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## ETHNOGRAPHIC AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL CORRELATES FOR AN MAINLAND SOUTHEAST ASIA LINGUISTIC AREA<sup>1</sup>

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### 1. Introduction

#### 1.1 *The MSEA Convergence Zone*

There has been considerable investment in the concept of Mainland Southeast Asia (MSEA) as a linguistic area (Enfield 2003, 2005; Enfield and Comrie 2014). Despite great phyletic diversity, its languages show a remarkable homogeneity in terms of structure. Such patterns are often

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<sup>1</sup> This chapter was written following a meeting in Leipzig, MPI, in December 2012 on the languages of Mainland Southeast Asia. It was not intended for the proceedings, as another paper (Blench 2014) has been published, which discusses the genesis of areal linguistic features in some detail. Although I was not at the conference in Singapore where the other chapters in this volume were presented, the topic seemed appropriate for the present volume.

described as *Sprachbunds*, geographical areas characterized by linguistic convergence (Trubetzkoy 1928; Becker 1948). *Sprachbunds* have been identified in many regions of the world, with the Balkan *Sprachbund* the most well-known. Regions of convergence are typically cited in Africa, notably Ethiopia (Ferguson 1976; see also papers in Heine and Nurse 2008) in India, and the Caucasus. However, those characteristics of language which converge are by no means the same in different regions. In some cases, a high incidence of lexical borrowing can coexist with great variations in grammar and morphology, as in Ethiopia. Papua, especially the Sepik, and Arnhem Land languages show strong typological similarities in grammar and morphology in conjunction with high lexical and thus phyletic diversity. A *Sprachbund* may thus be a less useful term than “convergence zone” which leaves open the parameters of similarity.

MSEA is undoubtedly a convergence zone, characterized by five major language phyla: Austroasiatic, Austronesian, Daic, Sino-Tibetan, and Hmong-Mien. Apart from the Andamanese peoples there are no language isolates. Phonology, tones, morphology (or more precisely the lack of it), word and syntactic structures all show remarkable similarities despite the evident lexical diversity (Blench 2014, in press *a*). No clear consensus in the linguistic literature has emerged to explain this pattern, but we have good evidence for the rapidity with which this type of analogical restructuring occurs. Utsat, the Austronesian language spoken in Hainan island, is a good example of this (Thurgood and Li 2012). Utsat is Chamic, and would have resembled Malay when its ancestral speakers settled on the mainland of modern-day Vietnam some 2,000 years ago. Its syntax and phonology were restructured so that it more closely resembled the neighbouring Austroasiatic languages. However, in 969 AD, part of its speakers fled to Hainan island in Southeast China and there came into contact with both Hlaic and Sinitic languages. Utsat then converged with these languages, losing all its morphology and adopting a complex tonal system.

This is useful evidence that convergence occurs, and because there is historical documentation, we have some estimates of timescales. What is much less clear is why it occurs, and the social and material correlates of this process. There are many examples of the geographical proximity of

languages with quite different structural features and lexicons, particularly in West Africa and the Amazon. If there is an MSEA linguistic area, then it is reasonable to assume we can also characterize a culture area, a bounded region where social and material culture share commonalities. Culture areas may be seen as an unwelcome revival of a Northern European ethnographic tradition long discarded. But not all discarded traditions are wrong; it is simply that their face does not fit at certain times in history. It is certainly the case that the period interpretations of *Kulturkreislehre* have little to contribute to today in the world of sophisticated linguistics, direct dating in archaeology and the analysis of synchronic and historical DNA. But the underlying assumption, that where languages converge and overlap their speakers must interact in ways that reflect similar patterns in cultural life, remains valid. The purpose of this chapter is not to add to the linguistic debate, but rather to put forward social and material correlates of the convergence observed in MSEA. In other words, if languages agree with one another so evidently, then presumably this indicates lengthy and elaborate interchange between populations and thus we should be able to find other types of commonalities. Such a broad question cannot be resolved in a short space, but a tentative model is advanced. This chapter makes some proposals for such common features in the field of material culture and ideas, in particular, music, house-forms, weapons and clothing. A short section discusses whether there is any credible archaeological correlate for the MSEA area while the final part considers the issue of boundaries. To what extent can these be geographically defined, and where do they have extensions? China and the Austronesian world represent the most obvious cases of extensions, since they have carried certain features of the MSEA area to remote locations as a consequence of later expansion.

### **1.2 Establishing the Boundaries**

If there is such a proposed linguistic area how do we identify its boundaries? Clearly, the Sinitic languages share many of the linguistic features of the MSEA region, including static tones, short words and a lack of morphology. Much of Sino-Tibetan in Eastern Nepal and Bhutan also has these features, but both Kuki-Chin and Kiranti are important

