

LAPITA AS TEXT: THE MEANING OF POTTERY IN MELANESIAN PREHISTORY

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INTRODUCTION

The analysis of Lapita style decorated pottery has been a major focus of archaeological research in Melanesia and western Polynesia. The methodology of these analyses, in particular, is a continuing concern, as evidenced by the presented papers and discussion at a recent workshop on Lapita design held at the Australian National University (Spriggs 1990a). Although my current work on the analysis of Lapita design is also largely methodological in focus, it is not my purpose in this paper to outline a new and/or improved approach to description of the Lapita decorative system. I wish instead to consider the place of such analyses in the larger context of archaeological research in this area. This discussion engages at least three important issues in Lapita research: the role of decorated pottery in the definition of "Lapita", the contribution of pottery design analyses to current knowledge about "Lapita", and the problem, or set of problems, which yet another study of pottery decoration might productively engage. All of these are subsumed under a question posed by Jim Specht (1988) at the Lapita Design Workshop: "Why analyze Lapita pottery at all?"

The answer to this question might seem self-evident: as the most abundant evidence of stylistic behavior in Lapita sites, the decorated pottery provides perhaps the best data set for documenting both local cultural sequences and regional connections. As Kirch pointed out in the Yogyakarta symposium, establishing local sequences - the what, when and where of Lapita - is an essential first step in understanding the how and why of cultural continuity and change in Melanesia. However, in the context of the current rethinking of Lapita evidenced by other papers in this symposium, it seems timely to consider the meaning of the pottery itself, and in particular, the contribution of an analysis of pottery to a wider set of questions.

LAPITA AS POTS

Establishing precisely what "Lapita" is - not only as a goal of explanation, but simply as a topic of discussion - is becoming increasingly difficult (Terrell 1989). From its conception

as a widespread and distinctive style of decorated pottery (Gifford and Shutler 1956; Golson 1971), the term Lapita has expanded to include, or potentially include, assemblages of plain, dentate-stamped and other decorated pottery (Golson 1972), a more generally applied but culturally-specific design style (Green 1979a), a biological population (Howells 1979), a language community (Pawley and Green 1975) and an archaeological "cultural complex" (Green 1979b; Spriggs 1984), diverse attributes which later coalesce in a relatively unified biological, cultural and linguistic community in Polynesia (Kirch and Green 1987). For archaeologists, a major focus of discussion and debate has been the nature, origin, and development and/or dispersal of such an entity in Island Melanesia (Allen 1984; Allen and White 1989; Bellwood 1978; Gosden *et al.* 1989; Green 1982, 1985; Kirch 1988c; Kirch and Hunt 1988; Spriggs 1984, 1990b).

Out of the welter of archaeological facts, inferred phenomena and proposed explanations subsumed under the label of Lapita, or "Lapita Cultural Complex", in Melanesia, two conclusions emerge. First, while generalizations about attributes of Lapita settlement, economy and non-ceramic material culture can be made (see Spriggs 1984; Kirch 1988a; Green 1979b and this symposium), no unified definition of Lapita has been attained. Moreover, the validity and uniqueness of many attributes seen as Lapita must increasingly be called into question. Second, all of the archaeological "facts" considered relevant to such a definition are relevant precisely because they occur with Lapita-style pottery: decorated pottery, especially dentate-stamped decoration, as Allen and White (1989) recently pointed out, is still the *sine qua non* of Lapita sites. Aside from a proposed "Lapita without pots" on Nissan (Spriggs 1991, but see Spriggs, this symposium, for a reconsideration), no artifact type except Lapita dentate-stamped pottery provides an "if and only if" criterion for the presence of "Lapita" occupation.

These two statements are directly related, through a logic which is, for the most part, not only acceptable but essential. An anthropological view of style as a "way of doing" (Hodder 1990:45) permits an argument from (1) the archaeological fact of the widespread distribution of a particular style of decorated pottery, to (2) the description of an ideational code underlying observed stylistic behavior, to (3) the identification of carriers of such a code as a cultural unit, to (4) the interpretation of, and generalizations about, other characteristics associated with this group. In this logical progression, however, lurks a potential muddle (*sensu* Bateson 1972): conflating a cultural code (e.g. a style of decoration), its material expression (e.g. the medium of pottery), and the cultural "text", or significance, of both code and medium (e.g. the utilitarian, economic, or social meaning of decorated pots).

