The Austronesians and their significance in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

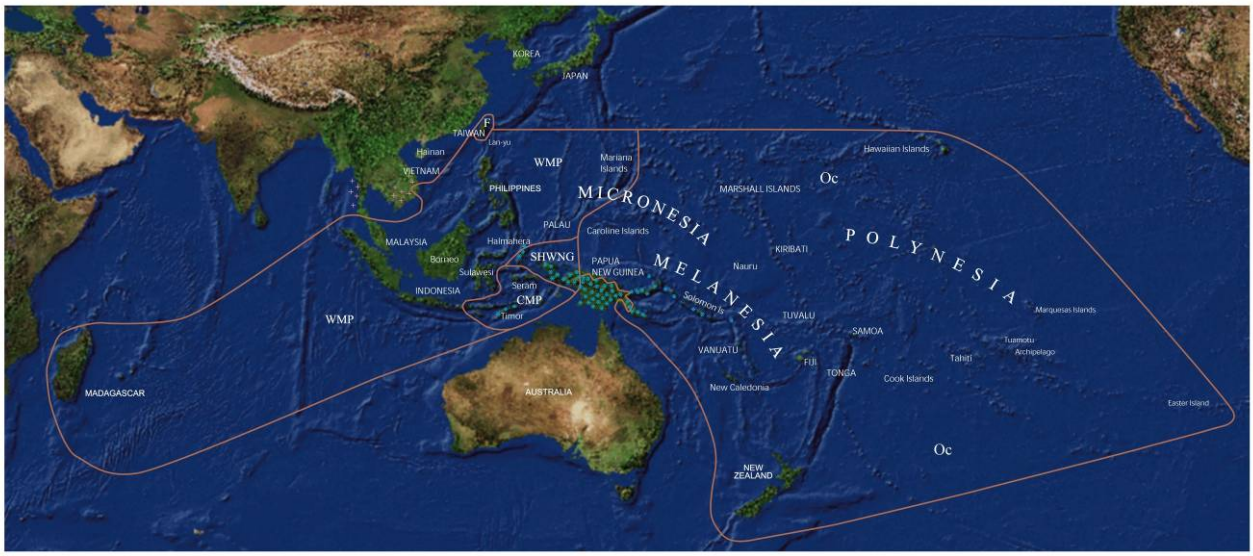
The Austronesian hypothesis, that more than a thousand languages spoken from Island SE Asia to Remote Oceania form a single language family, was first given its modern shape by Otto Dempwolff (1938). Most Austronesian languages have only a few thousand speakers, but Malay, Indonesian, Malagasy and Tagalog, number their speakers in the millions. Austronesian is spread from Taiwan to New Zealand, via Indonesia, Vietnam, Madagascar and the remote Pacific islands, and represents one of the most remarkable expansions in human history, premised on innovative maritime technology. It is generally thought to originated in Taiwan around 5500 BP. Austronesian culture is characterised by distinctive religious practice and a rich material culture.

Keywords; Austronesians; Indonesia; material culture; language

Introduction

The Austronesian hypothesis, that more than a thousand languages spoken from Island SE Asia to Remote Oceania form a single language family, was first given its modern shape by Otto Dempwolff (1938). The outlines of the Austronesian family were first recognised in the early eighteenth century by the Dutch scholar Adriaan van Reeland, who compared Malay, Malagasy and Polynesian (Relandus 1708). In the 1830s, the French navigator, Dumont d'Urville (1831), collected vocabularies in numerous Polynesian islands, not only noting the similarities between them, but proposing a trial of what would become lexicostatistical theory. Most Austronesian languages have only a few thousand speakers, but Malay, Indonesian, Malagasy and Tagalog, number their speakers in the millions. Map 1 shows its approximate distribution.