exceptions. Island Southeast Asia (ISEA) is dominated by Austronesian languages which are generally non-tonal, with complex morphology, although they share other linguistic traits with MSEA languages. Despite these fuzzy boundaries, the sense that languages spoken in MSEA exhibit a set of common features is palpable. To conceptualize this, we can assign a set of features to an array of MSEA languages; one or more of these may be picked up by an expansionist culture and carried far outside its normal region. For example, Austronesian shares some aspects of MSEA linguistic structure (hence the persistent notion of Austric, said to unite it with Austroasiatic; Reid 2005). Indeed, the long history of genetic hypotheses linking the various phyla of Southeast Asia, and the largely barren debate over the classification of Vietnamese, are inverted reflections of this convergence. Sinitic has carried MSEA features north to the Yangtze, but other languages which have migrated out of the MSEA area have been restructured according to the dominant language matrix. The Munda languages are the most prominent example of this, as their word order and much else approximates to Indic rather than Austroasiatic. Nicobarese, a branch of the archetypical MSEA phylum, i.e. Austroasiatic, moved to ISEA and developed complex morphology. This may have been through metatypy with Austronesian, i.e. persistent bilingualism with an Austronesian language but with limited lexical borrowing, resulting in analogical morphology without segmental cognates. At the same time, language groups that enter an area become restructured to fit the regional pattern. There is no scholarly consensus on the reasons for what appears to be a unique situation, globally.

The one exception to this is Andamanese, for which we finally have reasonable data (Abbi 2006, 2009, 2012, 2013). The Andamanese languages represent at least three distinct phyla. They appear to have been isolated from MSEA culture for a very long time, and their languages now show no trace of convergence with the features of the phyla on the mainland. They are characterized by complex verb morphology (for Great Andamanese), lack of tones and semantic classification of nouns. This argues strongly for an extended period when interaction with Southeast Asian cultures was absent, as does their phenotypical appearance.

Typological convergence has both linguistic and cultural facets. The linguistic element is usually explained by persistent long-term bilingualism without language loss or societal assimilation. In other words, speakers maintain their own language but restructure it to the typological norms of a dominant speech. The broader question then becomes the characterization of the social mechanisms underlying this. What common behaviours underlie both linguistic and cultural similarities? Why is the area relatively neatly bounded when set against comparable situations in Africa or Central America? This requires us to look at edge effects as well as the centre. Something clearly prevents MSEA features diffusing across certain boundaries. The Munda languages, which are underlyingly MSEA insofar as they belong to the Austroasiatic phylum, have ended up resembling the neighbouring Indo-Aryan languages rather than carrying MSEA features into the Indian Subcontinent. Nicobaric has equally lost many MSEA features, for reasons which are less clear. Blench (2013*b*) argues that the Daic languages were originally Austronesian, but their migration into the MSEA region caused them to be restructured as highly tonal, with short words and lacking morphology. The cultural features of Formosan Austronesian languages were also carried along and again appropriately transformed.

Another aspect of this is the prevalence of regional lexemes, words which cross phylum boundaries and whose original affiliation is in doubt. These are not the same as *wanderwords* (< German *Wanderworte*), perplexing lexemes that seem to spread across large regions with marked geographic limitations. Typical MSEA examples are “hawk” (#*g.laŋ*), “tiger” (#*k.la*), “elephant” (#*ta:ŋ*), “river” (*k.loŋ*) and “crossbow” (#*h.naa*). Exactly why animal names are so widespread is unclear; tiger and elephant may well be salient species, but the other items do not seem to have any greater cultural relevance than many others. But for such forms to be so persistent across languages, they must have had a high cultural salience, and this apparently maps against other regional linguistic features.

An influential conceptual framework has been the “Indosphere” and “Sinosphere” proposed by James Matisoff (1991). Matisoff considered that within the Sinosphere languages and cultures showed common

features which resembled those of Chinese culture, and similarly with the Indosphere. Certainly within Sino-Tibetan, the gradual shift towards (or away from) morphological simplicity can be characterized this way. But the term “Sinosphere” suggests a region of Sinitic influence. This is almost the reverse of the proposition advanced here, which is that the early forms of Sinitic were restructured through contact with resident MSEA languages, in other words, influence went in exactly the opposite direction. No obvious term presents itself to describe this hypothesis.

If we are to go beyond linguistics, we will need conspectuses of descriptive ethnography. Historically, although there are some rich monographs, notably Milne (1924) or Izikowitz (1951), the coverage they represent is limited. The first overview of Southeast Asian island groups appears to be Lebar (1972), while mainland groups are covered in the surveys of Schlesinger (1997, 1998, 2003*a*, 2003*b*, 2003*c*, 2003*d*, 2011*a*, 2011*b*, 2011*c*) and, for Laos, Chazée (1999). But this is not a live tradition. We are better at republishing old ethnography than doing new research. Ethnographers are occupied with the quirks of social media and mobile phones rather than the documentation of rural communities. The proposals on which this chapter is based are largely from my own research, bringing together visits to both rural areas and museums throughout Southeast Asia with a trawl of the secondary literature. It should therefore be strongly emphasized that the distribution maps presented here in particular are still highly provisional.

## 2. Music

### 2.1 General

In tracking cultural areas, music is a productive and also relatively unusual feature because it is essentially arbitrary. No society needs music to survive, but it is nonetheless a universal feature of social groups and societies and in some it is very elaborated. Societies can make individual choices, but apparently make similar ones over large areas of the world. Humans like music, but they are apparently not very inventive, since whole regions, such as Australia, Papua and the New

World, are missing most classes of instrument types.<sup>2</sup> As it happens, MSEA is probably the region of the world with the most distinct types of instruments, organologically speaking. This is remarkable, as its music is very largely of a single structural type, i.e. heterophony. This section tracks both musical structure and also the distribution of some specific instrument types. The musical form that most people associate with Southeast Asia, large orchestras dominated by tuned percussion, is almost certainly a late introduction, and thus it cannot be taken to characterize the region.

