Rethinking Africa's transcontinental continuities in pre- and protohistory

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Buddhism – and Nigeria's Classical Arts
by Robert Dick-Read

Any attempt to explain my title must rely upon a viable historical framework. Looking back into a past where there are remarkably few records – reliable or otherwise – is fraught with problems, so some people are bound to find any such framework questionable - but this is an inevitable hazard of the game.

So here goes….

Three and a half thousand years ago, Austronesian-speaking seamen whom we know as the 'Lapita' people, started on their voyages of exploration eastward into the Pacific Ocean.[1] But it is not unreasonable to assume that, at about the same time, they may also have begun to explore the islands and sea lanes to the west as well as those of the Pacific.

Though signs of their westward movements are not as clear-cut as those for the Pacific, where there was a virgin canvas of uncorrupted islands, there is nevertheless solid evidence of contemporary maritime activity within the western islands, and beyond into the Indian Ocean. Remnants of cloves, which at that time can only have come from the Moluccas, have been found in a pot at Terqa in Syria, dated to the first half of the second millennium BCE.[2] In the other direction, the remains of sheep or goats – animals of Middle Eastern origin – have been found in Timor, in a site dated to 1,500 BCE.[3] By 1,000 BCE obsidian from a single source was being traded across a distance of more than 4000 miles from Borneo to Fiji.[4] In 1920, James Hornell wrote an article asserting that *Polynesians* – in single outrigger canoes - had became established in southern India in pre-Dravidian times, at the latest by 500 BC.[5] And there is evidence that the Indonesian blowgun was also used in Southern India very

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1 Bellwood, Peter. *Prehistory of the Indo-Malaysian Archipelago.* University of Hawaii Press. Revised edition 1997.

Bellwood, Peter. *The Peopling of the Pacific.* Vol 733, Scientific American. 1980

[2] Buccellati, Giorgio. Correspondence. (Email☺ 11th April 2002. (Cloves in the Middle East 3rd millennium BC)

[3] Reade, Julian. Introduction to *The Indian Ocean in Antiquity.* Kegan Paul. London 1996

[4] Bellwood. P. *ibid*

[5] Hornell James. *The Origins and Ethnographic Significance of the Indian Boat.* In 'Memoirs of the Asiatic Society of Bengal,

Vol 7. 1 920 :

early on. In short, there is little reason to doubt that at least 3,000 years ago Indonesian mariners were as active in the polyglot Indian Ocean as they were in the virgin Pacific.

Long before the end of the first millennium BCE. regular sea-trade had developed between Greece, Rome, and India. By 500 BCE rich Greeks had Indian peacocks in their gardens. Pepper and other spices; aromatics; drugs and dyes; slaves; [6] and even ivory carvings[7], were increasingly in demand among the Roman upper classes. Wealthy Romans were wearing Chinese silks and Indian cottons.[8] In the conveyance of articles from China it is likely that Indonesian merchantmen were involved.

The sea routes extended across the Bay of Bengal to the Strait of Malacca … and on to China. Though Indians had coastal vessels, there is no evidence whatsoever that *Indian* ships were involved in long-distance trade across the ocean in those days. Far eastern cargoes were mostly carried in Indonesian vessels, probably the *kolandiaphonta,* (a.k.a. the Chinese *kun-lun-po* or 'Indonesian ships'), while virtually all the maritime traffic from India to the Mediterranean seems to have been carried in Greek and Roman ships. There was, however, one grey area: the top grade cinnamon that seems to have come – not via India or Sri Lanka - but probably on multi-hulls from Indonesia direct – on journeys which Pliny the Elder described dramatically - if enigmatically[9]:-

> *…(they) 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."*

It is quite possible that the curious vessels described by Pliny were Indonesian multi-hulls along the lines of Hawaiian or Tongan multihulls of the 18th century, or Indonesia's rapid *Kora-Kora* fighting outriggers of the same period.[10]

Archaeologist Ian Glover once commented that this period "...when the Classical civilisations of the Mediterranean encountered Buddhist India and Han China" should be looked upon as the beginning of the 'World System'.[11] But in many ways it seems to have been more – for it seems to have been a period when the people of maritime Southeast Asia began to wake up to their place in this new world order and the commercial opportunities it presented.

The standard sea route for goods going to, and coming from China at that time involved overland portage across the Isthmus of Kra, then – on its eastward leg - on by sea to a commercial centre at Oc Eo in the Mekong delta. It was on the strength of this traffic that

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Hornell, James. *Indonesian Culture in East Africa.* MAN, No: 1 January 1928

Hornell, James. *Indonesian Influence on East African Culture*.