Map 1. The AN languages



When Dempwolff (1938) first advanced a linguistic hypothesis as to the kinship of numerous languages in the SE Asian and Oceanic region, it was clear that this could only be explained the expansion of a technologically advanced maritime people. However, the origin of the Austronesians remained a puzzle for some decades, until the second major figure in Austronesian studies, Isidore Dyen (1963), situated its source in the languages of the indigenous peoples of Taiwan. Robert Blust (1999) may have been the first author to clearly establish that the Formosan languages required them to be ancestral to all others and to constitute an array of primary branches. Blust (2013) represents the most comprehensive overview of the Austronesian language family and includes sections on archaeology and culture, as well as surveying the purely linguistic literature.

The linguistic hypothesis evidently required a correlation with archaeology. The Austronesian hypothesis was outlined by Peter Bellwood (1984/5) and Blust (1995) to model the archaeological evidence, whence emerged a story about the ancestors of the Austronesians leaving Taiwan around 4000 BP by means of a highly developed sailing technology. They colonised the furthest reaches of the Pacific and the 'Great Isle' off the coast of East Africa. Archaeologically, a Neolithic 'package' was identified, consisting of pigs, dogs and chickens, rice, pottery and stone adzes, as well as distinctive types of jewellery, such as the nephrite *linglingo* ornament. Various sub-narratives, such as the 'express-train to Polynesia', reached high-profile journals, and the idea acquired a certain currency in global prehistory (Diamond 2001).

This was an attractive model, and the engine of the Austronesian expansion was identified as agriculture, i.e. it was a demographic process, which would have settled and colonised the Philippines, before moving on to other islands. The region had long been inhabited by hunter-gatherers, and indeed if the recent reports of *Homo Luzonensis* are confirmed, the Philippines archipelago may have been reached (somehow!) by the

hominins who preceded *Homo sapiens* (ref). The non-Austronesian antecedent populations, physically similarly to Papuans, remain in existence today in remote areas of the Philippines and the Malay Peninsula.

Although Austronesian clearly was a maritime expansion, almost every other aspect of the Bellwood narrative turns out to have more leaks than a Thor Heyerdahl raft. Archaeology has signally failed to support this model. Lewis et al. (2008), Bulbeck (2008), Donohue & Denham (2010) and Blench (2009, 2012), have all argued that neither the archaeological assemblages nor the linguistic structures of Austronesian correspond to a simple model of incoming Neolithic farmers replacing foragers. Early sites show very similar dates across a wide geographical area, suggesting that the first phase of Austronesian expansion took place extremely rapidly (Spriggs 2011). Sites in the extreme south of Taiwan at the beginning of the fourth millennium BP such as O Luan Pi (I and II) show no evidence of agriculture (Kuang Ti 2000). Pigs and chickens have been shown to arrive via other routes, and rice is conspicuously absent in most early sites. The majority of pigs in the Southeast Asian Islands originate not from Taiwan, but from the mainland, probably Việt Nam (Hongo et al. 2002). Moreover, they are conspicuously absent from the archaeological record in the main islands until significantly later than the Austronesian expansion (Dobney et al. 2008).

If the existing paradigm of Austronesian migration is crumbling in the face of a conspicuous absence of archaeological evidence for some of its central claims, its replacement will be a far more nuanced account of the movement of plants, animals and other types of material culture in the Southeast Asian region. The 'fisher-foragers' of Bulbeck (2008) and the emphasis placed by Solheim (1984/5) on trade, may well be significant components in any new model. However, these views do not satisfactorily account for the extreme pervasiveness of the Austronesian languages, which must have replaced and assimilated a mosaic of language families in numerous different places in Island South East Asia (ISEA).

The Bellwood model of agricultural expansion is in its essence an updating of the Neolithic Revolution, characterised by Gordon Childe (1936) for the Near East. But the Austronesian expansion may represent an inversion of the Neolithic hypothesis; it was the consequence of an agricultural revolution that failed. We know that the Austronesian peoples of highland Taiwan were skilled practitioners of intensive cereal cultivation, both adopting species from outside and domesticating local grasses (Arnaud 1974). But when they left the island for the Philippines, these skills and cultigens were not transferred. The pondfield technology of the famous rice-terraces of Luzon are now not considered to be an inheritance from the field rice of Taiwan (Acabado 2014). The groups which left Taiwan and became the Yami, Itbayat and Chamorro, were instead fisher/forager/traders energized by a powerful religious ideology but with no tradition of cultivation or livestock production (Blench 2012).

