

van Binsbergen, Wim M.J., 2020, 'The Cosmic Egg in global cultural history: A revised distributional exercise in comparative mythology', at: http://www.quest-journal.net/shikanda/topicalities/Cosmic_Egg_revised.pdf

1. *The Cosmic Egg: Introduction*

The mytheme of the Cosmic Egg is a particular version of mythical cosmogony: it claims that initially, all of reality was packed into one concentrated restricted location (egg, ovoid, etc.), from which subsequently the world came into being. It presents a vision of cosmogony, in which the entire future world *in statu nascendi* is considered to be wrapped up in one self-contained unit, which unfolds at the moment of cosmogony. In fact, the hypothesis of the Big Bang (Berger 1984; Hawking 1988), today the dominant mainstream paradigm in natural-science cosmology, may be considered the most recent version of the mytheme under study. Its wide appeal and impact upon the collective imagination may have mythical proportions; still, it is not unchallenged, the main modern natural-science alternative being the *Steady-State Theory* of Fred Hoyle c.s. (Hoyle 1948), according to which new matter constantly comes into being at all times and places.

Mythical birds abound in the mythology of Anatomically Modern Humans, and some of these mythemes may be reconstructed to go back all the way to Pandora's Box, *i.e.* the shared cultural including mythological heritage which Anatomically Modern Humans developed and circulated inside Africa ever since their emergence there c. 200 ka BP, and which subsequently was transmitted to the other continents (Asia, in the first instance) and there was further transformed and innovated. Birds lay eggs, and with the prominence of mythical birds in early mythology it is conceivable that the mytheme of the Cosmic Egg also emerged early, and might have been counted as belonging to Pandora's Box. However, in the course of decades I have developed a rule of thumb for assigning a mytheme to Pandora's Box: it may be considered to belong there if it is attested in Africa, the Andaman Islands, New Guinea, and Australia – for in an early phase of the Out-of-Africa Exodus, 80-60 ka BP, this is the route Anatomically Modern Humans are likely to have taken. Assessed by this rule of thumb, the mytheme of the Cosmic Egg does not belong in Pandora's Box and

¹ This argument was initially intended as a chapter in my book *Sunda Pre- and Proto-historical Continuity between Asia and Africa* (2020) but could not be accommodated there for reasons of space. The overall background of that book's argument is taken for granted in the present argument, and cannot be set out in detail here. The reader desiring clarification on specific theoretical and methodological points must be referred to the book.

must have had a rather later origin, for although it occurs widely in Africa, it is – to the best of my knowledge – not attested in the other three locations. It is however sporadically reported in India and even more sporadically in Indonesia (Chatterjee 2011;), of which New Guinea has been incorporated since the 1960s CE.

In the version of my analysis of the Cosmic Egg which has circulated on the Internet for a decade (van Binsbergen 2011f), I consider the possibility of a Sunda epicentre and transmission. Besides a number of attestations in Oceania, and in East and South Asia, the lack of attestations of this mytheme in the Americas suggests that this mytheme was not part of the common cultural heritage of the speakers of the Peripheral Branch of desintegrating *Borean:² the three linguistic macrophyla of Austric, Amerind, and the African language groups (Nigercongo, Nilosaharan and Khoisan) that continued, for millennia, for constitute a coherent, lexically identifiable cluster after *Borean had desintegrated c. 25 ka BP. This suggests that either of the following two possibilities:

1. the mytheme of the Cosmic Egg emerged in Asia (which I also consider – counter-paradigmatically – the cradle of African languages) ca. 20 ka BP, before the hiving off of Amerind languages, but although initially taken to the New World was eclipsed or replaced there under the influence of other, more dominant mythemes.
2. the mytheme was never characteristic of the entire Peripheral Branch of desintegrating *Borean, and was not already taken to Africa by demic transmission in the course of the initial phase of the Back-into-Africa migration,³ but was developed inside only one of these resulting macrophyla, notably Austric, and considerably later transmitted to Africa on the wings of Sunda expansion – even though formally we may consider the Sunda expansion another, relatively late, phase in the Back-into-Africa migration.

