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A highway and a crossroads: Island Southeast Asia and culture contact archaeology

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Abstract

Island Southeast Asia has several distinctive elements of its archaeological and documentary record that make it a particularly fertile region in which to further explore and develop theories of culture contact and cross-cultural interaction. In contrast to the traditional view of other regions, such as pre-European contact North America, archaeologists have always seen Island Southeast Asia as a zone of cross-cultural interaction, or as a passageway for migrations to other areas. Despite this potential, the region remains relatively under-explored archaeologically, and problems of cross-cultural interaction have not been the orientation for most of the archaeological research that has been done. There are several possible explanations for this relative lack of focus: this paper will review several case studies that demonstrate how additional research can contribute to general theory about the interaction of human social groups.

Island Southeast Asia as highway or crossroads?

Archaeological (and historical) interest in Island Southeast Asia has been largely based on the conception of the region as being *between* other places of interest (Wisseman Christie 1995). Archaeological interest in the earliest modern human occupation of the region (60–35,000 BP), for example, has been oriented primarily towards finding the routes of the first migrations from Asia to Australia (Bellwood 1997, 1998; Spriggs 1998a, 1998b; Spriggs *et al.* 1998; Veth *et al.* 1998). Similarly, interest in the period from 4500–2500 BP is primarily focused on tracing the spread of Neolithic innovation from its source in Taiwan to its easternmost expression as Lapita in Melanesia, where the highway becomes a high-speed expressway for some (e.g. Bellwood 1997; Diamond 1988; cf. Oppenheimer and Richards 2001). For later periods (2500–500 BP), research initially focused on understanding the relationship between the cultures of India and China, which met or collided in mainland and island Southeast Asia (Coedés 1968), although archaeology of this time period has more recently been concerned with internal developments. However, by and large, the Island Southeast Asian archaeological record has served to provide evidence for migration chronologies and routes to and from other places. While some researchers with a "highway" orientation have suggested that a "crossroads" focus would be interesting and relevant to current theoretical debates (e.g. Spriggs 2000:65), few have addressed interaction specifically, especially for periods predating 2500 BP. Highway focused Island Southeast Asianists have bucked the trends in general archaeological theory that have swung between migration and diffusion (or its more recent theoretical manifestations), which are only recently swinging back towards revisiting migration (Adams *et al.* 1978; Bronson 1992; Burmeister 2000; Härke 1998; Loofs 1993).

The archaeology of post 2500 BP periods provides a useful model for the study of cross-cultural interaction that might be applied to earlier periods. It is during this later period that archaeologists see increasing social "complexity" in the region, marked by the development of chiefdoms and early states, the growing importance of maritime trade and resulting cultural influences and contacts from the outside world, including China, India, the Arab world and eventually Europe. The earliest surviving written documents that describe Island Southeast Asia date to this period, and are both texts written by "foreign" observers from China and India, and, later, "indigenous" texts, the earliest surviving examples being stone inscriptions. As early as 2000 BP, these documents strongly suggest that there were communities in Island Southeast Asia that were regularly visited by traders and missionaries from distant places (Glover 1990; Ray 1989; Rockhill 1915). Archaeologically, there is also definitive evidence of this interaction, including the existence of exotic trade goods from mainland Asia and the subcontinent, and exotic styles, such as Hindu-Buddhist temple styles replicated in western Indonesia. Archaeologists working in Island Southeast Asia could take a closer look at the region as a crossroads rather than as solely a highway. A crossroads focus brings to mind a number of research questions. A not very exhaustive list could include the following:

1. What was the nature of pre-Neolithic trade and exchange? Are there similarities between these trade systems and those used in Neolithic and later periods?
2. If we concur with currently prevailing theories about the Austronesian expansion into island Southeast Asia and beyond, how did these new immigrants interact

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with non-Austronesian people? For example, did Austronesian immigrants initially colonize areas considered marginal by non-Austronesians, such as smaller and drier islands, which required agriculture and better navigation, fishing and water storage technologies? Did a new settlement pattern resulting from cross-cultural interaction provide the stimulus for development of more sophisticated Austronesian maritime culture, which is often theorized by Lapita researchers to have occurred in Island Southeast Asia, but is as yet untested? Does contemporary linguistic and biological diversity (such as the pockets of non-Austronesian speakers in eastern Indonesia) have any relationship to archaeological evidence for this migration and interaction process?

