extraordinary responsibility for the production of emphatically disinterested knowledge, on behalf not just of their own class but of society as a whole. Thus *Black Athena I* stresses how familiarity with the classics became the mainstay in the gentleman's education — although its author himself, in the mid-20th century and only marginally upper-class, went to a progressive coeducational school. But in the same way, colonial expansion and its attending class interests become translated in the study of exotic languages and cultures, remote in place and/ or time — as throughout Bernal's family and social circle. When directed not to dead civilisations but to living colonial subjects, such a study is likely to result in the appreciation of, and identification with, the people concerned; although initially ineffectual from a political and economic point of view, this may ultimately erode the premises of North-South domination — a development of which the production of anti-Eurocentric *Black Athena* is the final consequence.

*The burden of empire.* Having built part of their security on territorial expansion and productive exploitation of the African and Asian continent in the course of the 19th century, in the next generations — with the redefinition and subsequent loss of empire, though not necessarily of the wealth it had afforded them — the British upper classes were forced to redefine their identity; after dumping the Malawian tea plantation that

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*Africa's contribution to global systems of knowledge*, African Studies Centre, Leiden, The Netherlands, 28 June, 1996; the author's extensive conversations with Martin Bernal, 29/7/96 (Haarlem, The Netherlands) and 26/10/96 (Binghamton, N.Y., U.S.A.); Arno Egberts, 'Consonants in collision: Neith and Athena reconsidered' (this volume).

featured as a major asset in his maternal family's wealth, Afrocentrist-inclined *Black Athena* is the final stage in such a process, also in Martin Bernal's own perception.<sup>76</sup>

*A sense of inter-generational continuity and obligation.* Martin Bernal grew up among the giants of British intellectual life. He was early on socialised to the highest standards of intellectual prominence and heroism, of world-wide responsibility, of scholarship as a family obligation. The British upper classes shared this concern with academic professional circles with which, despite massive differences in wealth and birth, they entertained a *Wahlverwantschaft*, as expressed in close friendships and marriages — including presumably that of J.D. Bernal and M. Gardiner. The exalted family standards as regards scholarship were scarcely met by marginal Martin Bernal's inconspicuous Cornell professorship, outside the world's few great centres of Asian studies. This realisation may have been at least one ingredient in the mid-life crisis leading to *Black Athena*. The dedication of Volume I to the memory of J.D. Bernal, and that of *Cadmean Letters* to the memory of Alan Gardiner, would then appear to be a triumphant declaration: to the world, that Martin Bernal was coming into his own; and to the ancestors, that the son was discharging his obligation, even if this meant invading several disciplines totally new to him.<sup>77</sup>

*The stimulating effect of the transatlantic brain drain.* From a European

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<sup>76</sup>In his oral presentation at the Leiden 1996 conference on which the present volume is based, Martin Bernal revealed that one of the main driving forces behind writing *Black Athena* was simply: embarrassment at having benefited, as a member of his mother's family, from the capitalist exploitation of the African people in the context of this Malawian tea plantation, which he not only visited as a boy but for which later he also bore corporate responsibility before getting rid of it as, in the political views of his mature years, an ethically unacceptable asset:

'First I should indicate another motive to my taking up this topic. It is guilt. My mother's family owned a tea plantation in Malawi, where, over the years, I spent a number of months. The first non Indo-European language I attempted to learn was actually what was then called Chinyanja and what is now called Chichewa in Malawi. Since the nineteen fifties I have always had an interest in Sub-Saharan Africa. Indeed if there had been African Studies available in Cambridge at the time I went to study there I would have chosen these rather than Chinese, although I was very positively attracted to China and Chinese studies. I think there was something profoundly Eurocentric in my choosing these two topics, in that one of the things I wanted to find out what was the nature of European culture and identity by looking at others, in order to filter out what was common to humanity. Anyhow, at the age of nineteen I was thinking in terms of Africa very clearly.'

<sup>77</sup>Cf. *Black Athena II*, p. xx:

'I have been heavily influenced by my father. However, this has been more by the general features of his thought, his broadness of historical vision and sympathy for the underdog, than by the specifics of his Marxism.'

academic vantage point, one of the striking features of the *Black Athena* debate is that it is unmistakably American, despite its British-born protagonist.<sup>78</sup> Although Martin Bernal continued to frequent Cambridge academic circles during the preparatory stages of *Black Athena*,<sup>79</sup> his first papers on his newly chosen theme were virtually all situated within a U.S.A. context,<sup>80</sup> — where he was working at Cornell, where the aftermath of the Vietnam war dominated intellectual life, and where Blacks, i.e. African Americans, were becoming increasingly vocal — insisting on a university curriculum that would represent them and their intercontinental antecedents truthfully or at least: positively. Racialism, African roots, Black curricula, were already becoming established concerns of institutional and academic politics in the U.S.A. when, in the 1970s, European countries, utterly unprepared, were only going through the first waves of immigration from Africa and the Africanised Americas. Subsequently, after the end of the Cold War, the U.S.A. Black population and their socio-cultural aspirations were pressed into service by the dominant right-wing white community in order to constitute one of their much needed enemies within, now that the major external enemy, communism, had dissolved. The fact that North American white classicists dominate the *Black Athena* debate suggests that a major, if implied, concern for them has been preservation of the purity of their imported European culture, referring to a distant homeland far to the east (!) across the Atlantic; their *Ex oriente lux* simply has different mythical and geopolitical parameters than for British-born Martin Bernal. It is in the North American context that he hit on the one ideological issue, *race*; that allowed him to make the transition from Sinologist to ancient historian of the eastern Mediterranean; to discharge, in the process, the accumulated obligations which his nationality, class and family history have structurally imposed upon him; and to turn his own marginality into a positive force by passionately and creatively fighting the ideological exclusion of Africa and Asia, and of their diasporic descendants in the West.

Even from the vantage point of an increasingly ‘multicultural’ (i.e. phenotypically diverse) continental Europe with mounting racial tensions, it is difficult to appreciate the way in which race — a concept so utterly compromised by modern history, and dismantled by modern science — is

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<sup>78</sup>Cf. Levine, M. Myerowitz, 1992, ‘The use and abuse of *Black Athena*’, *American Historical Review*, 97, 2: 440-64.

<sup>79</sup>*Black Athena I*, p. xv.

<sup>80</sup>Bernal, M., ‘Speculations on the disintegration of Afroasiatic’, paper presented at the 8th conference of the North American Conference of Afroasiatic Linguistics, San Francisco, April 1980; Bernal, M., 1983, ‘On the westward transmission of the Canaanite alphabet before 1500 BC’, paper presented to the American Oriental Society, Baltimore (April); Bernal, M., 1985, ‘Black Athena’, in: Van Sertima, *African presence*.

an issue in U.S.A. public culture today. Outside specialist circles, the sheer existence of Afrocentrism as an established ideological option has even scarcely registered with the continental European intellectual public — another reason why e.g. the Dutch response to *Black Athena* has been so slow to gain momentum.

And this does not even exhaust the extent to which the *Black Athena* debate reflects an American academic culture which, despite the obvious American academic hegemony in many fields, still has not become fully standard in Europe. Further features include the stress on corporate action, corporate responsibilities, explicit professionalisation, formal labelling practices through public debate and mass gatherings, on the part of academic disciplines and of academia at large — in other words the visual and group-wise, organisational articulation of the academic forum. This pattern is rather different from the cherished model of public aloofness and small-scale, informal intra-academic exchanges, which is more or less standard in many European countries. The fact that France is rather an exception to this pattern suggests that we are not just talking here of subcultural free variation on both sides of the Atlantic, but about the way in which a national culture's sense of self-imposed mission, in other words a state's hegemonic cultural aspirations (which are massive in the case of both the U.S.A. and France today) are reflected in academic production patterns. If the European academic producer often aims at sheltered production to be assessed among selected peers, the American (or in general, hegemonic) pattern instigates the role model of the academic producer as the belligerent hero who seeks, and finds, public exposure and recognition, and who in the process satisfies the collective demand for new, topical intellectual issues to be initiated, used up, and replaced.

