



Indonesia and Africa in Pre-Islamic Times

Preamble.

At about the time delegates were gathering for the first Bandung Conference in 1955, I was cracking the shell of a fertile egg that has been a major focus of interest in my life ever since. At that time, I had a *duka* in the Fort Jesus Road in Mombasa, from where I ran a small business dealing in African arts and crafts. From my Mombasa base, whenever it was feasible, I made forays into the countryside to build up my stock, and find new suppliers of interesting work. One such journey took me to northern Mozambique, and it was there, on the coast, that I first heard stories of times long ago when flotillas of boats would descend upon the Mozambique coast from Madagascar to wreak havoc in the *shambas* of the Makua, and capture slaves to take back to The Great Isle... escapades that continued into the early part of the 19th century.

Like most people in Africa at that time I knew absolutely nothing about Madagascar, and was amazed when I discovered that much of the island's culture was of Indonesian origin, and that the people spoke a language that was structurally more similar to that of Easter Island 14,000 miles away in the Pacific than it was to the languages of Africa a mere 250 miles to the west.

For a host of reasons I closed my arts and crafts shop after a couple of years. But since those happy days I have dug deep into whatever materials I have been able to find concerning ancient economic and cultural ties between Africa and Southeast Asia. And in my retirement these studies finally culminated in the publication in 2005 of my book *The Phantom Voyagers – Evidence of Indonesian Settlement in Africa in Ancient Times*.

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Early days in the Indian Ocean.

One constant source of amazement to me has been the variety of fields in which there has been an interplay of ideas between Indonesia, and the western Indian Ocean. For example, the fact that cloves, which can only have come from the Moluccas, have been found in a Syrian site (Terqa) dated to 1,700 BC;¹ and that the remains of sheep or goats – animals that came originally from the Middle East – have been found in a Timor site dated to 1,500 BC,² brings up the curtain on a saga of huge antiquity.

On the African continent there are indications that contacts across the Indian Ocean might be almost as old as those with western Asia, going back to 500 BC and maybe earlier. From the evidence available it is possible – even probable – that the earliest contacts involved important

¹ G. Buccellatti. 2002 Correspondence 11th April

² J. Reade. 1996 *Indian Ocean in Antiquity*. Kegan Paul, London p.19 In the Introduction

features including agricultural practices; pyrotechnic and mining technology; fishing techniques; animal husbandry; magico-religious rituals; and at least one pernicious disease.

Tragically those responsible for whatever early cultural transfers there were, left no signs by which their presence can be proved beyond doubt; no tangible remnants; no inscriptions; nothing that screamed from the treetops unequivocally that 'We were Here!'. But the circumstantial evidence is everywhere and hard to refute.

It is probable that early contacts represented numerous waves of explorers and adventurers, and that during the first thousand years there were frequent contacts between insular Southeast Asia – called here 'Indonesia' for the sake of convenience, and because it was from the islands that they were most likely to have come – and Africa. Then, from around the middle of the first millennium AD it seems there may have been increased activity, spurred on by the powerful trading states that were founded in Indonesia.

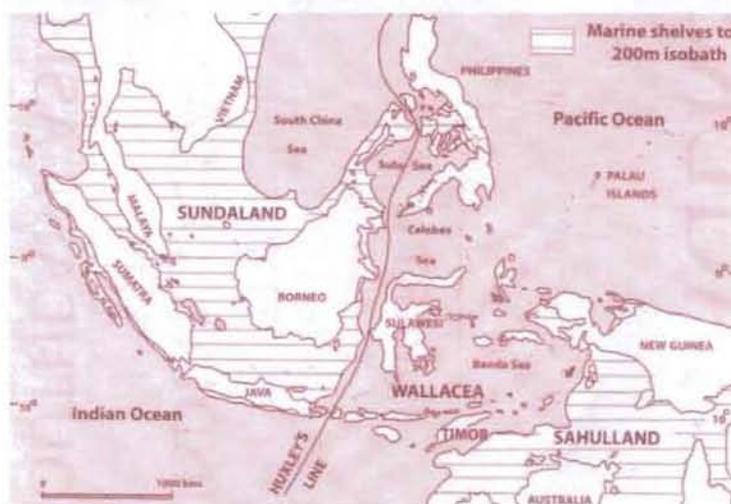
This second phase seems to have brought developments in new fields: music and musical instruments; boat design; introduction of new plants; glass and glass bead making; innovations in trading techniques; advanced metallurgical technology; sophisticated quasi-religious rituals possibly related to ancient Buddhist practices, to name some of the main ones.

Just as Britons were being influenced at roughly the same time by successive hordes of Romans, Jutes, Angles, Saxons and others coming over from continental Europe, these influences must have had a major impact on Africans who, like their counterparts in Britain, were emerging from a long period of cultural isolation. And just as Britain emerged richer and more vibrant, it does not stretch credibility to suggest that it was the advent of new technologies, new plants, and new ideas, that triggered the explosion of the Bantu-speaking world from their Cameroonian homelands; and the emergence of sub-Saharan Africa as we know it today.

Though the motives of those early Indonesians who were interested in Africa may not have precisely echoed those of 'Bandung 55', there can be no doubt that in the fields of economic and cultural change their achievements – whether witting or unwitting – were remarkable.

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Southeast Asia as it used to be and as we know it today – The emergence of Indonesia.



In the late Pleistocene era the frozen polar ice-caps sucked water from tropical oceans, lowering the sea as much as 100 metres below today's levels. In doing so the shallow basins between Borneo, Java, Sumatra and the mainland became one enormous land-mass which today we refer to as Sundaland; while further east, separated by a substantial area of deeper water (Wallacea) are Australia and New Guinea which form a separate land-mass we know as Sahulland.

Even with the seas at their lowest levels in Pleistocene times anyone from Sundaland wanting to travel to Sahulland would have had to make open-water crossings, none of which would have been of less distance than 70 kilometres. Despite this, about 60,000 years ago, when the seas were still fifty metres lower than today, hunter-gatherers from Sundaland, somehow crossed the deep waters that up till then had been an absolute barrier, to settle all the main islands of Wallacea, and eventually inhabit the vastness of 'Sahulland'. Seamanship in the region is ancient.

Then, some 35,000 years ago mariners from New Guinea managed to reach the Solomon Islands where they remained for several thousand years without further exploration. About 13,000 years ago, they took another stride across the 200-kilometres of water from New Guinea or New Ireland to the Admiralty Islands in the Bismarck Archipelago.

Around 5,000 year ago there appeared on the Indonesian scene a Mongoloid race of seamen moving south from their homeland in Formosa (Taiwan). They built seaworthy canoes, and may, at that early stage, have invented 'outriggers' to steady their boats in the choppy seas. They grew, among other crops, sugarcane, coco-yams, bananas, plantains and *taro*. Along with other vegetatively reproduced tubers and tree-fruits – particularly bananas and plantains (*musa*) which were native to Indonesia, the Moluccas and New Guinea. Yams and taro were to become of fundamental importance to them on their transoceanic explorations; and, as will be seen later, wherever they went, so also went *musa*. It was these people from Formosa who brought with them a new language that we know today as 'Austronesian' which now forms the basis of most Indonesian languages.

Then, 3,500 years ago there appeared a new and remarkable culture in eastern Indonesia, that of the 'Lapita' people, known for their distinctive pottery and named after the type-site where it was first found in the Bismarck Archipelago off the coast of New Guinea. The Austronesian-speaking Lapita people were the forebears of the Polynesians, who, over the next five hundred years, colonised Tonga and Samoa and dozens of other small islands. These journeys were no mere single voyages of 'accidental' exploration. They were the organised and coordinated voyages of people who maintained contact with one another across vast areas of ocean. Even in the early years they were trading obsidian (for manufacturing spear and arrow heads) from volcanic New Britain to islands 1,650 miles distant. By 1,000 B.C. the trading range was even greater: obsidian from the same source has been found in sites ranging from Borneo to Fiji, across a distance of more than 4,000 miles. So, clearly the Lapita master seamen maintained contact with fellow Austronesian mariners as far away as Borneo which lies as far to the west of the Bismarck archipelago as Fiji is to the east.

By the turn of the first millennium A.D. the western Polynesians, whose colonies in Tonga and Samoa were by then 1000 years old, were ready for the greatest voyages of all – across the remaining open waters of the Pacific. Large double canoes carrying food-plants and domestic animals sailed against the prevailing winds and currents to settle and colonise the Marquesas Islands by (at the latest) 300 A.D, then - perhaps a century later - Easter Island, one of the most isolated places on the face of the earth. Towards the end of the 1st millennium Austronesian mariners had colonised the Hawaiian chain and finally, by perhaps A.D. 900 they had reached the two great southern islands of New Zealand. (For the above section I have taken as my authority Peter Bellwood of the University of Hawaii ³)

Westward-Ho!

Why should we assume that Austronesians with the amazing skills of the Lapita mariners sailed only eastward, into an unknown ocean? With favourable winds behind them and lush islands on the horizon, the lure of the setting sun must surely have been irresistible. Isn't it therefore reasonable to

3 Bellwood P. 1977 Prehistory of the Indo-Malaysian Archipelago. University of Hawaii Press, n.d. The Peopling of the Pacific. Scientific America.

believe that they might also have explored beyond Borneo - where they were involved in the obsidian trade - to Malaya and Sumatra, and beyond even as far as India.

In 1920, James Hornell, one of the 20th century's most respected marine ethnographers, wrote an article asserting that *Polynesians*, having crossed probably from Sumatra, had become established in southern India in pre-Dravidian times, at the latest by 500 BC. Hornell also thought the Maldivic islands may also have been peopled by his 'Polynesians' at a very early period – in his words 'much earlier, I believe, than is generally supposed'.⁴

In short, there is no reason to doubt that 3,000 years ago, and even more, mariners from Indonesia were as active in the Indian Ocean as they were in the Pacific.

In Roman Times.

Long before the end of the first millennium B.C. regular sea-trade had developed between Greece, Rome and India. By 500 BC rich Greeks had Indian peacocks in their gardens. Oriental silks, cottons, and other luxuries, were in great demand among the urban upper classes in the Mediterranean.⁵ Lists of goods for the Mediterranean trade included food and drink, textiles and clothing, household items, tools, unspecified *raw* materials, *costly* materials,⁶ spices and aromatics, drugs and dyes, slaves, and even ivory carvings.⁷ A papyrus describes a typical consignment of goods shipped from Muchiris (near modern Cochin) to Alexandria, for a rich Roman merchant. It included over a thousand pounds of aromatic spikenard, over 4,700 pounds of ivory, and nearly 800 pounds of textiles with a total value of 131 talents, which, at the time, would have been sufficient to purchase 2,400 acres of Egypt's best farmland. Indian pepper, a trade item of particular value, was to remain of major importance for many years.

Most of this traffic seems to have been carried from India to the Mediterranean in Greek and Roman ships. The classical people of the Mediterranean ruled the open seas unopposed. Persians and Arabs still clung to the coasts; and there is no evidence whatsoever that *Indian* ships ever conveyed goods across the ocean to the Red Sea for onward shipment to Rome. There was, however, one grey area. There were one or two spices that reached the Mediterranean which were *not* carried on Roman ships, specifically, certain varieties of cinnamon. So how did they get there?

The Cinnamon Trade.

There were three varieties of cinnamon imported to the Mediterranean world: inexpensive cinnamon leaf, or *malabathrum* which came from a common tree that grew in China and India; higher value cinnamon bark, *Cinnamomum cassia* Blume; and the most expensive cinnamon flower tips of *Cinnamomum zeylanicum* Nees.⁸

The last two varieties were the most sought after; but for centuries their place of origin was a complete mystery to Greek and Roman writers of the time. The confusion was understandable because both varieties were *only* obtainable from Southeast Asia, and *neither* were mentioned as cargoes on Roman ships. Dismissing the various origin theories that were doing the rounds, Pliny the Elder (Natural History. 23 – 79 A.D) made an illuminating comment:

"All these stories are nonsense. In fact cinnamomum, which is the same thing as cinnamum, grows in 'Ethiopia', which is linked by intermarriage with the Cave Dwellers. These buy it from their neighbours and bring it over vast seas on rafts which have no rudders to steer them, no oars to push them, no sails to propel them, indeed no motive power at all but man alone and his courage. ... They say that their traders take almost five years there and back, and that many die. On the return journey they take glassware and bronzeware, clothing, brooches, bracelets and necklaces so here is one more trade route that exists chiefly because women follow fashion."

