

DIVERSITY, CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN THE BISMARCK ARCHIPELAGO,  
PAPUA NEW GUINEA

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We want in this opening paper to set the scene concerning the nature of the debates on meaning of the archaeological record from the Bismarck Archipelago (New Britain, New Ireland and the Admiralties group). These papers were produced for Session 4 of the 1990 IPPA conference, the overall theme of which was "the genesis of Indo-Pacific populations". Thus the dominating topic of the papers presented here is the coming into being of the various linguistic and cultural groups existing in the Pacific today. Of particular interest has been the origin of Austronesian speakers, especially those groups which became the Polynesians. In archaeological terms a link has often been made between Lapita assemblages and the incursions of Austronesian speakers into Oceania.

For those not familiar with the debate, the two positions taken are basically as follows. Some see Lapita assemblages as reflecting some form of social unity, which is termed either a cultural complex or a people. This cultural complex then becomes the basis for later cultural forms, particularly those known as the Polynesians. Others see Lapita as a series of assemblages behind which we cannot necessarily see any ethnic unity. What the apparent uniformity of material culture over a wide area of the western Pacific and over a long period of time means is considered as a problem with no easy answer. This group feels uneasy about translating archaeological evidence laid down over long time spans into ethnic or cultural terms ultimately derived from synchronic analysis.

A session on ethnogenesis seemed a perfect opportunity to discuss how far these competing ideas can provide a framework for interpreting the prehistory of the Bismarck Archipelago and the western Pacific. Our purpose here is not to set up an antagonistic debate but rather to refine our theoretical and practical definitions in order to research and debate more productively.

The last five years have witnessed a major shift in focus in the study of the prehistory of the western Pacific. For several decades the dominant concerns of archaeologists working in coastal Near Oceania were with sites with Lapita pottery and with Polynesian ancestry. Such emphasis was not surprising given the fact that much early archaeological work was based in New Zealand and Hawaii, both of which had Polynesian populations which

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lacked a pre-Polynesian prehistory. The development of archaeological courses in Australian universities in the 1960's brought a counterbalance, with greater emphasis on Papua New Guinea and the Pleistocene period. More recently, the emergence of indigenous archaeologists in Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands has reinforced concerns that these groups have valid prehistories of their own which should not be subordinated to any other region.

The Lapita Homeland Project of 1985, centred on the Bismarck Archipelago, provided an intellectual as well as practical bridge between Papua New Guinea and the rest of the Pacific, by focusing on the major islands of Papua New Guinea rather than the mainland. The discovery of Pleistocene sites on both New Britain and New Ireland has given the area dual significance. On the one hand it has produced Pleistocene evidence from the islands which links into questions of movements out of Southeast Asia onto the larger landmasses of Australia and Papua New Guinea over 30,000 years ago. On the other hand it has provided an immensely expanded timespan over which we can examine the colonisation of the islands of the Pacific. The process of continental and insular colonisation have thus been connected.

These new discoveries have changed the position of the Lapita period as an episode of colonisation. We now realise that Lapita assemblages appear after 90% of the period of human occupation of the Bismarck Archipelago had elapsed. A reassessment of Lapita assemblages in this region is also necessitated by new data from the Lapita sites themselves on pottery, plant use and human skeletal remains. New data thus necessitate new ideas. It is to a critical survey of the ideas applied to Bismarck's prehistory that we now turn and consider the two different models of colonisation.

#### LAPITA AS CULTURAL COMPLEX OR A PEOPLE.

The core of this model is that the Lapita assemblages represent some sort of social or cultural unity which was capable of maintaining itself over long periods. Social unity is seen to have been originally provided by language (the Proto-Oceanic branch of Austronesian), social formations which involve some form of differentiation or hierarchy, and stability in material culture. Material culture is of course crucial as it provides the direct archaeological evidence of social unity. Lapita assemblages are seen to evolve in a continuous and unbroken fashion into later Melanesian and Polynesian artefactual repertoires. Differentiation from others was provided by genetic stability, where some form of genetic distance from previous inhabitants of the Western Pacific was maintained. Language, social formation, material culture and genetics were combined into a stable package which can be differentiated from the Others, the non-Austronesian inhabitants of the western Pacific. In what is today Melanesia these non-Austronesian elements are seen to have gradually mixed together with Austronesian to form the cultural diversity of present day Melanesia. The peoples of Polynesia, on the other hand, derive from a pure, undiluted Austronesian inheritance. The idea of ancestry is very important to this model, as it is seen that the crucial features of life in Polynesia derive from the ancestral Proto-Oceanic stock, through descent with modification.

