# Ethnographic and archaeological correlates for an MSEA linguistic area

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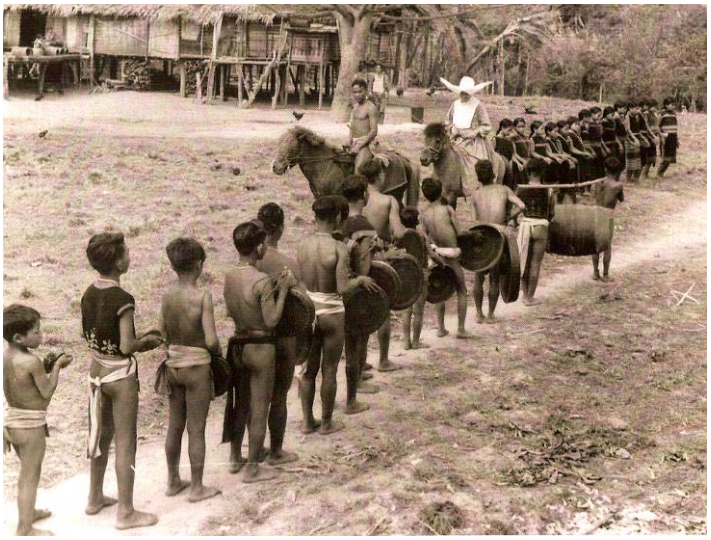

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## ABSTRACT

Mainland SE Asia (MSEA) is broadly recognised as a linguistic convergence area. Despite great phyletic diversity, its languages show a remarkable homogeneity in terms of structure. Phonology, tones, morphology (or more precisely the lack of it), word and syntactic structures all show remarkable similarities despite the evident lexical diversity. The paper suggests that such a convergence area must also have material and social correlates, and sets out the evidence for musical instruments, the crossbow, house types and dress. It considers whether this area can also be connected with the SE Asian distribution of Sumatraliths. Finally, its speculates that the type of linguistic similarities reflect a ‘consensus’ culture, where sounding and behaving like neighbouring peoples is desirable, while underlining minor differences.

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 The MSEA convergence zone

There has been considerable investment in the concept of mainland SE Asia (MSEA) as a linguistic area (Enfield 2003, 2005; Enfield & Comrie in press). Despite great phyletic diversity, its languages show a remarkable homogeneity in terms of structure. Such patterns are often described as *Sprachbund*s, geographical areas characterised by linguistic convergence (Trubetzkoy 1928; Becker 1948). *Sprachbund*s 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 & Nurse 2008) in India, and the Caucasus. However, the areas of language which converge are by no means similar in different regions. In some cases, a high incidence of lexical borrowing can co-exist with very different 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. *Sprachbund* may thus be a less useful term than 'convergence zone' which leaves open the parameters of similarity.

Mainland SE Asia is undoubtedly a convergence zone, characterised by five major language phyla, Austroasiatic, Austronesian, Daic, Sino-Tibetan and Hmong-Mien. Apart from the isolated Andamanese 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 & Li 2012). Utsat is Chamic, and would have resembled Malay when its ancestral speakers settled on the mainland of modern-day Việt Nam some 2000 years ago. Syntax and phonology were restructured so that it appeared closer to the neighbouring Austroasiatic languages. However, in 969 AD, part of its speakers fled to Hainan island in SE 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 the historical documentation, we have some estimates of timescales. What is much less clear is why it occurs, and what are 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 characterise a culture area, a bounded region where social and material culture share commonalties. 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 doesn't fit at certain times in history. It is certainly the case that the period interpretations of *Kreiskulturlehre* 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 paper[1] is not to add to the linguistic debate, but rather to put forward social and material correlates of the observed convergence. In other words, if languages agree with other so evidently, then presumably this indicates lengthy and elaborate interchange between populations and thus we should be able to find other types of commonalties. Such a broad question cannot be resolved in a short space, but a tentative model is advanced. This paper 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. 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

[1] This paper was written following a meeting in Leipzig, MPI, in December 2012 on the languages of mainland SE Asia. It was not intended for the proceedings, as another paper (Blench in press a) has been submitted, which discusses the genesis of areal linguistic features in some detail. Although I was not at the meeting in Singapore where the other papers in this volume were presented, the topic seemed appropriate for the subsequent volume.