## 2.2 Heterophony

Heterophony is a musical texture characterized by the simultaneous variation of a single melodic line. Such a texture is a complex monophony in which there is only one basic melody, realized simultaneously in multiple voices. Each one plays the melody, in either a different rhythm or tempo, or with embellishments and elaborations. Morton (1976, p. 34) proposed the term “polyphonic stratification”, which, he said “seems a more precise description, since each of the ‘layers’ is not just a close approximation of the main melody, but also has distinct characteristics and a style of its own”. This is most clearly heard in the large percussion orchestras such as the Indonesian gamelan, the Thai *pi phat* ensemble, the Cambodian *pin peat* and the Burmese *hsing waing*. The principle was unknown in Western music, and when Debussy heard the first gamelan to visit Paris in 1889, he adopted aspects of heterophony into his compositions.

The traditions which oppose heterophony are monody and polyphony. Monody is characteristic of a vast area stretching between the Maghreb and Northeast India, where the performers each follow a single melodic line, often accompanied by drones or percussion. In the art music of the region, melodies can be extremely elaborated, with rhythms ultra-complex. Polyphony is the simultaneous sounding of

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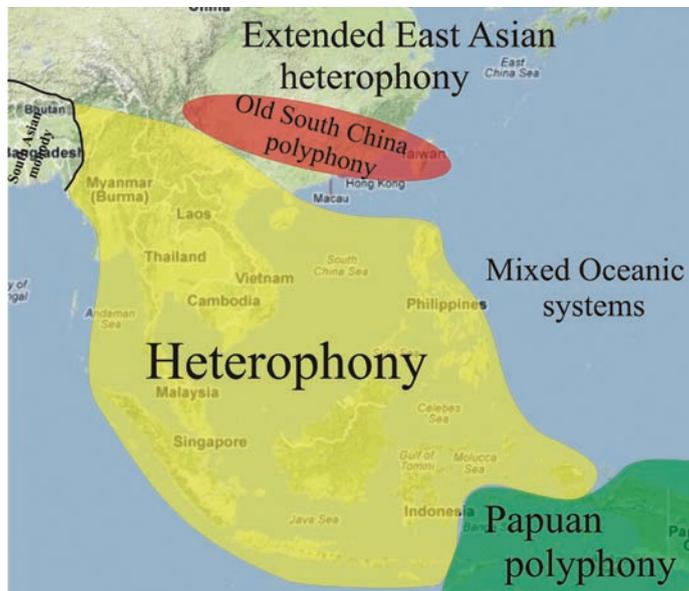
<sup>2</sup> Broadly speaking, ethnomusicologists divide instruments into four classes: idiophones (percussion), membranophones (drums), chordophones (string instruments) and aerophones (wind).

distinct melodies, and is characteristic of European art music, but also many intriguing folk traditions, including the polychoral music of the Mediterranean islands and the panpipes and distributed flutes of the Volga and Baltic regions. In East Asia, vocal polyphony is characteristic of Yunnan (Zhang 1997) which in turn is linked to the astonishingly diverse traditions of Taiwan (Wu 1994, 1995) and Northern Vietnam, yet those traditions are entirely lost in the Philippines.

Apart from Africa, elsewhere in the Old World, polyphony is common in Melanesia (Blench 2014). Polyphonic flute ensembles and vocal polyphony occur across much of New Guinea (Collaer 1965) and on many of the islands influenced by Papuan cultures (e.g. the panpipe ensembles of the Solomons described in Zemp 1978). Polyphony has also been reported from islands further west where there is strong reason to suspect a Papuan substrate, such as Flores (Rappoport 2011) and Timor (Yampolsky 2015).

Map 5.1 represents these distributions graphically.

MAP 5.1



**MSEA Heterophony and Its Extensions**

Source: Author.

The pattern emerging suggests that heterophony was an ancient structural principle established in the Southeast Asian region bounded strongly in the west by the monodic traditions of South Asia. The folk traditions of South China were polyphonic but heterophony was picked up by Sinitic speakers and underlies the art music and large-scale musical structures of East Asia. Although vocal polyphony was dominant in Taiwan, the Yami, whose ancestors became the proto-Malayo-Polynesians, were monodists. However, heterophony developed in ISEA, with the percussion ensembles which stretch from Lombok to northern Sumatra and the Philippines. Underlyingly, ISEA may well have been polyphonic, reflecting the prior traditions of the pre-Austronesian populations as surviving traditions on Flores and Timor suggest (Kunst 1942, 1950; Rappoport 2011).