This suggests that in addition to sailing technology and trade, the Austronesians must also have had an attractive social, organizational and religious ideology which persuaded the residents of individual islands to adopt Austronesian culture. This would certainly explain the extraordinary diffusion of certain iconographic elements, such as the *bulul* figure [woodcarvings of seated figures with their arms on their knees], the *linglingo* and others, long noted by art historians (Blench 2012).

Origin of the Austronesians on the Chinese mainland

In a strict sense, Austronesian originates on the island of Taiwan, simply because linguists generally agree that Formosan languages represent its primary branching. However, Austronesian-speakers were clearly not the first inhabitants of the island and must therefore have migrated from elsewhere. Taiwan has been inhabited for at least 25,000 years, and the original hunter-gatherer inhabitants were negritos similar those surviving in the Philippines today, represented by the cave site at Ch'ang-pin on the eastern coast and the sites of O-luan-pi II and Lung-K'eng in the south. They were displaced by incoming Neolithic populations from around 5500 BP (Tsang 1995, 2001; Rolett 2007; Bellwood 2007), migrants generally identified as the ancestors of the Austronesian peoples who are now the indigenous population, and must have arrived from the Chinese mainland. A link with the ceramic culture, Corded Ware or Ta Pen Keng (大坌坑), found on islands in the Taiwan Strait, was first proposed in Ferrell (1966:124) and was later taken up by a variety of authors, most recently Tsang (1992, 2005). However, it has so far proven difficult to connect early Taiwanese ceramics with a specific mainland horizon, although this is a very active topic of research

The Austronesian dispersal into Oceania

The Austronesian dispersal effectively had two very different modes, the complex spread in Island and Mainland SE Asia, where the migrants encountered resident populations and interacted both with them and eventually with large and well-organised polities such as China, and the expansion into Oceania, where apart from New Guinea, they were settling uninhabited islands. It was formerly thought that this process was quite gradual, but new radiocarbon dates and results from Ancient DNA, suggest that it was extremely rapid. Around 3200 BP, populations similar to those in the Taiwan Strait had reached the Admiralty Islands, off northeast New Guinea, and at that point the Lapita culture developed (ref). Lapita, marked by extremely fine ceramics, is marked by a rapid, explosive dispersal throughout the region. Ancient DNA from skulls in the Te Ouma cemetery on Vanuatu shows that the first settlers were still of basically mongoloid type and only later show evidence of mixing with Papuan phenotypes (Skoglund *et al*. 2016). These populations continued on to Fiji, Samoa, and then began the wide-ranging settlement of the Pacific we associate with the Polynesians.

The Chamic peoples of Vietnam

Throughout the centre of present-day Vietnam, there is a bloc of languages spoken by peoples who look culturally very much like their Austroasiatic neighbours, but whose linguistic affiliations are Austronesian (Thurgood 1999). These languages are known as Chamic, after the Hindu-Buddhist kingdom of Champa, known to Chinese historical chronicles as Lin Yi. The Cham themselves came under strong cultural influence from Hindu culture, although the other Chamic peoples remained traditionalists. Photo 1 shows the ruins of the largest Champa site at My Son in Central Việt Nam. The Champa controlled what is now southern and central Vietnam from approximately the 7th century until 1832. The Chinese over-ran Lin Yi in 446 AD, but a new Champa kingdom arose further south. Champa spoke an Austronesian language, and the first known inscriptions in an Austronesian language are in old Cham (Southworth 2004). Champa was constantly embroiled in military conflict with its Vietnamese neighbours further north and the Đại Việt overran the northern Cham capital at Indrapura in 982 AD while in 1471 AD the southern Cham capital of Vijaya also fell. In 1697, the southern principality of Panduranga became a vassal of the Vietnamese emperor and in 1832, the Vietnamese emperor Minh Mang annexed the remaining Cham territories.