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, Sinitic shares 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 SE Asia is dominated by non-tonal Austronesian languages, with complex morphology, although they share other linguistic traits with MSEA. Despite these fuzzy boundaries, the sense that MSEA languages exhibit a set of common features is palpable. To conceptualise 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 SE 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 left 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, Austroasiatic, moved to ISEA and has developed complex morphology (? through metatypy with Austronesian). At the same time, language groups that enter the area become restructured to fit the regional pattern. There is far from a scholarly consensus on the reasons for what appears to be a unique situation, globally.

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 characterisation 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, underlyingly MSEA, have resemble the neighbouring Indo-Aryan languages rather than carrying MSEA features into further India (Blench in press d). Nicobaric has equally left behind many MSEA features, for reasons which are less clear. Blench (2013b) 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, perplexing lexemes that seem to spread across large regions with marked geographic limitations. Typical MSEA examples are ‘hawk’ (#*g.laŋ*), tiger (#*k.la*), ‘elephant’ (#*ʨa: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 others do not seem to have any greater cultural relevance than many other items. 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). Roughly speaking, Matisoff considered that within the Sinosphere languages and cultures showed common features which resembled those of Chinese culture, and similarly with the Indopshere. Certainly within Sino-Tibetan, the gradual shift towards (? or away from) morphological simplicity can be characterised this way. But the term ‘Sinosphere’ suggests a region of Sinitic influence. This is almost the reverse of the proposition advanced here, which is roughly that the early forms of Sinitic were restructured through contact with 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 SE Asian island groups appears to be Lebar (1972), while mainland groups are covered in the surveys of Schlesinger (1997, 1998, 2003a,b,c,d, 2011a,b,c) and for Laos in Chazée (1999). But this is not a live tradition. We are better at republishing old ethnography than doing new research. Our ethnographers are busier with the quirks of social media and mobile phones than the documentation of rural communities. The proposals on which this paper is based are largely from my own research, visiting both rural areas and museums throughout SE Asia and searching the literature. It should therefore be emphasised that the distribution maps in particular are 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, although all societies seem to have it, 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[2]. As it happens, MSEA is probably the region of the world with the most distinct types of instrument, organologically speaking. This is remarkable, as its music is very largely of a single structural type, heterophony. This section tracks both musical structure and also the distribution of some specific instrument types. Sadly, the musical form that most people associate with SE Asia, large orchestras dominated by tuned percussion, is almost certainly a late introduction, and cannot be taken to characterise the region.

### 2.2 Heterophony

Heterophony is a musical texture characterised by the simultaneous variation of a single melodic line. Such a texture is a complex monophony in which there is only one basic melody, realised simultaneously in multiple voices. Each one plays the melody, in either a different rhythm or tempo, or with embellishments and elaborations. Morton (1976: 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.