3. Was the introduction of metal to the region beginning by approximately 2000 BP accompanied by new populations of traders from the Asian mainland? Are there any similarities between the patterns of foreigner accommodation in this period and earlier or later situations?

Some will argue that existing data from Island Southeast Asia is entirely inadequate to address these questions. I would counter that while this may be the case now, future research will require problem oriented efforts to gather data useful for these questions, and that the region is important enough to warrant those efforts. In some cases, these efforts are already underway; below is a brief sampling of case studies that demonstrate the potential for future research.

Social complexity and Indianization

One example where Southeast Asian archaeological research has been particularly focused on cross-cultural interaction is the ongoing debate on "Indianization". The traditional view has been that state formation in western Indonesia required the import of people and ideas from India (e.g. Coedés 1968). Other theorists, such as van Leur (van Leur 1967), proposed the then radical theory that Indonesians took an active role in the process of state formation, although even he still believed that the one-way transmission of ideas from India to Indonesia was the essential catalyst.

More recently, and as more data from both India and Indonesia became available, some theorists have proposed that state development was the result of a two-way exchange of ideas, technology and people. Kulke proposed a "convergence hypothesis" that used new data on state development in the Bay of Bengal region of India, which had the most direct contact with Island Southeast Asia, along with precise dating of architectural style shifts in both regions to demonstrate that states developed in both regions at about the same time, and to show influences on architecture traveled in both directions (Kulke 1990). Others have taken a critical look at data on exotic materials, which has suffered from an art historical perspective and over-reliance on stylistic analyses. Theunissen *et al.* (2000) used materials analysis to look at agate and carnelian beads of purported Indian origin found in Southeast Asian sites, and found that many of them are of local origin. This supports theory that has Southeast Asian political developments owing as much to local innovation as to Indian influences, and has other important implications regarding the role of the production and trade in prestige goods in political developments. Others have found evidence of Indian connections with regions east of what was previously assumed to be the limit of direct Indian contact, which could allow for comparative case studies of state development between areas with different developmental trajectories (Ardika and Bellwood 1997; Ardika *et al.* 1996).

Others have investigated the unusual nature of Southeast Asian states, which seem to lack archaeological evidence for large urban centers. Miksic suggests that Southeast Asian cities were different because of factors unique to tropical settlements, such as maintaining a water supply and limiting the spread of disease (Miksic 1999, 2000a). Allen's geoarchaeological analysis suggests that we may be looking in the wrong places for coastal trading settlements, since the coastlines of Sumatra and the Malay Peninsula have prograded rapidly. Similarly, those settlements previously thought of as inland may have been on the coast in the past, and thus need to be re-interpreted as places where cross-cultural interaction took place (Allen 1991, 1998). Bulbeck has investigated the origins of the Bugis state in south Sulawesi, and found intriguing discontinuities between Bugis texts, which describe heroic Bugis migration and conquest of the Luwu region, and archaeological data which suggest long term stability and prestige trade predating the supposed Bugis conquest (Bulbeck 1992; Bulbeck and Prasetyo 2000).

All of these studies have implications for the study of cross-cultural interaction because they document local developments in the context of large regional scale interactions and influences. This type of approach, which represents a move away from simplistic explanations for change attributed to external "civilizations" to more sophisticated ones that consider both internal forces and localized accommodations of foreigners, is mirrored in shifts away from acculturation in general culture contact theory (Cusick 1998). Features of this shift include a focus on the two-way transfer of ideas, influences and technologies in contact situations, an increased concern with the specific mechanisms of information transfer and a related focus on local uses and meanings of foreign ideas and material objects.

