

Lapita as politics

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Some 15 years ago, Green (1981, also 1982) presented his paper on “Models for the Lapita cultural complex” in response to Clark and Terrell’s (1978) critical assessment of Pacific archaeology in the *Annual Review of Anthropology*. He determined that while Clark and Terrell’s “trader” model was the best of the four they raised, a “colonizer” model more convincingly described the characteristics of the Lapita phenomenon in Remote Oceania. Lapita in Near Oceania remained unexplained, though in the same period White and Allen (1980: 733) noted that colonizer models did not hold well in the Bismarck Archipelago, and Anson (1983: 272) suggested that one or more of Clark and Terrell’s other models may have operated in the region.

In contrast to these positions, I argue here that a particular form of “trader” model may in fact hold best for the period during which the Lapita cultural complex (hereafter abbreviated as “Lapita”) first emerged in the New Britain-New Ireland region, though perhaps not afterwards. Specifically, I propose to use a framework provided by anthropological conceptions of diaspora, and particularly Abner Cohen’s (1971, 1969) propositions regarding trading diasporas, to organize four ideas concerning the mechanisms underlying Lapita origins and to cast light on the possible nature of early Lapita social formations. It must be stressed that this model has not been inductively derived from “the data” in any but the most general sense. Moreover, though I will do so in due course, I have not yet attempted to test it, nor even to distil its test implications. As a child of my times, however, I am confident my approach to model formulation is consistent with deductive scientific procedure.

Three of the above mentioned ideas relating to Lapita origins have been the subject of discussion for some time, *viz*:

- that Lapita emerged in the Bismarck Archipelago as a combination of local and exotic elements as well as certain innovations;
- that Austronesian-speakers penetrated the Bismarcks an unknown (though possibly only short) length of time before Lapita developed, and, not contingent on the first two;
- that trade/exchange was a central element of Lapita from the time of its first appearance.

The fourth idea is one that I discussed in an unpublished section of a paper delivered at the 1990 IPPA Congress (Lilley 1990), namely:

- that in addition to agricultural “push” factors of the sort considered by migrationist Lapita scholars such as Bellwood, Kirch and Spriggs, the Austronesian colonization of the Bismarck Archipelago was engendered by local economic and sociopolitical “pull” factors.

The hypothesis that Lapita emerged as a cultural complex in the Bismarcks requires little comment, though debate continues about the relative contributions to the complex of innovations, elements from the Bismarcks and elements from southeast Asia. I do not propose to discuss it further, other than to note that I find Green’s (1991, 1992) recent formulations the most reasonable of current alternative positions on the matter. The notion of a pre-Lapita Austronesian exploration of the Bismarcks goes back three decades to the work of the linguist Dyen (1965), whose proposal was endorsed in the early 1970s by Pawley and Green (1973) and given a biological aspect by Howells around the same time (1973). The idea fell out of favour, however, as we found out more about the deficiencies of glottochronology on the one hand and about the details of the archaeology of island Melanesia on the other (compare, for example, Bellwood 1978: 275 and Bellwood 1985: 125). I know I am not alone in having remained (quietly) open to the idea, but I do not think it appeared in print again until 1991, when Spriggs (1991: 309-310) canvassed and dismissed the possibility that his “Lapita-without-pots” on Nissan might represent pre-Lapita but Austronesian, or even non-Lapita, activity. More recently, he (1995: 124-125) speculated that Lapita-without-pots may represent Lapita exploration beyond the Bismarcks. He made this suggestion in the light of Anthony’s (1990) increasing well-known paper on migration in archaeology, to which I will return shortly.

To move on to the long-standing idea that trade was a central plank of Lapita strategies, it is worthwhile remembering that most commentators (e.g. Green 1982: 15) refer to trade amongst Lapita colonists, rather than between colonists and existing Melanesian populations. As Green (1982: 16) put it, “neither specialist trading nor unspecialized exchange appears to be a major characteristic of the Lapita cultural complex”. This may be the case in the broad view, particularly with regard to the period after Lapita spread to the Solomons and beyond. I think, though, that in the light of recent findings in the Bismarcks, and particularly at Talasea (e.g. Specht *et al.* 1991, Torrence 1994), we should look more closely at the question as regards the period immediately preceding the emergence of Lapita, as well as during what is becoming known as the ‘early Western’ Lapita period, the period between the emergence of the Lapita cultural complex and its dispersal beyond the Bismarcks (cf. Terrell 1989: 625).

