

Japan's Javanese Connection

Research >
Japan & Java

It is part of our received wisdom that Japan has had very little historical connection with Java. This article argues that Java has, in fact, had a substantial influence on the development of early Japanese civilization and presents evidence of this contact.

By Ann Kumar

It is known that Japan underwent a revolutionary transformation in the Yayoi period (from c. 300 BC to 250–300 AD) which saw the introduction of an advanced and expansionist wet-rice civilization, sophisticated metal-working and other technologies, a centralizing religion, and a hierarchical society culminating in a king/emperor. One of the great mysteries of Japanese history is why, after the 10,000-year stasis of the hunter-gatherer society of the preceding Jomon period, there was such a complete transformation in the Yayoi period.

Skeletal evidence indicates that immigration rather than local innovation was the key to this transformation. The appearance not just of agriculture, itself a major advance, but of sophisticated metalworking and a fully developed court civilization provides further support for the conclusion that outside influence rather than the more gradual process of local evolution was responsible.

Bronze and iron

Though research on bronze and iron age civilizations in Java has been minimal, it is known that metalworking developed earlier there than in Japan. There is a striking typological similarity between Yayoi artifacts – bells, blades, and pottery for example – and their Javanese counterparts. This is not just the sort of generic similarity one might expect of objects with the same function, but extends to design features unrelated to function, the repertoire of



Bronze bell from the Middle Yayoi period (c. 100BC-100AD)

cliplined form of earlier Jomon pots.

The striking similarities between these artefacts relate not only to form and decoration, but also, particularly in the case of weapon blades, to specific techniques of production. A number of early Japanese blades have the characteristic asymmetric flaring at the base of the blade that unites all kris (traditional Javanese blades) into a single family. More significantly, the kris and the Japanese sword blade are made using the same specialized technique. In the case of other artefacts, such as masks and architecture, the resemblance between the Javanese and Japanese examples is so strong that earlier Japanese and German scholars have remarked on it and wondered what the historical explanation might be.

many separate lines of evidence from different groups of phenomena or classes of facts to form an integrated explanatory framework.

Rice, religion and DNA

The relationship between the different types of cultivated rice is complex and cannot be explored here. It is sufficient to point out that Morinaga's work (1968) has demonstrated that Javanese rice (*javanica*) was the closest relative of ordinary Japanese rice, and vice versa. This establishes the first demonstrably genetic as opposed to typological link between Java and Japan. Rice, the basis of the Yayoi civilization, also had a parallel religious significance in Java and Japan.

This is reflected in the myth, common to both, of the angel who descended from the moon to bring rice to mankind, and whose heavenly robe both Javanese rulers and Japanese emperors must don at the time of their accession.

Other shared myths are that of the sea goddess who gives rulers dominion over the undersea world and the world of the spirits, and the secular myth of the radiant prince, peerlessly beautiful, superbly attired, phenomenally accomplished in all the arts, and of hyper-refined sensitivity. This prince, called Panji in Java and Genji in Japan, epitomizes the highest imaginable attain-

ment that urban court life seemed to make possible. The ensemble of cults called Shinto also corresponds to equivalent cults in Java.

There is also genetic evidence of contact between Java and Japan. The positive evidence of earlier studies using indicators such as teeth, skulls and blood has been confirmed by the author's study (1998) of d-loops (the d-loop is part of mitochondrial DNA), which shows that Japanese and Indonesians share sites (particular locations on the d-loop) not found in other Asian populations. This indicates that there has been not only great cultural and technological influence from Java, but also significant numbers of migrants.

Language

It is axiomatic that any contact of the magnitude suggested by the evidence so far must have involved language contact and borrowing. Diverse theories concerning the relationships of the Japanese language have been put forward by researchers, and Japanese has been linked to languages from Basque to Tamil. The most favoured candidate for a genetic relationship with Japanese is Korean. Though there may indeed be a distant genetic relationship with the Korean language, Korean cannot have been the language of the immigrants who brought the innovations of the Yayoi period. If this had been the case, attempts to prove the relationship between Japanese and Korean using the comparative method (which can certainly reach as far back as the Yayoi period) would have succeeded by now.

The author and Rose (2000) presented data which clearly establish linguistic borrowing (rather than a genetic relationship) by an earlier form of Old Japanese, not from Korea, but from an antecedent of Old Javanese. This linguistic data was statistically evaluated using Bayesian probability. Furthermore, the linguistic evidence elucidates many different aspects of the contact – directionality (demonstrating that the borrowing was indeed from Java to Japan, not the other way round), precise location of the donor language, intensity of contact, and imported ideas and concepts which, by their nature, cannot be found in archaeological remains. Thus we find words referring both to known Yayoi innovations such as swords, warehouses, fences, rice-mortars, plates, cloth, and baskets (material objects) as well as to concepts of kinship, royalty and divinity, and the idea of the divinity of royalty.

Some of the borrowed words are from the high-culture end of the language spectrum, such as Old Javanese *matur*, 'to present, offer, tell or report to person of higher rank', which was borrowed by an antecedent of Old Japanese as *matur* - 'to give or present something to a person of high rank/God; to offer prayers'. It was also used as the 'humble auxiliary' *matur*-. This usage as an affix indicating humble speech shows that it had in Old Japanese the full range of meanings it had in Old

Javanese – including speaking to a superior – and which it still has in Modern Javanese, where it is used as a humble auxiliary verb in expressions like 'my humble answer/question/respect/thanks'.

At the other end of the language spectrum, we find the borrowing of less culturally loaded everyday words such as *sosok*, to pour, and *tutup*, to cover. These words are both basic vocabulary and verbs, categories that are known to be borrowed only in cases of intense language contact.

Thus the 'consilience of induction' strategy shows that there has been significant cultural influence and at least some migration (determining how much requires further research) from Java to Japan. Despite our instinctive resistance to the idea, the Javanese did, in fact, sail 'up the map' to Japan – which is also the direction the currents flow in. (The Austronesian ancestors of the Javanese had made the more difficult journey southwards from Taiwan at a much earlier date).

Though many adherents of the prevailing belief in the Korean origin of early Japanese civilization regard this counter-proposal as outrageous, it is in fact supported by more compelling evidence than competing hypotheses, and this evidence cannot be disregarded.

This research sheds new light on the development of Japan and Java. It demonstrates that the court civilization of Java is actually much older, and much more indigenous (rather than derived from India as is often supposed) than has previously been realized. The research also provides a new perspective on the way gender relationships are perceived in different civilizations, since this particular civilization was one in which women were seen as the bearers of precious gifts such as rice and cloth, and divine protectors of kings. Finally, it also helps to explain the resilience of Javanese civilization in the face of external cultural influence and foreign conquest. <

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Ann Kumar is chair of the board of faculties and reader, Centre for Asian Societies and Histories, Australian National University. Her current research interests include Panji theatre in Java and Bali, and Indonesian peace movements.

ann.kumar@anu.edu.au

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motifs used and the details of the decoration. Thus Yayoi pots, with their classic shapes and restrained geometric decoration, are as similar to Javanese pots as they are dissimilar to the undis-

To provide this historical explanation, I have used a 'consilience of induction' strategy, a term first used by William Whewell (1840) and later by Darwin in *Origin of Species*. This strategy takes

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