While these Americanisms may have offended some of Martin Bernal's British upper-class values, they must also have appealed to his family-instilled sense of social obligation as discharged through scholarly excellence and fame. He has utilised these characteristics of the American academic scene with the same capacity for absorption and mastery as is demonstrated in his polyglot language skills and his stunning display of erudition, which show him to be the scion of an intellectual dynasty he is.

## 6. *The Black Athena debate*

The above goes a long way to explain the scope of the *Black Athena* debate and the peculiarly insistent stance of its protagonist. In addition there may be something of a band-wagon effect producing a '*Black Athena* industry' (including the present collection...), but the vehemence of the debate reveals that, instead of opportunism, profound emotions and convictions

are involved on all sides. Understandably so, considering the scope of Bernal's project. The publication of Volume II in 1991 meant not only a further increase of the number of disciplines involved in the debate, but also a marked change of tone. As long as the *Black Athena* project remained (as in Volume I) essentially a review of the image of Egypt in European intellectual history, with — as was the author's stated intention — mere truncated and only lightly referenced previews of the expected findings of the next volumes, the project was by and large welcomed for its solid foundation in scholarship, and critical sense of Eurocentric and racialist prejudices informing previous generations of classicists now long dead. Glen Bowersock, the leading American classicist, proved far from blind to the oddities even of *Volume I*, yet he could declare:

‘This is an astonishing work, breathtakingly bold in conception and passionately written. It is the first of three projected volumes that are designed to undermine nothing less than the whole consensus of classical scholarship, built up over two hundred years, on the origins of ancient Greek civilization. (...) Bernal shows conclusively that our present perception of the Greeks was artificially pieced together between the late eighteenth century and the present. (...) Bernal’s treatment of this theme is both excellent and important.’<sup>81</sup>

However, when Volume II was published four years later, it addressed the specifics of eastern Mediterranean ancient history — a topic constituting the life’s work of hundreds of *living* researchers. And it did so in a truly alarming fashion, less well written than Volume I, invoking yet more contentious Egyptian etymologies for ancient Greek proper names and lexical items, insisting on the cultic penetration not only of Neith but of specific minor Egyptian gods to the Aegean, relying on mythological material as if whatever kernels of historical fact this might contain could readily be identified, claiming physical Egyptian presence in the Aegean by reference to irrigation works, a monumental tumulus, and traditions of a Black pharaoh’s military campaign into South Eastern Europe and adjacent Asia, playing havoc with the established chronologies of the Ancient Near East, attributing the Mycenaean shaft graves to Levantine invaders identified as early Hyksos yet bringing Egyptian culture, and reiterating a sympathy for Afrocentrist ideas which meanwhile had become rather more vocal and politicised in the U.S.A. It was at this stage that many scholars parted company with Bernal and that genuine and justified scholarly critique was combined with right-wing political contestation against the unwelcome, anti-Eurocentric, intercultural and intercontinental message of the *Black Athena* project as a whole — a development formalised and meant to be finalised by the publication of *Black Athena revisited* in 1996

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<sup>81</sup>Bowersock, G., 1989, [Review of *Black Athena I*], *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 19: 490-91.

under the editorship of Mary Lefkowitz and Guy MacLean Rogers.

Moreover, a peculiar feature of the debate has been that Martin Bernal has remained the single main producer in the *Black Athena* industry, not only with his two fat tomes and a modest number of independent articles, but particularly as the author of a large number of often quite lengthy responses,<sup>82</sup> which take up major and minor challenges of his stated views. Two more such responses were specifically written for the present volume,<sup>83</sup> and an entire volume of them is now underway as the answer to *Black Athena revisited*.

One thing which the editors of *Black Athena revisited* have certainly managed to bring about, is a state of alarm and embarrassment among all scholars and lay people seriously interested in pursuing the perspectives which Martin Bernal has sought to open in the *Black Athena* volumes. How could one honestly and publicly continue to derive inspiration from an author whose work has been characterised in the following terms by a well-informed critic like Robert Palter:

'...those today who are seriously concerned with formulating a radical political critique of contemporary scholarship (...) might wish to think twice before associating themselves with the methods and claims of Bernal's work; (...) for his lapses in the most rudimentary requirements of sound historical study — traditional, critical, any kind of historical study — should make one wary of his grandiose historiographical pronouncements. (...) In the absence of adequate controls on evidence and argument, the view of history presented in *Black Athena* is continually on the verge of collapsing into sheer ideology.'<sup>84</sup>

Sarah Morris praises the critical self-reflection *Black Athena* has brought about among classicists, but finds this too dearly paid for:

'On the other hand, it has bolstered, in ways not anticipated by the author, an Afrocentrist agenda which returns many debates to ground zero and demolishes decades of scrupulous research by excellent scholars such as Frank Snowden. An ugly cauldron of racism, recrimination, and verbal abuse has boiled up in different departments and disciplines; it has become impossible for professional

<sup>82</sup>Bernal, M., 1989, 'Response to Professor Turner' In: Myerowitz Levine & Peradotto, pp. 26-30; Bernal, M., 1989, 'Response to Professor Snowden' In: Myerowitz Levine & Peradotto, pp. 30-32; Bernal, M., 1990, 'Responses to Critical Reviews of *Black Athena*, Volume I', *Journal of Mediterranean Archaeology*, 3, 1: 111-37; Bernal, M., 1992, 'Response to Edith Hall', *Arethusa*, 25: 203-14; Bernal, M., 1992, 'Response to Mary Lefkowitz, "Not Out of Africa"', *New Republic*, 9 March, 4-5; Bernal, M., 1992, 'A Response to John Coleman (Part II)', *The Bookpress*, 2, 2: 2, 13; Bernal, M., 1993, 'Response to S. O. Y. Keita', *Arethusa*, 26: 315-19; Bernal, M., 1993, 'Response, The Debate over *Black Athena*', *Journal of Women's History*, 4, no. 3: 119-35; Bernal, M., 1994, 'Response to Robert Palter', *History of Science*, 32, no. 4: 445-64.

<sup>83</sup>Bernal, 'Response to Josine Blok' and 'Response to Arno Egberts'.

<sup>84</sup>Palter, R., 1996, 'Eighteenth-century historiography in *Black Athena*', in: Lefkowitz, & MacLean Rogers, *o.c.*, pp. 349-401, p. 350f.

Egyptologists to address the truth without abuse, and Bernal's arguments have only contributed to an avalanche of radical propaganda without basis in fact'.<sup>85</sup>

Mary Lefkowitz says she does not doubt Bernal's good intentions yet finds him criminally guilty of what must be, especially in her eyes, the greatest crime: providing apparently serious, scholarly fuel to what otherwise might have remained the Afrocentrist straw fire:

'To the extent that Bernal has contributed to the provision of an apparently respectable underpinning for Afrocentric fantasies, he must be held culpable, even if his intentions are honorable and his motives are sincere.'<sup>86</sup>

Yet all this cannot be the entire story, and it is probably only a one-sided version of whatever story. How else to account, for instance, for the praise which the prominent Egyptologist and archaeologist B.G. Trigger piles on *Black Athena*? He sees Martin Bernal's project certainly not as a mere exercise in consciousness-raising meant for Blacks in search of identity,<sup>87</sup> but as a serious contribution to the history of archaeology — one of his own specialisms<sup>88</sup> — and as a stimulating pointer at the possibilities of innovation in that discipline, which he considers to be bogged down by processual scientism.<sup>89</sup>

Yet even Trigger stresses Bernal's methodological inadequacies, rejects his contentious chronology particularly with regard to the Hyksos, and criticises the way in which he tends to take ancient myth as a statement of fact. And given the large numbers of both Egyptian and Greek myths, he argues, it is easy for any scholar to take his pick and claim historical connections between selections from both sets. Moreover, as an Egyptologist Trigger appears unconvinced by Bernal's argument in favour of the possibility of extensive Asian and European campaigns by Senwosret I or III.