Photo 1. Champa remains at My Son, Central Vietnam

Source: Author photo

Photo 2. Jarai tomb

Source: Author photo

The great majority of speakers of Chamic languages were not associated with Champa, but spread inland as farmers and hunters, becoming the

montagnards beloved of French ethnographers. Small independent peoples practising slash-and-burn agriculture in the highlands, they rapidly assimilated to their Austroasiatic neighbours. Some however, maintained spectacular cultural practices inherited from their island roots. Photo 2, for example, shows a characteristic tomb of the Jarai people in Central Vietnam, surrounded by carvings more typical of Indonesia.

The rise of Srivijaya and the spread of the Malay language

One of the major influences on the pattern of Austronesian in Indonesia was the rise of the Srivijaya trading empire. From around the sixth century AD, a new power began to emerge in the region, with access to large, fast ships. Its exact origin is disputed, but it may well have been in Kalimantan, in the region of today's Banjarmasin. However, the first stone inscription to record the name is the Kedang Bukit inscription in the area of Palembang, Sumatra, dated 682 AD. Srivijaya underwrote the expansion of the Malay and Malay type languages, across from the Raja Ampat islands in the east to Sumatra in the west. Srivijaya was well-known to Chinese historians and our first description is by a monk, Yi Jing, who spent six months in Srivijaya in 671 AD. By the ninth century, Srivijaya was sufficiently well established to mount a raid of 'a thousand ships' on the East African coast, in the quest for ivory and slaves. Map 2 summarises some aspects of the chronology of the expansion of Srivijaya. By the 13th century, Srivijaya was in decline, through competition from new trading empires, such as the Javanese Majapahit polity.

Map 2. The expansion of Srivijaya

Source: Wikipedia

Sea nomads pioneer early trade routes

Sea nomadism is a unique and characteristic subsistence strategy found in the Indonesian archipelago reflecting a confluence of sophisticated maritime technology and resources scattered across thousands of islands. The sea nomads in Island SE Asia fall into three major groups, Samalic or Sama-Bajaw, the Orang Laut of Eastern Sumatra and the Riau islands, and the Moken/Moklen complex of the Andaman Sea, west of Thailand and Myanmar (Map 3). Sea nomads typically live on their boats and follow both trade routes and migrations of fish, exchanging marine products for staple foodstuffs and manufactured goods (Photo 3).

Photo 3. Typical Bajar Laut houseboat

Source: Author

All the languages are part of mainstream subgroups of Austronesian, Malayic or Greater Barito. This strongly suggests that, unlike marginal foragers in other parts of the world, the evolution of sea-nomad society is tied to historical events over the last two thousand years. The answer may be that technological

and mercantile innovation was a force sufficiently powerful to completely replace the more informal, dispersed and linguistically diverse networks that previously existed. As the Malay languages spread out from Borneo that trading networks developed rapidly. This almost certainly was initiated with the growth of the Srivijaya trading empire from the 6-7th century onwards. The evolution of mercantile sea-traders did not end with the Samal. Later groups such as the Buginese and Makassarese of Sulawesi (who probably originate as a distinct identity in the 16th century) also serviced the commercial networks.

Map 3. Distribution of sea nomads in Indonesia

The spread of writing systems

Writing systems in the Austronesian world are somewhat fragmentary but all are derived in some way from the Indian script families. They begin with inscribed objects in Sanskrit, such as those at Oc Eo in Vietnam, the earliest of which may be 2nd century AD. Since they occur on small objects, these may be imported trade goods and not local. However, the Vo Canh inscription, 3rd century AD, is in Khan Hoa province, south Vietnam, is clearly locally inscribed (De Casparis 1975). Adaptations of Indic scripts are best attested for the near islands of SE Asia such as Java and Bali, as well the mainland inscriptions of the Champa kingdom. However, some little-used scripts also exist in the Philippine islands, as well as intriguing graphemes on archaeological finds, may or may not represent attempts at writing. A common practice, derived from Indic culture, was to make the leaves of books from the palmyra palm, *lontara* (Photo 4).