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

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

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

[9] Pliny the Elder. *Natural History* CE 77-79

[10] Horridge, Adrian. The Prahu OUP 1981

Dick-Read, R.N. *The Phantom Voyagers* chaps 3 and 5

[11] Glover, I.C The Indian Ocean in Antiquity ed. J. Reade. P 77:

early in the first century CE the prosperous State of Funan was founded. Presumably encouraged by the success of Funan, other states in the Indonesian islands sought to share in the profitable trade. By the second century CE sturdy ships were plying the Malacca Strait[12] thus avoiding the portage across Kra, and before long there was a plethora of Island states negotiating with Han China for preferential trade agreements.

Perhaps inevitably it was the states that could control traffic though the Malacca and Sunda Straits that eventually held the reins of power. First it was Ko-ying in the 2nd century about which not a lot is known; then it was Kan-to-li, founded in the early part of the 5th century, which O.W. Wolters described as "the most important of the trading kingdoms before the rise of Srivijaya."

Despite a gap in the records of over eighty years, it is likely that Kan-to-li was the immediate predecessor of Srivijaya, the powerful state which eventually held sway over the vast region from central Java in the south, to Kedah on the Malay peninsular in the north, thus commanding both the main seaways from the Indian Ocean to the far east. Srivijaya's power lay in both the military and naval forces that enabled it to weld its numerous semi-autonomous valley societies into a strong cohesive polity ruled from its capital Palembang in southern Sumatra.

In all probability Srivijaya's navy was drawn from the main groups of *orang laut*, whose homelands were originally in southwest Sulawesi, but many of whom had outposts in Bangka Island off the southeast coast of Sumatra[13]. These were the Makassar, the Mandar, the Bajo and the Bugis. Of these the Bajo (or Bajau) seem to have been the most ubiquitous. Bajo toponyms crop up from Nias to the Philippines 3000 kms to the east[14]. From all reports, however, it was the Bugis who are likely to have been the leading lights in subsequent voyages of conquest, trade and exploration. Apart from being superb seamen the Bugis had a reputation for being adventurous traders and courageous, if sometimes cruel, warriors; traits that probably extended way back in their history. If any ruler of a state such as Srivijaya wanted to form a powerful navy, these are the people he is most likely to have drawn upon.

It should be noted that Kan-to-li and Srivijaya were both dedicated Mahayana Buddhist states[15].

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[12] Manguin, Pierre-Yves. *Pre-modern Southeast Asian Shipping in the Indian Ocean: The Maldive Connection.* 'New Directions in

Maritime History Conference' Fremantle. Dec 1993

Manguin, Pierre-Yves. *Southeast Asian Shipping in the Indian Ocean During the First Millennium A.D.* in Tradition and

Archaeology. ed. Hamanshu Ray and Jean-Francois Salles. See:'Proceedings of the International Seminar – Seafaring in the

Indian Ocean'. New Delhi. 1994.

Manguin, Pierre-Yves. *The Southeast Asian Ship: An Historical Approach* Journal of Southeast Asian Studies,

11 (2): 266-276. 1980

[13] Adelaar, K.A. *Malagasy Culture-History: some Linguistic Evidence.* in "The Indian Ocean in Antiquity" Ed. J. Reade 1996. p.492

[14] Sopher, David E. *The Sea Nomads – A study of the Maritime boat people of Southeast Asia.*

National Museum of Singapore. 1965 (reprint 1977)

[15] Wolters, O.W. 1967. *Early Indian Commerce* Cornell Univ. Press.

Over on the African coast were the people we know as the Zanj. Back in Roman times Pliny the Elder had written of a land called Azania, and the people associated with it, the Zangenae, referred to also as the, Zingis, the Zand or the Zanj. The Zanj were prominent in the region for well over a thousand years: and there is every reason to believe they were the mixed-race progeny of Southeast Asian sailors who had begun crossing the northern Indian Ocean to Africa several centuries BCE. The reasons for saying that the Zanj had Indonesian affiliations can be encapsulated as follows:-