The *Black Athena* debate can be seen to operate at two levels:

- that of the political agenda of the editors of *Black Athena revisited*, which revolves on the grossly irresponsible *denial*<sup>90</sup> of the multicultural, intercontinental and multicentred origins, both of

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<sup>85</sup>Morris, S.P., 1996, 'The legacy of Black Athena', in: Lefkowitz & MacLean Rogers, *o.c.*, p. 167-175.

<sup>86</sup>Lefkowitz, M.R., 1996, 'Ancient history, modern myths', in: Lefkowitz & MacLean Rogers, *o.c.*, pp. 3-23, p. 20.

<sup>87</sup>Pace Cartledge, P., 1991, 'Out of Africa?', *New Statesman and Society*, 4 (164): 35-36.

<sup>88</sup>Cf. Trigger, B.G., 1980, *Gordon Childe: Revolutions in archaeology*, London: Thames & Hudson; Trigger, B.G., 1989, *A history of archaeological thought*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>89</sup>Trigger, 'Brown Athena', *o.c.*

<sup>90</sup>E.g. MacLean Rogers, G., 1996, 'Multiculturalism and the foundations of Western civilization', in: Lefkowitz & MacLean Rogers, *o.c.*, pp. 428-445, p. 429.

classical Greek civilisation, and ultimately of Western European and modern global civilisation; character defamation is among their lines of attack.<sup>91</sup>

- and that of the majority of contributors, who — whatever their political convictions — are merely doing their jobs as scholars, justifiably defining and defending, not so much the political and economic resources, but the methodological and theoretical principles, of their respective disciplines.

The factual, chronological and methodological chords struck by Trigger as a thoroughly sympathetic reviewer reverberate, with dissonants and fortissimi, throughout *Black Athena revisited* and the other venues of the *Black Athena* debate. Many complain of the defects and even of the absence of methodology in Bernal's writings.<sup>92</sup> Many are appalled by what they consider to be Bernal's confusion of culture, ethnicity and race.<sup>93</sup> They suspect him of a nineteenth-century, lapidary belief in

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<sup>91</sup>Cf. MacLean Rogers, 'Multiculturalism', p. 441:

'it is hard in retrospect not to see the entire enterprise of Black Athena as a massive, fundamentally misguided projection upon the second millennium B.C.E. of Martin Bernal's personal struggle to establish an identity during the later twentieth century',

as if an author and his work are to be disqualified by the very fact that he is sensitive and responsible enough for the crucial dilemma's and contradictions of his social situation and historical period to make themselves felt in his personal life. With the same futile argument one might disqualify Freud's genius on the grounds of having shared the neurosis of fin-de-siècle Vienna, and Nietzsche and Wittgenstein for having lived, in their personal lives, the philosophical struggles their works expound. It is in the nature of prophets to personally suffer and express the ills of their age; cf. van Binsbergen, W.M.J., 1981, *Religious Change in Zambia: Exploratory studies*, London/ Boston: Kegan Paul International, ch. 4. For this very reason I have been careful, in my above discussion of the sociology of knowledge, to insist on structural contradiction, not individual motives.

<sup>92</sup> Yet such criticism often turns out to be difficult to substantiate, e.g. the utterly unconvincing two methodological case studies by Palter ('Eighteenth century historiography', *o.c.*, pp. 388f). However, E. Hall (1996, 'When is a myth not a myth: Bernal's "Ancient Model"', in: Lefkowitz & MacLean Rogers, *o.c.*, pp. 333-348) convincingly shows the methodological naïvety of Bernal's handling of mythical material. Meanwhile, Bernal prides himself, and not entirely without justification, precisely on the explicitly theoretical nature of his approach and his attention for factors relating to the sociology of knowledge, which, he argues (*Black Athena I*, pp. 433f) constitutes the main difference between his work and e.g.: Morenz, S., 1969, *Die Begegnung Europas mit Ägypten*, Zürich & Stuttgart: Artemis.

<sup>93</sup> MacLean Rogers, G., 1996, 'Quo vadis?', in: Lefkowitz & MacLean Rogers, *o.c.*, pp. 444-454; Snowden, 'Bernal's "Blacks"'; Brace, C. L., D. P. Tracer, L. A. Yaroch, J. Robb, K. Brandt, and A. R. Nelson, 1996, 'Clines and Clusters versus "Race": A Test in Ancient Egypt and the Case of a Death on the Nile', in: Lefkowitz & MacLean Rogers, *o.c.*, pp. 129-164; Baines, J., 1996, 'On the aims and methods of *Black Athena*', in: Lefkowitz & MacLean Rogers, *o.c.*, pp. 27-48.

physical displacements of people through migration and conquest as prime explanatory factors in cultural change. They blame him for an unsystematic and linguistically incompetent handling of etymologies. While Bernal positively prides himself (to the extent of claiming to have authored a Kuhnian paradigm shift) in championing modes of interpretation which were far more favoured in the beginning of the twentieth century than towards its end, many critics do not so much find fault with his specific points but simply — and clearly for disciplinary, internal, rather than political and external reasons — refuse to recognise his approach as legitimate, up-to-date ancient history.<sup>94</sup> As John Baines has pointed out,<sup>95</sup> the notion of paradigms may be scarcely applicable in the field of ancient history:

‘Despite the extended applications of Kuhn’s term that have appeared since the publication of his book [Kuhn’s; i.e. *The structure of scientific revolutions*, o.c.], ancient Near Eastern studies are not a ‘science’ or a discipline in the Kuhnian sense. Rather, they are the sum of a range of methods and approaches applied to a great variety of materials from a particular geographical region and period; even definitions of the area and period are open to revision. So far as the ancient Near East relates to ‘paradigms’, these are, for example, theories of social complexity and change, or in other cases theories of literary form and discourse. *This point is where Bernal’s aims depart farthest from those of many specialists in ancient Near Eastern studies.*’

Specialists in eighteenth and nineteenth century CE intellectual history have little difficulty showing that some of Bernal’s allegedly racist villains were in fact heroes of intercultural learning and tolerance.<sup>96</sup> His Afrocentrist-inspired views of Ancient Egyptian science have been severely attacked by Palter.<sup>97</sup> Several find his treatment of what he alleges to be the

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<sup>94</sup> Baines, o.c., p. 39; Thus also Muhly, J.D., 1990, ‘*Black Athena* versus traditional scholarship’, *Journal of Mediterranean Archaeology*, 3, 1: 83-110, who summarises his methodological objections in Bernal’s own words:

‘it is difficult for the scholar without a discipline “going it alone”, to know where to stop’ (cf. *Black Athena I*, p. 381).

<sup>95</sup> Baines, o.c., p. 42.