Photo 4. Balinese lontar manuscript

The Batak script, *surat Batak*, is used in northern Sumatra, mainly for magical texts and calendars. Batak script was probably derived from Pallava and Old Kawi. Photo 5 shows a typical Batak book.

More striking and hard to interpret are some of the early writing systems in the Philippines. Photo 7 shows one of the Monreal stones found in 2011 on Ticao Island, Masbate. Although the writing system resembles other Philippines scripts in general, it has so far proven difficult to interpret.

Photo 5. Batak book

Source: Author collection

Java, the rise of the centralised kingdoms of Indonesia

When Europeans first reached Island SE Asia, they encountered the long established kingdoms, on Java, characterisd by huge populations densities and fed by elaborate terraced rice cultivation. The first kingdoms we know about appeared in western Java in the 4th and 7th centuries respectively, the Taruma and Sunda kingdoms. In central Java, the first major principality, the Medang Kingdom was founded at the beginning of the 8th century. These polities were all Hindu Buddhist and one of the more dramatic surviving temple complexes, Prambanan, built by the Sailendra dynasty in Kedu Plain, is profoundly Hindu in its imagery. Around 850 AD, the remarkable complex at Borobudur was constructed, with a more Buddhist orientation, but remarkably, was allowed to go under the jungle, only to be rediscovered by Sir Stamford Raffles in 1814 (Photo 6). Borobudur is remarkable for the carved stone friezes which surround the terraces of the temple, which depict many scenes of everyday life at the period. By the sixteenth century, the expanding Islamic trade of SE Asia, resulted in the conversion of the Buddhist rulers to Islam, and Java is today fully Muslim, with only the island of Bali retaining Hindu culture.

Photo 7. Monreal inscribed stone

Source: Author photo, Philippines Museum of Anthropology

Photo 6. Borobudur

Source: Author Photo

Human and plant genetics

Needless to say, an expansion as clear-cut as Austronesian has attracted the attention of geneticists. From Capelli et al. (2001) studies, first of mtDN, then paternal DNA and now whole genome resolution have attempted to track the migrations of the Austronesians. The literature is already vast, but Lipson et al. (2014) provides a useful summary. Broadly speaking, the 'out-of-Taiwan' hyphteiss is confirmed. For Austronesian populations in Island SE Asia, the results are complex, as would be expected from the mixing with indigenous peoples that occurred. A striking case study concerns the island of Nias, part of the Barrier islands west of Sumatra. Nias shows astonishing genetic and linguistic uniformity, despite settlement for than 12,000 years ago (Forestier et al. 2005). This can be attributed to a settlement and language-levelling event as little as 600 years ago, obliquely recorded in the *hoho* or historical chants (Kennerknecht, Hämmerle & Blench 2012).

Geneticists have also begun to look at disease markers as evidence for migration. A study of specific human pathogen *Helicobacter pylori*, hspMaori, shows a very strong association with Austronesian populations, linking Taiwan with the New Zealand Maori, and marking a western dispersal along the coast of Vietnam into Indonesia (Moodey et al 2009). Trejaut et al (2011) studied the distribution of nasopharyngeal carcinoma, which again confirms an 'out-of-Taiwan' pattern. Plants and animals also travelled with the Austronesians. One of the most well-known is the Polynesian rat, *Rattus exulans*, which travelled with the Austronesians into the Pacific (West et al. 2017). A recent study of the DNA of the paper mulberry, *Broussonettia papyrifera,* has shown that its distribution corresponds extremely well to the Austronesian dispersal (Chang et al. 2015).

Conclusion

The Austronesian expansion has been revealed as one of the great migration stories of human history, settling the region from Easter Island to Madagascar in a series of bold navigations, the mechanisms of which we are still only beginning to understand. Without writing systems or iron, with only stars, winds and ocean currents as navigational tools, they were able to reach some of the most remote places on the earth. Establishing themselves in modern-day Indonesia, they created the first great maritime trading empire, a thousand years before the European seaborne expansion. Their art, music and culture has drawn the admiration of Europe since the first encounters in the sixteenth century. However, as recent research shows, much remains to be done to understand the more nuanced history of these peoples.