1. The East African outrigger canoe, the *ngalawa***,** has Indonesian origins. Several bits of outrigger terminology directly link it with the four most important groups of mariners in Indonesia who would have been in the employ of the states of Srivijaya – and possibly Kan-to-li beforehand. In East Africa, the Kiswahili term for the outrigger boom is *tengo; tengotengo; or rengo*. In Buginese, Makassarese and Mandar it is *baratāng (*in Malagasy *'bara'* or the interchangeable '*vala'*, as in '*vala-bè'* the great enclosure of the Tromba cult, or '*valamena'* , the Royal enclosure, denotes an enclosure made up of wooden poles*)*. The outrigger-connector of a Makassarese boat is *tenko*: in Bajo, *tētēnkona*.[16] A double-outrigger canoe in eastern Indonesia is *tango.*[17] These unequivocally indicate Bajo, Mandar, Buginese, and Makassarese connections with East Africa.
2. The Zanj appear to have employed fishing techniques similar to those used in Malaya and Indonesia.[18]
3. The Zanj of Azania, from which Zanzibar and Tanzania take their names, seem to have been recognised as a demographically distinct people before any large numbers of Bantu-speaking people arrived in eastern Africa, and before the arrival of Arabs on the coast.
4. They were obviously seamen as they occupied some of the off-shore islands. The Indian Ocean off the African coast was later known to Arab chroniclers as the *Bahr az Zanj*.[19]
5. In addition to the 'Zanj' toponyms ('Azania', 'Zanzibar)' it can be argued that the Bajo gave their name to the Bajun Islands and that Manda Island took its name from the Mandar. Likewise, Buki the Swahili name for Madagascar, is almost certainly derived from the Bugis of Indonesia; while 'Madagascar' itself is most likely derived from 'Makassar'.[20]
6. 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. (For the most comprehensive research on the Zanj see works by Marina Tolmacheva. [21], and my chapter on the Zanj[22])

16 Horridge, Adrian. The Prahu OUP 1981 Table 1. Page 88/89

17 Dictionary of the World's Watercraft.

18 Casson. L. Trans. The Periplus Maris Erythraei…: Princeton. 1989

19 Trimmingham, J. Spencer. The Arab Geographers in Chittick and Rotberg. 'E.A and the Orient'

20 Dick-Read R.N. The Phantom Voyagers. 2005. Chapter 10

[21] Tolmacheva, Marina *The Zanj Language.* 1975

7. 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'*.
8. 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.
9. 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 dark-skinned people of the tropical islands of South-east Asia; and *Tseng-kji* equals 'Zanj'.
10. 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'.
11. The well known British orientalist, Anthony Christie, thought the name 'Zanj' might be "a Southeast Asian word"[23].
12. 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"*.
13. 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! (See Spencer Trimmingham's invaluable chapter 'The Arab Geographers'[24])

It must have been Afro-Indonesian Zanj people who - perhaps under increasing pressure from migrating Bantu, and Islamists filtering down the coast from the north - began to cross the channel in the sixth or seventh century CE to the unsettled island of Madagascar[25]. This is about the only way we can account for the fact that Madagascar's language is basically Austronesian, with a heavy admixture of Bantu vocabulary. It would also account for the diversity of Malagasy tribes – agriculturalists, cattle herders, fishermen and so on, some with strong African elements, others more noticeably Indonesian. But Raymond Kent, in his *Early Kingdoms in Madagascar*,[26] went further when he wrote …

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

Tolmacheva, Marina *Toward a Definition of the Term 'Zanj'*. Azania. Vol XX1, 1986

Tolmacheva, Marina *Zanj*. In 'Dictionary of the Middle Ages' v.12(1989), 738-740

Tolmacheva, Marina *The African Waq Waq: Some Questions regarding the Evidence.* In Bulletin d'Information Fontes

Historical Africanae. No 11/12 1997/8 9

[22] Dick-Read, R.N. *ibid* pp 68 ff

[23] Christie, Anthony: in the minutes of the African History Seminar S.O.A.S. 11.4.1959 (unpublished).

[24] Trimmingham, J. Spencer. *The Arab Geographers* in Chittick and Rotberg. 'E.A and the Orient'

[25] Adelaar, K.A. *Malagasy Culture-History: some Linguistic Evidence*. in "The Indian Ocean in Antiquity" Ed. J. Reade 1996.

Dahl, Otto Chr. *Migration from Kalimantan to Madagascar*. Norwegian University Press 1991

Deschamps, Hubert. ***Histoire de Madagascar***. (4th ed.) Paris: Éditions Berger-Levraut, 1972

[26] Kent, Raymond. *Early Kingdoms in Madagascar 1500 – 1700* Holt, Rinehart and Winston. 1970

> "…there must have been a vast and fairly gradual human movement from the general direction of Indonesia in the early centuries of the first millennium of our era, a movement one could call by an old Malagasy term *lakato* (or true outrigger people) because they did not belong to a single ethnicity. Moreover, these *lakato* must have spread considerably into the interior of east-central and southeast-central Africa, along the waterways and lakes, *before* the Bantu speakers left their core area … Long before the Bantu reached coastal east Africa … they met the *lakato* in the interior." He went on: "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 admixture in-between."

Surely the Zanj and Kent's *lakato* were one and the same. And surely Kent was also correct in concluding that there were all sorts of admixtures of people: Africans of differing ethnic backgrounds; Indonesians, and Indians from Srivijaya, among whom would have been specialist miners and metallurgists of different religious persuasion … Hindus and Buddhists among them[27]. It was this admixture that must have been responsible for most of the 'enigmas' that recent historians have found so baffling.