In my book *The Phantom Voyagers* I have argued (p.28 ff) that the purveyors of cinnamon, who brought it to Opone and ports on Africa's Berber coast for onward transmission by Arabs to the Mediterranean, were in fact Indonesians. Archaeological evidence of people who lived

⁴ Hornell, James 1920. *Memoirs of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* Vol 7 – Part V. P. 225 - 235 *The Light Shed upon Eastern Ethnological Problems by Indian Boat Designs.*

⁵ Warmington. E.H. n.d. *The Commerce between the Roman Empire and India* London revised

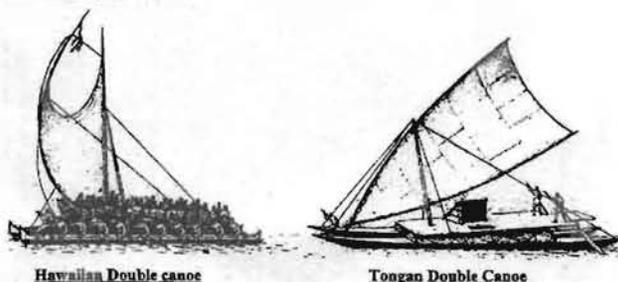
⁶ Hall, Kenneth R. 1985 *Maritime and State Development in Early Southeast Asia* U. of Hawaii. p. 27-36 + p.59

⁷ Glover, I.C. 1993. *Recent Archaeological Evidence for early Maritime contacts between India and Southeast Asia.*

⁸ Miller, J. Innes. 1969 *The Spice Trade of the Roman Empire*. Oxford, Clarendon Press.

on Mafia Island of the coast of Tanzania as long ago as the 3rd century BC suggests they may have been the 'Cave dwellers' referred to.⁹ And as island dwellers they must have had boats which set them apart from the land-bound Bushmen who would then have been living on the mainland opposite.

As for the 'raft boats' they were probably some sort of multi-hulled canoes with platforms, not dissimilar to some of the large voyaging canoes used to explore the Pacific. Absence of 'rudders to steer them' might simply mean that they had prahu-style steering-oars rather than axial rudders such as Pliny would have known. Like so many Indonesian and Polynesian boats, even in modern times, in contrary winds or still air they would have been propelled – fast - by banks of sailors with paddles.



As there is every likelihood that the Indonesian sailors who made such a journey would have been darker skinned than his own people, Pliny's description of them being 'Ethiopians' would be justified. If they were Indonesians, they probably came across the ocean via the Maldive Islands, maybe avoiding the ports of southern India and Ceylon, thus remaining unobserved by Roman merchants. Pliny said they were 'linked by intermarriage' with the 'Cave Dwellers'. If so, this would fit well with the hypothesis that there may already have been Indonesians residing on Africa's coast.

It cannot be over-emphasised how dominant the Indonesians were in the eastern oceans two thousand years ago – how much moreso than the Chinese. Despite the fact that China had, by 500 BC, developed both large and small vessels, many of them very sophisticated, that plied up and down its river systems, and along its immense coastline from Siberia to Indochina, they were for long reluctant to venture far out to sea.¹⁰ Despite their technical brilliance, even as late as the 7th centuries AD – according to the records - most Chinese travellers to the Indian Ocean seem to have travelled on *Kun-lun-po* ('Indonesian ships') rather than Chinese vessels.

Oliver Wolters, in his book on *Early Indian Commerce*,¹¹ seemed quite clear about who was doing the shipping in Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean:-

"... what is known of Asian shipping in the fifth and sixth centuries has indicated that at least in respect of the voyage between Indonesia and China the Chinese knew of Indonesian and not of Persian and Indian shipping. Nor does the evidence at present available from other sources contradict the Chinese evidence. The conclusion must be that the shippers of the 'Persian' cargoes were for the most part Indonesians."

By way of additional confirmation that *Kun-lun* ships were involved in the Persia/China trade that had developed in the 6th century, there were occasional complaints from customers that the shippers were adding cheap, second-grade *Indonesian* resins to the higher quality Persian goods to swell the profits!

The Indonesian States.

Indonesian sailors did not have a monopoly on the Chinese trade with the west. When possible, the preferred route for China's riches was overland, either along the silk-road through Turkistan to Roman Syria; or by overland caravan to ports in north-western India and from there by sea up the

⁹ Chami, Felix. 1999 *Graeco-Roman Trade Link and the Bantu Migration Theory*. Anthropos [Freiburg] Vol 94 Part 1-3. p 205 - 215

¹⁰ Needham, J. 1954 *Science and Civilisation in China - Nautical Technology* Cambridge. pp 451-453

¹¹ Wolters, O.W. 1967. *Early Indian Commerce* Cornell Univ. Press.

Persian Gulf. In the second century A.D. however, the central Asian overland routes were severely disrupted by incursions of nomadic steppe people, suddenly making the sea route a more attractive alternative. And as the nomad incursions continued there was a massive flight of rich and privileged Chinese from the north to regions south of the river Yangtse which in turn spurred the demand in southern China both for western and Indonesian products coming in by sea. Following China's partition in the post-Han period in the 3rd century, the overland routes through Turkistan were closed off completely, giving the sea-route an even greater fillip.

This scenario created the perfect incubator for the birth of independent States in Indonesia, each vying for privileged trading status with China. The first truly prosperous State was Funan,¹² centred on Oc Eo at the mouth of the Mekong, through which all trade passing from the Indian Ocean across the narrow Isthmus of Kra *en route* to China had to pass. In 240 A.D. a Chinese envoy to Funan took home a glowing picture of the country, telling the Emperor Wu how the people: "... live in walled cities, palaces and houses... They devote themselves to agriculture... Taxes are paid in gold, silver, pearls and perfumes ... There are books and depositories of archives and other things."¹³

During the 2nd or 3rd century, doubtless with an eye on Funan's wealth and burgeoning trade, alternative commercial zones began to emerge in various places throughout the Java Sea: Ko-ying, P'o-li, P'o-ta, Tan-Tan, Ho-ling, Ho-lo-tan ... and finally the first really important commercial centre, Kan-to-li, whose recorded history runs from 441 A.D. to 563 A.D. Chinese tradition has it that Kan-to-li, the first *Mahayana Buddhist* state to be established in Indonesia, grew directly out of its predecessor Ko-ying, and ultimately developed into the most powerful kingdom of all - Srivijaya. As such it would have been a link in a chain of organised control that gave Indonesians absolute dominance over the strategically vital Malacca and Sunda Straits linking the Indian Ocean with the islands for well over a thousand years.

From the earliest days of Ko-ying and Kan-to-li the stability of the Indonesian Island states had relied on a carefully balanced relationship between the three main groups of inhabitants:

- a) the *rulers*, the hub of whose power was in the seaports near the mouths of the great rivers, from where they could control all movements between the hinterland and the coast;
- b) the *producers* in the forests, fields, and mines of the hinterland who created much of the State's wealth;
- c) the State's *mariners* who protected the country from rogue pirates, and manned the merchant fleets.¹⁴

These relationships - often of people with different ethnic and tribal allegiances - were held together not just by formal alliances sealed with oaths, but as importantly, by the sharing out of the spoils of overseas trade on a mutually acceptable basis. The system was fragile because if, for one reason or another, the balance was upset - if trade declined and profits were poor - producers might withhold their products, or even look for markets elsewhere. Or, as may have happened with Kan-to-li, the mariners might renege on their oaths and sail away in search of better rewards, or back into a happy-go-lucky entrepreneurial life of piracy.

The great state of Srivijaya probably started off in the same way, until it expanded beyond the confines of Palembang on the Musi river in southern Sumatra, eventually to encompass half Java and most of the west coast of Malaya, thus controlling both the Malacca and Sunda Straits. One key to Srivijaya's ultimate success was that, in addition to having a substantial land army, it formed a highly organised navy. (The chances are that the mariners were drawn from the ranks of Bajau, Bugis, Mandar and Makassar sailors, the dominant sailors of the Indonesian islands, whose original homeland was in Southwest Sulawesi.¹⁵) And it was this 'navy' that may have enabled Srivijaya to expand overseas, beyond the islands and across the Indian Ocean to Africa. There is no doubt that in the middle of the first millennium AD, before the newly Islamic Middle East had

¹² Wolters, O.W. *op cit.* pp 37ff.

¹³ Hall, Kenneth R. *op cit.*

¹⁴ Wolters, O.W. *op cit.*

¹⁵ Sopher, D. E. 1965 (reprint 1977) *The Sea Nomads - A study of the Maritime boat people of Southeast Asia*. National Museum of Singapore.

started spreading its wings across the world, (The first Arab seaborne mission to China was in 724CE.¹⁶) there was a considerable increase in insular Southeast Asian activity in the Indian Ocean and on the coast of Africa. The kingdom of Srivijaya is not just the most likely main source of this activity, but was probably the only regional entity that had the wealth and power to organise it.

The Zanj.

Two thousand years ago Pliny the Elder, referring to the coast of East Africa, wrote about a land he called 'Azania' and its people the 'Zangenaë'. At about the same time as Pliny, in the middle of the 1st century, the Greek sea-captain who wrote the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* also mentioned the 'Small and Great Bluffs of Azania', and – possibly of significance – people on an offshore island who had sewn boats and dugout canoes used for fishing and catching turtles. 'The inhabitants of this island' he wrote, '... also have their own way of going after these with baskets, which they lower instead of nets around the mouths of [?rocky inlets].'¹⁷ The techniques he observed were obviously new to him; and he would have been unaware that they were similar to ancient fishing techniques in Malaya and Indonesia.

Ptolemy Claudius, in the 2nd century AD, mentioned the 'Zingis' or 'Zanj', which referred to both a place and its inhabitants somewhere south of the 'Barabara', or Berbera. The Sassanids of southern Persia, around 300 A.D., had dealing with 'Zand Afrik Shah', i.e. the king of the Zanj people of East Africa. Then Cosmas Indicopleustas, writing in about 520 A.D. mentioned the 'Zanj' but added little that was new. The Zanj of Azania were mentioned time and again throughout the first millennium. They must have been permanent - and prominent - residents of the African coast.

So who were these people?

One thing is sure – the 'Zangenaë' were not Arabs. When, later on, many of them were taken as slaves to the Middle East they needed interpreters to converse with their masters as they could not understand Arabic. The British orientalist, Anthony Christie, thought the word 'Zanj' may even have originated on the far side of the Indian Ocean. 'The Arab word *zang* or *zenj* used for *negro* may not be Arabic.'... said Christie, adding: 'An apparent Chinese form occurs as early as 607 AD. There is no doubt that this *seng-ch'i* was typically S.E. Asian. It could possibly be a S.E. Asian word.'¹⁸

Writing in 1278, Chou Ch'u-fei referred to the African people who had for centuries sent rhino horn, ivory, ebony, frankincense and myrrh to China, as the *Kuen-luen Tseng-kji*. Normally the term *Kuen-luen* carried implications of swarthy, and was usually used by the Chinese to describe the dark people of tropical Southeast Asia. Here, however, it links the people of Southeast Asia (*Kuen-lun*) directly with the Zanj of East Africa (*Tseng-kji*). The Arab author, Ibn Said (d.1286), a contemporary of Chou Ch'u-fei, equated the 'island of the Zanj' with northern Madagascar saying that the people were not Africans but rather the 'brothers of the Chinese'. Surely this link with the Indonesian-ised Great Isle was another clear indication that the Zanj had blood-ties with people on the other side of the Indian Ocean?

In the 1970's and 80's, using post-Islamic Arab writings as her sources, Marina Tolmacheva, a Soviet researcher at the Institute of Ethnography in Leningrad (later a professor at Washington State University), wrote several articles about the Zanj which helped to build a picture of who they might have been.¹⁹ From Arab sources there were clearly different 'kinds', or 'tribes', of Zanj. For instance, Zanzibaris were distinguished from Pembans; both of whom differed from other Zanj

¹⁶ Laffan Michael. 2005 *Finding Java: Muslim Nomenclature of Insular Southeast Asia from Srivijaya to Snouk Hurgronje*. In Asia Research Institute paper No 52..