<sup>96</sup> Palter, o.c., on Kant, Goethe and Lessing; Jenkyns, R., 1996, ‘Bernal and the nineteenth century’, in: Lefkowitz & MacLean Rogers, o.c., pp. 411-419; and on Herder: Norton, R.E., 1996, ‘The tyranny of Germany over Greece? Bernal, Herder, and the German appropriation of Greece’, in: Lefkowitz & MacLean Rogers, o.c., pp. 403-409. For a penetrating discussion of this dimension of Bernal’s work, cf. Blok (this volume).

<sup>97</sup> Palter, R., 1996, ‘*Black Athena*, Afrocentrism, and the history of science’, in: Lefkowitz & MacLean Rogers, o.c., pp. 209-266. However, see the short but convincing argument for Egyptian/Greek scientific continuity by the great historian of science and magic W. Hartner (1963, ‘W. Hartner’ [ Discussion of G. de Santillana’s ‘On forgotten sources in the history of science’ ], in: Crombie, A.C., ed., *Scientific change*, New York: Basic Books, pp. 868-75): e.g., Hellenist Greek astronomers tell us

undercurrent of Egyptian knowledge in European culture since Late Antiquity incompetent.<sup>98</sup> Many critics question whether Bernal's stated intention of trying to understand Greek civilisation is sincere: all they can see is an obsession with provenance, with intercontinental cultural displacement, and with late 20th century CE identity politics, but certainly no coherent and empathic appreciation of the inner structure, the moral and aesthetic orientations, religious experience and life world of the Ancient Egyptians, Levantines and Greeks.<sup>99</sup>

These are very serious points, although not necessarily destructive for the *Black Athena* thesis as a whole. An examination of Bernal's epistemology may help put them in perspective.

## 7. Martin Bernal's epistemology

### 7.1. a reality out there

Trigger's impression that Bernal points to the way ahead rather than to outdated methods of the past, is evidently not shared by most other critics. Thus Manning,<sup>100</sup> who contemptuously calls Trigger a 'pseudo-realist' (p. 264), in a full-length exploration of the epistemological context of *Black Athena*, states:

'*Black Athena* is in many ways set within the pre-processual, empirical, culture-historical framework of traditional archaeology (...), and forms a radical critique of several of the trends in the subsequent (...) 'new' or 'processual' modes of archaeology. This is both a requirement for the book's approach (with its concern for 'origins') and ironic, as the object-typology-culture-identity approach leads (via its study of specific peoples) inexorably to non-holistic, extreme and often racist or race-centred interpretations.'

For Manning the central dilemma of *Black Athena* revolves on the issue of realism:

'If these relativist-orientated, or post-processual, modes of thought became dominant in the discipline, then the debate over *Black Athena* is not about facts or evidence at all, but should only be a critique of the ideology in which its author is enmeshed along with everyone else. In these paradigms, the value of *Black Athena* would be political and social; it would probably be seen as another worthwhile attack on the imperialist, late capitalist, male chauvinist, and racist forces against which the Good

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that Egyptian astronomers (whom we can demonstrate to have been pre-Hellenist) have calculated the lunation to a figure which, as we know now, is within 13 seconds of the correct astronomical value!

<sup>98</sup>Jenkyns, *o.c.*, p. 412; Baines, *o.c.*, p. 44; also: Lefkowitz, *Not out of Africa*.

<sup>99</sup>Jenkyns, *o.c.*, p. 413; Baines, *o.c.*, p. 39.

<sup>100</sup>Manning, S.W., 1990, "Frames of reference for the past: Some thoughts on Bernal, truth, and reality", *Journal of Mediterranean Archaeology*, 3, 2: 255-74.

continue the unending struggle...'.<sup>101</sup>

Although tongue in cheek, Manning does apparently not intend to be dismissive of *Black Athena*, but merely to define the specific epistemological settings within which Bernal's project can or cannot make sense. Manning's escape clause lies in what we can call the relativity of relativism:

'The acceptance of a realist mode of thought within a wider acceptance of a relativist, or socially constructed, framework both allows for *Black Athena*, and for a satisfactory discussion of it. Uncritical positivism, or relativism, does not'.<sup>102</sup>

As an assessment of the epistemological options this conclusion is adequate but it scarcely offers a solution; for as Manning has stated at the outset of his argument, against the background of recent advances in the critique of objective knowledge by such philosophers as Rorty and Bernstein,<sup>103</sup>

'the historian *creates* [original emphasis] the past, and what Bernal considers to be the objective reality is *his* [original emphasis] reality (largely set within a paradigm of race)...'.<sup>104</sup>

But even though he has only led us to realise that the problem behind *Black Athena* is an insurmountable epistemological contradiction, Manning is correct in claiming that realism is one of the underlying assumptions of Bernal's project and of his political stance. E.g., speaking on Said Bernal declares that he is aware of the parallels between his and Said's work, however:

'his work is literary and allusive, mine historical and pedestrian. More importantly, I do not accept his view that Orientalism — or for that matter ancient history — are almost entirely self referential'.<sup>105</sup>

In other words, for Bernal, there is a past reality i.e. a real past out there, which we can at least partially capture even if we are largely determined by set paradigms and the sociology of knowledge (while for Said, orientalism's 'conception in sin' — European expansion and racialism — could never produce valid knowledge of Asian and Islamic cultures and their history).

But here precisely lies, for Jenkyns, the pitfall of Bernal's approach:

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<sup>101</sup>Manning, p. 260.

<sup>102</sup>*Ibid.* p. 269.

<sup>103</sup>Cf. Rorty, R., 1979, *Philosophy and the mirror of nature*, Princeton: Princeton University Press; Rorty, R., 1982, *Consequences of pragmatism*, Princeton: Princeton University Press; Bernstein, R.J., 1983, *Beyond objectivism and relativism: Science, hermeneutics, and praxis*, Oxford: Blackwell.

<sup>104</sup>*ibid.* p. 256f.

<sup>105</sup>Bernal, M., in press, 'Response to John Baines'.

'A problem with any strongly externalist argument is that you have to release a small band of the elect from original sin: if objectivity is a mirage and almost all scholars are distorters, why should Bernal and the few people who have written in similar terms before him be exceptions?'<sup>106</sup>

It is here that we begin to discern a fundamental contradiction, between realism and politically-inspired idealism, in Bernal's epistemology. Let us try to explore this point somewhat further.

### 7.2. dogged responses

Bernal's long series of responses may be interpreted as sign of a scholar's consistency, sticking to his earlier published arguments since these, far from being gratuitous, opportunistic or market-orientated, were based on solid research in the first place, including conscientious assessment of the available views and interpretations. In Bernal's case his awareness that outsiders aiming at questioning a discipline's conventional wisdom are often considered cranks,<sup>107</sup> perhaps also justifies a certain responsive overkill. Yet it is as if he prefers to situate his project somewhat outside the realm where rules of the academic game reign supreme, and where the best thing that can happen to a theory (and its author) is its methodical refutation since this (neo-positivists would say: this *alone*) produces genuine knowledge, notably knowledge as to what is certainly *not* the case. What is at stake is not so much detached scholarly debate about the intricacies of Europe's history of ideas since the eighteenth century, or about the details of East Mediterranean ancient history, archaeology, ethnicity, religion and historical linguistics — but fundamentally different conceptions of epistemology. In addition to the peculiar nature of American academic dynamics, the politicisation of Black issues, and Martin Bernal's structural peculiarities as an academic actor, this fundamental disagreement is responsible for the phenomenal scope and the often unpleasant tone the *Black Athena* debate has taken on.<sup>108</sup>

It is significant that Martin Bernal speaks so much about the sociology of knowledge and the circulation of paradigms (in other words about the social group dynamics of academic production regardless of academic contents), and relatively little about epistemology and methodology — supposedly the very determinants and criteria of academic contents. What is it that validates an academic statement and renders it true or false? 'Competitive plausibility', as Bernal repeatedly claims.<sup>109</sup> But plausibility in the light of what determining criteria? Of what *really* happened? How

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<sup>106</sup>Jenkyns, *o.c.*, p. 413.