### **2.3 Mouth-organ**

One of the most characteristic instruments of the MSEA area is the free-reed mouth-organ (Blench in press *b*). Using the same principle as the European harmonica, free-reeds are found in horns and single tube flute-like instruments. The principle of the free-reed was confined to a specific geographical area in Southeast Asia, before its worldwide diffusion in the last two centuries. Free-reed instruments are widely distributed and morphologically highly diverse, pointing to several millennia of evolution, as confirmed by archaeological evidence. However, most commonly they are found in the free-reed mouth-organ which consists of groups of at least five stopped pipes. The arrangement of the pipes allows the player to sound block chords, which form the underlying metrical frame of large Chinese ensembles. Free-reed mouth-organs are played almost everywhere in the region, and the oldest types have a spherical gourd resonator. The remains of a mouth-organ, alongside the more famous arrays of tuned bells, were found in the tomb of Marquis Yi of Zeng, in Suixian country, Hubei and dated to 433 BC (Guangsheng 2000). Metal wind-chests, skeuomorphs of gourds, occur in archaeological sites in Yunnan as far back as 200 BC, as attested in the collections of the Yunnan Provincial Museum, Kunming.

Apart from synchronic ethnography, it is possible to develop the history of the free-reed mouth-organ from archaeological and literary sources. Existing reviews of the free-reed mouth-organ are somewhat limited (e.g. Finsterbüsch 1961; Miller 1981; Schwörer-Kohl 1997). Map 5.2 shows the region where the gourd-resonated mouth-organ is played in Southeast Asia and where it presumably originates. It was picked up by the Chinese for the classical orchestra, probably quite early, developed into the *sheng*, which was in turn borrowed in Japan and Korea as the *shō*.

MAP 5.2



### Gourd Mouth-organ in Southeast Asia

Source: Blench (in press *b*).

There is also a unique extension into Borneo, which bespeaks early contact between the regions, although it never developed into a standard part of the Austronesian instrumentarium (Blench 2011). Iconographic evidence shows that mouth-organs were known in both Java (Borobudur) and Myanmar (Bagan) but were probably never adopted.

#### **2.4 Gong Ensembles**

The gong is a circular percussion instrument, usually made of bronze or brass, suspended and struck with a soft, padded beater. It is perhaps the single most characteristic instrument of the Southeast Asian region (Simbriger 1939). Gongs are divided into two main types, the deep-rimmed, bossed gong and the flat, shallow-rimmed gong, known respectively as *mang* and *luó* (鑼) in Chinese. In Borneo and the Philippines there are intermediate types with shallow rims, flat faces and low bosses (Frame 1982). The earliest gong that has been excavated is from the Luobuwan site in Guangxi Province in southwestern China (Wu Ben 2002, p. 111) dating from the early Han Dynasty (i.e. after 202 BC). Casting of gongs was a highly specialized art, only practised in a few places and gongs were traded over great distances as prestige goods (Champion 1869; Nicolas 2009).

Despite its widespread dispersion and significance of the gong, we have no real idea of its antiquity in Southeast Asia; gongs are not shown on the friezes of musical ensembles at Borobudur (eighth to ninth century) or at Mỹ Sơn in Vietnam (fourth to fourteenth century), but they are present at Angkor in the eleventh century. Despite its importance, the gong took a long time to come to the attention of European observers. Peter Mundy described it in Sumatra in 1637:

*another Copper Instrument called a gung, wheron they strike with a little wooden Clubbe, and although it bee butt a small Instrumentt, not much More then 1 Foote over and 1/2 Foot Deepe, yet it maketh a Deepe hollow humming sound resembling that of a great bell.*

Mundy (1919, p. 123)

Gongs can be played as single large instruments or in tuned sets, as in the Burmese gong circle, *kyi waing* ကြိုးဝိုင်း. However, their most distinctive music is in the form of large ensembles, where instruments are not tuned but graded in size and timbre. Throughout MSEA and in the Philippines and Borneo, collections of gongs owned by individuals are brought together in ensembles (Collaer 1979; Maceda 1998). In 2005, the gong ensembles of the Vietnamese highlands were named by UNESCO as part of the intangible cultural heritage of mankind. Why the exactly similar ensembles of Cambodia and Laos were excluded probably says more about heritage politics than any subtle appreciation of cultural ethnohistory.

Nonetheless, these ensembles are sufficiently striking to warrant wider recognition. Arsenio Nicolas (2009) has reviewed archaeological finds of gongs in the South China Sea, mostly from shipwrecks, which suggest that they were expensive traded items. Gongs are known throughout much of Northeast India and even into Tibet, but they were never used in large ensembles. Some representations of what are apparently flat gongs appear in India, but these do not survive in the ethnographic record (Arnold 2000). Angkor Wat and Borobudur provide some evidence for the time-depth of gong ensembles. Figure 5.1 shows a fairly typical gong ensemble, played for a marriage ceremony by the Bidayuh people at Annah Rais, Sarawak and Figure 5.2 depicts nuns supervising a Jarai gong performance in the highlands of Vietnam in the 1930s.