¹⁷ Casson, L. 1989 *The Periplus Maris Erythraei ...* Princeton.

¹⁸ Christie, Anthony: 1959 11th April (unpublished). In the minutes of the African History Seminar S.O.A.S. London. .

¹⁹ Tolmacheva, Marina 1975 *The Zanj Language*.

Tolmacheva, M 1989. *Dictionary of the Middle Ages* v12

Tolmacheva, M. 1997/8 9 *The African Waq Waq: Some Questions regarding the Evidence*. In Bulletin d'Information Fontes Historical Africanae. No 11/12

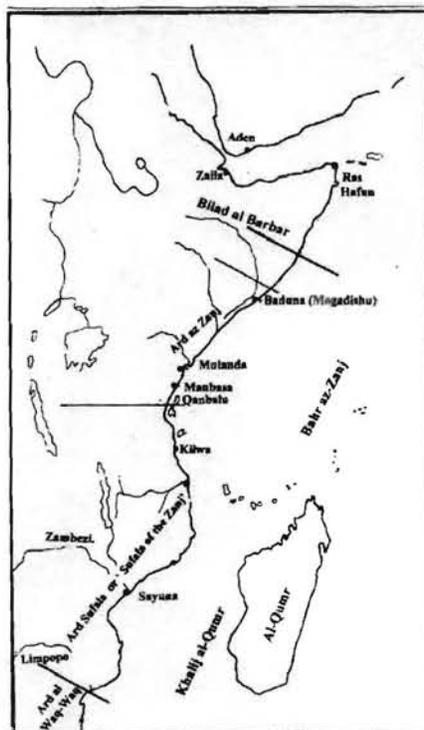
Tolmacheva, Marina 1986 *Toward a Definition of the Term 'Zanj'*. Azania. Vol XXI,

Tolmacheva, Marina 1976 *The Origin of the name 'Swahili'*. Tanzania Notes and Records No: 77/78,

on the mainland. Though the Zanj are described as 'black skinned' the term was never used in the same context as '*Sudan*' which was a general Arab term for 'Black people' – in fact al-Istakhri and Ibn Hawqal referred to some of them as 'White Zanj'.

The Zanj were Pagans, and their conversion to Islam seems to have been a slow process. In the 10th century their rulers were regularly referred to as 'Kings'. Only in the 13th century did they become 'Sheikhs' and 'Sultans': and not until the same century was Mogadishu, which may once have been at the northern limits of the Zanj empire, referred to by Yaqut as a Muslim city, or by Ibn Said as 'the glorious city of Islam'.

Several Arab writers referred to the fact that the Zanj were fine orators. Al-Masudi noted that; '... the Zanj have an elegant language and men who preach in it. One of their holy men will often gather a crowd and exhort his hearers to please God in their lives and to be obedient to him.' The holy men, said Masudi, explain the punishments for disobedience, and remind them of their ancestors and their ancient kings. Al-Dimishqi stressed that this eloquence for which they were famed applied mainly to the northern Zanj, saying that the inhabitants of more distant places 'are deprived of any cultural understanding'; and Ibn al-Nadim pointed out that they '... do not have any kind of known script or written language'. Clearly they were not Arabs.



IDRISI'S MAP OF EAST AFRICA, A.D. 1154

One of the earliest and most interesting 'maps' of the East African coast was that compiled by el-Idrisi in 1154. In it he mapped over 2000 miles of the coast - from Mogadishu to the Limpopo - dividing it into several distinct zones. To the Arabs, the whole western part of the *Bahr al-Hind* (The Indian Ocean) was then called the '*Bahr az-Zanj*'. Idrisi sub-divided the *Bar az-Zanj* into the *Bilad az-Zanj*, the "Land of the Zanj" stretching roughly from Mogadishu to Tanga; and the *Bilad az-Sufala* (also referred to as "Sufalah of the Zanj", or the *Ard adh-dhabad*, the "Land of Gold") between Tanga and the Limpopo. Beyond the 'Sufalah of the Zanj' - that is all the country, approximately, to the south of the Limpopo - was the '*Ard al-WaqWaq*', the land of the 'Waq-Waq'; 'Waq-Waq' in the literature of those days being synonymous with 'Indonesians'.

In the first millennium many people still held to the Ptolomaic notion that southern Africa curved away to the east in a solid strip of land that crossed the southern Indian ocean, 'to places where it was dangerous to go.' Although Al-Masudi had cast doubts on the Ptolomaic geography, it would seem that the southern seas were a no-go area for the Arabs. The writer Al-Buruni, for instance,

was confident that '... The sea beyond Sufalah of the Zanj is unnavigable. ... No ship which ventured to go there ever returned.' He was referring, of course, to Arab *dhow*s which were much less maneuverable in unfavourable winds than Indonesian vessels.

When Idrisi described the people of Sayuna, an important harbour on or near the mouth of the Zambezi, he wrote: 'The Zanj have no ships in which they can travel [the open sea]', doubtless meaning that their vessels were restricted to travelling up and down the coast, and for getting to the inhabited offshore islands. He goes on:- '... but ships come to them from Uman and other places [concerned with trade with the Zabag islands] that belong to the islands of Hind. They exchange there [in Zanj country] their goods for those of the Zanj. The people of the Zabag islands [also] travel to the Zanj in both small and large ships and engage in trafficking in their goods because they understand each other's language.'

Compounding a connection between East Africa and Indonesia, 'Zabaj', or 'Zabag', was the Arab name for Sumatra and, indeed, for the State of Srivijaya. And 'the islands of Hind' can be read as 'the Indonesian islands'. The phrase '... because they understand each other's language' is therefore of significance. It does more than just imply a genetic connection between the Zanj and the Zabag. It points to close geographic and commercial links. In fact, Al-Biruni had already written of the 'Zabaj and Zanj' as one and the same people, noting that they were very tricky to deal with!

The English Arabist, the Rev Trimmingham, seemed to be agreeing with Al-Biruni in a brief footnote to an article about the Zanj. He first explained that the Arabic word '*Zabag*' can be transcribed from Arabic in different ways: 'Zabaj/Zanaj, an early Arabic rendering of Java, though actually Zabag was also Sumatra.' He then wrote of an island which lay off the coast of Mombasa that had been described by Idrisi as belonging to the Zanj, or, according to another Arab writer, the Zanaj. '... might it be Zanj?', said Trimmingham, suggesting that the 'Zanaj' and the 'Zanj' were actually the same people.²⁰

Zabag, Zabaj, Zanaj, Zanj. The conclusion is compelling, that throughout the first millennium, before the Bantu dominated the hinterland, and before the Arabs and Shirazis were established in strength in their fortified coastal cities, there was a strong Indonesian element embedded along the two thousand miles of coastline from Somalia to South Africa.

What happened to the Zanj?

We know that Indonesians, or part-Indonesians whom we believe to have been the Zanj, were the first to colonise Madagascar; and it would seem that they did so from settlements on the African coast. Also, it seems there was regular trade between the Zanj (East African) and the Zabag (Srivijayans) in Sumatra. Now add another piece to the jigsaw, pointed out by the 13th century Arab writer, Ibn al-Mujawir: ... that from time to time the Zanj occupied the port that is now called Aden.

If there was continuous two-way traffic between East Africa and Sumatra, control of Aden may have been as important then as it was for the British in later years. When, soon after the foundation of Islam, Arabs and Persians began to found settlements and trading centres down the African coast they, too, would have sought to control the Aden coast. In his chronicle, Ibn al-Mujawir, referring specifically to the people of Al-Komr (Madagascar), because by the 13th century Arab influence down the African coast would have been dominant, explains what might have been a key factor in the ultimate demise of the Zanj:

"The Al-Komr (Malagasy) people used to leave Al-Komr to reach Aden in fleets and using a single monsoon ... these people have now disappeared since their power came to an end and since the route of their travel has been closed ... From Aden to Mogadiso there is one monsoon ... from Mogadiso to Kilwa there is a second monsoon and from Kilwa to Al-Komr there is a third one. These people managed to unite the three monsoons into one. A single vessel from Al-Komr thus went .. directly to Aden .. in the year [1228-1229 A.D.]. It was to have docked at Kilwa but it docked at Aden instead. The vessels ... have outriggers because the seas ... are

²⁰ Trimmingham, J. Spencer. 1975 *The Arab Geographers*. in Chittick and Rotberg. 'East Africa and the Orient'

dangerous. [But following the conquest of Aden] these people lost power and the Barabar [people of Berbera] came to them and chased them out of Aden.”

There is something about this that sounds like the last pathetic gasp of the people who, for a thousand years had maintained a life-line between Africa and their Austronesian homelands. By the time of the last fateful expedition to Aden, Kilwa and the other main African ports would have been almost wholly ‘Arabised’, or as some would prefer – ‘Swahili-ised’. By the 13th century the Zanj would have been slowly metamorphosing into the Swahili as we know them today. The last outposts of their empire would have retreated to Al-Komr beyond the Moçambique channel, where they still speak their Austronesian language; leaving a language with an Arabised Bantu base to become the *lingua franca* of the African coast.

Spencer Trimmingham thought the demise of the Zanj was earlier: ‘... when the change took place around 1150, it occurred rapidly and simultaneously in all these places and was probably associated with a change of leadership which might have been the result of external or internal stimulus.’²¹ But whatever the precise year, by the 14th century there were no further literary references to the Zanj.

So why should Indonesians have been interested in Africa so far away?

What would have been the incentive to settle there so long ago? In 1278 Chou Ch’u-fei mentioned trade in rhino horn, ivory, ebony, frankincense and myrrh – items that had been traded for centuries before his day, and would not necessarily have involved large scale colonization.²² So what else?

Could the answer lie in Africa’s *gold*?

Sumatra used to be known as ‘*Suvarnabhumi*’ – ‘the Land of Gold’: and on the face of it, there seem to be good reasons for it. First, it was alone among Indonesian islands in ancient times that was known to have gold mines; and it appears that the rulers of Ko-ying, Kan-to-li, and Srivijaya all made good use of them. As early as the 3rd century AD, Chinese scripts mention gold coming from Ko-ying which is presumed to have been in southern Sumatra; and when an embassy was sent from Kan-to-li to China between 454 and 464 AD it is recorded that the tribute included gold and silver.²³

The Arab chronicler Ibn Khurdadhbih, writing in the 9th century, pointed out just how important gold was to the running of the Srivijayan state. He related how it was customary for the Maharaja to demonstrate his debt to the oceans by communicating with *Tandru n Luah*, ‘the God of the Waters of the Sea’, by daily throwing a gold bar into the water, chanting ‘Look, there lies my treasure’ – a sure indication of the importance of overseas trade to the well-being of the State. When a Raja died, Palembang harbour was dredged, and the gold bars were distributed among the royal family, military commanders, and - if there was any left - the king’s other subjects.²⁴

But despite Sumatra’s sobriquets, *Suvarnabhumi* - or *Suvarnavipa*, ‘the Island of Gold’ - one has to wonder just how much gold was produced from the mines in the island’s mountainous western spine. In the 19th century, geologists working in the area reported traces of ‘... advanced mining techniques ... deep vertical shafts, horizontal tunnels, stopes, winzes(sic), aqueducts, and sluices’. There was evidence of devices for rock-crushing and signs that mercury may have been used in extracting gold from the ore. ‘The extensiveness of the old workings’ said the geologists, ‘indicates a thorough organisation, in which thousands and thousands of men must have been employed. It is evident that considerable quantities of gold have been produced.’²⁵ With Indian influence already considerable in Indonesia, and because India’s remarkable mines in Mysore were already nearing the end of their useful life by 300 AD it is probable that highly efficient gold miners from southern India had a hand in Sumatran mining.

²¹ Trimmingham, J. Spencer. *Op cit*

²² Wheatley, Paul. 1975 *Analecta Sino-Africana Recensa* in Chittick and Rotberg. ‘East Africa and the Orient’

²³ Wolters, O.W. *Op cit*.