The distributional data favour interpretation (2). The mytheme of the Cosmic Egg is well attested in Africa, mainly in the coastal areas – which is compatible with a Sunda link. The series of attestations from South Asia, the Iranian Plateau, Ancient Mesopotamia and Ancient Egypt (and the Ancient Aegean, which was culturally dependent upon both Egypt and Mesopotamia) are again compatible with the idea of Sunda transmission – although there is also room for West Asia as an epicentre in its own right. Sufficient reason to include the Cosmic Egg as another mytheme inviting interpretation in terms of East-West parallels with a possible Sunda background

2. Referenced distribution data

The following Table 1 presents some of the more salient attestations of our mytheme world-wide:

² *Borean is the name which modern long-range historical linguists such as Starostin and Fleming gave to a hypothetical language construct, supposed to have been spoken in Central to East Asia in the Upper Palaeolithic (ca. 25 ka BP), and available for reconstruction since traces of its lexicon are argued to have retained among the systematically, intersubjectively reconstructed protoforms of several linguistic macrophyla (largest arguable linguistic groups. *e.g.* Eurasiatic, Sinocaucasian, Khoisan) spoken today. Over 1150 *Borean roots have now been identified. They may be gleaned from Starostin & Starostin 1998-2008, and have been listed in van Binsbergen 2018: Appendix I, pp. 515f.

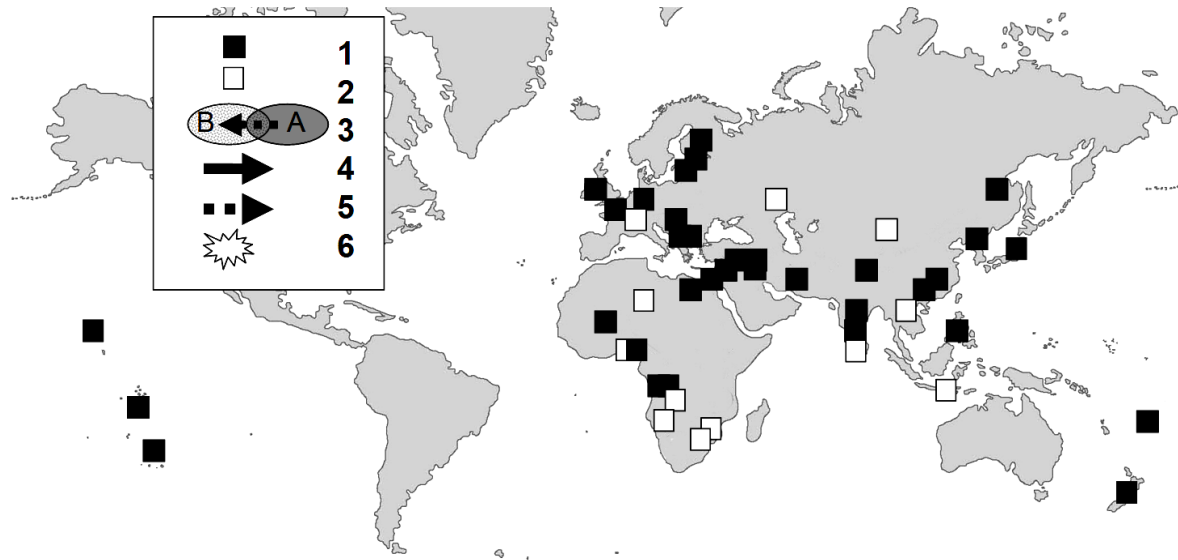
³ Cf. Hammer *et al.* 1998; Cruciani *et al.* 2002; Coia *et al.* 2005; Underhill 2004.