Historically speaking it seems as if gongs were first developed within the same bronze-casting culture that developed bronze drums in Vietnam, Laos, South China borderland (see Calo 2014). They spread as a prestige good, a rather less expensive and more portable equivalent of the bronze drum. Their musical qualities and the fact that they could be owned by individual families and brought together for collective celebrations made them a potential fit for the heterophonic music and social structures of MSEA. Gongs were carried to the western edges of ISEA by Chinese traders, but never penetrated far into the

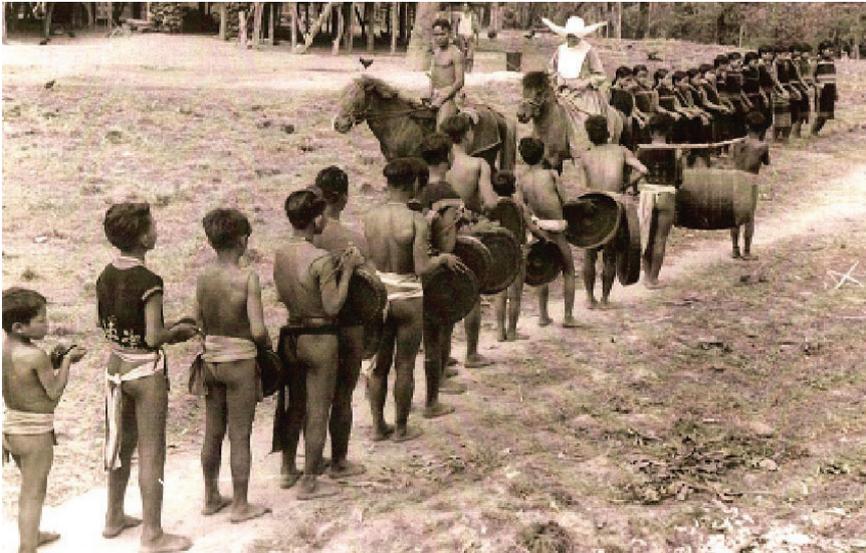
FIGURE 5.1



**Gong Ensemble, Annah Rais, Sarawak**

*Source:* Author's photo.

FIGURE 5.2



**Nuns Supervising Jarai Gong Ensemble, Vietnam**

*Source:* Creative Commons [CC].

eastern islands.<sup>3</sup> The growth of *gamelan* culture in Java allowed for a secondary distribution from the eighth century onwards. Map 5.3 shows the approximate distribution of the gong ensemble in Southeast Asia.

MAP 5.3



**Southeast Asian Gong Ensembles**

Source: Author.

<sup>3</sup> The easternmost occurrence of gongs appears to be as bridewealth items on the Raja Ampat islands, in the western tip of Papua Barat (formerly Irian Jaya). These are displayed in the collections of the Loka Budaya Museum, Cenderawasih University, Papua Barat, photographed February 2014.

Individual gongs and rows of gongs in a frame, typically used for orchestral ensembles have a much wider distribution, but they are not expressive of heterophony in the same way as gong ensembles.

### 3. Crossbow

The crossbow consists of a bow mounted on a stock that shoots projectiles, bolts or quarrels, with the string tensioned mechanically rather than by the archer. It was known in Ancient Greece and became a weapon of choice in medieval Europe. The crossbow was carried around the world by the Spanish, and appears in both West Africa and the New World after the sixteenth century (Balfour 1909). However, its most significant area of distribution is in MSEA. Wooden crossbows are found across the arc of highlands between Vietnam and Eastern Nepal and so skilled were the Montagnards of Vietnam that they were recruited by US Special Forces against the Việt Cộng. Figure 5.3 illustrates a typical wooden crossbow from this region, from the Naga area of Northeast India. Map 5.4 shows the MSEA distribution of the traditional, all-wooden crossbow.

FIGURE 5.3



**Naga Wooden Crossbow**

*Source:* Author's collection.

MAP 5.4



### Distribution of Wooden Crossbows in MSEA

Source: Author.

Crossbows (*nǚ 弩*) were adopted by the Chinese, who rapidly improved on their materials and mechanism (Needham 2004). The earliest evidence for crossbows in China goes back to the mid fifth century BC, at a Chu burial site in Yutaishan, Hubei where bronze bolts have been found. The earliest handheld crossbow stocks with a bronze trigger, dating from the sixth century BC, come from Tombs 3 and 12 at Qufu, Shandong, capital of Lu. Repeating crossbows, first mentioned in the *Records of the Three Kingdoms*, were discovered in 1986 in Tomb 47 at Qinjiazui, Hubei, around the fourth century BC. The earliest Chinese document to mention the crossbow is from the fourth–third century BC.

As with the mouth-organ, the crossbow is a distinctive MSEA technology, adopted and further spread by the Sinitic cultures. Schuessler (2007) argues that Old Chinese *\*nâ?* is a borrowing from Austroasiatic. This is credible on distributional grounds, since other Sino-Tibetan languages have quite different terms. Table 5.1 shows related MSEA terms for “crossbow” reflecting a protoform something like *#hnaa*.

In ISEA, the crossbow was only present on the Nicobars, where it constitutes striking evidence for the Austroasiatic migration to the archipelago. The blowpipe was otherwise dominant elsewhere in the archipelago.