Islam, world trade and the European encounter

Another body of research in the region that falls under the domain of culture contact studies is focused on the process by which Islam became the dominant religion in much of Island Southeast Asia. Indianization and Islamization theory building have followed similar paths,

but with some important differences. While it is clear that the foundations of the Islamic belief system originated in regions far removed from Island Southeast Asia, Muslim identity and practice in the region has always been seen as locally unique. Unlike traditional views of early state development and Hindu-Buddhist practice, Islam in Island Southeast Asia has always been seen, at least by outside observers, as having local meanings and influences from pre-existing indigenous belief systems. Even the earliest texts describing Muslim practice in Island Southeast Asia tended to emphasize its difference from Muslim practice in the Middle East. Early Arab visitors to the region were often appalled by unorthodoxies (Tibbetts 1979), while early European visitors, who may have been looking for excuses to engage in trade with Southeast Asians in an anti-Islam climate, were less judgmental but equally curious about different practices (Pires and Rodrigues 1944; Reid 1993a). The distinction between Southeast Asian and Middle Eastern Islam is maintained in western academic analyses (Geertz 1960; Milner 1983; Ricklefs 1979, 1993).

Many studies have brought into focus the different ways individual actors strategically utilized and manipulated available religious dogma, including fundamentalist Islam, Hindu-Buddhist thought, ancestor worship and animism (e.g. Anderson 1990; Geertz 1960). Most western academic historians of Island Southeast Asian Islam depict its history in terms of these kinds of processes. Johns (1995), for example, has reevaluated the role of the Sufi mystic, particularly in spreading a text-centered religion like Islam through the largely non-literate world of 13th-17th century Island Southeast Asia. In the framework of culture contact theory, this concern with local difference could be seen as innovative. However, as studies of the history of Islam in Island Southeast Asia have been almost entirely dependent on documentary evidence, this concern can be attributed to biases inherent in the data. Some researchers have worked to transcend these biases by critically analyzing local texts within local contexts through lenses of local politics and history (Bowen 1989), or relationships to the diversity of Muslim practice in other places (Feener 1998; Hooker 1983; Johns 1995).

Still, archaeological data has yet to add much to the discussion, though it should have a significant contribution to make. Archaeological data has been used to interpret the Islamization process in other parts of the Muslim world (e.g. Insoll 1996, 1999), and archaeologists have found new ways of inferring religion from the archaeological record (e.g. Fennell 1998). However, the power of archaeological data to provide an alternative line of evidence that is independent of documents produced in the politically charged conflict between Islam and Christianity in the early modern era has not been tapped extensively.

The relatively few archaeological studies that address Islamization in Island Southeast Asia suggest that the history of the process is considerably more complex than can be inferred from written record. Archaeologists have often seen Islam as a pervasive force that swept over Island Southeast Asia leaving a transformed society in its wake. But in local situations, Islam is better conceptualized as a diverse set of beliefs held by Muslim and non-Muslim people acting in self interested ways in historically constituted situations set in environmental contexts.

Intertwined with the spread of Islamic influence from the Middle East and India to Island Southeast Asia is the arrival of the first European visitors to the region beginning in the early sixteenth century AD (Steenbrink 1993). The first sustained interactions between Europe and Island Southeast Asia began in 1512, after the Portuguese conquest of Malacca opened the trade routes to Iberian merchants. While there is some textual data about pre-European foreign contacts in the region, particularly in Chinese records, the amount of written material available to contemporary scholars increases substantially after 1512, and increases again after Dutch and English trading companies found their way to the region in the last years of the sixteenth century. There has been much historical scholarship on the nature of cultural entanglement between Europeans, Southeast Asians and other groups living in the East Indies in the early modern era. The body of textual data has been mined extensively and scholars have produced both wide ranging narratives and nuanced, fine textured case studies that have contributed much to our understanding of culture contact in the so-called early modern era (e.g. Abdurachman 1978; Andaya 1993; Andaya and Andaya 1995; Beekman 1996; Blussé 1986; Bohigian 1994; Boon 1990; Boxer 1965, 1969; Chaudhuri 1990; Geertz 1980; Goodman 1998; Henley 1993; Jacobs 1985; Meilink-Roelofsz 1962; Reid 1993b, 1993c; Ricklefs 1993; Sears 1996; Soedjatmoko 1965; Stoler 1985).