Location and period	Reference	Remarks
[Dahomey (Benin)]	Van der Sluijs 2004;	
[NW Europe , early modern]	Ashliman 1998-2005	Grimm / Aarne type 302, The Giant Whose Heart Was in an Egg,
[Xhosa (Rep. South Africa)]	Van der Sluijs 2004;	
[Yaka , Congo]	Devisch 1988	
[Zulu (Rep. South Africa)]	Van der Sluijs 2004	
[Angola, Sub-Saharan Africa, modern]	Rodrigues de Areia 1985	Egg in divinatory set represented
[Bali, modern]	Brinkgreve 1997	Implied in sacrifice
Buddhism	Newall 1967	
China, Ancient	Christie 1968, ; Cottrell 1989 : 98 ; Willis 1994 : 90 ; Girardot 1976, 1977, 1978; Yu 1981; Liu 1991; Neville 1985 ; Johnson 1981,	Phan-ku 盤古 [cf. Tiamat, Leviathan] out of whose dead and fragmented body the world was formed , still venerated among minorities Miao, Yao and Li; however, a rotting body is not exactly the same as an egg
Dogon, Mali	Van der Sluijs 2004; Fernandez 1967; Griaule & Dieterlen 1965; van Beek 1992; Zuesse 1975; Horton 1967;	
Druids, Ancient	Moorehead 1885	
Egypt, Ancient	Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1994; Cottrell 1989: 168; Gardiner 1994; Devitt 2005,	Great Cackler; Thoth hatching; 467: 'In Dyn XIX or before F51 [but 180 degrees rotated] changes into the egg H8 and subsequently Xo1+H8 becomes a generic det. for goddesses.'; egg especially Hermopolis [= Thoth , Ogdoad, not Nine] ;
Eurasia, Upper Palaeolithic	Rappenglueck 1999; Gimbutas 1982, 1991; Eliade 1976	shamanistische connotaties van Zwaan, Ei, Dioscuren, Leda, Zeus
Fang (Gabon)	Van der Sluijs 2004;	
Finland, Ancient	Cottrell 1989: 217; Puhvel 1971	217: egg: also Finnish mythology: Luonnotar, daughter of the creation god, mated with bird, produced egg; from this egg: heaven, earth, sun, moonb
Greece, Ancient	Chevalier & Gheerbrant 1994; Cottrell 1989: 168; Fontenrose 1980; Minar 1963; Kerényi; Pollard 1948; Cornford 1934	Dioscuri, Helena, Hera [fertilised egg from Kronos] ; and from pre-Socratic philosophers onwards
[Hawaii]		The god Paka'a, inventor of the sail? Cf. Cretan Minos with Daedalus; however, the egg connection is merely implied here
India, Ancient	Cottrell 1989: 186 ; Penner 1966; Newall 1967	186: Vinata, mother of Aruna ('Dawn') lays two eggs, Aruna comes from the broken egg, hence is only half (cf. the widespread Luwe mytheme)
Iran, Ancient	Russell 1993; Zaehner 1940	Mithras, Zervan
[Japan, modern]		This is an uncertain attestation, however, often implied or mentioned in

		passing in literature on East Asia and Buddhism; also Bon continuity
Korea	Song 1974,	
Lithuania	Straiþys & Klimka 1971	
Mandaeans, Ancient (Southern Iraq)	Kraeling 1933	
Nanai people, Amur, Eastern Siberia	Sem n.d.	
[New Zealand]		Uncertain attestation
NW Europe, ME and Early modern	Bacon 1969; Jung 1987: 214, 291 n 25; Zetterberg 1979,	Philosopher's egg, alchemy
Pangwe (Gabon),	Van der Sluijs 2004;	
Philippines, modern	Demetrio 1968, 1969	
Post-Neolithic great civilisations of the Mediterranean, South and East Asia, and Africa	Loeb 1956, Baumann 1955; von Sicard 1956	
[Sahara, Neolithic fertile]	Lhote 1959: Fig. 47	Strong suggestion of Primordial Egg depicted
Sri Lanka, modern	Feddema 1995,	Egg in sacrifice
Syro-Palestine, Ancient	Cottrell 1989: 223, 143; West 1994; Magness 2001; Schmidt 1921,	Mot (Canaan) lord of death, born from primal egg from Air and Chaos; Baal is invited by Mot, dies in the underworld; Anat brings him back, killing Mot; ogre motif; [perhaps Og, riding the Ark, is a variant of the cosmic egg] ; Enoch text as mediated through Ancient Slavic
Tahiti, Oceania	Cottrell 1989: 164	Taároa
[Thailand]	Heinze 1977	Implied in sacrifice
Tibet, Ancient	Richardson 1968, Snellgrove 1967	
Yoruba (Nigeria, Benin)	Lowie 1937	

also cf. Witzel 2006

Table 1. Attestations of the myth of the Cosmic Egg world-wide



LEGEND (also applies to the maps below)