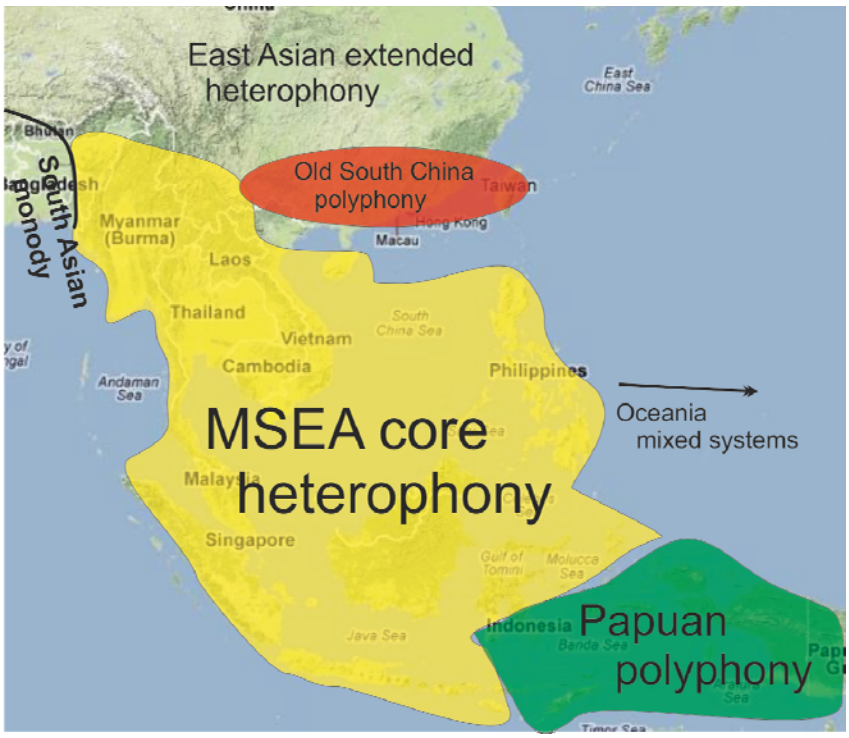
The traditions which oppose heterophony are monody and polyphony. Monody is characteristic of a vast area stretching between the Maghreb and NE India, where the performers each follow a single melodic line, often accompanied by drones or percussion. In the art music of the region, melodies can be extremely elaborated, with rhythms ultra-complex. Polyphony is the simultaneous sounding of 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. At the other end of the world, vocal polyphony seems to have been characteristic of Yunnan (Zhang Xingrong 1997) which in turn is linked to the astonishingly diverse traditions of Taiwan (Wu 1994, 1995), traditions which are entirely lost in the Philippines.

Apart from Africa, elsewhere in the Old World, polyphony is common in Melanesia (Blench in press b). 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 (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.

[2] Broadly speaking, ethnomusicologists divide instruments into four classes, idiophones (percussion), membranophones (drums), chordophones (string instruments) and aerophones (wind).

Map 1 represents these distributions graphically.

**Map 1. MSEA heterophony and its extensions**




**The pattern emerging suggests that heterophony was an ancient, dominant principle established in the Yana, whose ancestors became the proto-Malayopolynesians, were monodists. However, heterophony developed ISEA, with the percussion ensembles which stretch from Bali to northern Sumatra. Underlyingly, ISEA may well have been polyphonic, reflecting the prior traditions of the pre-Austronesian populations. Figure 1. Mouth-organ resonator, Dian**