<sup>107</sup>Cf. *Black Athena I*, p. 6.

<sup>108</sup>Cf. the assessment by Preston Blier, as quoted in a footnote above.

<sup>109</sup>*Black Athena I*, p. 8f; *Black Athena II, passim* (see that book's index).

would we know?

Let us take one example of such plausibility, Bernal's refusal to give up the *Ht Nt-Athena* etymology in the face of Egberts' demonstration, in the present volume,<sup>110</sup> of its untenable nature on the basis of established historical linguistics.

'I repeat, the phonetic fit, the lack of Indo-European alternatives and the tight semantic connections between Neith and *thn* 'faience,' divine eyes, the *Thnw* people and olive oil and those between Athena as *parthénos* with grey-blue, terrifying eyes, Libya and olives do not make the etymology certain but merely very *plausible* [my italics, WvB], especially since they are mutually reinforcing. The etymologies of both *Athena* from *Ht Nt* and *parthénos* from *Pr thn* should be seen in the light of the close cultural contacts between speakers of Ancient Egyptian and Greek for more than two millennia.'<sup>111</sup>

In other words, from Martin Bernal's point of view it is primarily the attractiveness and persuasiveness of the scholar's discourse, the mutual reinforcement and co-reflexivity of the images which he conjures up, which produce plausibility as the closest possible approximation of truth — whereas such plausibility is not so much produced by the demonstrable fit with empirical generalisations, even laws, such as historical linguistics has formulated; even if it is demonstrated that such fit is absent, the discursive plausibility continues to be upheld unabated!

Paradoxically, this example has far greater negative implications for Martin Bernal's method than for the *Black Athena* thesis as a whole. He does not seem to realise that explanation is simply a form of generalisation, subsuming a particular phenomenon under more general categories, and illuminating that phenomenon in the light of the relationships demonstrated and agreed to exist between these more general categories. An appeal to the *exceptional* nature of the *explanandum*, and to the *inapplicability* of general rules (on the grounds that the sound laws of historical linguistics do not work between languages belonging to different language families, do not work with proper names, or have been made into fetishes anyway), is the same as refusing to admit that (for lack of evidence, method, and/ or theory) that no explanation can be given as yet. Contrary however to what Bernal seems to fear, such an admission is a sign, not of weakness but of strength in a researcher. The *Black Athena* thesis certainly does not *depend* on the identity between the Greek goddess Athena and the Egyptian goddess Neith. It was Bernal, nobody else, who chose to make this identity into a showpiece for the thesis as a whole. He did this presumably because enormous support for the central, and eminently plausible, thesis

<sup>110</sup>Egberts, 'Consonants in collision'.

<sup>111</sup>Bernal, 'Response to Arno Egberts'; cf. the relevant passage in: Bernal, 'Responses to *Black Athena: General and linguistic issues*'.

of 'Afroasiatic roots of classical civilization' was going to derive from the scientific status of a firm etymology, upheld by sound laws which are closer to natural science exactitude than anything else<sup>112</sup> in the humanities. To try and cling to the *Athena-Ht Nt* link *on semantic grounds* is only logical,<sup>113</sup> considering the extensive and converging cultic, iconographic and documentary evidence. But to doggedly cling to the etymology as such, amounts to an attempt to make unaccountable accident pass for the manifestation of generalised regularity. It raises fundamental questions of epistemology.

Indeed, if *Gublum* can become *Byblos* and *Baghdad* *Baldock*, why should not *Ht Nt* become *Athena*?<sup>114</sup> The point however is not the derivation as such, but the fact that such a derivation could pose as

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<sup>112</sup>Except statistics, which despite the obvious utility of e.g. cluster analysis for archaeological, anthropometric and intercultural analysis, never enters Bernal's horizon. This may well be because his main model of scientific method was J.D. Bernal, who as a prominent physicist working in the field of crystallography, must have shared physicists' general abhorrence of statistical indeterminacy as against the fixed beauty of physical law. This is what made quantum mechanics (as essentially statistical) such a difficult breakthrough. Statistics was primarily designed in order to cope with the distributional messiness typical for the lesser sciences, such as biology, psychology and anthropology. Provided one can agree on numerical indicators for the types of systematic variations and correspondences within the corpus of signs within early alphabets, cluster analysis would be the ideal tool to explore such relationships between alphabetic series as make up the bulk of the argument in: Bernal, *Cadmean letters*. The irony is that these relationships would then be visualised as dendograms — representing not in the least genetic nor necessarily dyadic relationships as in the tree models which Bernal (o.c., p. 1f) abhors excessively, but merely degrees of statistical nearness between any number of items, waiting to be explained.

<sup>113</sup>Even Arno Egberts' point as to the posthumous virility of Osiris, whose *Pr Thn* or 'House of Glitter' temple therefore could not have been the etymon of Greek Athena's *Maiden Chamber* (*Parthenon*), seems to have an obvious answer. If female Athena in her capacity of *parthenos* derived from male Osiris, her feminine role in sexuality and reproduction would have to be impeded to the extent to which Osiris' masculinity was accentuated; and this is what happened. As Bernal rightly points out on the authority of specialists of Greek religion, belligerent Athena was a virgin not in the sense that she was inchoately, dormant feminine, but in the sense that she was implicitly masculine. Neither Greek nor Bernalian inventiveness needs to be invoked on this point. It is the composite nature of the goddess, combining 'warfare, wisdom and weaving' among her specialisms, which poses a difficulty — but one only too familiar in the domain of comparative religion, and therefore apparently unrelated to the question of Egyptian-Greek connections.

<sup>114</sup>As far as *Gublum/a-Byblos* is concerned there is a clear-cut answer: because in this case there is appeal to a systematic sound shift *g<sup>w</sup>-b*, 'the breakdown of labiovelars', which took place in the second millennium BCE and *explains a whole range of attested linguistic phenomena* (cf. Albright, W.F., 1950, 'Some Oriental glosses on the Homeric problem', *American Journal of Archaeology*, 54: 160-76; p. 165; also: Bernal, *Cadmean letters*, p. 30). By contrast, with regard to the proposed etymology *Ht Nt-Athena*, Egberts and others have argued that the systematic tools at our disposal do not warrant the proposal systematically, even force us to reject it.

*systematic, productive and therefore predictable, generalisable and explicatory*, the claim in other words of it being an etymology, one that allows us at least this one solid *proof* for the *Black Athena* thesis — a unique opportunity of scientifically underpinning so many conjectures which in themselves we know we shall never be able to raise to the status of certainty because of the nature of evidence throughout ancient history. *Ht Nt-Athena* has now returned to the company of these conjectures. In view of Martin Bernal's repeated claim that not proof, but merely competitive plausibility is attainable in ancient history, he cannot even complain. But far more important, he has shown, once more, his epistemological and methodological feathers.