- 1 mytheme of cosmic egg attested (or merely implied, or uncertain: 2)
- 3 proposed region of origin (= 6), subsequent diffusion into the Eurasian Neolithic 'proto-Pelasgian realm' (A); the latter's subsequent transformation constitutes the Bronze Age 'Pelasgian realm' (B)
- 4 proposed spread from Late Bronze Age onward; 5 broken line = putative

Fig. .1. Global distribution map of the mytheme of the Cosmic Egg

3. Discussion of the global distribution of the mytheme of the Cosmic Egg

The distribution shown here has much in common with that of the spiked wheel trap, which I have elsewhere (van Binsbergen 2010) shown to be an 'index fossil' of transcontinental continuities within the 'Pelasgian realm':⁴

- Considerable incidence in sub-Saharan Africa
- In evidence in Egypt and Graeco-Roman Antiquity
- Sporadic in Asia
- Absent from the New World, Australia and New Guinea

The distribution of the Cosmic-Egg motif, however, differs from that of the spiked wheel trap in the following respects:

- The Cosmic Egg has attestations in Oceania
- Half of the African attestations of the Cosmic Egg are only uncertain, partial or implied
- Attestations of the Cosmic Egg in Uralic and in Baltic < Indo-European speaking Scandinavia (Finland, Lithuania), where there are no attestations of the spiked wheel trap
- Asian attestations of the Cosmic Egg are not in the far interior but rather in coastal regions; this may be due to chance but might also be due to overseas diffusion e.g. along Sunda lines
- Asian attestations are to some extent compatible with a distribution on the wings of the transmission and use of chariot technology, from 2000 BCE onward, although a coastal maritime spread also seems to have contributed

The restricted distribution is indicative of this motif being relatively young, Neolithic or later (also the central Pacific was only populated a few ka BP, from East Asia –which in this case is the most likely path – or South East Asia)

⁴ Cf. van Binsbergen, 2010a; For my 'Pelasgian Hypothesis', further see van Binsbergen 2011, in press (a); van Binsbergen & Woudhuizen 2011.

The African attestations are, in my opinion, not indicative of an African origin but, like the spiked wheel trap, *mankala*, the unilateral mythical figure, and the linguistic macrophylum of Niger-Congo (probably also that of Nilo-Saharan), are indicative of a rapid spread of a recently introduced feature over the culturally receptive African continent,⁵ in the context of the Back-into-Africa migration from Central to West Asia

The attestations in Uralic-speaking Northern Europe are in line with the considerable likelihood that *the proposed region of origin as reconstructed according to the Sunda Model (see below, Figs 3 and 4) was situated near the region where the Uralic linguistic family emerged and was spoken in its earliest handful of millennia* (Fortescue 1998; mapped in Fig. 4.2 of van Binsbergen 2020); the Uralic traits, though fragmented (e.g. the royal diadem, the skull complex, shamanism, the veneration of white aquatic birds as epiphanies of the Creator Goddess associated with the Primal Waters), can be argued to have percolated throughout the proposed region of origin of the Cosmic Egg motif, and from there to have sporadically reached the outlying parts of the distribution area shown above

However, if we wish to insist (which seems ill-advised) on an exclusively Pelasgian reading of the distribution pattern, the extensions of the distribution into the Altaic language realm (the Nanai of extreme eastern Siberia; Japan) might be in line with an eastbound diffusion from a Central to West Asian region – for, ever since the invention of horse riding, and especially since the invention of the spoked-wheel chariot (Kazakhstan, 2 ka BP) the Steppe area has been a fairly continuous culture region and linguistic region, with relatively easy and rapid communication east-west and *vice versa*. Needless to say that the same trans-Steppe line of transmission could have brought our mytheme from East Asia to West Asia, as a terrestrial rather than nautical Sunda connection.