²⁴ Hall, Kenneth R. *Op cit*. pp 80/81

²⁵ Miksic, J. 1990. *Old Javanese Gold*. Quoting van Bemmelen.: 11,105

As there is no evidence of ancient gold mining in other parts of Indonesia, it is noteworthy that at more or less the same time that the powerful state of Srivijaya was rising from the ashes of Kan-to-li there was another major source of gold coming 'on stream' across the ocean in Africa – in what el Idrisi later described, in an echo of Sumatra's *Suvarnabhumi* – as the *Ard adh-dhabad*, the Country of Gold, or the *Sufalah az-Zanj*. One feels that the Srivijayans must at very least have been aware of this gold. Could it be that they actually had a hand in its discovery and production and that they obtained gold directly from their brethren the Zanj to whose country – according to Idrisi – they travelled in 'both small and large ships', and with whom they were able to engage in 'trafficking in their goods ... because they understood each other's language'? Could it even be that, with experience gained in their own mines in Sumatra, the Srivijayans were responsible for developing the mines of Zimbabwe? According to the archaeologist Roger Summers, the African mines bore many similarities to the mines of India; and though in some ways less sophisticated than the mines of Sumatra those of Zimbabwe could well have been established by Srivijayan miners.²⁶

The Mines.

There had been mining of one sort or another in Southern and Eastern Africa for at least 2000 years – long before the discovery of gold. Some coastal and inland iron workings, even as far south as the Transvaal in South Africa, date back to the 1st or 2nd century AD, long before the arrival of the Bantu, Persians or Arabs. Copper mining in Zambia started around the 4th century AD.²⁷ Though some people hold the view that mining technology was independently invented in Africa, most concede that it is likely to have been introduced by outsiders. And as the Zanj people seem to have played a prominent role on the coast for fifteen hundred years or more, and were without doubt in the southeastern part of Africa long before Bantu people reached that part, the participation of Zanj (whose skill as iron workers was noted by Masudi in the 10th century) cannot be discounted.

Just how extensive was mining in the Zimbabwe highlands?

It is estimated that in a wide swathe across Zimbabwe there were over 4,000 ancient gold mines varying in age, and at least 500 copper mines²⁸. There were also uncountable iron workings in the region some of which, near the upper reaches of the Congo, were huge. Although, using primitive techniques, annual output of gold was not likely to have been massive, but the total amount extracted between the 6th and 12th centuries was estimated by Summers, and others in the mining industry, to be in excess of 20,000,000 ounces.

There were many different means of prospecting for gold; but as the majority of reefs were visible on the surface, the first phase of mining was relatively simple. The reefs generally dipped steeply and were frequently less than a metre wide. If the stope stretched far underground, the miners sank shafts and excavated laterally to the limits of light and air, before repeating the process with another shaft nearby. The system was similar to the techniques described in Sumatra where miners sank 'deep vertical shafts and horizontal tunnels'.²⁹

Old mines have been found where the underlying ores must have been barely visible on the surface. Some old shafts were barely 18 inches in diameter and can only have been wide enough for children (or Bushmen?) to pass. For digging, hardwood sticks and short handled hoes were used, but in one ancient mine the discovery of a shovel caused a stir. Shovels were unknown in that part of Africa when Europeans arrived; but they had been used in India and Indonesia for centuries.

When the ore was extracted, the miners left columns of mineral-rich rock to support the ceiling, or – on rare occasions – propped the ceiling with timber supports; and when an area was worked out, the shaft and the stope were usually filled in as the next shaft was excavated. Mines were usually worked until water was reached, which in some cases was as much as 120 feet beneath

²⁶ Summers, Roger. 1969 *Ancient Mining in Rhodesia* Museum Memoir 3. Salisbury, Southern Rhodesia

²⁷ Herbert, Eugenia W. 1984 *Red Gold of Africa* Wisconsin

²⁸ Summers, Roger. *Op cit.*

²⁹ van Bemmelen, R.W. 1949 *The Geology of Indonesia* The Hague

the surface. Because of the ever present fear of flooding, it is probable that the mines could only be worked during the dry season in August, September and October.

One problem that the archaeologist Roger Summers was unable to figure out was how the miners hauled the broken ore to the surface. Early Indian mines, some of which reached a depth of 600 ft, had fairly sophisticated lifting gear; but there were no signs of this in the African mines. It is, however, conceivable that some form of gantry may have been erected over the tops of mine shafts which would explain the lack of evidence. In modern times the bark of baobab trees has been extensively used for making rope, a method probably also used centuries ago.

Having got the ore to the surface the miners were faced with the laborious task of crushing it and recovering the gold, copper, or whatever other metal there might have been. One of the commonest ways of milling the ore was in 'dolly-holes' ... mortar-like holes made in rock surfaces in which it was bashed with dolerite pestles or hand-held balls of hard stone. Another more efficient method may have been with a large rock weighing maybe 1000 or 1500 pounds onto which a small tree trunk was fixed so that it could be rocked back and forth by several people as uncrushed ore was pushed beneath it. This ancient but simple piece of machinery, known as a 'mullocker', was still in use in the twentieth century in some Indian mines and there is some evidence that it might have been used in Africa. Once crushed to a powder, the most likely method of concentrating the metal was by the time honoured technique of 'panning' in wooden trays; but as very few milling and recovery sites have come to light there is scant evidence of precisely how this was actually done. It seems that 'amalgamation' with mercury, as used in India and, apparently, in Sumatra, was not used in Africa.

Some remarkable finds have been reported from the African mines: a Roman coin from A.D. 138 – 160, said to have been found 70 feet down; a silver penny of John of England, c 1200 AD; and a silver sixpence of Elizabeth 1st of England, retrieved from 'fill' 40 ft down. These finds may be surprising; but are by no means impossible. A large variety of silver coins were in circulation along Indian Ocean trade routes from Roman times onwards. Though some of the coin finds have been questioned by disbelieving experts, less questionable were the more common discoveries of 9th century blue-green, green, and yellow beads of southern Indian or Malayan origin that seem to confirm a trading relationship between the two zones in the first millennium.³⁰

So what happened to all the gold?

A few small gold objects have been found scattered throughout the mining region, showing that at least some was used locally. The most significant piece, perhaps, is a carved wooden rhinoceros sheathed in finely beaten gold foil found on the hill of Mapungubwe just south of the Limpopo river. But most of the gold appears to have been taken down to the coast to be exported. There were several routes to the coast. One was overland to the Zambezi valley somewhere near the modern town of Tete, from where there were 300 miles of navigable river to the sea-port named by Idrisi at 'Sayuna' whose '... inhabitants are a collection of people from Hind, Zunuz, and others' - i.e. probably Srivijayans; and folks from the 'Isle of the Hind' or 'Indonesia'?

Another route may have been down the Save valley, between the Zambezi and the Limpopo rivers. Not far from the village of Marumbene, on the Zimbabwe/Mozambique border, there are ancient excavations beside the river that appear to have been man-made docks from which small watercraft would have been able to negotiate the 200 miles to the sea.³¹ Once at the coast there were a number of ancient, pre-Islamic, 'ports' - some dating back to the early iron-age - from which goods might have been shipped. Of particular interest was Chibuene where 6th C. pottery has been found and where, amongst the surrounding sand-dunes archaeologists have found

³⁰ Summers, Roger. *Op cit.*

³¹ Summers, R. *Op cit.*

crucibles for purifying gold, thus associating the port beyond doubt with the gold-mining communities inland.³²

In theory the gold could have been shipped to a variety of destinations ... Arabia, Persia, India. But back in the 6th or 7th century, before the Persians and Arabs started taking an active interest in East Africa, and when India is unlikely to have had ships capable of transoceanic journeys, the most likely destinations would have been the islands of Southeast Asia. And though Srivijaya seems to have been the most likely of all, there is another possibility that pops up unexpectedly...could Zimbabwe's gold have gone to Java?³³

Far back in history, Java had acquired a reputation for being a veritable El Dorado, supposedly producing huge quantities of gold of its own. To the writers of the pre-Christian Ramayana in India, Yavadvipa (Java) was known as 'the gold and silver island that is rich in gold mines'. In the 2nd C. Ptolomey wrote that Java is '... said to be a most fruitful island and to produce much gold'. A 7th C. Javanese inscription proclaimed that the island was 'possessed of gold mines'. Both T'ang and Sung sources (618–1279) refer to Java producing both silver and gold. And Marco Polo (not always reliable!) said of Java: 'The quantity of gold collected there exceeds all calculations and belief'. Modern treasure hunters are constantly finding buried rings, hair pins, and other items of personal adornment. But perhaps most extraordinary of all was a discovery in the village of Wonoboyo in Central Java, where, in 1990, exquisite gold bowls, dishes, ladles, etc. weighing 440 ounces and dated to about 900 AD, were found buried 9 feet beneath the surface stashed in a large Chinese porcelain jar. It seems that Java's reputation for being an island with enormous riches in gold might have been justified.³⁴

But herein lies the mystery: modern geologists emphatically deny that Java could ever have produced gold in appreciable quantities: leading one writer to ask: 'Whence came Javanese gold?'³⁵

Several possibilities have been suggested: that it was in fact gold leaf creating a wrong impression; that it was imported from the Philippines; that it came from another island as yet unidentified, etc. But given the apparent connections between the Zanj of Africa and the Zabaj of Sumatra; given the power of Srivijaya, and its command of the high seas; given that, at its height, Srivijaya's hegemony extended deep into Java, beyond Prambanan and Borobudur; given the movement of people between Indonesia, Africa, and Madagascar which must have continued over a period of a thousand years into the eleventh century; surely the probable answer is that the gold from ancient Zimbabwe was mined primarily to satiate the ravaging appetites of both Sumatran *and* Javanese princes and that Java's gold came from both Sumatra *and* Zimbabwe.

Maybe one day chemical analysis will go some way to proving or disproving this hypothesis.

How does Madagascar fit into the picture?

Though Madagascar's existence must have been known of for centuries, Adelaar and Dahl's arguments – mainly on linguistic grounds - that the island was not permanently settled until about the 6th or 7th century AD are generally accepted. Though a few people still cling to the belief that the earliest inhabitants sailed directly across the Indian Ocean, this is highly unlikely, for had they done so they would surely have discovered the Seychelles, the Amirantes, and other islands on the Mascarene ridge. As these islands appear to have remained virgin until more modern times it is virtually certain that the earliest settlers would have come around the northern part of the Indian Ocean via southern India and the Maldives to the coast of Africa. Then, as Hubert Deschamps said in his *Histoire de Madagascar*³⁶ "It seems to me that the Proto-Malagasy settled on the coast, from Somalia as far as Mozambique, and they have left traces of their presence in the local civilisation"

³² Sinclair, Paul, 1982. *Chibuene – An Early Trading Site in Southern Mozambique*, In *Paideuma* pp149-164

³³ Miksic, J. *Op cit*

³⁴ Google *Wonoboyo Hoarde*.

³⁵ Colless, Brian. 1973 *Were the Gold Mines of Ancient Java in Borneo?* *Brunei Museum Journal*, condensed in SE Asian section of 29th Int. Congress of Orientalists. Paris as: *Gold in Ancient Insulinidia*

³⁶ Deschamps, Hubert. 1960 *L'Histoire de Madagascar*. Paris

We have already explored the probability that it was Indonesians who brought cinnamon to the Horn of Africa for the Roman trade, and as they subsequently explored further down the coast there is every reason to think that it was Africa – not Madagascar – that was from the earliest times their most important destination. Eastern Africa, then mainly, but sparsely, inhabited by Bushmen (San), held no perils, threats, or hazards of note. On the contrary, it was a land of plenty, offering opportunities for trade and exploration; and as ‘masters of the oceans’ who had little opposition in the ensuing centuries until after the expansive adventures of Islam, why should they not have taken advantage of their dominant situation in the western Indian Ocean?