### *7.3. empiricist realism cum political idealism*

Underlying Bernal's processing of two extremely voluminous, complex and heterogeneous data sets ('the European intellectual perception of Egypt through the centuries'; 'the ancient history of the eastern Mediterranean') I detect the implicit denial of the contradiction between two very different epistemological stances: empiricist realism on the one hand, political idealism on the other:

- *Realism*: the pattern of reality (including cultural, man-made reality as studied by the humanities and social sciences), is held to have a unique and objective existence independent from human actors, their perceptions and interests; and that pattern is transparent, open to direct human knowledge. In rather typical British intellectual fashion, such realism is even empiricist in the sense that knowledge concerning the pattern of reality (which realism has declared to be unique and knowable in the first place) is supposed to be acquired in a self-evident and matter-of-fact way, through simple inspection of reality illuminated by common sense not to say intuition. In the empiricist's mind, there is no need to complicate matters or to give ourselves airs by the formulation of explicit and consensual, cumbersome methodologies stipulating complex procedures supposed to determine the conditions under which an image of reality can be accepted to be true by the contemporary community of researchers.
- *Political idealism*: reality (including the temporal succession of realities which we capture in historiography) is not blind, neutral, a-moral, but ultimately speaks to man's moral qualities such as we seek to realise through our deliberate, productive, collective action in the world; and the truest statement is the one that most serves such realisation.

Empiricist realism belittles, even ignores, the immense difficulties attending the formulation of any meaningful, permanent and collectively

shared image of reality that is not a mere figment of our imagination. Political idealism on the other hand amounts to a position according to which *myth*, if inspiring, empowering and mobilising, is the only worthwhile image of reality, and perhaps even the ultimate product of scholarly inquiry. The strained combination of these two orientations produces an epistemology which rejects any rigid, unitary discourse stipulating that ascertainable truth must be anchored — by means of explicit and consensual procedures argued before a scientific forum — *outside* individual or collective myth. On the contrary, if myth is the ultimate, inevitable and therefore even justifiable product of scholarship, then the pattern of reality can and must be read backwards, projecting the most revealing, most attractive, most politically advisable, most empowering, myth onto the fragmented and endless set of potential data. If methodological procedures are not held to determine truth value, then common sense and intuitive, myth-guided processing of reality may be expected to reveal an underlying pattern of reality which corresponds with, in fact is just another version of, the myth with which the researcher set out in the first place. Research becomes wishful thinking, and may even claim the right to be just that. The social group dynamics of academic production (the ‘sociology of knowledge’, in other words) become all there is to it, for essentially truth as a product of scholarship has been declared an empty shell. It is the specific group with its particularist interests that determines which myth it will pursue, in an endless circulation of essentially arbitrary paradigms, and scholarship is nothing but the pretext of providing a particular myth with scientific trappings — as in the case of the radical, racialist Eurocentrist and Afrocentrist myths supposed to genuinely and permanently empower Whites or Blacks, and of the myth of a primordial matriarchy supposed to do the same for women, etc.<sup>115</sup>

#### *7.4. steering away from, and back to, myth*

The internally contradictory epistemology as outlined above also helps us to understand why Martin Bernal has such obvious difficulty in detachedly and convincingly handling mythological material from Greece and

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<sup>115</sup>Cf. Bamberger, J., 1974, ‘The myth of matriarchy: Why men rule in primitive societies’, In: *Woman, culture, and society*, edited by M. Z. Rosaldo & L. Lamphere, pp. 263-80, Palo Alto: Stanford University Press; Wagner-Hasel, B., ed., 1992, *Matriarchatstheorien der Altertumswissenschaft*, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft; inevitably, the principal Afrocentrist Diop played with a combination of the Afrocentrist and the matriarchal myths, cf. Diop, *The Cultural Unity of Black Africa: The Domains of Patriarchy and Matriarchy in Classical Antiquity*.

Egypt.<sup>116</sup> If rather inevitably myth<sup>117</sup> is the ultimate product of scholarship, and if reality's structure is both transparent and knowable and ultimately mythical at the same time, then it cannot make much difference if in the academic process we start out from the tangible marks of archaeology, the shaky language data of an exotic script, or a canonised myth enshrined in traditional mythology.

In fact, my own failure, in my book *Tears of Rain*,<sup>118</sup> to rigorously sort out myth (the reminiscence of a primal matriarchy) from historical truth regarding the exclusively female kingship in western Zambia in the seventeenth and eighteenth century CE, betrays an epistemology disarmingly similar to the one here imputed to Bernal. But then, the problem at hand was equally similar: reconstructing ideological history for a region and a period for which contemporary documentary sources are virtually absent. And the same similarity attended our shared reliance on Marxist-inspired models of socio-political organisation and of scholarly praxis. It is not the use of myth as a historical source which is dangerous from a methodological point of view, but the failure to apply such sophisticated methodology as has been developed for doing so.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>116</sup>Hall, 'When is a myth not a myth; cf. Bernal, M., 1992, 'Response to Edith Hall,' *Arethusa*, 25: 203-14.

<sup>117</sup>I.e. myth posing as scholarly truth, whose mythical nature can only be demonstrated by scholarly reassessment, usually in a future generation. Of course the entire thrust and passion of Martin Bernal's scholarship (and anyone else's) hinges on scholarly myth *not* revealing its mythical nature to the author's consciousness. If it does, and thus becomes clearly detectable as myth, serious problems of consciousness arise, e.g., in Bernal's case (*Black Athena II*, p. 41 and *passim*) when his own analysis of the Hyksos evidence left him, as he saw it, no alternative but to appeal (albeit not for Greece but for the Levant) to the 'Aryanist' image of a militant barbarous invasion from the north — however distasteful such an image was to him, since it seemed to mean reverting to a mode of historical explanation whose eradication had been the very purpose of *Black Athena*.

<sup>118</sup>Van Binsbergen, W.M.J., 1992, *Tears of Rain: Ethnicity and history in central western Zambia*, London/ Boston: Kegan Paul International.

<sup>119</sup>Cf. van Binsbergen, W.M.J., 1985, 'The historical interpretation of myth in the context of popular Islam' in: van Binsbergen, W.M.J., & Schoffeleers, J.M., 1985, *Theoretical explorations in African religion*, London/ Boston: Kegan Paul, pp. 189-224; van Binsbergen, W.M.J., 1987, 'Likota lya Bankoya: Memory, myth and history', in: *Cahiers d'Etudes Africaines*, 27, 3-4: 359-392, numéro spécial sur *Modes populaires d'histoire en Afrique*, sous la direction de B. Jewsiwicki & C. Moniot; Vansina, J., 1985, *Oral tradition as history*, London/ Nairobi: Currey/ Heinemann Kenya. The problem is understandably central to the study of African precolonial history, and has received much attention since the heyday of this sub-discipline in the 1960-70s. This did not lead to consensus. While scholars like Vansina, Schoffeleers, and myself are convinced of the usefulness of myth as evidence (however little, and however difficult to handle) for history, others argue that it is impossible, by whatever method, to thresh truth out of myth. Cf. Feierman, S., 1993, 'African histories and the dissolution of world history', in: Bates *et al.*, *Africa and the disciplines*, pp. 167-212, p. 182f; Gilsenan, M., 1972, 'Myth and the history of African religion', in: Ranger, T.O. & I.

By the same token, under Bernal's epistemology as reconstructed here it would no longer be necessary to distinguish between

- scientific statements (which are capable of, and intended to be, faulted by progressive research employing progressively consensual and improved methodological procedures), and
- pre-scientific statements (such as the pronouncements of 'the Ancients' on the historical relations between Egypt and Greece), whose mythical component is admittedly large (e.g. they reflect not so much past facts but current interests).

However, by any other epistemology these two types of statement cannot be simply juxtaposed in terms of contrasting Models, an Ancient Model as against an Aryan Model. While Bernal successfully and properly faults the Aryan Model (and such faulting is what it was intended for and capable of, although its authors did not realise that), he fails to appreciate that it exists at a different epistemological plane from the Ancient Model, which is not a scientific model and cannot, and should not, be faulted, or even 'Revised' (by allowing for Northern, Indo-European migration into ancient Greece, in addition to cultural indebtedness to Egypt and the Levant).