The 盘古 P'an-Ku myth (which the prominent comparative linguist and comparative mythologist Václav Blažek 2010 considers to be of Indo-European origin) is alleged to be conceived by Taoist Chinese monks around the beginning of the Common Era, and, being relatively recent, can have accommodated influences from the above diffusion streams. If this were the case, there would be no reason to assume that the P'an-Ku myth belonged to the original heritage of Sinotibetan speakers in East Asia. However, the P'an-Ku myth is to this day cherished by the Miao, Li and Yao minorities of South China – which might be indicative of a Sunda connection, or a Sunda epicentric origin. These minorities are also associated with Nu Wa 女媧 as a mythological Flood heroine.

Mithraic and Orphic cults in Antiquity, and their Iranian predecessors and sources, can be considered to have challenged the Cosmic-Egg motif that had taken shape probably under Sunda

⁵ Why do I speak of 'culturally receptive'? Is it a congenital feature of Africans to be culturally receptive, in other words, to be on the passive side of global cultural initiative?! Far from it, as the case of Ancient Egypt (one of the world's most powerful, most impressive, and longest-lasting civilisations) may sufficiently demonstrate. The point lies in the prevalence of specific modes of production, and their succession. As the splendid civilisations of the Neolithic, still fertile and well-watered Sahara indicate (e.g. Lhote 1959), and as is commonly acknowledged (e.g. Ehret 1993; Krzyzaniak & Kobusiewicz 1984), Africa did take active part in the Neolithic revolution towards food production through agriculture and animal husbandry; some domesticated animals (e.g. *zebu* cattle) and some food crops (e.g. *sesame*) have been agreed to derive from Africa. However, this does not take away the fact that until well into the 1st mill. BCE most African societies were engaged in hunting and gathering as their principal mode of production, in the absence of extensive permanent settlement, of highly developed class distinctions, of statehood, and of elaborate traditions of the visual and performative arts that thrive under the complexification of society. The logocentric package of writing, the state, organised religion, and proto-science was the mainstay of Ancient Egypt and of the Ancient societies of the Ancient Near East, South Asia, East Asia and Meso America, but (largely because of the difficulty of realising surplus production on Africa's relatively depleted, old soils) it was slow to penetrate to the other parts of Africa. When it did so, it found socio-cultural niches not yet saturated with resistance-prone local equivalents, and could fill them. Hence my use of the term 'culturally receptive'.

impact), presumably in Neolithic times, in West to Central Asia, and that also in more diffuse form (by demic diffusion) was spreading west (into West Asia, Egypt, and both sides of the Mediterranean) as part of the extension of the ‘proto-Pelasgian’ realm.

After these detached observation, let us proceed to try and interpret the global distribution of the Cosmic Egg mytheme more systematically.

4. From distribution map to tentative historical reconstruction: Pelasgian and Sunda Model contrasted

The Sea Peoples constitute an enigmatic episode in the history of the Eastern and Central Mediterranean towards the Late Bronze Age (c. 1300 BCE); they destroyed the Hittite Empire and dealt a vicious blow to Egypt, yet – hailing from all over the Eastern and Central Mediterranean and with considerable differences in physical appearance, attire, weaponry – it is not immediately clear what was the basis on which they could unite and mobilise effectively into a formidable military force. Trying to find a cultural context in which the few puzzling detached fragments of Sea Peoples culture, social organisation, and religion could find a meaningful place I proposed them to belong to what I called the Pelasgian Complex, a loose conglomeration of traits supposed to have emerged in West Asia during the Neolithic, and subsequently transformed and transmitted to the Mediterranean, from where it diffused on all directions of the compass by the Late Bronze Age (van Binsbergen & Woudhuizen 2011; van Binsbergen 2011b, 2012, 2020, and in press (a)). Understandably, my first approach has been to interpret the mytheme of the Cosmic Egg as a Pelasgian trait (Fig. 2).