Entering the realms of speculation with our eyes wide open we can see how miscegenation among the San; among pastoralists emanating from the North; and the earliest Bantu migrants trickling in from the West, might have given rise to the mixed-race Zanj people – and indeed, maybe, to the Khoi-Khoi, or ‘Hottentots’, as well. We have discussed the Zanj in some detail already but it is worth repeating, in encapsulated form, the reasons for thinking that the Zanj were mixed Afro-Austronesians:-

1. The Zanj of Azania, from which Zanzibar and Tanzania take their names, have been recognised as a demographically distinct people for at least 2000 years, before the Bantu arrived on the East coast of Africa in numbers.
2. The Zanj were *seamen* – thus unlikely to have been Bantu, Khoisan, or any of the cattle-herding tribes. The Indian Ocean off the African coast was known as the ‘Bahr az Zanj’ – the ‘Sea of the Zanj’.
3. The Zanj seem to have employed *fishing techniques* similar to those used in Malaya and Indonesia.
4. The *ngalawa*, the East African outrigger canoe, probably used since the days of the Zanj, has south-east Asian origins. Several bits of outrigger terminology directly link it with Indonesia. The Kiswahili for the outrigger boom is *tengo; tengotengo; or rengo*. In Buginese it is *baratāng*. The outrigger-connector of a Makassarese boat is *tenko*: in Bajau – *tētēnkona*. A double-outrigger canoe in eastern Indonesia is *tango*. These suggest a direct Buginese, Makassarese and Bajau connection with East Africa.
5. The Zanj did not speak *Arabic*. When, in the 9th century, many of them were enslaved by Sassanians from southern Persia to drain the Euphrates marshes they needed Arabic interpreters.
6. Arab chroniclers recognised the Zanj as ‘*different people*’, neither Arabs, nor Africans. The 13th century chronicler Ibn Said even described them as ‘*brothers of the Chinese*’.
7. The Zanj *exported goods* to China, via South-east Asia. Early in the 7th century, long before Arabs started building settlements along the East African coast, ambergris was being shipped to China, soon followed by rhino horn, ivory, frankincense, and ebony.
8. Later, a Chinese writer referred to the people whose land these commodities came from as *Kuen-luen Tseng-kji*. ‘Kuen-luen’, or Kun-Lun, was the term used by the Chinese for the dusky people of the tropical islands of South-east Asia; and ‘Tseng-Kji’ equals ‘Zanj’.
9. The Zanj were *pagans*, and their conversion to Islam was very slow. In the 10th century, Zanj rulers were still referred to by Arab chroniclers as ‘Kings’. Not until the 13th century were they referred to as ‘Sheiks’ and ‘Sultans’.
10. The well known British orientalist, Anthony Christie, thought the name ‘Zanj’ itself might be “*a Southeast Asian word*”.
11. Al-Idrisi not only describes the coast but mentions vessels that came from the *Zabaj* islands to trade with the Zanj. *Zabag* or *Zanaj* was the name by which Arabs referred to Sumatra and Java – ‘The people of the *Zabaj* islands’, wrote al-Idrisi, ‘travel to the Zanj in both small and large ships and engage in trafficking in their goods because *they understand each others’ language*’.
12. Finally, the 11th c. Arab chronicler, Al-Biruni, went further when he wrote that the Zanj [of Africa] and the *Zabaj* of Sumatra were actually *one and the same people*, adding that they were very tricky to deal with!

It was from these people that the core settlers of Madagascar must have sprung, when they still spoke an Austronesian language, before the main flood of Bantu immigrants came in from the west, and settlers from the Middle East started building their trading empires down the coast. The settlement of Madagascar must have taken place whilst the Zanj (the proto-Malagasy – the 'Tompondane') were still masters of the seas capable of ongoing contacts with the African mainland, and still in touch with the islands of Indonesia.

Madagascar and Africa.

There is much to support a hypothesis of Indonesian settlement in south-central Africa in the 1st millennium AD. One of the strongest bits of evidence lies in music and musical instruments, particularly xylophones and panpipes. The general consensus among musicologists is that the African xylophone was introduced from Indonesia. Jaap Kunst, an authority on Indonesian music, was the first to produce convincing evidence of this.³⁷ Others included A.M. Jones who discussed every aspect of the African xylophone including its morphology, tuning, and methods of playing, in detail, in his 'Africa and Indonesia'.³⁸

In his 1948 book 'Chopi Musicians' Hugh Tracey noted that around 1500 AD, the Chopi – Africa's finest xylophone players - broke away from a major Shona sub-tribe, the Karanga, and moved to southern Mozambique where they now reside.³⁹ This is of particular significance as the Karanga are looked upon as having been the guardians of southern Africa's greatest building complex, the Great Zimbabwe. It seems to create a direct link between Indonesian culture and the people occupying Africa's most iconic ruins, which were, incidentally, also one of the major centres of the African goldfields.

If there are any doubts about the xylophone - and the occasional contrarian will still hold that Africa's xylophones were an entirely independent invention - there must be fewer doubts about the African panpipes, best represented by the huge groups that Andrew Tracey [Hugh Tracey's son] heard being played in the village of Nyungwe on the Zambezi.⁴⁰ The worldwide distribution of panpipes is very specific, and would not normally include southern Africa. But there are records of panpipes being played in Java,⁴¹ and those in south-central Africa shared both morphological and musicological similarities with the pipes of Southeast Asia.⁴²

In his 'Early Kingdoms in Madagascar' the American sociologist Raymond Kent presented an unassailable case that there were close links between the Afro-Indonesians of Madagascar and the people of mainland Africa across the Mozambique channel... in essence Kent was describing the Zanj:-

To put it in the simplest form of statement there must have been in the first millennium of our era an Afro-Malagasy race inhabiting both sides of the Mozambique channel, which was then not a barrier but a duct for the movement of peoples ... And this race had its African and Indonesian extremes with all sorts of admixtures in between.⁴³

Kent's focus is mainly on the Shona of Zimbabwe, and it starts at the top of the pyramid: the Shona creator - *M'wari* - for example, shares a name with the creator of the monotheistic Malagasy people: *Zana-hary*, *Rana-hary*, or *Adriana-hary*. Once the links between Madagascar and Africa are established, many analogous customs and beliefs expounded by Kent and others appear to offer solutions to a host of Central Africa's most famous 'mysteries'.

Consider the thousands of mysterious pits scattered across the Nyanga highlands for which many uses have been suggested.⁴⁴ Though not *identical* to any in Madagascar, they are very similar to

³⁷ Kunst, Jaap 1936 *A musicological argument for cultural relationship between Indonesia and Central Africa* .
Kunst, Jaap. 1970 *Music in Java*. The Hague,

³⁸ Jones, A.M. 1971 *Africa and Indonesia* 2nd Edition: Leiden

³⁹ Tracey, Hugh. 1948 *The Chopi*. OUP p. 123 Also ref: pp 9, 107, and 137

⁴⁰ Tracey, Andrew. 1971 *The Nyanga Panpipe Dance*. African Music Vol 5

⁴¹ Kunst, Jaap. *Op cit* (1970)

⁴² Fischer, Hans 1983 *Sound Producing Instruments in Oceania* Inst. of PNG Studies p. 207 No 389 and 384

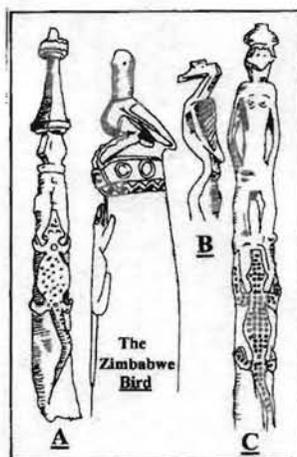
⁴³ Kent, Raymond. *Op cit*. pp 263 and 247

⁴⁴ R. Soper 1997 *Nyanga*

descriptions of stone-lined family *tombs* in Betsileo⁴⁵ and Tanala⁴⁶ country. It is by no means improbable that those in Nyanga once had timber and thatched roofs that have long since rotted to dust, and the fact that they contain no bones of the dead simply means that when the earlier inhabitants left they disposed of their forbears by some other means.

Then, in the Great Zimbabwe there is the anomalous 30ft high stone construction referred to as 'The Conical Tower', surrounded by a scattering of small phallic objects. It does not over-stretch credibility to interpret the Conical Tower as a *vatolahy* (lit. 'male stone'), the centre of a phallic cult similar to those documented among the Betsileo in southern Madagascar⁴⁷ in which the emblematic *vatolahy* is surrounded by small phallic replicas by those seeking to improve their sexual performance.

Also in The Great Zimbabwe, are the famous soapstone birds, one of which is now the national emblem of Zimbabwe. These can be compared directly to the grave posts, *aloalo*, of the Mahafaly of southern Madagascar⁴⁸, some of which share the same features as the Zimbabwe counterparts⁴⁹ – birds on the top; lizards or crocodiles on the stems. In Madagascar the *aloalo* are made of wood. The few Zimbabwean counterparts doubtless owe their survival to the fact that the most favoured memorials were made of durable soapstone.



The Zimbabwe Bird with three Mahafaly 'Aloalo'

Finally, the dozens of 'Zimbabwes' found in Zimbabwe and Mozambique... Latter day academics like to think the name 'Zimbabwe' derives from the Shona *dzimba za mahwe*, 'houses of stone'. But the problem with this is there have never been any 'stone houses' in any of the African *Zimbabwes*. In Madagascar, however, at the centre of the multiple enclosures of a widespread ancestral cult - the *Tromba* - there stands, or stood, a large grass and timber building called the *Zumba-bé*, which translates as 'The Great House', in which the revered relics of the ancestors were kept. The translation of the Shona word 'Zimbabwe', in the opinion of a fluent chi-Shona speaker, the late Charles Bullock, is simply: 'A Great House'⁵⁰ – i.e. identical to that of the *Zumba-bé* in the Malagasy *Tromba*, and probably sharing a similar function, i.e. housing the relics of the ancestors.

The spider's web that spreads across the Indian Ocean to Africa and Madagascar begins to contract, drawing together the threads of boat design, music, religious beliefs, language, and social mores. Indonesian influences certainly reached East Africa, but did they spread further, beyond the Cape of Good Hope, to Western Africa?

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⁴⁵ J. Sibrec, 1896 *Madagascar Before the Conquest*. Fisher Unwin, London. p320 ff

⁴⁶ R. Linton, 1933 *The Tanala. A Hill Tribe of Madagascar*. Chicago p.177

⁴⁷ C. Poirier. 1939 *Vatolahy d'Ampasampirafy et Ankazomiranga en pays Betsileo* Planche XI. *Memoires de L'Academie Malgache* XXVI 11.

⁴⁸ H. Lormian 1930 *L'Art Malgache*. Paris ... et al.

⁴⁹ R. Dick-Read. 2005 *The Phantom Voyagers*. Winchester.. p 104

⁵⁰ C. Bullock. 1928 *The Mashona*.

Indonesia and West Africa.

As I have already pointed out, when Idrisi wrote his description of the East African Coast in 1154 he described the region south of the Limpopo as the 'Ard al Waq Waq' – the country of the Waq Waq – which, in the literature of the day, was synonymous with 'Indonesia'⁵¹. Arabian dhows found it hard to navigate in the waters beyond the Mozambique channel; and Al-Buruni, for instance, wrote: "... The sea beyond Sufalah of the Zanj is un-navigable ... No ship which ventured to go there ever returned."⁵² But there is solid modern evidence that sturdy and more maneuverable Indonesian vessels were able to do so.

In 2004 an Englishman, Philip Beale, built a ship (*Samudra Raksa* = 'Defender of the Seas'), whose design was based on vessels depicted on the walls of Borobudur attributed to a merchant named Mairakanyaka⁵³, and sailed it from Java to West Africa. Despite the danger of the famed Cape rollers and other supposed hazards, and with no engine or other modern equipment except radios, Philip Beale and his mainly Indonesian crew took *Samudra Raksa* round the Cape, and north to Accra without problems or incidents. There is no reason to think that ancient Indonesian mariners with their vast experience, could not have done the same.

When did Indonesians first sail into the Atlantic? The Plant Evidence:-

The answer may be linked to the diffusion of bananas and yams from Southeast Asia to Africa.⁵⁴ There is a school of thought that bananas were first introduced in Northeast Africa, from where they spread across to the west. But many experts now think it more likely that bananas – together with yams and cocoyams and other plants - were introduced *directly* in West Africa.