Source: Author photo. Kunming Provincial Museum

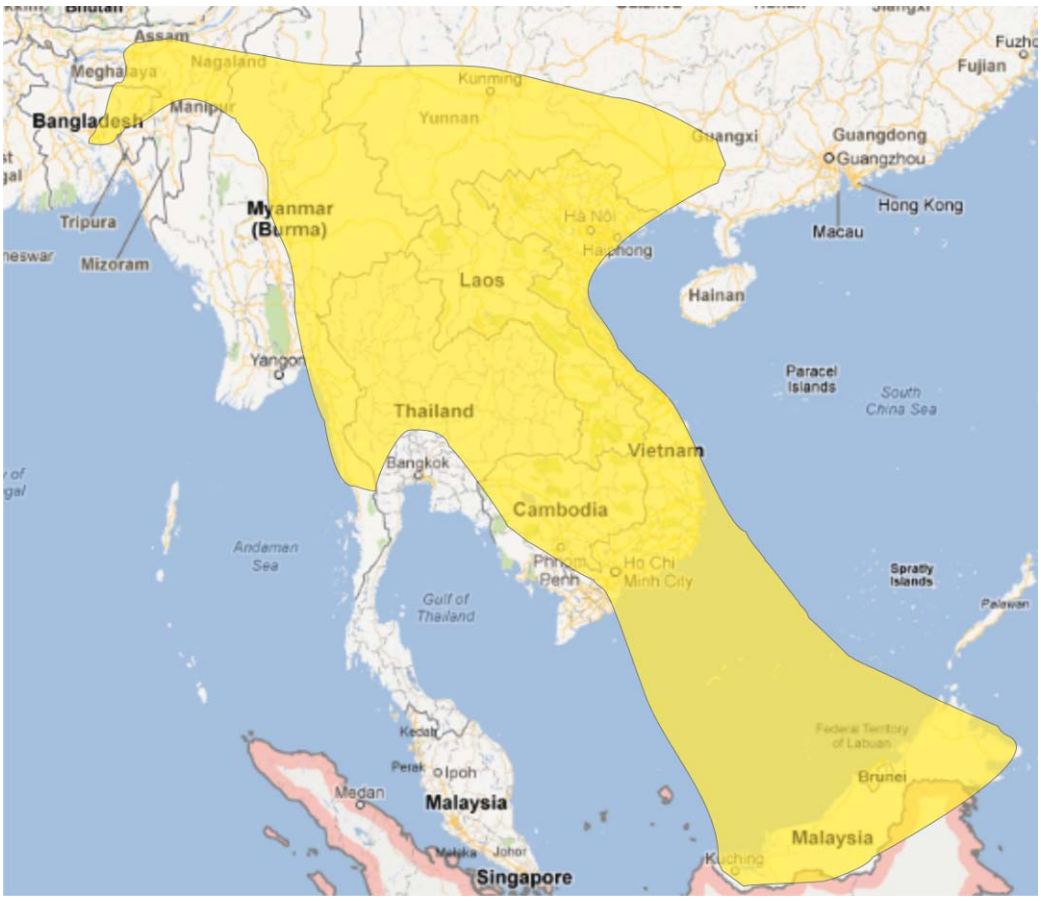
## 2.3 Mouth-organ

One of the most characteristic instruments of the MSEA area is the free-reed mouth-organ (Blench in press c). 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 SE 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, something confirmed by archaeological evidence. However, most commonly they are found in the free-reed mouth-organ which consists of groups of stopped pipes, usually at least five. 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 seem to 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 (Figure 1).

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 2 shows the region where the gourd-resonated mouth-organ is played in SE 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*.

Source: Author photo. Kunming Provincial Museum

**Map 2. Gourd-mouth-organ in SE Asia**




Source: Blench (in press c).

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 SE 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 *luo* in Chinese. In Borneo and the Philippines there are intermediate types with shallow rims, flat faces and low bosses (Frame 1982). The earliest gong, *luo*, that has been excavated is from the Luobuwan site in Guangxi Province in southwestern China (Wu Ben 2002:111) dating from the early Han Dynasty (i.e. after 202 BC). Casting of gongs was a highly specialised art, only practised in a few places and gongs were traded over great distances as prestige goods (Champion 1869; Arsenio 2009).

Despite its widespread dispersion and significance of the gong we have no real idea of its antiquity in SE Asia; gongs are certainly present when the first carvings of musical ensembles are shown. 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, 1919:123)

Gongs can be played as single large instruments or in tuned sets, as in the Burmese gong circle, *kyi waing* ခြင်းဝိုင်း. 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). The gong ensembles of the Vietnamese highlands were recently (2005) 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 (2009) has reviewed archaeological finds of gongs, mostly from shipwrecks, which suggest that they were expensive traded items. Gongs are known throughout much of NE 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 2 shows a fairly typical gong ensemble, played for a marriage ceremony by the Bidayuh people at Annah Rais, Sarawak and Figure 3 depicts nuns supervising a Jarai gong performance in the highlands of Vietnam in the 1930s.