The continuity with my own fairly recent work will, I hope, make it clear that this attempt to reconstruct and make explicit Martin Bernal's epistemology is meant neither as a caricature, nor as an attack – although it may well be misread to be both. Nor is this epistemology peculiar to us: there are signs that it is becoming a somewhat accepted mode of academic production. Some might wish to call it post-modern. Underlying it is a far more disconcerting claim, which goes to the heart of scholarship in the humanities and social sciences today.

Persuasively produced in words which also have an extra-scientific, common-sense meaning, scholarship invariably yields statements which have the outside appearance both of myth and of truth. We cannot see from the outside, at first glance, which applies. Statements of research findings, as products of scholarship, therefore remain merely 'potential myths/potential truths', unless they are accounted for by elaborate descriptions of the procedures defining the data set, its collection and selection, the transformations it has undergone, the theories guiding its interpretation,

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Kimambo, eds., 1972, *The historical study of African religion*, London: Heinemann, pp. 50-69; Henige, D., 1982, *Oral historiography*, London/ New York/ Lagos: Longman; Ki-Zerbo, G., 1981, ed., *UNESCO General History of Africa, I: Methodology and prehistory*, Heinemann/ California University Press/ UNESCO; Schoffeleers, J.M., 1985, 'Oral history and the retrieval of the distant past: On the use of legendary chronicles as sources of historical information', in: van Binsbergen & Schoffeleers, *Theoretical explorations*, pp. 164-188; Vansina, J., 1986, 'Knowledge and perceptions of the African past', in: Jewsbiecki, B., & Newbury, D., 1986, eds., *African historiographies: What history for which Africa?*, Beverly Hills: Sage.

etc. The decision whether a statement is admissible as scientific, in other words has a low myth content and a high truth content, is neither individual nor idiosyncratic, but depends on the examination of the statement and the accompanying procedures by a collectivity of scholars, the forum. Such decisions are invariably meant to be provisional. For the growth of science consists in the continuous recycling of past truths and faulting them for being myths. *To the extent that disciplines are established and professionalised, they are routinised structures for the reduction of mythical elements in their members' scholarly statements.* So much for the outsider going it alone. To the extent to which disciplines undergo paradigmatic shifts (i.e. become aware of their own paradigms as have hitherto informed their analysis on the unconscious plane), earlier science and paradigms are revealed to be mythical, and new science is stipulated by new procedures.

This recycling of older truths in order to show them to be myths is of course what Martin Bernal himself has done when deconstructing the Eurocentrist myth underlying the classicist science of the last few centuries. However, when he is tempted to turn around and produce — as if that were his true calling, and the brilliant *Black Athena I* merely a stepping stone, *Prolegomena* once more — the 'correct' image of intercultural exchanges in the eastern Mediterranean in the third and second millennium BCE, his own Marxist-inspired 'sociology of knowledge' takes revenge. The fundamental and lasting insight that pure knowledge uncontaminated by class interests is illusory — in other words, that all knowledge is to a considerable extent, and inevitably, mythical — makes him reject all methodological rigour and all insistence on procedure as merely an illusory devise meant to ban the essentially mythical i.e. arbitrary nature of academic knowledge from consciousness.

There is enough here that I recognise from my own work to feed the hope that I may be forgiven for spilling the beans.<sup>120</sup> We have to admit that Bernal's stance as reconstructed here at least implies a certain humility, in implicitly (but never explicitly) admitting to the mythical nature of his or her knowledge just like anybody else's. Or, as Jan Vansina, today's

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<sup>120</sup>In the 1970s and 1980s much of my work explored the potential of neo-Marxism for anthropology, specifically in the field of religious and ethnic studies. Cf. my *Religious change in Zambia*: and *Tears of Rain*, as well as: van Binsbergen, W.M.J., 1984, 'Kann die Ethnologie zur Theorie des Klassenkampfes in der Peripherie werden?', *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Soziologie*, 9, 4: 138-48; van Binsbergen, W.M.J., & P.L. Geschiere, 1985, eds., *Old modes of production and capitalist encroachment*, London/ Boston: Kegan Paul International. I am not identifying Martin Bernal as a Marxist let alone denouncing him for being one; I simply detect somewhat loose but unmistakable, and valuable, Marxist strands and dilemmas in his position — like in my own.

leading historian of Africa, conceded in a critical discussion of Luc de Heusch's personal version of the confusion of myth and scholarship:

'All history as reconstruction of the past is of course mythical. Myths are held to be "true".'<sup>121</sup>

### 7.5. a way out?

Yet, while such an epistemology may be respectable, in keeping with modern times, and perhaps even the only epistemology free from untenable assumptions about our capability of rising above our own limitations, it poses immense difficulties. We have already seen how its mythical orientation tends to be implied, eclipsed from consciousness by the rather crude realism which Manning identified as the necessary epistemological abode of the *Black Athena* project. Bernal's very notion of 'competitive plausibility' implies that at the level of the researcher's consciousness, he insists that some representations of the past are truer and less mythical than others, and therefore to be preferred. However, I have no doubt that it is not the overt, realistic dimension alone, but its interplay with the implied mythical dimension, and hence the (partly subconscious, deeply emotive, libidinous) gratification produced by mythical fulfilment, which — for reasons Freud<sup>122</sup> has helped us to understand — constitutes the true drive behind Bernal's, my own and anybody else's quest for knowledge, academic or otherwise.

It is here that the problem lies. One can very well understand why the state, or an economic elite, is prepared to invest lavishly in scholarship precisely if this were a mere regurgitation of myth; and the current routinisation of scholarly production under state supervision and patronage, at a scale totally inconceivable only half a century ago, strongly suggests that the main purpose of our scholarship is in fact to produce state-supportive myth — supportive, not necessarily in contents, but at least because such scholarship keeps alive the illusions of freedom, choice, meaningfulness, rationality, planning, on which the relationship between the modern democratic state and its citizens is constructed to depend. But

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<sup>121</sup>Vansina, J., 1983, 'Is elegance proof? Structuralism and African history', *History in Africa*, 10: 307-348; cf. my discussion in: *Tears of Rain*, pp. 239f, and: de Heusch, L., 1982, *Rois nés d'un cœur de vache: Mythes et rites bantous*, Paris: Gallimard.

<sup>122</sup>Freud, S., *Jenseits des Lustprinzips*, in: *Gesammelte Werke*, XIII, 1, Frankfurt a/M.: Fischer, 1968-1977; Freud, S., *New Introductory lectures on psycho-analysis*, in: *The standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud*, XXII, London: Hogarth/ Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1953-1974. Cf. Brown, N.O., 1970, *Life against death: The psychoanalytical meaning of history*, London: Sphere Books, first published 1959, pp. 208f.

as scholars ourselves, the idea that myth might be all what our work as intellectual producers amounts to, is often unbearable. What sustains our intellectual efforts and enables us to keep up with the frustrations of an institutional career (or even, for an increasing number of us, the lack of such a career) is a belief in the liberating and validating powers of academic knowledge — through the production and enactment, not of arbitrary myth but of valid, reliable models of reality, of truth.