Typical of this reasoning is the story of False Horn bananas. There are more than twenty varieties of False Horns exclusive to West Africa whose morphology is precisely the same as some AA bananas in New Guinea, but which are not matched anywhere in Eastern Africa or Asia.⁵⁵ If they do not occur in East or Central Africa, how did they get to West Africa?

Also, the huge number of banana cultivars in western Africa suggests a slow development *in situ* over many centuries rather than a rapid spread across the continent from the east. As for the date of their arrival in West Africa the answer may lie in the Southern Cameroons where banana phytoliths that date reliably to c. 450 BC have been found.⁵⁶ ... a period that may be significant for other reasons that will be mentioned.

Many other exotic plants appear to have been introduced from the orient at various times before Arab and European contact. When excavating the floors of an impluvium in Yorubaland Frank Willett found potsherds dated by thermo luminescence to between the 12th and 14th centuries that had been decorated with the imprint of old corn-cobs⁵⁷. Maize is a plant that was hybridised in Central America, but which is known to have reached Southeast Asia in pre-Columbian times.⁵⁸ It has been suggested that Arabs brought it to West Africa. But as Arab merchants in the Indian Ocean do not appear to have known about maize until early in the 15th century, an introduction by them over the Sahara in the 12th C. can safely be ruled out⁵⁹. On the other hand it would have been quite simple for maize to have been carried to Africa by Indonesian mariners along with other plants.

Recently (2010) a Nigerian palynologist, Bisi Sowunmi working with a team in northern Yorubaland found exotic pollens in mid-13th century archaeological levels that long pre-date European or other external contacts with the region.⁶⁰ Of these, *Lagerstroemia indica* (the Crape

⁵¹ J.S. Trimmingham. *Op. Cit* p. 138

⁵² M. Tolmacheva. 1987/88 *The African Waq-Waq: Some Questions regarding the Evidence.* Bull. d'Information Fontes Historical Africanae. No 11/12

⁵³ J. Miksic. 1990 *Borobudur* Periplus Editions (HK) Ltd

⁵⁴ G.P. Murdoch 1959 *Africa: Its People and their Culture History.* New York.

⁵⁵ E. De Langhe. 2009 Correspondence

⁵⁶ Vrydaghs & E. De Langhe, 2002 *Phytoliths: An Opportunity to rewrite History.* JAS 27:151-162.

⁵⁷ F. Willett. 1967 *IFE in the History of Western African Sculpture.* pp126-127

⁵⁸ C. Stonor and E. Anderson, 1949 *Maize among the Hill People of Assam.* Ann. of the Missouri Bot. Gdns vol 36.

⁵⁹ G.F. Carter, 1964 *Archaeological Maize in West Africa* Man. No 95. May/June

⁶⁰ B. Sowunmi et al 2010 *The Archaeology and Palynology of Ajaba, A Late Iron-Age Settlement in North-East Yorubaland ; some preliminary results.* U. of Ibadan;

Myrtle) is of Asian origin; while *Delonix regia* (the Flame Tree) is indigenous to Madagascar. Though Sowunmi admits it is curious that both trees are ornamentals with no known uses (other than the Flame tree's seed pods being used as a rhythm instrument!) we cannot be sure that they did not have spiritual significance, as, for instance, did the Baobab and Silk Cotton Tree.

Adansonia digitata (the Baobab) and *Ceiba pentandra* (the Silk Cotton tree) pose interesting questions. In a 2003 paper⁶¹ Roger Blench noted: "Neither are truly native to the continent; the baobab probably originated in Madagascar ... while Ceiba probably originated in the Americas." Though they have economic uses, he continues: "... it is unlikely that this is the primary reason for their spread ... and (both) have been incorporated into ritual systems almost everywhere they occur". Blench also notes that both owe their distribution to human activity. In Africa the baobab appears to have spread from east to west and be most concentrated in two core areas: A) Zambezia and to a lesser extent the eastern coastal hinterland; and B) the Niger/Benue/Bauchi region and to a lesser extent along the Senegal river and the western coastal hinterlands; both regions where we suspect there may have been strong 'Indonesian' activity dating back to the 1st millennium BC.

Ceiba pentandra is originally from Central America. We know from wall-depictions that by 850 AD *Ceiba pentandra* had reached Java⁶². It would have been one of numerous plants brought by mariners from the Americas. According to Roger Blench, on linguistic grounds, it appears to have spread across Africa from west to east, 'translocated by human action'. For a long time it was thought that seeds must have floated across the Atlantic from South America, but it has since been shown they would not have survived in the sea. In its homeland of Central America the Ceiba tree was held sacred by the Mayans, and is still a sacred tree for the Caribs and other Central and South Americans. Curiously, according to F.R. Irvine, it is also 'one of the most sacred trees of West Africa'⁶³. There is absolutely no reason why it should not have been brought across to Africa via Southeast Asia by Indonesian mariners. And if it is correct that it spread from west to east, then it probably reached West Africa in the same manner as other exotic plants - bananas, yams, cocoyams, maize, Crape myrtle, the flame tree, et al - though precisely at what date remains unknown.

Why is 450 BC a significant date? The introduction of Iron...

Roughly coincident with the appearance of bananas in West Africa was the earliest sign of iron smelting in sub-Saharan Africa, in about 500 - 450 BC. Apart from some sites of similar date in the lacustrine regions of eastern Area which could have been reached from the east coast, the earliest iron in West Africa has been found in various locations in a belt running from the Du Chaillu hills in Gabon, 800 or 900 miles north to Taruga, on the Jos Plateau in Nigeria. Several of the earliest sites are located at the mouth of the Gabon river near the sea.⁶⁴

There is a school of thought that iron technology in sub-Saharan Africa spread south and west from the iron-working region of Meroe, the capital of the ancient Kushitic empire on the Nile. Another hypothesis is that it came across the Sahara via the Air plateau where iron-working dates back to the 7th century BC. Both of these theories are possible, but have serious problems. If iron came to western Africa from Meroe along the most obvious route via Chad and the Benue river, why was there no sign of its use in ancient Daima along the way until the 5th or 6th century AD? And if it came south via the Air Massif 600 miles north of Taruga, why was there no sign of such early iron smelting in Kano or elsewhere in northern Nigeria? An obvious possibility is that the technology was brought by those who carried bananas and other plants by sea from Indonesia.

Taruga and the Nok Culture. Elephantiasis...

Let us, for the moment, assume that Indonesian mariners rounded the Cape and sailed up to Nigeria, and that more than two thousand years before the Lander brothers first explored the true course of the Niger, found that the many streams flowing into the Bight of Benin in fact formed the delta of a huge river, navigable in small craft, that stretched for thousands of miles inland ...

⁶¹ R. Blench. 2003 *The Intertwined History of the Silk-Cotton and the Baobab*. Groningen

⁶² R. Blench 1934 *Op. cit.* P 6 Quoting Steinman..

⁶³ F.R. Irvine 1961 *Woody Plants in Ghana* Oxford U.:191

⁶⁴ J. Vansina. 1990 *Paths in the Rainforest*. U. of Wisc.. Map 59

and that they followed this huge river to its tributary, the Benue, and into other smaller rivers such as the Mada or the Wase that flow down from the Nok Plateau.

This might sound fantastic... if it were not for one thing. Among the famous Nok terracottas found near Taruga, and about the same age as the earliest known iron sites with which they were associated⁶⁵ (the middle of the first millennium BC), is at least one significant sculpture depicting a man with elephantiasis of the testicles.⁶⁶ Because of the manner in which elephantiasis is passed from person to person, it is a disease that is considered by experts to have been introduced *directly* to West Africa from Southeast Asia⁶⁷ and did not spread all the way across the continent overland. Might not those who brought elephantiasis also have introduced iron-smelting?

Hutton's miscellany.

The possibility of an early introduction of bananas, elephantiasis, and iron, would not be the first time such an ancient Indonesian/West African connection has been mooted. In 1947 Professor J.H. Hutton, a well known anthropologist who worked both in Southeast Asia and Nigeria, wrote a paper entitled *West Africa and Indonesia: A Problem of Distribution* in which he discussed numerous ancient traits, mostly connected with ritual cannibalism and head-hunting in the two regions.⁶⁸ In his conclusion Hutton stated:

“...the number of independent beliefs and practices common to the two areas and absent elsewhere involves an assumption of coincidence ... which goes, as it seems to me, far beyond probability.

Coincidence does not account for similarities and contrasts on such a scale. It may account for some of them, but not for the whole complexes”.

Some of Hutton's claims may sound extraordinary, but should not be dismissed out of hand.

Musical instruments.

The almost total absence of xylophones in Madagascar, and, curiously, in Yorubaland in Nigeria, set against their popularity in parts of eastern Africa (remember Chopi xylophonists at the Great Zimbabwe 500 years ago?) gives support to the view that far from there being just one wave of Indonesian migrants, different groups of Indonesians, probably from different *sukus* brought different culture traits to different parts of Africa at different times.

Does the fact that xylophones of one sort or another are found from southeast Africa in a great dog-leg to the Atlantic coast of Senegal necessarily mean that they spread overland? Or might they have been introduced in several locations, not necessarily at the same time? The latter is the most likely as, for one thing, the instruments of West Africa, and the manner in which they are played, often vary considerably to those of, say, the Chopi, Ndaou or Baganda in the east.

As for the African xylophone's connections with Southeast Asia, Father Jones⁶⁹ used to tell his famous story of how a Mandinka *griot* of Sierra Leone, to whom he had lent a Cambodian xylophone with a box resonator, was able to play it inter-changeably with his own African instrument: “He told me it was the same as the Mandinka model and asked me if he might buy it!”

Other different instruments of Western Africa that might be compared with Southeast Asia are the Igbo *ekere-mba*⁷⁰ and the Thai *kong tock*⁷¹; identical message gongs of Indonesia and several parts of Africa⁷²; virtually identical bar-zithers from the Congo, Mozambique, Madagascar – and Sulawezi – shown by Jones and Carrington; various metal gongs, including the double iron gong (clapperless bell) that is found sporadically from West Africa (where it is still in use) to the Great Zimbabwe (where it has been found in archaeological levels) – and a not-too-dissimilar bell depicted on a Borobudur frieze⁷³.

⁶⁵ B. Fagg. 1977 *Nok Terracottas*. National Museum of Lagos. p 39 (bottom)

⁶⁶ B. Fagg *Op cit* Plate 121

⁶⁷ B.R. Laurence. 1968 *Elephantiasis and Polynesian Origins* Nature. August 219.

⁶⁸ J.H. Hutton, 1947 *West Africa and Indonesia: A Problem of Distribution*. Everard am Thum Memorial Lecture

⁶⁹ AM. Jones. 1971 *Op cit*.

⁷⁰ J. Lo-Bamijoko, 1987 *Classification of Igbo Musical Instruments, Nigeria*. Af. Music Vol VI Part 4 pp 19-41

⁷¹ J. Kunst, 1987 *Op cit*

⁷² J.F. Carrington. 1947 *Central African Gong Language*. L'Institut Royal Colonial Belge. Tome XV111 Endpaper.

⁷³ Kon. Inst. v/d Tropen. Pic No 726.121.312: 78 No 10. Borobudur. – 1 Bb 89

Glass beads.

Those amazing brothers, Richard and John Lander, when they purchased a block of what looked like fused glass pebbles in the market of Old Oyo in 1830, were the first Europeans to uncover the glass bead industry of which Nigerians are justly proud. Eighty years after the Landers, Leo Frobenius found crucibles for melting glass in a grove outside Ife, plus a huge number of glass beads in a rich variety of colours, all of which dated back long before the arrival of the Portuguese.