**Figure 2. Gong ensemble, Annah Rais, Sarawak**

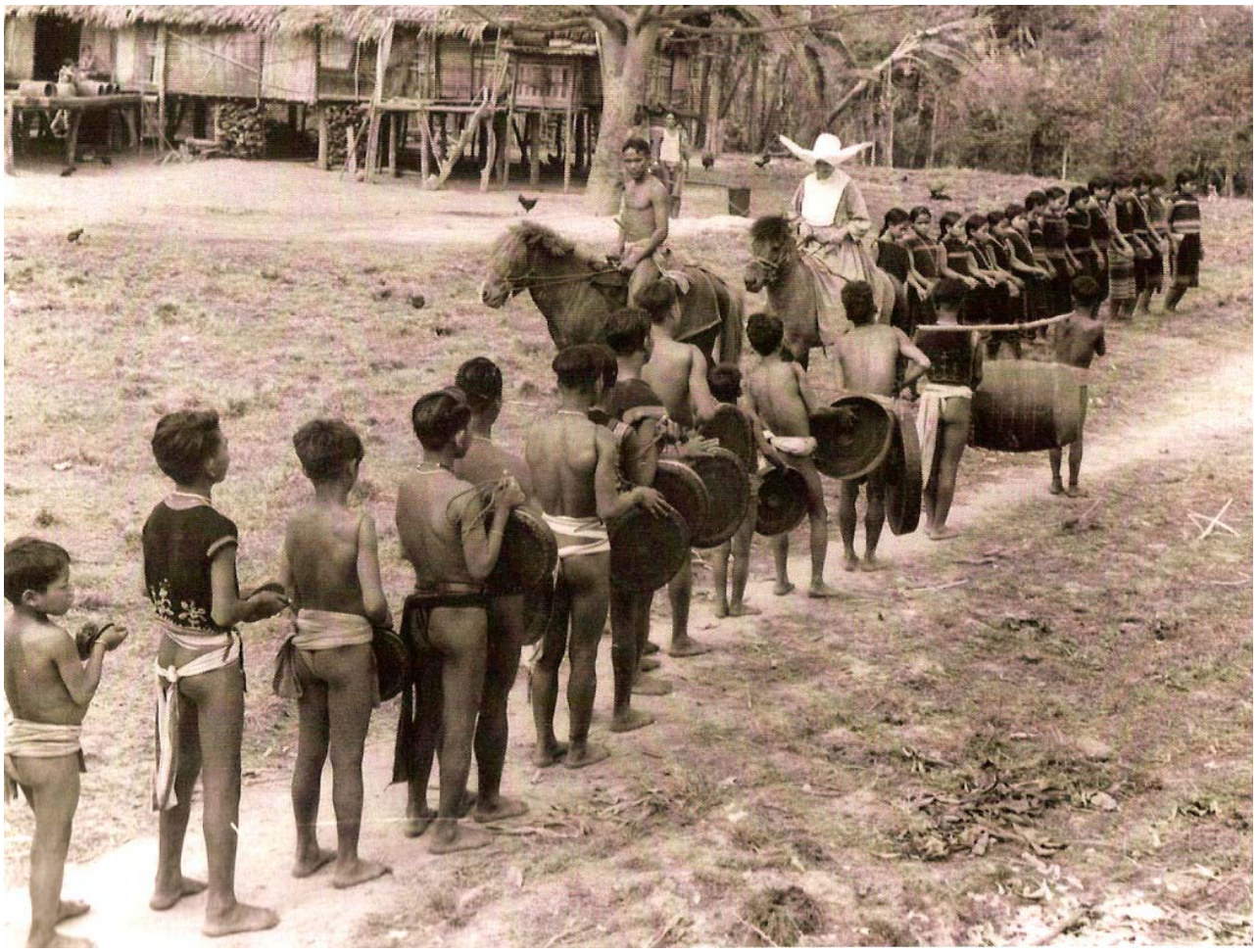
Source: Author photo

**Map 3. SE Asian gong ensembles**


Historically speaking it seems as if gongs were first developed within the same bronze-casting culture that developed bronze drums in the Vietnam, Laos, South China borderland (e.g. 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 the Chinese trade, but never penetrated far into the eastern islands[3]. The growth of gamelan culture in Java allowed for a secondary distribution from the 8th century onwards. Map 3 shows the approximate distribution of the gong ensemble in SE Asia.

[3] The easternmost occurrence of gongs appears to be as bridewealth items on the Raja Ampat islands, west of Papua Barat.