Nor is such a belief totally unfounded, since we know from practical experience that some varieties of human knowledge are not merely mythical, arbitrary and self-referential, but amount to eminently practical truths, allowing us to have an impact on reality through which we manifestly produce and reproduce ourselves and our life world. Whether we base such an insight on the Marxist thesis of the primacy of work, production, praxis, in shaping both the world, our society, and our categories of thought and logic; on the philosophy of pragmatism; on the widespread (though not universally) Christian view as to the redemptive nature of good works; on a Taoist or Zen Buddhist reliance on concreteness over theory; or on the practical wisdom of primary producers wherever in the world — an appeal to *common sense* (Bernal's main stock-in-trade as far as methodology is concerned) is not *ipso facto* to be dismissed. But for precisely the many reasons that make empiricist realism an unpopular epistemological option, such an appeal is simply not enough for the production of good science — of scientific truth, which is not only true (again, how would we know?), but which can also be seen and accepted to be true by the community of scholars — even if for what in a next generation will turn out to have been the wrong reasons.

Can we at all produce non-mythical knowledge in scholarship, and distinguish it from the spurious recirculation of myth? Or does the exclusively verbal and disembodied nature of academic production preclude such grounding? If there were an obvious answer to this central question the problem would not arise. The best we can do is to propose, critique and progressively agree on methodological procedures which have to be argued out in the collectivity of scholarship, thus deliberately designing a practice which — in emulation of the practices that support us materially — may keep myth at bay.

But this forces us to think deeply about what the aim of our production of knowledge is. If the fateful cycle of today's scientific truth shown to be tomorrow's myth cannot be broken, — if the moment of truth is so very short, then perhaps, after all, the only value of the ephemeral knowledge we produce is that, like myth, it inspires and empowers us for that short moment. Bernal's epistemology, precisely in its idealist contradictions, may be more realistic than we would be inclined to give him credit for.

All this leads on to a re-assessment of the *Black Athena* project.

Volume I was an eminently successful explosion of the Eurocentric myth of the autonomous origin of Greek civilisation — a liberating act of deconstruction of previous scholars' myths worthy of the greatest respect (and, incidentally, one in which specifically Bernal's skill as a trained historian employing an implicit but time-honoured methodology produced an argument largely<sup>123</sup> away from myth).

Volume II, lacking such methodology and venturing into a domain where the production, recirculation and reproduction of myth was only too tempting, has not yet produced the science it set out to produce. The great debate it has generated is essentially a struggle to formulate the conditions and the procedures under which Bernal's claims (or the alternative statements that can supersede them) can be allowed to be true; under which their myth content can be kept low. Even if meant to be destructive and dismissive, even the most critical reactions therefore are inherently constructive, and Bernal's responses (often more precise, clear, subtle and palatable than his original published statements), bring out once more the fact that scientific truth is the product of a social process.

What is needed is that his sheer unbearable, self-imposed burden is now shared with others, working under an epistemology more readily recognised as suitable to tell myth from truth, but within the spirit of his vision of interculturality and multicentredness as the central challenge of our age, and of his standards of interdisciplinary breadth and scholarly imagination.

For even after subtracting the rhetorical, heroic and mythical dimensions of *Black Athena*, the net result remains astoundingly impressive. Of course, one can hardly suppress a chuckle when Martin Bernal himself declares:

'It is now simply too late to crush the ideas I have been proposing. They have become an established academic discourse.'<sup>124</sup>

And even more telling, when he himself quotes<sup>125</sup> an anonymous reviewer as saying that

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<sup>123</sup> Though far from entirely, cf. the criticism by Blok (this volume); Palter, 'Eighteenth century'; Jenkyns, *o.c.*; Norton, *o.c.*

<sup>124</sup> *Black Athena II*, p. xxii.

<sup>125</sup> Bernal, 'Reponse to Josine Blok'.

Yet I tend to agree, provided one acknowledges that the wrong reasons at best lead to not-yet-truth; and provided that one defines 'being right' at a sufficiently abstract, high level of generality ('right in calling attention to the ideological, including Eurocentric, context of scholarly production'; 'right in insisting on an intricate, multicentred pattern of intercontinental interaction in contributing towards classical Greek civilisation') so as to accommodate the many corrections on major and minor points which the *Black Athena* debate over the past ten years has adduced, and which it would be absurd to ignore or deny, whatever the political agendas of these critics or their editors.

If Martin Bernal produces truth inextricably mixed with myth; if his epistemology (or perhaps, as I argued above, if the nature of historical knowledge production, to which we are all subjected) is conducive to this; if he has not adopted more widely acceptable methodologies for mythical and etymological analysis; if his reconstruction of the modern history of ideas may be too schematic and partly wrong; if he shows himself more adept at the tracing of the trajectories of isolated cultural and religious items than at the understanding of the complexity of localising cultural and religious transformations; if his lack of detailed knowledge of African cultures means that the *Black Athena* debate so far has said much less about Africa's place in global cultural history than should be said and could be said; if there are a hundred other things more or less wrong with *Black Athena*, — then *these are merely so many items for a research agenda that ought to keep as many of us as possible occupied well into the twenty-first century CE*.

We owe Martin Bernal a great deal. First on the level of concrete, specific contributions to the study of the ancient eastern Mediterranean. On this point the testimony especially of what was meant as a dismissive critique, *Black Athena revisited*, is eloquent. If we made a list of all the positive points of specific scholarship which the twenty contributors — deliberately selected by the editors of that collection for their negative assessment — concede to Martin Bernal, the sum total would be enough to mark any specialist career in this field as eminently prominent and creative — as if that fat critical tome were in essence a *Festschrift* written for Bernal's 59th birthday. But his principal significance lies elsewhere. He has cleared the path by exposing the role of classics in constructing the myth of Eurocentrism and white superiority. He has thus reminded us that the global processes of intercultural exchange today and tomorrow require responsible and politically sophisticated disciplinary and epistemological

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<sup>126</sup> *Antiquity*, 12/1991: 981.

reflection — an insight unaffected by his own ambiguous relation to myth. He has set a standard, not so much of methodological rigour and theoretical consistency but at least of visionary interdisciplinary scope and depth, of language skill and bibliographical exhaustiveness, of inspired imagination in the formulation of exciting, testable hypotheses, and perhaps most important, of cosmopolitan, global anti-Eurocentrism.

In mid-life and without the required specialist academic training in classical and Ancient Near Eastern languages, archaeology, and ancient history, Martin Bernal has set himself a truly Herculean task. A fundamental dilemma has attended the *Black Athena* project from the beginning: its scope is far too comprehensive for one person, its political, ideological and moral implications are far too complex than that one person could possibly be trusted to thresh them all out. *Whatever error has crept in is more than compensated by his scope of vision, which made him realise that, inside as well as outside scholarship, creating a viable and acceptable alternative to Eurocentrism is the most important intellectual challenge of our time.*

One obvious strategy for reducing the state of alarm which *Black Athena* has brought about among specialists on Ancient Greece and the Ancient Near East, has been to try and refute the details of its scholarship, and to subsequently, smugly, withdraw from the debate. The other way out, and one which I — an outsider myself to the study of at least the ancient, eastern Mediterranean, but an insider in the identity issues raised by *Black Athena* — passionately advocate, is to continue in the spirit of Martin Bernal's project, with vastly increased personal, disciplinary, financial and temporal resources, and see where this will lead us. Vocal participation of scholars from Egypt, from Africa in general, from the Near East, and the critical involvement of African American researchers be they Afrocentrists or not, must counteract such Eurocentrism as may yet sneak in.

The research programme initiated by *Black Athena* continues to be viable, exciting, and of global significance, but it has far outgrown the capabilities of a single person, even if that person is Martin Bernal. The greatest reward that could be bestowed upon him is that others, with specialist knowledge of the many relevant specific domains of scholarship involved, and representing a more diverse range of seasoned epistemological and political options, join forces with him. With all its critical overtones, to work towards such a constructive outcome has been the only aim of this collection.