Thus the tantalizing - perhaps even offensive - title of this paper, which is not intended to imply, or even condone, a wholesale adoption of recent "post-processual" approaches in archaeology (see Tilley 1990). Nor is it my intention to interpret the "text" presented to us by Lapita pottery and/or Lapita decoration, but simply to use the notion of text to examine some assumptions, goals, and potential interpretations of Lapita-style decorated pottery.

There are three aspects of this concept (following Ricoeur 1974, 1981) that are relevant to the present discussion. First, the idea of text, in its broadest sense, implies a set - or better, sets - of meanings embodied in material objects. Decorated pots as manufactured objects have technological significance, as vessels they have functional significance, as a medium of exchange they have social and economic significance. Patterns of manufacture, distribution and use of decorated pots both express and reflect, and in a sense construct, economic and social relationships. Surely this role in a culturally-constructed world is a significant aspect of the objects we are trying to interpret.

Second, these objects achieve their purpose - which can be and often is something other than an intended purpose - only within a particular context: that is, within an existing natural environment and especially a social environment that place very real constraints on possible meanings, and surely on possible uses of pots in relations among people.

Thirdly, both of these statements apply equally to the archaeologist as interpreting subject: we assign meaning to material objects in terms of our current understanding of the prehistoric culture we study, but also in terms of what we currently believe to be appropriate goals and methods of archaeology as a discipline.

LAPITA AS CODE

This context of archaeological interpretation, with respect to Lapita pottery decoration, has clearly and quite self-consciously derived from a view of style, and the significance of decorated pots, as code. The current framework of design analysis was developed in the early 1970s by Mead (1975a, 1975b; Shaw 1975) in Fiji, expanded by Green and his students (Donovan 1973a, 1973b; Green 1978; Kay 1984) to include decorated pottery from the Solomon Islands, and modified by Anson (1983, 1986) in his analysis of decorated assemblages from the Bismarck Archipelago. The approach, as formulated by Mead (1975a), derives from an analogy between language and decorative systems. As codes, both consist of units (words or decorative elements which make up a dictionary of meaningful items) and patterned ways of combining units (grammatical rules for creating acceptable linguistic or design statements). An adequate description of a decorative system, Mead argued, is similar to description of a language in that it specifies both the elements and the rules which particular groups of potters use to produce decoration on pots. This structural description provides the basis for assessment of similarities and differences in decorative codes across space and time.

This is an elegant approach, and one that has great appeal as a way of describing and comparing stylistic behavior. Attaining a better understanding of the Lapita decorative system (Sharp 1988; see also Green 1990) appears to be a matter of methodological - or perhaps more accurately, technical - refinement, one of extending the structural method to include previously unanalysed units of decoration and standardizing descriptive categories to remedy some problems of comparability of descriptions produced by different analysts.

A major goal of the analysis of decorative codes has been to identify not only temporal sequences of stylistic change within Lapita sites, but also patterns of interaction among Lapita communities. Underlying these interpretations is the assumption that decorative codes, like linguistic codes, are attributes of cultural transmission and group membership (Sackett 1977). By tracing spatial and temporal patterns in such expressions of cultural identity as Lapita pottery decoration, one achieves some understanding of the history of, and historical relations within, a "Lapita Culture". The general equation of decorative code and cultural group has proved both analytically useful and empirically valid as a culture historical tool. Criticisms focus not so much on the validity of "style as ethnic marker" as on the mechanisms of transmission and maintenance of style (e.g. Friedrich 1970; DeBoer 1990) and on the limitations of an interaction approach for understanding the "behavioral significance" of stylistic behavior (Weissner 1985).

Without entering into the current archaeological debate about the nature of stylistic behavior (Sackett 1982, 1985, 1986; Weissner 1983, 1985), one could point out that it seems unfair to criticize a culture-historical approach for failing to answer questions which are not, in fact, part of its program; and that criticizing a program of constructing accurate cultural sequences as "mere" culture history is something of a luxury that can be indulged in only after culture history has been done, and done well. In the specific case of Oceanic prehistory, understanding the role that decorated pottery might have played in maintaining social and/or economic relationships within or between Lapita communities requires the kind of contextual data only recently available, and even then from a very few Lapita sites.