My research on Islam and European incursions during the late pre-colonial period in the Banda Islands of Eastern Indonesia suggests that the influence of Islam cannot be disassociated from the people who brought its ideas to Southeast Asia, their social networks, particularly trade networks, and other localized factors as diverse as the effects of eating or not eating pigs on local ecological systems and the geographic situation of maritime trade ports and settlements. Many of these factors can be assessed only through archaeological data, although the explanatory power of this data is considerably enhanced by documentary, environmental and geographical evidence. For example, historians have concluded that the Bandanese converted en masse to Islam in the mid-fourteenth century, and that they were united in opposition to Portuguese and Dutch efforts to convert them to Christianity as well as to control trade and land (Hanna 1978; Masselman 1963; Villiers 1981). However, archaeological evidence suggests that Muslim foodways were practiced in the islands at least a century before the mid-fourteenth century, and that non-Muslim practice continued well afterwards. Muslims and non-Muslims appear to have coexisted during the late pre-colonial period, and it was this complex and dynamic situation that Europeans encountered beginning in 1512 (Lape 2000a, 2000b, 2000c, 2002).

Relative to archaeological studies of earlier periods, however, post-sixteenth century archaeological data from Island Southeast Asia is extremely rare. Not surprisingly, very few if any historians have utilized this limited archaeological contribution which, compared to the riches still to be found in the archives, is very poor indeed. However, there is much to suggest that this era holds considerable potential for archaeological data to provide new insights into the complex cross-cultural interactions caused by Island Southeast Asia's encounter with Europe.

Spatial and temporal comparisons

One of the common products of colonialism is a documentary record written from the point of view of the colonizers. Colonial narratives often serve state and individual colonial objectives, such as de-emphasizing indigenous innovation and resistance, emphasizing core-periphery relationships and the presumed cultural, economic and biological superiority of the colonizers (Thurston 1997; Trouillot 1995). In other regions, archaeology has been used to access information about the lives of "those of little note" (Scott 1994), providing an alternate view of the colonial process that can be cast back on the documentary record, providing new insights. One factor that gives Island Southeast Asia unique potential is that the documentary record extends for many centuries before first contact with Europe. In comparison to the situation in other colonized regions, such as the Americas, Australia, Oceania and Southern Africa, there is a corpus of descriptive texts about the inhabitants of Island Southeast Asia from different times and different cultural perspectives. In some cases, this data can have the effect of de-emphasizing the "impact" of foreigner intrusions by situating them in a context of long-term changes and trajectories (e.g. Swadling 1996; Torrence 2000), although the divide in between prehistoric and historic archaeology (more prevalent in Americanist archaeology than in others, perhaps) can interfere with the ability of archaeologists to compare archaeological data between periods (Lightfoot 1995).

Junker has used this unique potential in her studies of social change in the Philippines in the 10th to 17th centuries AD (Junker 1993, 1998, 1999). In her work, Chinese, Arab and Spanish texts and Malay oral traditions provide disparate narratives about the nature of foreigner interactions and political developments. These are compared with a set of archaeological data from the same time period regarding local and long distance trade and social organization at a variety of spatial scales. Contradictions between texts serve to both expose biases and illuminate context of their production, and ultimately to generate questions for the archaeological data. The result is an analysis of Philippine political development that allows for anthropologists to compare Philippine chiefdoms with other chiefdom-like societies while avoiding the "overhomogenization" that often results from attempts at broad comparisons (Junker 1998:292).