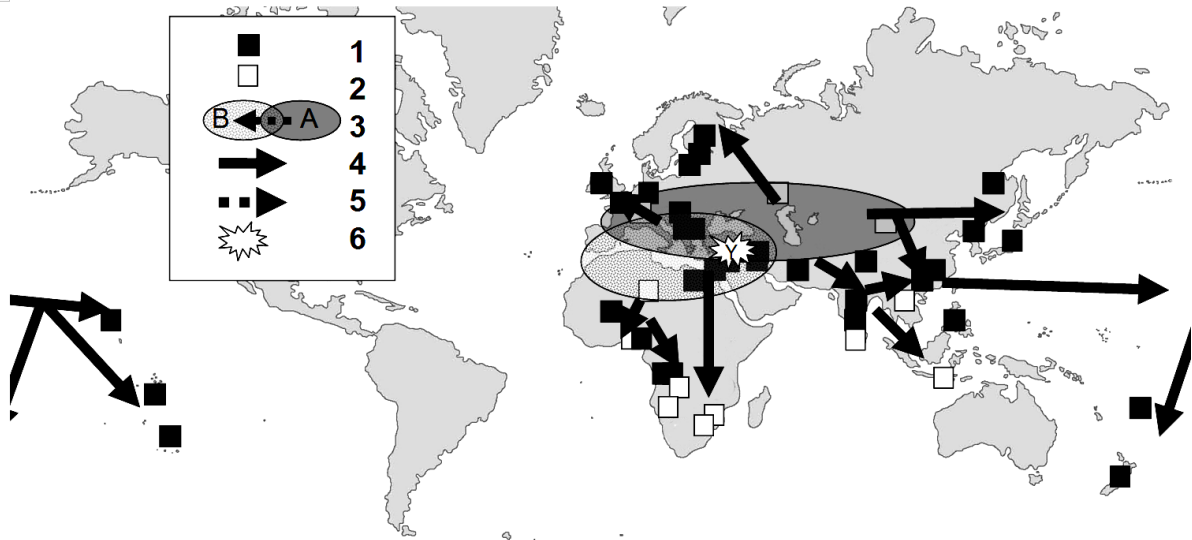


Fig. 2. Tentative historical reconstruction of the mytheme of the Cosmic Egg: (v) Pelasgian Model

While the Pelasgian interpretation certainly has its merits, the Sunda model leads to a totally different historical reconstruction, with an epicentre in continental South East Asia in the Early to Middle Holocene, and subsequent transmission to West Asia, Africa (especially the coastal regions), East Asia and Oceania, either overland, or by sea (Fig. 3). Most attestations of our mytheme, including the African ones, can be fairly well accounted for by this Sunda model. However, we are hard pressed to admit noticeable Sunda impact upon

the North Sea, Scandinavia and Baltic regions of Europe – an idea that explicitly featured in Oppenheimer’s original Sunda argument (1998) with semi-circular axe blades invoked as – rather implausible – supportive evidence, but that must remain highly speculative.