LAPITA AS TEXT

As these data accumulate, so do expressions of interest in the social context of manufacture, use, and exchange of Lapita-style decorated pottery (Kirch 1988b; Gosden *et al.* 1989; see also Gosden 1989 and this volume). Seeking an understanding of the social significance of decorated pottery necessarily shifts the emphasis of research and interpretation to situated rather than normative meaning, usage rather than structure, and potential manipulation (conscious or unconscious) of metaphor and ambiguity inherent in speech as opposed to language. Although this shift need not be couched in the terminology of textual studies - indeed, I would argue that it should not rely on the methodology of textual interpretation - attention to the social role(s) of decorated pottery cannot help but add to the essential description of the decorative language which provides one medium for social expression.

In this positive expansion of the interpretive framework of Lapita research, however, it is important to discriminate between the significance of pottery decoration and the significance of decorated pots. Especially pernicious is the assumption that wherever pots exhibiting the Lapita decorative code appear, so does a "Lapita Culture". By examining other material remains in locations with Lapita-style pottery, we arrive at an understanding of Lapita settlement, Lapita subsistence, Lapita shell and stone technology and so on. And by examining the social role of Lapita decorated pots we arrive at an

understanding of a Lapita context of social action. This assumption is not only limiting, but in western Melanesia, probably invalid. One of the major attributes of texts, whether linguistic or material, is that once created, they and their significance are detached from the creator (Ricoeur 1981); indeed, meaning is continually re-created in other contexts. This statement has serious implications for the definition of a "Lapita Cultural Complex" and for understanding the role of decorated pottery in the prehistory of western Melanesia in particular. There is no reason why Lapita-style pottery may occur only in "Lapita" sites: its meaning is necessarily ultimately, but not immediately, linked to a "Lapita" context. Codes, whether linguistic or aesthetic, often define cultural boundaries (Barth 1969); objects are free to move across them.

And cultural boundaries surely existed in the Bismarck Archipelago at about 3500 BP. This is likely to be the case even if the arrival of "Lapita" is nothing more than the acquisition of pottery technology by indigenous groups in Island Melanesia (Allen and White 1989). Some groups might well have adopted pottery-making while others did not: as yet there are few examples of aceramic sites contemporaneous with Lapita (Spriggs 1990b), but this is hardly surprising given the much greater visibility of, and interest in, sites with Lapita pottery. Those who argue that Lapita represents the migration of people into Island Melanesia (Bellwood 1978; Kirch 1987, 1988a; Kirch and Hunt 1988) also cite the shift in settlements to offshore islands, the appearance of domesticated animals, and possibly a suite of non-ceramic artifact types as evidence of more than simple technological change. While the question of which of these traits are, or are not, unique to Lapita requires much closer examination, both because of the possible bias of previous work (Spriggs 1984) and because recent research has established a greater antiquity for some attributes previously thought to appear with pottery (Allen and Gosden 1991), there is one aspect of the appearance of pottery that seems to me to strongly support the general argument. The advent of a new technology provides, among other things, a new medium for expressing established social and economic relationships, and might reasonably be expected simply to "map on" to existing networks. In fact, the earliest Lapita pottery not only occurs in previously uninhabited locations, but apparently fails to penetrate very far into older exchange networks for perhaps several hundred years. Pots were not simply superimposed on to an established social and economic structure, but participated in quite different structures. It seems unlikely that pottery alone could have been responsible for a profound reorganization of social life in western Melanesia.

If there were Lapita folk who got off the fast train in the Bismarck Archipelago, there is now ample evidence that they had to deal not only with a new natural environment, but with one that included other people. These were people capable of travelling some distance by sea, with a well-established trade in Talasea obsidian and very possibly other commodities throughout the archipelago, who apparently transplanted and perhaps even managed the plants and animals around them - in short, people who had a considerable amount of control over their environment and extensive lines of communication and trade (Allen and White 1989, Allen, Gosden and White 1989; Flannery *et al.* 1988; Wickler and Spriggs 1988). There are several ways that relations between these two