The pragmatic programme entailed by this model is firstly to search for the origins of Austronesian culture somewhere to the west of the Bismarck Archipelago and to outline the timing and nature of its spread into the western Pacific. Once the Lapita cultural complex was established in Oceania after 3500 BP it is then necessary to chart its spatial and temporal limits, how local variants were established and how each local variant developed into the cultural forms known today. On a more detailed level the cultural complex model prompts research into how various aspects of society are reflected in material culture. It is crucially important to know how aspects of production, exchange and social hierarchy are made manifest in a material form. Here much of the analytical strain is taken by pottery (both fabric and decoration), together with the changing forms of obsidian exploitation and use.

The strengths of this model are that it provides a readily understood narrative structure for the archaeological evidence and creates a most suitable framework for interpreting Polynesian prehistory. It focuses on topics of social structure and social interaction, which must be tackled by any research programme. Finally, it binds together linguistic, physical anthropological and archaeological data into a coherent package. The weaknesses of this model are that it provides a single point of disjunction in the 30,000 year sequences we now have from the Bismarck Archipelago. The Lapita outsiders represent the only crucial point of change and are seen to lay the foundations for all later cultural developments. It assumes also that social identity as put together in the Lapita cultural complex maintains itself over 3500 years with its essence unaltered. As Kennedy pointed out ten years ago, the idea that Lapita is the ancestral cultural form in the western Pacific makes good sense for Polynesian prehistory, where cultural continuity and unity may be discerned, but it is less useful for Melanesia, where diversity is the norm. The model also ignores elements of continuity between the Lapita and pre-Lapita periods. Here the exploitation and movement of obsidian is of key importance, as it has been quarried and moved around the Bismarck Archipelago for at least 20,000 years. Plant exploitation is also an important strand of continuity. A number of Lapita sites have now produced large suites of plant remains which include many of the tree crops used in the Bismarcks today. Although pre-Lapita evidence is fragmentary it seems likely that these crops had a long history of use prior to the Lapita period and exhibited patterns of exploitation developed within the western Pacific islands, not derived from outside. Finally, shell technologies are now turning up in a number of pre-Lapita sites. This vital aspect of Oceanic life was previously thought to have been an innovation of the Lapita period, but this now seems unlikely.

#### LAPITA AS PART OF A LONG PROCESS OF SOCIAL CHANGE.

Alternative models to that of Lapita as a cultural complex or people are difficult to state succinctly as they are still in the process of development, a development prompted partly by the recent Pleistocene data from the Bismarcks. The following represents some initial thoughts of our own. Our main point is that we do not feel it likely that Lapita represents a crucial break with all that went before, thus reducing the previous 90% of Bismarcks

prehistory to an insignificant role. We are also unhappy with the rather straightforward notions of cultural continuity implied by the view that Lapita represents a discrete social unit which maintained its essential features over 3500 years.

Rather we should like to construct a model with more complexity of continuity and change within it. Our starting assumptions are as follows. Over the last 30,000 years at least there have been a series of archipelago cultures stretching from Island Southeast Asia out into the western Pacific. Movement throughout this area has been facilitated by competent sea faring over this long period. Continuous movement has created a constant flux of material culture, genes and language between these islands. At first, settlement was restricted to the major islands down to the end of the Solomon island chain. At some point, perhaps even still within the Pleistocene, people moved further east of the Solomons on to smaller and more impoverished islands. We await more data from this area of Oceania. Patterns of colonisation created new demographic structures and altered the dynamics of contact and voyaging. Thus although movement through this island world has been constant over a long periods, the shape, scale and nature of movement has changed continuously. Varying developments have taken place in different parts of Oceania in response to local conditions and the position of different islands within the whole. Local development and inter-regional movement are locked together in mutual patterns of cause and effect.