**TABLE 5.1**  
MSEA Terms for “Crossbow” Reflecting *#hnaa*

Phylum	Subgroup	Language	Form
Austroasiatic	Bahnaric	PSB	*sdna
	Khmeric	Khmer	snaa
	Nicobaric	Nancowry	fəjɲ
	Pearic	Pearic	thəəma
	PMnong	PMnong	*so'na
	Vietic	PVietic	*s-na:ʔ
Sino-Tibetan	Sinitic	Chinese	nǔ
	Sinitic	Old Chinese	*nâ?
	Nung	Rawang (Nung)	thəma
	Nung	Dulong	tānā
	Lolo-Burmese	Moso	tǎna
	Jingpho	Jingpho	ndan
Daic	Kam-Sui	Sui	hna
		Proto-Tai	*hnaa <sup>c</sup>
	Tai	Northern Tai	naa (bolt)
		Thai	naa
Hmong-Mien		Proto-Hmong-Mien	*nha <sup>B</sup>

#### 4. Raised Houses

One of the most distinctive features of Southeast Asia is the raised house, where the occupants live at least one storey above the ground. Not typical of the Chinese, it was noted by early observers as in use among the Tai populations of Yunnan. It is found across MSEA, but also in ISEA (Waterson 1990). Raised houses thus occur between Northeast India and Eastern Indonesia. Curiously, the *morung*, a large house for an extended family with an A-frame roof, typical of the Naga area of Northeast India, constitutes a major geographical exception, as these are flat on the ground. Sometimes these houses can be raised very high indeed, as the Orang Ulu house in Borneo shows (see Figure 5.4). These houses are found in remote interior parts of Sarawak, and protect the inhabitants against floods as well as wild animals.

FIGURE 5.4

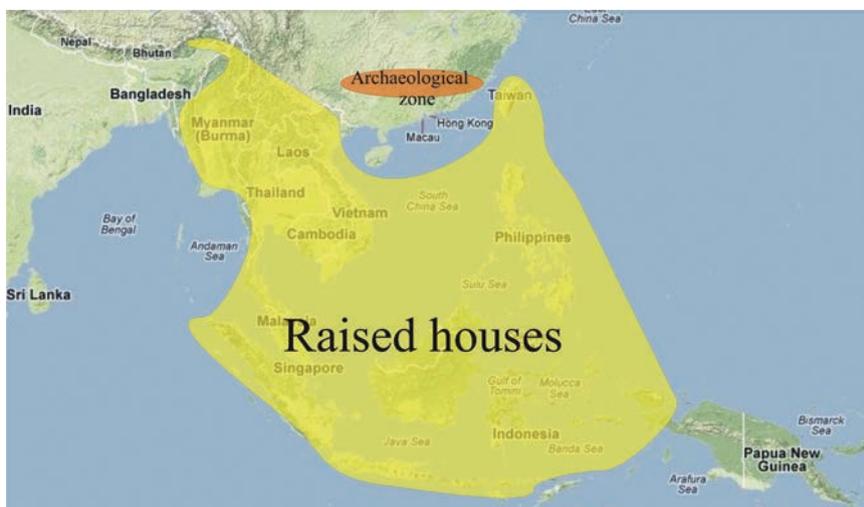


Orang Ulu House, Sarawak

Source: Author's photo.

The function of raised houses is somewhat variable. It is defensive, and protects against the depredations of termites, flooding, and allows livestock to be kept beneath the living space. It is one of the few features of the region for which we have good archaeological evidence, since the piles of such houses are found at Hemudu in Southeast China dated to around 7,000 Before Present [BP] (Chang 1989). In Northeast India, this classic MSEA structure halts where it confronts Tibetan-style housing, which has a multi-storey structure with an enclosed basement, and with Assamese ground-level houses. The typical Papuan house, with its steeply pitched roof, has a quite different design. Map 5.5 shows the distribution of the raised house in Southeast Asia.

MAP 5.5



### Raised Houses in MSEA and ISEA

Source: Author.

## 5. The Emblematic Use of Clothing in Marking Ethnicity

Anyone who visits ethnographic museums from Itanagar to Hanoi will have been alternately impressed and bored by the endless displays of folk costume. Mannequins of crumbling plaster display complex

arrays of cloth and jewellery that almost no one wears today outside cultural festivals. However, it is clear from old photographs that much of this was everyday wear until recently, and still may be in remote areas. Costume is highly politicized; the Kohima museum in Nagaland displays the proposed gear for a “unitary Naga lass” (see Figure 5.5). Designed by Naga intellectuals frustrated by Naga disunity, costume synthesizes highly differentiated cloth and ornaments characteristic of different Naga subgroups (e.g. Oppitz et al. 2008). The Hmong-Mien in particular distinguish all their subgroups by the costumes they wear, so that language and dress are closely correlated.

**FIGURE 5.5**



**Naga Lass, Kohima Museum**

*Source:* Author's photo.

All this reflects a widespread situation in MSEA, the naming of ethnolinguistic groups with clothing terminology. “Folk costumes” are a staple of ethnographic museums throughout most of Eurasia. However, costumes are generally areal markers rather than used to differentiate ethnolinguistic groups. So there is a Basque costume, but its elements are also characteristic of non-Basques in northeastern Spain and adjacent France. Costume rarely marks ethnicity so sharply as in Southeast Asia. Austroasiatic, Daic, Hmong-Mien and Sino-Tibetan speaking peoples all use this convention. For example, the Mien peoples have numerous subgroups, including the White Trouser, Black Trouser, Flowery and Longshirt Mien, ethnolinguistic subgroupings based on dress. However, the practice of defining subgroups in this way is lost in Northeast India, and it is absent among all the large pluralistic groups such as the Chinese, Viet, Khmer, and Thai. It is also curiously absent in ISEA, where it might have been expected to spread.