In Indonesia, Stark and Latinis have investigated the effects of increased long distance trade on local subsistence strategies, where archaeological data provides a long term background picture as a means of understanding short term, colonial period changes (Stark and Latinis 1996). My studies of Muslim identity in the Banda Islands also used texts from multiple cultural and temporal perspectives, including Chinese, Arab, Javanese, Portuguese and Dutch, to investigate the links between local settlement and religious identity (Lape 2000b, 2000c). As with Junker's work, contradictions between texts provided an analytical portal, which helped generate questions for the archaeological data, while patterns in archaeological settlement data suggested questions to be cast against the texts. While lacking the wealth of archaeological data collected by and available to Junker, this small scale study illuminated the local diversity of reactions to culture contact. They also highlighted how useful it can be to have a case study of a society that has been through several, historically documented episodes of cross-cultural interaction. Comparing these various episodes has the potential, as yet under exploited, to expose generalities that might apply to other episodes in other regions of the world.

Intriguingly, the Philippines have been the locus of the majority of archaeological studies of the eras postdating the arrival of Europeans (see also Bacus 1999; Skowronek 1998). Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore have seen comparatively less attention paid to the archaeology of colonialism, and those studies that have been published to date have been primarily descriptive reports (Manning *et al.* 1980; McKinnon 1984; Miksic 2000b; Miksic *et al.* 1995). For Indonesia, the reasons for this lack may be a national focus by Indonesian archaeologists on the preservation of large Hindu-Buddhist architecture, combined with the relative difficulty of access by non-Indonesian archaeologists (Tanudirjo 1995). It is not difficult to see the incredible potential for studies of this nature throughout the region, and hopefully, future practitioners will add to the as yet underdeveloped corpus of site specific and regional data.

Unsolved problems in the archaeology of culture contact

Evidence for cross-cultural contact comes from many different and often conflicting sources, and researchers have had some difficulty interpreting, disentangling and reconciling these lines of evidence. Archaeological evidence for contact has been in the form of exotic materials and styles (e.g. obsidian, pottery, architecture) sourced to distant locations. The sudden appearance of new cultural or behavioral remains is often attributed to contact or the influx of new social groups, classic examples being "Islamization", or the sudden appearance of the Lapita material culture complex in neighboring Melanesia. Documentary evidence, such as descriptions of "others" (written by foreigners, locals or third parties)

is used to infer the interactions of multiple social groups. Linguistic and biological evidence is often used to infer cross-cultural interaction in the region, although both lines of evidence lack absolute dating methods to determine chronology, which has hampered the reconciliation of that evidence with archaeological and documentary data. Framing and guiding all of this evidence are conceptualizations of culture, ethnicity and social interaction held by researchers. Many pitfalls lie in the path of those who would like to synthesize these data sets and make some sense out of was undoubtedly a dynamic, confusing and nonsensical past. Major unsolved theoretical issues remain a barrier to assembling and interpreting the evidence.

For example, studies of culture contact must assume that two or more "cultures" can be seen in the record, and that changes can be tracked in each "culture" as the interaction process unfolds. However, archaeologists have a difficult time making sense of social identity in the archaeological record. Archaeological analysis of social identity is often based on an assumed simple relationship between artifact style or assemblage makeup and social group (Conkey 1990). For example pots of a certain style are all assumed to have been made and used by people from a coherent, bounded social group. Ethnographic and ethnoarchaeological research has now for several decades shown that this assumed simple relationship between style and social identity is not valid, and that the relationship is in fact extremely complex, although situation-specific patterns can be observed in many cases (Beaudry *et al.* 1991; Hodder 1981, 1985). These studies of contemporary situations suggest that the production and use of style is more accurately seen as one expression of social identity, an aspect of human life that seems to be both primordial and strategically constructed (Bourdieu 1977). In response, there has been a gradual re-assessment of acculturation theory, which had been the dominant framework for archaeologists linking change in material culture to social changes in cross-cultural interaction (Andren 1998; Cusick 1998). However, while some theorists have made progress in reconciling anthropological understandings of ethnicity with archaeology (Jones 1997; Stark 1998), it remains unclear to me whether archaeologists can actually use this more sophisticated understanding of social identity to understand contact situations (Lilley 2000).