Within this schema the importance of the Lapita period is set in a new context. We cannot assume that the movements and changes in social circumstances that occurred in the Lapita period are more important than in any other. The immediate importance of the Lapita period is that it is more archaeologically visible than periods before and after. We can use this visibility to our advantage and Lapita period data can form the basis for detailed investigation of other periods, earlier and later. Such modelling can only take place if Lapita is seen as part of an overall sequence of change, not as different from the rest of prehistory.

The pragmatic considerations raised by this model are as follows. We must investigate what sort of unit the Bismarck Archipelago was in various periods of prehistory. Thirty thousand years ago it was at the limit of the settled world, a jumping off point for new colonisation. By 3000 years ago it was enmeshed in a series of contacts both east and west and its regional position had changed out of all recognition. We need to understand the nature of these changes, how they manifest themselves in material terms and what long term legacies particular periods have left.

Although change is readily apparent in the social circumstances of the Archipelago, continuity is also evident. We have already mentioned the long term use of obsidian and this urgently needs further investigation. Perhaps of even more import for the overall colonisation of the Pacific is evidence for environmental manipulation going back into the Pleistocene. From the evidence of the New Ireland cave sites we may well be dealing with the introduction of animals, which in turn may have implications for modification of plant communities in the region. Further evidence on both plants and animals is urgently needed for early periods. However, we can say at present that people had an active

attitude towards their landscape and strove at an early period to overcome the constraints of island life through moving raw materials and food resources. The "transported landscapes" of Polynesia may thus have vast antiquity.

The model sketched in outline here contains both elements of continuity and change. Although there may have been a constant flux of movement between the islands creating and recreating social forms constantly, certain basics were always built on and these include seafaring, environmental manipulation and the movement of raw materials. Within this mixture of stability and change it is impossible to pick out constellations of social forms which were directly ancestral to the present.

The weaknesses of this model are that it does not create an easy narrative form through which to understand the archaeological record. In particular, it makes it more difficult to understand the ethnogenesis of the Polynesians. Similarly, it creates the need for more complex notions of the transmission of language between Southeast Asia and the Pacific. The main problem, however, is that above model is no more than a thumbnail sketch. We need to think more about the relative importance of various periods for later prehistory in order to set the Lapita period in its proper perspective. In order to do this both more data and theory are needed.

It is of considerable interest that all the papers gathered here put forward more complex models of interpretation of the origins and subsequent history of Lapita than can be contained in a simple dichotomy between immigration and local development. Green and Spriggs both canvas the idea that Lapita sites west of Fiji represent the mixture of local and intrusive elements; Green puts forward a model as to how this mixture may have occurred. Similarly Sharp, concentrating on pottery, puts forward an important set of ideas as to how we might investigate the meeting of different populations, if indeed such a thing occurred. Specht *et al.* present data from both the pre-Lapita period and the Lapita period in Talasea, still the only area of the western Pacific with any amount of information from both periods. Their conclusion is that the scale of social change often associated with the Lapita period may have been over-emphasised. Gosden takes a similar tack in his paper, which tries to provide a long term context for colonisation within which the Lapita phase can be evaluated. Lilley presents data from a newly explored area of New Britain which he uses to evaluate linguistic models of Lapita/Austronesian language origins and to chart the changes in exchange which have taken place over the last 3000 years.

Taken together the papers represent a fascinating insight into the process of research, demonstrating that sharply dichotomised models are most easily sustained when there are few data to hand. The vast increase of information which has occurred over the last five years has brought a good number of surprises and re-evaluation. Such is the continuing pace of work in the Bismarck Archipelago, both in the field and the laboratory, that the picture we will have in five years time will be infinitely more complex and interesting.