**Figure 3. Nuns supervising Jarai gong ensemble, Vietnam**



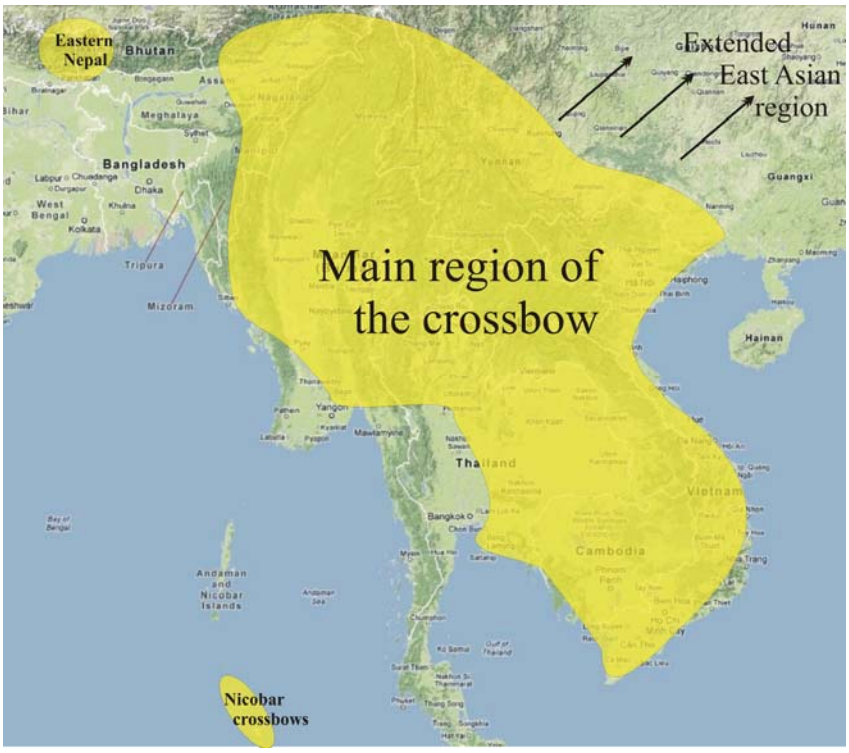
Source: CC

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

**Map 4. Distribution of wooden crossbows in MSEA**



found across the arc of highlands between Vietnam and Eastern Nepal and so skilled were the Montagnards of Việt Nam that they were recruited by US Special Forces against the Viet Cong. Figure 4 illustrates a typical wooden crossbow from this region, from the Naga area of NE India. Map 4 shows the MSEA distribution of the traditional, all-wooden crossbow.

**Figure 4. Naga wooden crossbow**

Source: Author collection

Crossbows (*nǔ* 弩) were adopted by the Chinese, who rapidly improved on the materials and mechanism (Needham 2004). The earliest evidence for crossbows in China goes back to the mid 5th 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 6th 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 4th century BC. The earliest Chinese document to mention the crossbow is from the 4th–3rd 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 **nâʔ* is a borrowing from Austroasiatic. This is credible on distributional grounds, since other Sino-Tibetan languages have quite different terms. Table 1 shows related MSEA terms for 'crossbow' reflecting a protoform something like *#hnaa*.

**Table 1. MSEA terms for 'crossbow' reflecting** *#h.naa*

| Phylum | Subgroup | Language | Form |
|---|---|---|---|
| Austroasiatic | Bahnaric | PSB | *sdna |
| | Khmeric | Khmer | snaa |
| | Nicobaric | Nancowry | fə̌ŋ |
| | Pearic | Pearic | thəəma |
| | PMnong | PMnong | *so'na |
| | Vietic | PVietic | *s-na:ʔ |
| Sino-Tibetan | Sinitic | Chinese | nǔ |
| | Sinitic | Old Chinese | *nâʔ |
| | Nung | Rawang (Nung) | thəma |
| | Nung | Dulong | tānā |
| | Lolo-Burmese | Moso | tǎna |
| | Jingpho | Jingpho | ndan |
| Daic | Kam-Sui | Sui | hna |
| | | S. | sa-nao |
| | Tai | PTai | *hnaa$^{c}$ |
| | | NTai | naa (bolt) |
| | | Thai | naa |
| Hmong-Mien | | PMY | *nha$^{B}$ |

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.

## 4. Raised houses

One of the most distinctive features of SE 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 into the Austronesian world (Waterson 1990). Raised houses thus occur between NE India and Eastern Indonesia, roughly speaking. Curiously, the Naga *morung* 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 (Figure 5). These houses are found in remote interior parts of Sarawak, and probably protect the inhabitants against floods as well as wild animals.