These examples are about the unity of a culture area, and at first sight this might suggest a high degree of differentiation. However, as has been observed with the Hmong-Mien, the greater the emphasis on difference, the less significant linguistic differences really are. Sigmund Freud aptly named this “narcissism of small differences” (*der Narzißmus der kleinen Differenzen*). The two parts of Hmong-Mien consist of languages which are little more than dialect chains, often mutually intelligible, despite the striking contrasts of costume in the market. This may correspond to emblematicity in language, i.e. the notion that each subgroup has a word which demarcates it from another, disguising the fact that the other 99 per cent of the words are in fact the same or close cognates.

## 6. Could MSEA Area Culture Have an Archaeological Correlate?

Some of the cultural attributes discussed in this chapter must be of significant age. We know from both comparative ethnography and archaeology that raised houses are at least as old as the settlement of Hemudu (7,000 BP). Crossbow mechanisms and bronze resonators for mouth-organs are abundant in Chinese archaeology. Unfortunately,

partly due to preservation conditions, the general archaeology of MSEA itself is much weaker with respect to the type of material excavated.

However, there is a deep-level lithic culture which corresponds extremely well with the boundaries of MSEA, i.e. the so-called “Sumatraliths” that characterize the Hoabinhian technocomplex. Sumatraliths are a type of stone tool, often made from river pebbles, and very roughly shaped. The precise use of Sumatraliths is still under discussion, but there is a growing consensus that their main use was to process bamboos, rattans and other wood-like plants (Blench 2013a). Strictly defined, Hoabinhian tool types are virtually absent from ISEA, except for those in Northeast Sumatra (Forestier et al. 2005). Map 5.6 shows the approximate region where Sumatraliths are found. Hoabinhian culture (*Văn hóa Hòa Bình*), named for the type-site in

MAP 5.6



**Approximate Zone of Sumatraliths**

Source: Author.

Vietnam, describes stone artefact assemblages in Southeast Asia with flaked, cobble artefacts (see Figure 5.6), ascribed to the period 10,000–2,000 BC in earlier sources (Matthews 1964, 1966; Gorman 1971; Anisytukin and Timofeyev 2006). Bacsonian is often regarded as a variation of the Hoabinhian industry characterized by a higher frequency of edge-ground cobble artefacts, produced by direct percussion with hard hammerstone, dated to c. 8,000–4,000 BC.

Postulating the psychic unity of a region based on the distribution of lithics would rightly be regarded with suspicion by archaeologists and linguists alike. Nonetheless, it is helpful to think that prior to the Neolithic a widespread common culture had already been established through the region, which implies a common approach to managing the natural environment. The key issue is probably boundedness, the notion that when a new idea or technology enters the regional culture, whether the crossbows or a musical instrument, they slot into a bounded geographical and linguistic area and increase the level of interaction which produces the observed linguistic consequences.

FIGURE 5.6



**Sumatraliths from Malaysia**

*Source:* Author.

## 7. Core and Extensions of the MSEA Area

The pattern emerging from these examples is that of “core” and “extension”, characteristic objects or behaviours can be consolidated in nuclear MSEA but spread further in slightly unpredictable ways, when picked up by an expansionist neighbour. Most notably, there are strongly delimited lines where a cultural zone is sufficiently marked as to block further spread. In the west, this is the Indosphere (see §1.2), in the southeast, the Papuan area and the Altaic zone of North China. ISEA is a receptor zone, where at least some MSEA innovations were picked up and underwent secondary spread (Blench 2012). The Sinitic zone was also susceptible to influence, but the Altaic zone to the north marked the final boundary.

There are also what I am calling here “restructuring zones”, where a community is a geographical outlier, and undergoes analogical restructuring as a result of interaction with the dominant cultural matrix. The most obvious example of this is the Munda area of Northeast India, where Austroasiatic languages underwent major typological change. Chamic (a group of Austronesian languages spoken on the Vietnamese mainland) and Nicobaric (a branch of Austroasiatic spoken on the Nicobar islands) represent other well-known examples. In addition, the Andamanese isolate zone is a small region of languages and cultures protected by geography from the large-scale processes taking place on the nearby mainland. This situation can be represented schematically as in Map 5.7.

Beyond these geographical observations, however, is the question of the forces driving linguistic and cultural convergence. Whatever the explanation, the answer must be social, rooted in the way individuals and communities conceptualize themselves and interact with one another. Linguistic convergence must be a product of this, not its cause or an independent variable. The hypothesis is that the underlying feature of MSEA culture responsible for this cultural and linguistic convergence zone is its high degree of social consensus. This involves making sociological generalizations about a vast and highly diverse region and some readers will inevitably consider the empirical basis for such a model hard to substantiate and therefore impossible to demonstrate. Speculations are what

MAP 5.7



Core and Extensions of the MSEA Linguistic Area

Source: Author.

they are. However, no matter how sceptical the reader, the distributional data highlighted in this chapter are real and need explanation and that explanation must include a sociological element.