With an abundance of quartz in the vicinity and soda easily brought from Lake Chad, the Hausa city of Bida claims to have been the centre of Nigeria's glass-making industry for centuries. One theory is that the technology was originally brought across the Sahara by Arabs. But had this been the case one might expect that there would have been some mention of it in the chronicles of the 65 Arabs who wrote about West Africa between the 9th and 17th centuries. But there is nothing.⁷⁴

Simple glass beads 2,000 years old have been found in northern Nigeria alongside other, more sophisticated, 'drawn cylinder beads' dating from the 5th to 7th century AD⁷⁵. As these date back long before the arrival of Arabs, archaeologists Sonja Magnavita and Thurston Shaw believed that these may have been imported across the deserts from the Middle East by the Garamantes. But again, as there is no sign of trade-beads in archaeological levels at Germa, or elsewhere on the Garamantian routes from the Mediterranean, this seems unlikely. What is more, beads found by Thurston Shaw at 9th century Igbo Ukwu, as well as those of Magnavita's found in Songhai compare well "... chemically and macroscopically with our 8th to 10th century samples from eastern and southern Africa"⁷⁶

To make solid clear glass from sand, with neither 'cullet' (old glass) to act as a catalyst, nor the correct alkaline fluxes, requires levels of pyrotechnology of a very high order, and knowledge of how to build fuel-greedy furnaces capable of maintaining temperatures as high as 2,000° for several days. It is so problematic that some experts believe the technology may only have been discovered once – about 4,500 years ago in the wooden regions near the headwaters of the Tigris⁷⁷. The odds against glass technology having been randomly 'discovered' in Nigeria years ago are so astronomical that it would seem certain that the technology was introduced from elsewhere.

In the first millennium AD the greatest glass bead-making centre was Arikamedu in southern India, a city that dates back some 2,000 years⁷⁸. It was there that the technique of drawing glass into cylinders was first devised⁷⁹; and it was from there that glass bead technology spread to numerous other places in Southeast Asia including Kuala Selinsing on the west coast of Malaya – a city under the control of the Srivijayan state; and later to Srivijaya's capital, Palembang.⁸⁰

In view of all other factors that point to Indonesians having had a hand in both eastern and western Africa, and the near certainty that they rounded the Cape and came to West Africa, Indonesia has to be the most likely source of Nigeria's glass bead making technology.

Igbo Ukwu. The forerunner of Ife and Benin...

It should not be necessary to say much about the artworks of 9th century Igbo Ukwu and 12 – 14th century Ife. They are certainly some of the most interesting works of art ever found in sub-Saharan Africa. But the concern here is to try to find out about their origins. Were they wholly autochthonous? Or was there outside influence of any sort?

Most observers, when they first see the 'bronzes' and terracottas of Igbo Ukwu and Ife, see them as being so different from the African art they are used to, that they assume there must have been 'outside influence' at some stage in their creation. Regarding the techniques, these assumptions of outside influence are wholly justifiable. Is it possible that the complex problems of finding copper, lead and tin from areas many miles from one another; then working out how to blend them

⁷⁴ N. Levtzion and J. Hopkins. 1981 *Corpus of Early Arabic Sources for West African History*. Camb U. Press

⁷⁵ S. Magnavita, 2005 Correspondence.

⁷⁶ Peter Robertshaw. 2005 Correspondence.

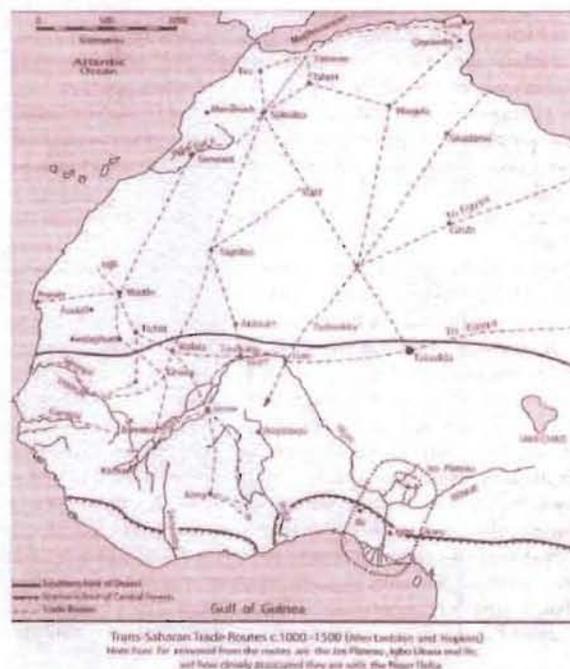
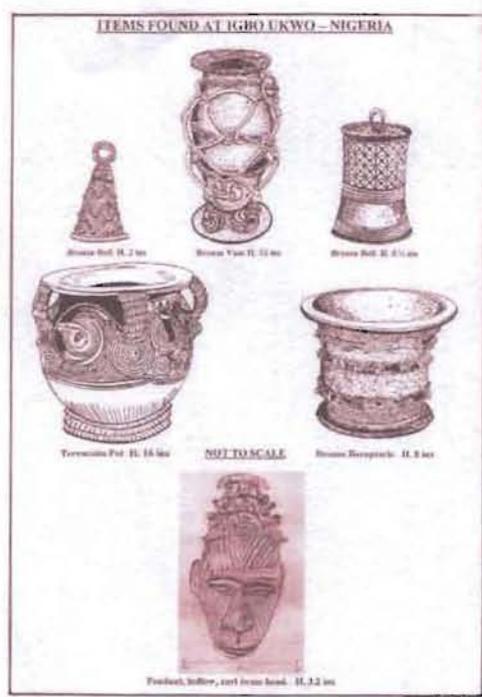
⁷⁷ S. Kurinsky, 1991 *The Glassmakers*. Kegan Paul p.88.

⁷⁸ P. Francis. See: www.thebeadsite.com. Thanks also to Jamey Allen of The Bead Museum. Glendale. Arizona

⁷⁹ M.E. Hall & L. Yablonsky. 1998 *Chemical Analyses of Sarmatian Glass Beads from Pokrovka*, J. of Arch. Science N025 pp1239-1245

⁸⁰ A. Lamb. 1965 *Some Glass Beads from the Malay Peninsular*. MAN March/April;

to form true bronze, and setting out to cast bowls 30 – 40 cms in diameter, only 1 or 2 millimetres thick, complete with handles in one piece (which most expert bronze workers today would not even consider doing)... is it possible that these highly sophisticated technologies can have been discovered over a thousand years ago by an acephalous Igbo community in the Niger river forests, hitherto completely unaware of such things? For the answer to be an unqualified 'Yes' – without it in any way being an insult to the Igbo - one would have to believe in miracles.



So if there was outside influence, one has to ask where might it have come from – and where is it *not* likely to have come from?

The received wisdom is that if there was 'outside influence' it came from the Mediterranean or the Middle East across the Sahara sands. But a glance at the map above, derived from Levtzion and Hopkins, would show how remote Igbo Ukwu was from all the trade routes. Additionally, none of the chronicles of Arab writers make any reference to deep or permanent penetration of the southern forests of Nigeria as early as the 9th century. Indeed the impression they give is that Arabs feared the forest dwellers; and there was no serious Islamic influence in southern Nigeria until the 17th century. So where else can the technology have come from?

With so much other collateral evidence pointing to Southeast Asia and Indonesia, our answer must by now seem inevitable. Not only are there few other alternatives, but the bronze and brass casting cultures of Nigeria have numerous indications of having come across the Indian Ocean.

So let us here invoke the spirit of the Javanese Buddhist merchant Maitrakanyaka whose name is linked with the great outrigger ships depicted on the walls of Borobudur ... the ships that are the most likely to have been used for long-distance Indonesian voyaging towards the end of the 1st millennium A.D. Maitrakanyaka's family came from Benares in India, one of Asia's greatest metallurgical centres. He was in turn a dealer in perfumes, and then in gold. According to Nicholas Krom's textual translations he then had a series of adventures in mythical far away lands.^{81/82} During his time as a perfume dealer he may well have been tempted by frankincense and other aromatics that came from the Horn of Africa. As a goldsmith and merchant, precious metals from the mines of Zimbabwe would have been a huge lure. And if indeed he made journeys of exploration around the Cape to the Niger river he would have been well placed to impart secrets of mining, metallurgy, and *cire perdue* bronze casting.

⁸¹ N.J. Krom 1896 *The Story of Maitrakanyaka* Ib108 ~ Ib112 ... (Google this reference.)

⁸² J. Miksic. 1990 *Op cit*, p. 91

Three important but far-flung systems of divination: Ifa and Atimi... and Bwé

There is a popular system of divination in Nigeria known as *Atimi*. It is a version of the Arabs' widespread *Derb el raml* or *Al-raml*. William Bascom, who wrote the authoritative work on Nigerian divination in 1969 said of *Atimi*: "... there can be no question of a historical relationship of *Atimi* with Islamic geomancy, but it is probably a recent introduction among the Yoruba."⁸³

Much more important is *Ifa*, a quasi-religious divination system that is far older, more complex, more important, and more deeply rooted in Yoruba culture. In simple terms *Ifa* is dependent on the manipulation of nuts or stones on a board, or the throw of a special chain, to produce 16 basic patterns and 256 (4 x 4 x 4 x 4) derivatives. "The real core of *Ifa* divination," wrote Bascom, "lies in the thousands of memorized verses by means of which the 256 figures are interpreted." For many people, *Ifa* lies at the heart of Yoruba life. And inevitably it has spread to parts of West Africa beyond the bounds of Yorubaland and throughout the West African diaspora in other parts of the world.

But clearly, the fundamental principals of neither *Ifa* nor *Atimi* are indigenous to Africa. They both spring from the philosophical origins of the Chinese 'Book of Chance', *I Ching*, which dates back to Taoist and Confucian times in the 12th century BC. So the big question is: how did they get to West Africa?

Throughout south-central Africa, in regions where there has been Indonesian activity, people have for a long time used divination systems based on the 4 x 4 x 4 (64 derivatives) *I Ching* model. For example, the Venda of N. Transvaal had their *To Kolo*⁸⁴; many Bushmen and Hottentots had systems almost identical to those of the Venda⁸⁵. From Lesotho to Zambia to Botswana (covering much the same area in which panpipes were once played) others existed. Gertrude Caton-Thomson, when working on the Great Zimbabwe culture, found sets of four inscribed divining dice that seem to have belonged to a related divination system⁸⁶. Some people have suggested that these systems were introduced by Arabs; but in central Africa there is no evidence of any direct Arab penetration in the distant past, and there is every reason to think that their 4 x 4 x 4 systems were in use - and had therefore been introduced - before Arab or Persian contacts late in the 1st millennium A.D.

Madagascar has a famous 4 x 4 x 4 based system called *Sikidy-bé*. But here a spanner seems to have been thrown into the works, as the predominant language of *Sikidy-bé* is *Arabic* leading many people to think that it must have been based on Arabs' sand divination. *Sikidy-bé* however, may have been introduced by people known as the *Anteimoro*, magico-religious specialists who came from north-eastern Africa, but who only came to the island in the 15th century.⁸⁷ The Tanala of southern Madagascar - people of mixed Indonesian/African blood who may be representative of some of the earliest inhabitants of the island - say they had a form of *sikidy* long before the *Anteimoro* arrived. And to support this, the Tanala form, *alanana*, which they say is 'aboriginal', employs only Malagasy words for the different patterns.⁸⁸

Although William Bascom, in a letter to this author in 1975 about *Ifa* divination in Nigeria commented guardedly that: "*Ifa* divination is regarded as being autochthonous" it is difficult to believe that he felt strongly about it, as it was he who also pointed out the similarity between *Ifa* and *Bwé*, a 4 x 4 x 4 x 4 divination practiced in the Caroline Islands in the Western Pacific. Though the means of arriving at the formulae among the fishermen of the islands differs from that of the Yoruba, *Bwé* has important similarities and much the same religious power as *Ifa*.

If there is indeed a relationship between *Ifa* in Nigeria and *Bwé* in the Western Pacific, how on earth, one might ask, could that have come about? Well, there may be an answer to that.

⁸³ W. Bascom. 1969 *Ifa Divination: Communication Between Gods and Man in West Africa*. Indiana U. Press

⁸⁴ N. Roberts 1916? *A Few Notes on To Kolo, a System of Divination practiced by the Superior Natives of Malaboch's Tribe in the Northern Transvaal*.