**Figure 5. Orang Ulu house, Sarawak**

Source: Author 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 SE China dated to around 7000 BP (Chang 1989). In NE India, the classic MSEA structure halts where it meets Tibetan-style housing, which has a multi-storey structure with an enclosed basement, and Assamese ground-level houses. The typical Papuan house, with its steeply pitched roof, has a quite different design. Map 5 shows the distribution of the raised house in SE Asia;

**Map 5. Raised houses in MSEA and ISEA**

## 5. The use of clothing to distinguish 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 politicised; the Kohima museum in Nagaland displays the proposed gear for a 'unitary Naga lass' (Figure 6), designed by Naga intellectuals dismayed by Naga disunity, symbolised by the 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 6. Naga lass, Kohima Museum**

Source: Author 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 SE Asia. Austroasiatic, Daic, Hmong-Mien and Sino-Tibetan peoples all use this terminology. However, it disappears in NE India, is absence 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. 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, the notion that each subgroup has a word which demarcates it from another, disguising the fact that the other 99% of the words are in fact the same or close cognates.

## 6. Could MSEA areal culture have an archaeological correlate?

Some of the cultural attributes discussed in this paper 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 (7000 BP). Crossbow mechanisms are abundant in Chinese archaeology, and bronze resonators for mouth-organs are also widespread. Unfortunately, partly due to preservation conditions, the general archaeology of MSEA itself is much weaker, as the type of material excavated.

**Figure 7. Sumatraliths from Malaysia**


However, there is a deep-level lithic culture which corresponds extremely well with the boundaries of MSEA, the so-called 'Sumatraliths' which characterise 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 NE Sumatra (Forestier et al. 2005). Map 6 shows the approximate region where Sumatraliths are found. Hoabinhian culture (*Văn hóa Hòa Bình*), named for the type-site

in Vietnam, describes stone artefact assemblages in Southeast Asia with flaked, cobble artefacts (Figure 7), ascribed to the period 10,000–2000 BC in earlier sources (Matthews 1964, 1966; Gorman 1971; Anisyutkin & Timofeyev 2006). Bacsonian is often regarded as a variation of the Hoabinhian industry characterised by a higher frequency of edge-ground cobble artefacts, produced by direct percussion with hard hammerstone, dated to c. 8000–4000 BC.

**Map 6. Approximate zone of Sumatraliths**


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 crossbows or musical instruments, they slot into a bounded geographical and linguistic area and increase the level of interaction which produces the linguistic results.

## 7. Core and extensions of the MSEA area

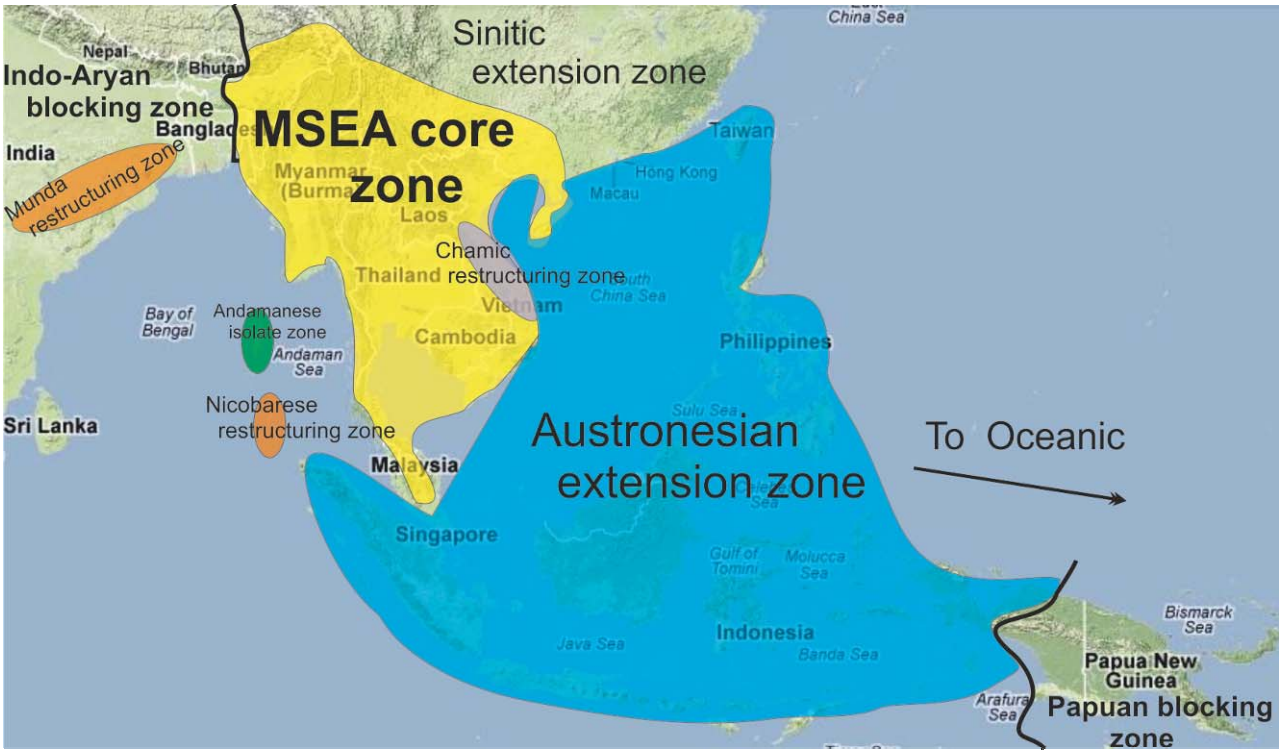
The pattern emerging from these examples is that of 'core' and 'extension', characteristic objects or behaviours can be consolidated in nuclear MSEA but undergo extension in slightly unpredictable ways, when picked up by an expansionist neighbour beyond its boundaries. Most notably there are strongly delimited lines where a different cultural zone is sufficiently marked as to prevent further spread. In the west, this is the Indosphere, in the southeast, the Papuan area and the Altaic zone of North China. Island SE Asia 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 NE India, where Austroasiatic languages underwent major typological change. Chamic (Austronesian on the Vietnamese mainland) and Nicobaric (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 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 conceptualise themselves and interact with one another. Linguistic convergence must be a product of this, not its cause or an independent variable.