Both archaeologists and historians face a second obstacle, which is the difficulty of keeping track of social identity in fluid, complex situations when individuals from these groups come together and both they and their group's identity are transformed by the experience over time, and in succeeding generations (Sahlins 1981, 1985). How do we continue to name and track "English", "Dutch", "Iroquois", "Chinese", etc. when the categories have so many different and ever changing meanings and forms of expression, and when individuals can switch between them so easily? Reid, for example, claims that ethnic and social boundaries were unusually permeable in early modern Island Southeast Asia, although that permeability may have only applied to European imposed categories (Reid 1988). Even if we assume social identity is innate and derives from place of birth or parents, how do we identify children of English parents born in India, children of mixed parentage, and successive generations? While Lightfoot, for example, accurately characterizes "boundary situations" as places where these categories are dynamic, he lacks the language to describe them, falling back inevitably on "Russian" or "Miwok" (Lightfoot and Martinez 1995). The most successful studies of contact situations pay close attention to these categories, their changing meanings, and individual identity strategies (e.g. Stoler 1985, 1989; Taylor 1983). Even with a theoretical orientation towards assuming human agency as a factor in the production of the archaeological record (Dobres and Robb 2000), it remains unclear how archaeological data can be used to infer social identity in the absence of other lines of evidence such as texts, although a large and detailed body of archaeological evidence have provided the foundations of some studies that approach this goal (Dietler 1998; Shennan 1989).

A third set of obstacles lies in the history of the discipline of archaeology. One example is the underlying "myth of the primitive isolate" (Terrell 1998), the pervasive assumption that nonliterate people lived socially isolated lives, with little or no contact with "outsiders". This myth has contributed to the still living assumption that contact between Europeans and "Natives" was an unprecedented event, one that completely transformed the foundations of "Native" social systems e.g. (Fitzhugh 1985; Sahlins 1981). The dramatic power of written accounts of "first contacts" has helped emphasize this notion (Connolly and Anderson 1987), though in most cases it is not clear for whom the contact experience is a "first". While these contact events no doubt happened, cross-cultural interactions are long-term processes, which, ironically, should be particularly well suited to archaeological analysis (Schortman and Urban 1998). However, even in the western Pacific, where archaeological data suggests that people maintained interactions with others for millennia over extremely long, open ocean pathways e.g. (Bellwood and Koon 1989; Ray 1989), links between "prehistoric" and "historic" contact continue to be ignored or de-emphasized.

Conclusions

It is difficult to say (and perhaps irrelevant) whether Island Southeast Asia has been the locus of new theoretical developments in culture contact theory, or has simply following innovations established elsewhere. However, there is much to suggest that the data available could help advance culture contact theory in several important ways. First, it is well established that the region has been a crossroads of humanity from its earliest settlement through the present day. The archaeology of early periods in the region has not suffered from the theoretical

baggage of the "myth of the primitive isolate" as is common in other parts of the world. Secondly, a documentary record stretching back over two millennia, and written from a variety of cultural perspectives, can allow archaeologists to explore social identity in ways that are impossible using the archaeological record alone. Third, multiple episodes of culture contact and cross-cultural interaction have taken place in the region, and their effects have been recorded in both the documentary and material records, and echo in contemporary linguistic and genetic patterns. The combination of these factors means that Island Southeast Asia has tremendous, if yet unrealized, potential to expand our understanding of the causes and effects of culture contact and cross-cultural interaction both locally and worldwide.

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