⁸⁵ S. Dornan. 1923 *Divination and Divining Bones* S.A. Journal of Science. XX pp 504 -511

⁸⁶ G. Caton-Thomson. 1931 *The Zimbabwe Culture*. Clarendon Press, Oxford,

⁸⁷ R. Kent. *Op cit*

⁸⁸ R. Linton. *Op cit*

In 1999 Professor Stephen Oppenheimer published a book entitled *Eden in the East* in which he analysed and traced the origins of various myths. Amongst those studied were immortality myths relating to the moon – how man originally died with the moon and after three days of dormancy, came to life again, following the natural lunar cycles. He observed belief in this myth among aboriginal Malays, and among Australian aboriginals – and also in parts of Africa. And then he noticed that the people of the Carolines in Western Micronesia had a similar tradition. To quote Oppenheimer:

“... probably the clearest link across the Indian Ocean is the Moon’s immortality motif, which we find among the aboriginal hunter-gatherers of Africa, Australia and Malaysia – and also in Fiji and the Caroline islands of the southwestern Pacific..”

It is significant that Oppenheimer’s map showing the distribution of the myths⁸⁹ includes parts of West Africa, which he refers to somewhat archaically as Nigeria, Togo and ‘The Gold Coast’. He believes the original point of dispersion to be in Southeast Asia – Vietnam or Malaya – and that diffusion across to Africa came later. He suggests a date of about 3000 years ago, but by his own admission in correspondence this is ‘highly speculative’. It must have taken place many centuries ago, prior to the Bantu dispersion, and may well have been linked to the arrival of the early Zanj on Africa’s East coast. But the obviously fascinating thing about this is the apparent similarity between the diffusion pattern of the *I Ching* based divination systems, and the mortality myths.

Buddhist influence in West Africa?

Bearing in mind that any Indonesian influence in Africa, East or West, would have come from the Mahayana Buddhist state of Srivijaya, we should keep our eyes sharpened for any evidence of Buddhist influence there might be from that area. Though proof may be illusive, it is surprising how many pointers can already be observed.



Ife Bronze – c. 12th Century :: Khmer Bronze 8th – 14th century
From a photograph in A.M. Jones “Africa and Indonesia.”

In his book *Africa and Indonesia*, A.M. Jones noted a number of similarities between Nigerian and Southeast Asian art. He compared, for instance, an Ife figure of an Oni (12th c.) with a roughly contemporary Khmer piece (10th – 14th c... a period when Mahayana Buddhism was still practiced in Cambodia).

Both figures wear tiered cloth caps; both have *aigrettes* rising from the front of the caps in the form of what appear to be lotus buds (in Buddhism a closed blossom signifies the *potential* for enlightenment while an open flower signifies *full* enlightenment); the figures have beaded collars with pectoral insignia; hands held aloft in an identical manner holding similar emblems; ‘skirts’ wrapped right-over-left around their bodies; and heavy bangles on their ankles. Bronze conch shells unearthed at Igbo Ukwu caught Jones’ eye also. The conch shell is one of the eight most sacred symbols of Buddhism. It represents the deep, echoing sounds of the scriptures being preached. Numerous such shells are depicted in on the friezes of Borobudur.

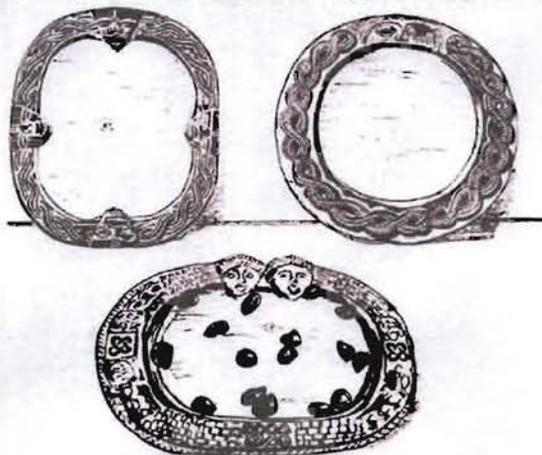
⁸⁹ Oppenheimer S. 1999 *Eden in the East* p. 388



Next, there is a mid-16th century Ife sculpture of an Oni who is wearing a unique, and enigmatic, plume on his headdress. It has been interpreted as an eight-petalled lotus and compared with eight-petalled emblems on the headdresses of dozens of figures on the Borobudur friezes. But could it possibly be another of the divine Buddhist symbols, the eight-spoked Dhama Wheel which symbolizes Buddha turning of the wheel of truth? It looks more like a wheel than a flower.

One feature evident in many parts of West Africa is the use by Chieftains of large umbrellas, the size and ornateness varying with rank and importance. It is not clear how this particular indicator of rank came to West Africa; but it may be significant that the parasol is another of the eight most sacred Buddhist emblems. In the Buddhist world it signifies Honour and Respect, and is a traditional symbol of Royalty.

A fifth of the eight sacred Buddhist symbols that appears repeatedly is the *shrivatsa*, the



Ipon-Ifa with endless knot designs

'endless knot' which symbolizes how everything is interrelated and only exists as part of a web of *karma*. Used as a decorative motif on many objects in West Africa, it appears frequently, for instance, on the edge of the Ifa divining board, the *opon ifa*. In the *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, produced early in the 20th century, the writer notes the following:

"Among 'Northern' or Mahayana Buddhists, divination is almost universal." It is, he says, mainly similar to the Chinese method, I Ching: "In arriving at the calculations an important art is played by the famous mystic Chinese trigram 'the eight Kwa' on which the mysterious 'Book of Changes', Yi-king, with its 64 hexagrams is built up."⁹⁰ It raises the question: if there *was* substantial

⁹⁰ Wadell, J.A. 1908-1927 *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*. Hastings, James ed. Part 8 pp 786/787

Buddhist influence in the lower Niger region, could Ifa Divination have been derived *directly* from Indonesians of the Buddhist faith? Let us say - perhaps whimsically, perhaps not - from the Bodhisattva Maitrakanyaka and his followers?

Many mysteries yet to be solved; but it appears that Indonesian influences in Africa were once far greater than has hitherto been accepted.

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The Phantom Voyagers.

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What others are saying about "The Phantom Voyagers":.....

1) From a 2000 word critique by Dr Stephen Ellis, Editor of "African Affairs" ... the journal of the Royal African Society. (Oct 2005)

... Mr. Dick-Read has put forward a bold and stimulating thesis based on wide reading and long experience. Daring new theories are necessary if specific distortions of the historical record are to be rectified, or just to help us change the way we think about important aspects of history ...

Africanist academics have a rather poor record when it comes to considering books produced by historians from outside their ranks ... They should read *The Phantom Voyagers* sympathetically rather than point only to its shortcomings or, worse, ignore it altogether. A challenge has been issued.

2) From a review by Prof: Roland Oliver (Founder of the Journal of African History) in *The Times Literary Supplement*, December 9th 2005

"The Phantom Voyagers is in most ways a very learned book, brilliantly written and marred only by occasional lapses into uncritical guesswork ... In conclusion, however, one must respect Dick-Read's contribution to African history, and his claim that migrants from the Indonesian islands did far more than just settle in Madagascar It is a topic that has slumbered for forty years, but it is one that certainly deserves a wake-up call."

3) Extracts from an e-mail from a member of the Centre for African Studies in Leiden who wishes to remain anonymous:

"Dear Mr Dick-Read ... In the first place I wish to congratulate you from the bottom of my heart, for doing what needed to be done and that so far no professional has done: bring together, in an imaginative and innovative way, whatever evidence is available on Indonesian-African contacts. I admire how you make your case, and how you defend people (e.g. Kent) who have been ridiculed and excluded for making a similar case from with academia - and for exposing some of my longstanding friends and colleagues, such as ***** and *****, for, what is regrettably, their myopia and high-handedness in this matter. Indeed, the basic conundrum is why no one inside academia could afford to touch this topic. It is a clear instance of intellectual geopolitics, about which I have thought and written a lot myself, albeit that little of that got published so far. Also, I admire you, not for being a professional Africanist, but certainly for being someone who knows Africa inside out, and who has managed to turn personal experience into intersubjective argument. Most of your speculations ring plausible not to say convincing, and it all comes together to a grand pattern of which I, in a different way, have investigated other parts in the past two decades. Excellent, and important! ... Anyway, my main purpose in writing this letter was to convey you my sincere congratulations. I have greatly enjoyed your book and will be citing it a lot ... Kindest regards..."

4) Dr Johann Templehoff, Editor of The Journal of Transdisciplinary Research in Southern Africa, *Skool vir Basiese Wetenskappe, Vaal Triangle Faculty, South Africa.*

"Hallo Robert, Once again, thanks for your fascinating book. I am enjoying it thoroughly. You have managed to influence a lot of my thinking."

5) Dr Randall D. Bird; Du Bois Institute for African and African American Studies. Harvard University:

"I cannot tell you how happy I am that this topic is finally being explored seriously."

6) Professor Roland Oliver, Emeritus Professor of African History, S.O.A.S. after reading the manuscript before publication:-

"I can see that in Part One you have to range widely over the South-East Asian seascape in order to establish the most likely origins of your Phantom Voyagers. I found this section of the book quite enthralling. I admire your stalwartness in publishing it yourself and hope that it will find a worthy market".

7) Jan Nederveen Pieterse. *Professor of Sociology at University of Illinois.*

"Pretty good thesis ... Good work,"

8) Chisato Hara. *The Jakarta Post.*

"*The Phantom Voyagers* is driven by a passionate, intuitive and generous mind that can venture beyond the bounds of 'established' scholarship; and it is this that lures readers to follow the ghostly trail"

9) Professor Dr Dierk Lange, *Professor of West African History, University of Bayreuth:*

"I read the West Africa part of your book and I am ... impressed by the breadth of your ideas. ... congratulations for the brave achievement."

10) *An email from Michael Holman, Financial Times correspondent and African editor for 25 years: author of "Last Orders at Harrods", etc.*

Dear Robert, Your fascinating book defeated my best intentions! Instead of concentrating on my novel, I became engrossed in *Phantom Voyagers*. It opens up a new historical vista. I do not have the expertise with which to assess it, but I admire and respect your extraordinary intellectual journey. With best wishes, Michael.

11) Sir Ewen Fergusson, *ex-British Ambassador to the South Africa, and Paris .(Review for Rugby School Magazine)*

"Robert Dick-Read has been an adventurer, physically and intellectually, all his life. He is an enthusiast with no fear at all of propagating ideas which may be against the mainstream, may be unpopular in academic circles and may even swim against the political correctness which insists on the African origin of everything "African". Dick-Read's motto follows Pliny :- 'There is always something new from Africa'.

Phantom Voyagers, as its full title indicates, is about the extraordinary coincidences over the millennia which suggest links between the societies and cultures in South-East and South Asia and societies in not just Madagascar and East Africa but also in West Africa--only possible because of the heroic enterprise of the sea-faring peoples of the Eastern Indian Ocean area.

Dick-Read's reading has been vast ; there is almost no aspect of human experience which he has not penetrated during his years of study, on paper and on the ground. Of course, in such a broad field, where the archaeological ground has been only sketchily furrowed, it would be impossible to be sure that there is a right answer. Dick-Read's merit consists in putting forward hypothesis after hypothesis, accompanied with more than a few question marks, not so much to tease as to challenge the received orthodoxies. At just over 200 pages, *Phantom Voyagers* makes a compelling short read."

12) M.Marc Felix, *adviser to museums, and lecturer on African tribal arts:*

"I congratulate you for the depth and scope of your research. I was totally fascinated and surprised by the West African section."

13) Dr Eric Louw, *University of Queensland, Brisbane. (Eric Louw has written a review for the 'Australasian Review of African Studies')*

"Fascinating. Makes sense to me."

14) Sir Mervyn Brown: *ex-High Commissioner in Nigeria and ex-British Ambassador to Madagascar, author of "A History of Madagascar":*

".. I found it a fascinating read .. I learned a great deal, especially about the Indonesian links with Nigeria."

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'*Indonesia and Africa: Questioning the Origins of some of Africa's most Famous Icons*'.

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Ekspedisi Pelaut Indonesia pada Abad ke-5 Hingga Kawasan Afrika Tengah'

Mizan Publishing House. Bandung. Indonesia. 2008

In June 2008 an article was published in the International Review of Ancient Art and

Archaeology, *Minerva*, focusing on the importance of the Indonesian thesis to African studies

Bassey Andah Memorial Lecture. University of Ibadan, Nigeria. February 15th 2011.