This brings me to the fourth idea mentioned at the beginning: that local developments “pulled” southeast Asian people and culture into the Bismarcks as much as southeast Asian events and processes “pushed” them. In 1988, Kirch (p. 162) made the aside that

“it is not yet possible to rule out a model of expanding Austronesian colonists who may have ‘tapped into’ an older small-scale obsidian distribution network”. A variation of this idea has appealed to me for some time, and was behind the suggestions I made at the 1990 IPPA Congress. At the time I was exploring the conditions and mechanisms which could have facilitated the diffusion of pottery technology and other southeast Asian elements of Lapita into the Bismarcks that would be required by Allen and White’s (1989) model for local rather than southeast Asian of origins of the cultural complex. I am now convinced migration was involved rather than diffusion, but that it would have to have been “pulled” by the same factors I previously argued may have fostered diffusion.

Precisely what the pull factors may have been is difficult to gauge owing to a lack of evidence from the immediately pre-Lapita period, but I suggest they should be glossed as “emerging economic opportunities”. In my IPPA paper, I hypothesized that aceramic Austronesian-speakers entered the Bismarcks at some time between 3500 and 4000 years ago and became involved in the expansion of exchange networks which, some time later, facilitated the acquisition of pottery technology and other southeast Asian elements of the Lapita cultural complex from people to the west. I argued that the expansion and intensification of the Melanesian networks and the pull they came to exert on the populations of island southeast Asia were tied to and perhaps generated by the demands of developing sociopolitical subsystems for mechanisms which enhanced or cemented social or political linkages and possibly also status or ranking. What was eventually selectively “pulled” from southeast Asia to satisfy these demands included pottery technology and various other ideas and goods.

These proposals were originally inspired by work on the role of “island filters” in the western Mediterranean Neolithic (e.g. Lewthwaite 1986: 62-63; also Cherry 1981), where there are more than a few parallels with Lapita. I would now argue that what was “pulled” was not just goods and ideas, but small-scale migration which brought with it the southeast Asian elements of Lapita. Though I do not wish to pursue the matter at length here, I also think the speed of the process may have been dramatically hastened around 3,500 BP by far-reaching disruptions to obsidian trade and related exchange linkages caused by a cataclysmic eruption of Mt Witori, a volcano near the obsidian source areas on the central-north coast of New Britain (cf. Torrence and Summerhayes 1997: 80-81).

Be that as it may, the discussion of “pull” factors is an important aspect of Anthony’s (1990) paper on migration which I mentioned earlier and which Spriggs (1995) has recently cited with considerable enthusiasm. Spriggs’s paper does not discuss pull factors, though, which is the critical difference between my hypotheses and his and indeed other migrationist positions on Lapita, all of which focus on agricultural intensification as the engine of Austronesian expansion. In considering such issues, my position reconciles the competing hypotheses of indigenist and migrationist models of Lapita origins.

Some may of course argue that pull factors are unnecessary in this case, despite Anthony's persuasiveness. As Clark (1994: 335) points out, unlike short-distance population movements, migrations are dependent on population density and are thus likely to be linked with the emergence of farming, just as the migrationists suggest. While this may well be the case, I do not accept that southeast Asian farmers could simply have migrated to the Bismarcks and flourished had the state of local socioeconomic and political systems not provided appropriate conditions for their societies to take root.

To continue in this vein, I also suggest that it was more than a need for *lebensraum* that was pushing from island southeast Asia, and that it would be more useful to subsume the pressures of agricultural expansion under a more general category of "limited economic opportunity", which also included limited access to the benefits of trade and exchange relationships. It is this suggestion that brings together all the threads of the foregoing discussion and ties them firmly to migration theory of the sort outlined by Anthony. If there obtained a situation where, in southeast Asia, limited possibilities were "pushing" and, in the Bismarcks, expanding horizons (including those widened by the effects of volcanism) were "pulling", it seems sensible in the light of contemporary thinking on migration to propose that "scouts", as Anthony (1990) calls them, explored the Bismarcks to assess opportunities and relay information back to potential source areas for migration prior to any large-scale population movement.