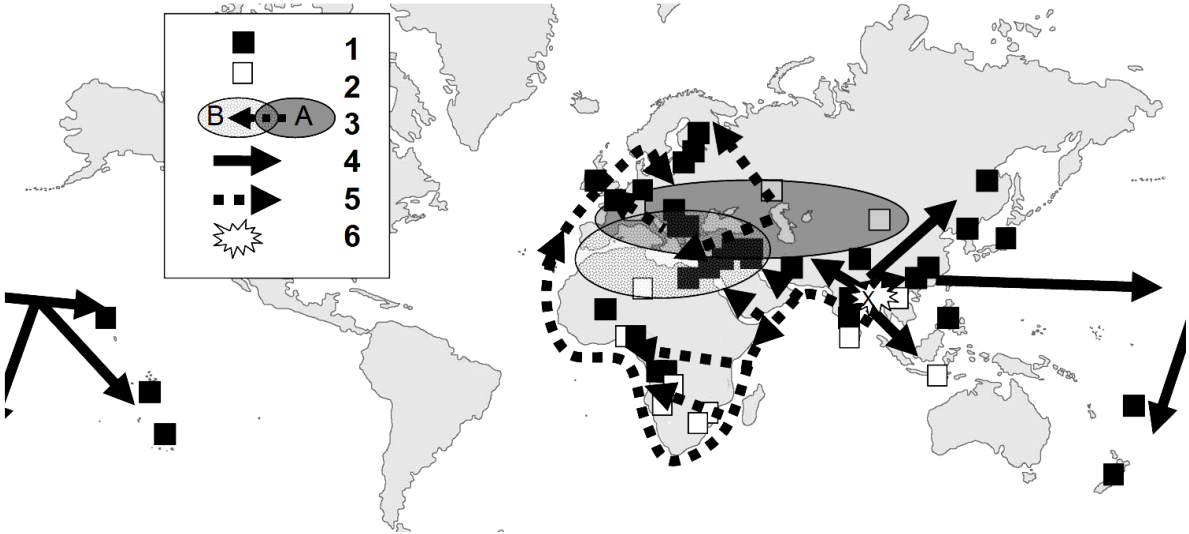


Fig. 3. Tentative historical reconstruction of the mytheme of the Cosmic Egg: (X) Sunda Model

In the last analysis, therefore, it turns out that a combination of the Pelasgian and the Sunda model gives the best results for an historical reconstruction: after an origin in Sunda (X) the mytheme of the Cosmic Egg is supposed to have landed in West Asia, and from both the original and the secondary epicentre it is supposed to have further diffused over Asia, Europe, Africa and Oceania (Fig. 4).

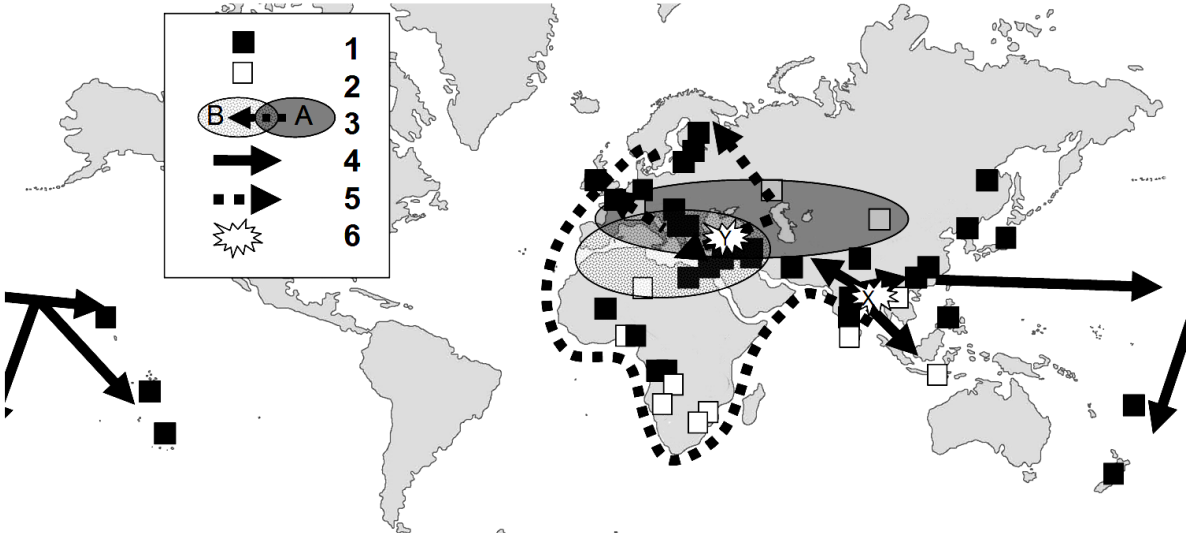


Fig. 4. Tentative historical reconstruction of the mytheme of the Cosmic Egg: (X) Sunda Model as primary and subsequently (Y) Pelasgian model as secondary, with combined, intertwined diffusion effects

4. *The Cosmic Egg mytheme: Conclusion*

Despite the considerable merits of the Pelasgian Model as set out elsewhere, in the case of the mytheme of the Cosmic Egg I suggest that a combination of the Pelasgian model (as secondary) and a Sunda model (as primary) is the best fitting interpretation of the distributional evidence.

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