groups - the Lapita and the pre-Lapita - might have developed. One possible mode, of course, is no relationship: separate groups in separate locations, without social or economic exchange. This is possible, but not plausible, since obsidian from the Talasea source on New Britain, widely traded in pre-Lapita times, appears in the earliest levels of sites with Lapita pottery and continues to appear, although in decreasing amounts, over long time periods (Allen and Bell 1988; Green 1987; Kirch 1987). Obsidian in Lapita sites might have been obtained through intra-Lapita trade networks (and is likely to have been in the case of the Lou Island source in Manus), but another possibility is that earlier occupants, who controlled the distribution of Talasea obsidian throughout western Melanesia, continued to do so well after Lapita pottery appeared (Specht *et al.* 1988).

There is no inherent reason why Lapita pottery should not have been exchanged in return. The presence of non-local clays and tempers in Mussau (Hunt 1989), Watom (Anson 1983) and Ambitle (Ambrose, pers. comm.) attests to a lively trade in pots at early Lapita sites. My observation of sherds which appear to be from vessels of identical shape and identical complex dentate-stamped decoration in assemblages excavated by Ambrose from Ambitle, Gosden from the Arawe Islands, and Kirch from Mussau, suggests the possibility that at least these three widely separated locations around the perimeter of the Bismarck Archipelago might have been part of an early Lapita pottery trading network. The fact that this network apparently remained in the offshore island Lapita sites rather than expanding along pre-existing trade routes implies one of two things: either pots were offered for trade and not accepted, or they were not "legitimate" items of trade outside the Lapita network - possibly because pots played some crucial and culturally-specific role within the Lapita system (Kirch 1988b).

POTS WITHOUT LAPITA?

The later appearance of Lapita pots at Watom (Green and Anson 1987), the New Ireland cave sites (Allen, Gosden and White 1989) and possibly Talasea seems to me to be a significant event - not because the pottery at these sites is "western" Lapita in style (Anson 1983, 1986; Specht 1988), since other Lapita sites appear to be making this transition as well, but because it marks the establishment of widespread Lapita links with the interior of the Bismarck Archipelago, and possibly the beginnings of a third mode of interaction: integration of Lapita and pre-Lapita in Melanesia.

The role of the Talasea sites in this process is crucial and at present unknown. Indeed, the only thing Lapita about the Talasea sites with Lapita pottery appears to be the pottery itself (Specht *et al.* 1988). If one were to make a case for "pots without Lapita" surely it would be here. It is possible that these sites are the recipients of Lapita-style pots in exchange for obsidian, increasingly valued as Lapita sites in New Britain became isolated from the Lou Island obsidian source traded along the northern edge of the archipelago. Certainly they appear quite different from Watom, for example, where no pre-Lapita occupation is evident, at least some pottery is locally made, and the associated fauna includes domesticated pig (Anson 1983; Green and Anson 1987). Specht's (1988) analysis of an expanded sample of decorated pottery from Talasea also suggests that the design

inventory is not only different from Watom (Anson 1983, 1986) but different from Anson's other "Early Far Western" assemblages in the Bismarck Archipelago as well. If the Lapita-style pottery at Talasea was locally manufactured (Specht, pers. comm.), of course, it represents at least the adoption of pottery technology by a pre-Lapita population, if not the movement of new populations into the Talasea area. Establishing which of these standard culture-historical explanations - trade, diffusion, migration, or all of the above - accounts for the distribution of decorated pottery requires accurate sourcing of the pottery and precise dating of the deposits in which it is found, as well as analysis of the decorative code. Any of these events implies effects far beyond the pottery itself, for both Lapita (pottery-making) and non-Lapita (non-pottery making) groups.

Let us accept for the moment that there is such a thing as "Lapita Culture", as well as Lapita-style pottery. There were, at least, people who made Lapita-style pottery in the Bismarck Archipelago and people who did not. Here, then, are four possibilities: Lapita with pots, non-Lapita without pots, Lapita without pots and pots without Lapita. In each of these is the potential for very different roles and different sets of meanings, for pots as expressions of social and/or economic rather than ethnic relations within and among groups of people. None of these meanings is inherent in the code of Lapita decoration and analysis of decorative codes is clearly a necessary but not sufficient condition for understanding the role of pottery in Melanesian prehistory.

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