Anthony (1990: 902-903) argues that scouts are critical in long distance migration, owing to their role in providing information to source communities regarding conditions and opportunities in potential destinations. He says:

"Archaeological evidence for a postulated large-scale interregional migration should therefore be supported by archaeological evidence for an earlier penetration of merchants, trappers, mercenaries, craft specialists or other information-relaying scouting groups which must have preceded any significant interregional movement."

I think "merchants" (i.e. traders) are far more likely than "mercenaries" (or any other conceivable group) as scouts in the present context, even if trade with existing populations had little to do with later Lapita expansion beyond the Bismarcks, for as Anthony (1990: 903) remarks, "initial migrants (the scouts) might have had motives and organization very different from those of the group that followed". If this were the case, we have to ask what such motives and organization may have been. Thinking about the way Lapita society and culture are characterized (e.g. Green 1992), but mindful of the caveat issued by Ambrose (1975) regarding the differences between Lapita exchange and later Melanesian trade/exchange networks, I looked to the literature on diasporas for alternatives, and particularly the substantial body of anthropological work concerning pre-industrial west African trading diasporas.

Mostly commonly applied to the dispersion of the Jews after the destruction of the Kingdom of Judah by the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar in 586 BC, the Greek term

diaspora has been used to describe all manner of exiled groups, migrant enclaves and networks of trading colonies. I first came across a detailed discussion of the phenomenon many years ago in the work of historian Arnold Toynbee (1972), who outlined what he called a “Jewish model of civilization”. The term “trading diaspora”, however, was coined by the anthropologist Abner Cohen (1971, also 1969 and Curtin 1975). He used it to describe “a nation of socially interdependent, but spatially dispersed, communities” of traders who “are culturally distinct from both their society of origin and from the societies among which they live” (Cohen 1971: 267). Cohen worked on the ethnographic Hausa diaspora in Nigeria, but other obvious examples (e.g. Fallers 1967) are the ancient Phoenicians, the medieval Greeks, the modern overseas Chinese and, of course, the first Austronesians in the Bismarcks.

Using Cohen’s acephalous trading diaspora model as a basis for discussion for Lapita origins and the nature of early Lapita social formations is apt because it describes and explains a situation very close to that which I believe may have obtained in the Bismarcks from just before Lapita emerged to the end of the “early Western” Lapita period. Cohen (1971: 266) argues that: “the conduct of long-distance trade requires finding solutions to a number of basic technical problems [of communication and control]... Under pre-industrial social conditions - characterized by ethnic heterogeneity of the communities involved in the trade, the absence of regular services for communication and transportation, and of effective central institutions to ensure the respect of contract, etc. - these technical problems have often been overcome when men from one ethnic group control all or most of the trade in specific commodities”.

I hypothesize that pre-Lapita, pre-Austronesian trade/exchange in the Bismarcks may have evolved to a point where local mechanisms were unable to solve the technical problems to which Cohen refers. This need not imply that the intensity of such trade was spiralling fiercely upward, nor that it was teetering on the edge of collapse, only that it reached an organizational threshold which could not be crossed owing to structural constraints imposed by the nature of the societies involved (cf. Allen 1984). Lack of continued growth in the systems may have had effects sufficiently far-reaching to create perturbations on the fringes of island southeast Asia, from where highly mobile individual traders (or would-be traders) departed to explore ways to overcome whatever problems existed. In doing so they may have created conditions for renewed growth, which would have provided them with opportunities for personal benefit not available in their home communities. Such traders may have established separate communities in the Bismarcks, but could very well have lived in enclaves in the communities of existing populations, particularly in the beginning.

How do we get from individual traders motivated by the opportunity to improve their access to the benefits of trade and exchange to the Lapita cultural complex? I hypothesize that it was through the development of a trading diaspora in the form of early Western Lapita. Cohen (1971: 266) observes that: “ethnic control or monopoly [of

trade] can be achieved only in the course of continuous rivalry and opposition from other ethnic groups. In the process, the monopolizing group is forced to organize itself for political action in order to deal with external pressure, to co-ordinate the co-operation of its members in the common cause and establish channels of communication and mutual support with members from communities of the same ethnic group in neighbouring localities who are engaged in the trading network. In this way, a trading diaspora, consisting of dispersed, but highly interrelated communities, comes into being... A diaspora of this kind is distinct as a type of social grouping in its culture and structure. Its members are culturally distinct from both their society of origin and from the societies among which they live”.