A not atypical journalistic article is prone to contrast India and China, emphasizing democracy in India and authoritarianism in China. Clearly caste groups and ethnic minorities in India do not necessarily benefit from democracy in India while the Tibetans, Mongols and Uyghurs in China do experience the heavy hand of the state. Nonetheless, as the 2012 changeover in the Chinese leadership shows, a remarkably high proportion of the Han population generally accepts that the state will act for their benefit, and consensus would be an alternative characterization. This higher degree of social consensus may also be the key feature which marks the MSEA area and East Asia more broadly. Families, communities, regional governments and nation states all consider individualism and personal freedom of less importance than the harmony of the social unit. Put another way, social obligations always take precedence over individual freedoms. In linguistic terms this would

involve placing greater emphasis on speaking in a way comparable to those you encounter, or cultures with which you wish to assimilate.

To understand this model by exploring a contrasting region, the Papuan area on the southeastern edge of ISEA illustrates the nature of acephalous societies characterized by a strong emphasis on individualism and personal achievement. In the Papuan area, there are no large-scale, hierarchical societies with economic pluralism and the division of labour. Equally, Papua is characterized by a high degree of linguistic diversity. Papuan cultures are well known to anthropologists for the “big man” culture, the achievement of social status through acquisition of wealth and the corresponding lack of social hierarchy. There is some evidence that social differentiation is underlined by the conscious attempt to make your language as different as possible from that of your neighbour.

An intriguing cultural correlate of this is that MSEA is above all the area where Buddhism has been accepted and persisted. Buddhism originated in the northeastern area of the Indian Subcontinent, but died out in South Asia (except in Nepal and the areas bordering the Himalayan region, as well as Sri Lanka) a few centuries after its spread, and has made only a limited comeback in recent times. Dividing into two streams early in its career, it became dominant in Sri Lanka, Tibet and Bhutan, and MSEA.<sup>4</sup> Although, as the archaeological remains testify, it was clearly present in ISEA, i.e. in most of Sumatra and certain areas of Java, Bali, Kalimantan, and Sulawesi, it never became dominant, and coexisted or synthesized with Śaivism throughout most of its history. More importantly, Buddhism eventually died out in ISEA by the sixteenth century when Islam became the dominant religion of both the elites and the general population.

Buddhism emphasizes the insignificance of the self and the importance of denying the ego, which certainly fits the consensus model described above. I am not arguing that Buddhism is responsible for the

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<sup>4</sup> Although Buddhism was never dominant in China and Japan, it became very important and well-represented in those countries throughout their histories.

MSEA convergence phenomenon: indeed the reverse, i.e. that it was accepted and has persisted because of its congruence with an existing mindset. As a consequence it has therefore become dominant in MSEA, whereas it has withered in much of the Indian Subcontinent, where its value system is ultimately in contradiction to underlying cultural norms which emphasize extreme social differentiation. Interestingly, Hinduism, a religion which made important incursions throughout Southeast Asia (both on the mainland and in the islands) over nearly two millennia, has died out everywhere except Bali, Bali-influenced areas of Lombok, and pockets in remote areas of East Java.

The incursion of Islam also seems to tell something of the same story. Its impact on MSEA has been very slight, with the exception of the Malay Peninsula, which was settled from the islands. By contrast, it has been very influential in ISEA almost as far as Melanesia. This could well be related to the much more opportunistic nature of Austronesian culture, who began their voyages from Taiwan as highly mobile fisher-foragers (Bulbeck 2008; Blench 2012). Their very success seems to have been their capacity to adapt and adopt cultural identities as they went, and Islam, with its mercantile ideology, seems to have been a good “fit” with their existing patterns.

Two objections to this model seem obvious, i.e. the prevalence of violent confrontation between different ethnic groups in Southeast Asian prehistory, and the emblematic use of dress and jewellery styles to express difference. Even a cursory reading of MSEA history reveals a mind-numbing succession of wars between the Thais, Laos, Burmese, Khmer and Viet, seeming to contradict state philosophies espousing Buddhist values—notably those underlining the importance of peace. However, violence itself does not run counter to the model described above; indeed it is driven by the wish to enforce consensus. Communal values are not those of the nation state and persist long after individual polities pass into history.

More intriguing is the highly characteristic pattern described in §5, i.e. the use of dress styles to mark ethnicity. One way of thinking of this is that ethnicity in MSEA corresponds to clan or moiety in other regions of the world. Acephalous societies in Africa and Melanesia are

typically organized via opposing kin groups. The formation of clans or similar units is not seen as contradicting the larger ethnic unit, and clans do not usually wear marked dress or ornament. Hence dress in MSEA expresses unity in diversity, a rather more formal way of operationalizing difference. A parallel in western culture might be the ephemeral cultures of teenagers, marking their similarity to one another, differentiating them from adults through the use of emblematic language and dress. Teenagers, however, are unlikely to think this marks them as “not” English, French or whatever.

## 8. Conclusion

This chapter provides preliminary evidence for an MSEA culture area which corresponds to a well-established linguistic convergence zone. Language and material culture are relatively objective markers which can be plotted on a map and the map reveals a series of sharp delimitations, beyond which neither cultural items nor social models easily spread. The assumption is that this culture area also reflects a structural and psychological map of the many societies within the region. The corresponding psychogeographic map which establishes the core and delineates the boundaries is inevitably harder to draw and will remain controversial, especially as it has clear political implications, some of which will be unpalatable to nationalists. Descriptive ethnography is not much in favour these days, but a greater understanding of the sociology and culture of MSEA peoples will extend our understanding of the structural principles that underlie them.

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