At this point, I am going to advance the hypothesis that the feature underlying the culture of MSEA responsible for this cultural and linguistic convergence zone is a high degree of social consensus. This involves making sociological generalisations about a vast and highly diverse region and some readers will inevitably consider this type of model to have no empirical base and therefore impossible to demonstrate. Speculations are what they are. However, no matter how sceptical the reader, the distributional data highlighted in this paper are real and need explanation and that explanation must include a sociological element.

**Map 7. Core and extensions of the MSEA linguistic area**




A not atypical journalistic article is prone to contrast India and China, emphasising 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 characterisation. This higher degree of social consensus may also be the key feature which marks the MSEA are 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. In linguistic terms this would involve placing greater emphasis on speaking in a similar way 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 eastern edge of ISEA illustrates the link between acephalous societies characterised by a strong emphasis on individualism and personal achievement. There are no large-scale, hierarchical societies in the Papuan area, with economic pluralism and the division of labour. Equally, Papua is characterised by a high degree of linguistic diversity. Even assuming the controversial Trans New Guinea phylum is a valid genetic unit, there are still dozens of isolates and small phyla. 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 mainland India, but rapidly died out there after its spread, and has made only a limited comeback in recent times. Dividing into two vehicles early in its career, it became dominant in Sri Lanka, Tibet and Bhutan, Japan and MSEA. Although it was clearly present in ISEA, it died out there by 1000 AD. Buddhism emphasises 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 MSEA convergence phenomenon, indeed the reverse, that it was accepted and has persisted because of its congruence with an existing mindset. As a consequence it has therefore persisted and become dominant in MSEA, whereas it has withered in India where its value system is ultimately in contradiction to underlying cultural norms. Interestingly, the reverse is true with Hinduism, a religion which

made incursions throughout SE Asia over nearly three millennia, but which persisted nowhere except Bali, ultimately because its values were inimical to those already established.

Two objections to this model seem obvious, the prevalence of violent confrontation between states in SE 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. Mainly however, 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, 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 organised 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 operationalising 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.

This paper provides preliminary evidence for an MSEA culture area which corresponds to a linguistic convergence zone. Language and material culture are relatively objective markers which can be plotted on a map. The corresponding psychogeographic map which establishes the core and delineates the boundaries is 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 greater understanding of the sociology and culture of MSEA peoples, will extend our understanding of the structural principles underlying the region.

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