I suggest that to survive and prosper, the original, far-flung “trader-scouts” would have begun this process, the most critical outcome of which was to create a form of society which “combines stability of structure but allows a high degree of mobility of personnel” (Cohen 1971: 267). In doing so, they laid the blueprint for the emergence during the early Western Lapita period of a fully-developed trading diaspora, as economic expansion created by their own activities, and information about it they relayed back to their home regions, encouraged a more significant movement of population from southeast Asia into the Bismarcks.

What sort of social formation would have characterized early Western Lapita thus conceptualized? Cohen (1969: 201) proposes that the distinctive social features of a trading diaspora result from the way certain basic organizational problems are solved by “groups whose political corporateness is not formally institutionalized within the contemporary situation”. Important though the matter is, the following discussion necessarily glosses over “the problem of internal differentiation” noted by Cohen (1971:270), which arises because typically diasporas handle the trade in more than one specific commodity. The trade in each commodity has its own organization, its own politics and its own impact on the structure of the local communities and on the organization of the diaspora as a whole.

The basic organizational problems to which Cohen (1971: 271-278, also 1969: 201-211) refers are those of distinctiveness, continual demographic adjustment, communication, the organization of trust and credit, and the organization of authority. An effective diaspora “must define its membership and its sphere of operation by defining its identity and exclusiveness”. Maintaining distinctiveness has implications for recruitment, if dying members are to be replaced and, where a diaspora is expanding, new members admitted. Distinctiveness is also related to communication, which is crucial to the conduct of trade and the maintenance of the interdependence of the diaspora. Communication, though, while necessary, “is not sufficient for a distinct group to function politically”. This requires authority, the legitimate use of power, which has to be supported by political ideology.

The Hausa overcome the foregoing problems through distinctive behaviour, by focusing their primary relationships within their community, by enforcing endogamy, through “the speedy homogenization of diaspora culture”, by using a common distinctive language, and, most importantly, by maintaining a moral community founded on a shared ideology, in their case derived from a mystical order of Islam. Though I will not go into detail here, I think that what we know or at least postulate about Lapita, and especially about decorated Lapita ceramics, suggests similar effort went into similar means of establishing and reinforcing distinctiveness, facilitating communication and maintaining authority among the communities scattered through the Bismarcks. On these grounds, I would argue that we are dealing with a similar class of social formation (see Curtin 1975: 59-66).

In closing, I would bring the paper back to its title and note that Cohen’s consideration of trading diasporas goes considerably further than I have described here, in ways I think are pertinent to the early Lapita period. The connections he makes between trading diasporas and ethnicity are particularly instructive and, if introduced to discussion of Lapita, would help steer debate away from views of ethnicity of the sort which have plagued Pacific archaeology for so long. A traditional culture-historical perspective may have its comforts, but on philosophical grounds I must side with Terrell (e.g. Clark and Terrell 1976: 299) to argue, in Renfrew’s (1988: 438) words, that “the notion of ethnicity cannot properly be used as the fundamental organizing principle for the prehistoric past”. This does not, of course, mean that we cannot and should not investigate ethnicity or the ways it may have shaped or been shaped by in past human behaviour.

Cohen’s arguments are relevant here because he suggests that trading diasporas create ethnicity as much as ethnicity creates them. He (1969) refers to the process as “re-tribalization”, wherein factors promoting homogenization of internal cultural differences of diaspora members from different parts of the migration source region or different subcultures are minimized to strengthen group solidarity in the face of external competition. In this formulation (Cohen 1969: 192), ethnic groups of the sort associated with trading diasporas are not survivals from the source area, as they are portrayed by culture-historical models of Lapita. Rather, they are: “new social forms...[which] have continuously re-created their distinctiveness in different ways, not because of conservatism, but because these ethnic groups are in fact interest groupings whose members share some common economic and political interests and who, therefore, stand together in the continuous competition for power with other groups”.

So there you have it: Lapita as politics. That’s about as postmodern as people like me can manage!

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