The Great Zimbabwe, at the centre of the culture we know by that name, was not a purely African affair. With its many links to Madagascar it has to be seen as a multi cultural creation. Quoting Kent again:- "… the traditional past of Madagascar makes absolutely no sense without Africa". To which one might add that the traditional past of Zimbabwe is inescapably linked with that of the Austronesian world of Madagascar – and people from the other side of the Indian Ocean[28].

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Though proof, as always, is illusive, it is likely that it was Raymond Kent's 'lakato' who spread far and wide across south central Africa, with prospectors amongst them who opened up iron workings in the Transvaal as early as the 1st or 2nd century CE[29], copper mines in Zambia in the 4th century[30], and, late in the 6th century, approximately 4000 gold workings in the hills of Zimbabwe.[31] Most of the production from all these mines is likely to have been exported to the Indonesian islands by ships under the control of Ko-ying, Kan-to-li and Srivijaya, from ports such as Chibuene[32] on the East African coast. And it is probable that people of the same ilk are those who, since the 5th century CE, occupied the Upemba depression near the headwaters of the Congo river, and who may indeed have explored the great river to the Atlantic ocean… though this is conjecture.

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[27] Hromnik, Cyril. *Indo-Africa* Cape Town. 1981

[28] Dick-Read. R.N. *The Phantom Voyagers*. Chaps 10/11/12

[29] Mason, R. *Background to the Transvaal Iron Age – New Discoveries at Oliphantspoort and Broederstrom.* J. of the Inst. Of

Mining and Metallurgy. Jan 1974

[30] Herbert, Eugenia W. *Red Gold of Africa.* Wisconsin 1984

[31] Summers, Roger. *Ancient Mining in Rhodesia* Museum Memoir 3. Salisbury 1969

[32] Sinclair, Paul. Chibuene – An Early Trading Site in Southern Mozambique in Paideuma 28 1982

The big question then is: did these intrepid explorers also find their way to the southern tip of Africa, round Cape Agulhas, and up the west coast to the Niger delta and beyond?

Though the answer to this is almost certainly 'Yes', it is complicated by the fact that there seems to have been a wave of exploration up the west coast at a much earlier date than the main focus of this paper. Without going into too much detail here, this earlier period of exploration can best be exemplified by the apparent arrival of bananas – Indonesian fruits – in the Cameroons by the 5th century BCE[33]; by the appearance of the Southeast Asian disease, *elephantiasis,*[34] in the Nok region[35] of Nigeria at about the same time; and the strong possibility – based on the locations and dates of 5th/6th century BCE workings near the coast of Gabon[36], and near tributaries of the Niger/Benue complex in Nigeria (e.g. at Taruga near Nok) – that iron smelting technology may have also been introduced from Southeast Asia. We have already seen how Indonesian spices (cloves), came to Asia minor thousands of years ago; and how Middle Eastern animals (sheep or goats) were introduced to the Indonesian islands at an even earlier date. Early explorations of West Africa may have been part of the same wave of maritime activity – the western arm of the more easily definable exploration of the Pacific in the east.

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When the Chinese monk I Tsing visited Srivijaya in AD 671 he wrote of an international community of a thousand Buddhist monks studying at Palembang.[37] From the 7th to the 10th century, noted the author Kenneth Hall, the royal capital "became a major pilgrimage centre and the Srivijaya ruler and his representative became participants in Buddhism's international intellectual dialogue…".[38] Other writers have expanded on this theme: O.W. Wolters noted that Srivijaya was recommended as a centre for Buddhist students before they went on to India.[39] And G. Coedès noted that "Only one thing is certain: the coming of the Sailendras (late 8th c.Srivijaya) was marked by an abrupt rise of Mayahana Buddhism".[40] Furthermore: " … an inscription from Nakhon Si Thammarat attests that the Srivijaya kings were enthusiastic sponsors of Mahayana Buddhism and did not confine their patronage to Sumatra."[41] … suggesting that if voyages of exploration and commerce were taking place, they went hand in hand with the proselytizing of Mahayana doctrine.

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[33] Vrydaghs, L. & De Langhe, E. and others: *Phytoliths: An Opportunity to Rewrite History*

European Meeting on Phytolith Research (3th Circular) - Madrid, 1996

De Langhe, E. Correspondence.

[34] Laurence, B.R. *Elephantiasis and Polynesian Origins*. Nature. Vol 219 Aug. 1968

Laurence, B.R. Correspondence.

[35] Fagg, Bernard. *Nok Terracottas* Lagos, 1977

[36] Vansina, J. *Paths in the Rainforest.* U. of Wisconsin. 1990

[37] Hall, Kenneth R. *Maritime and State Development in Early Southeast Asia*. U. of Hawaii. 1985 p. 37

[38] Hall, Kenneth R *Ibid.* P. 101

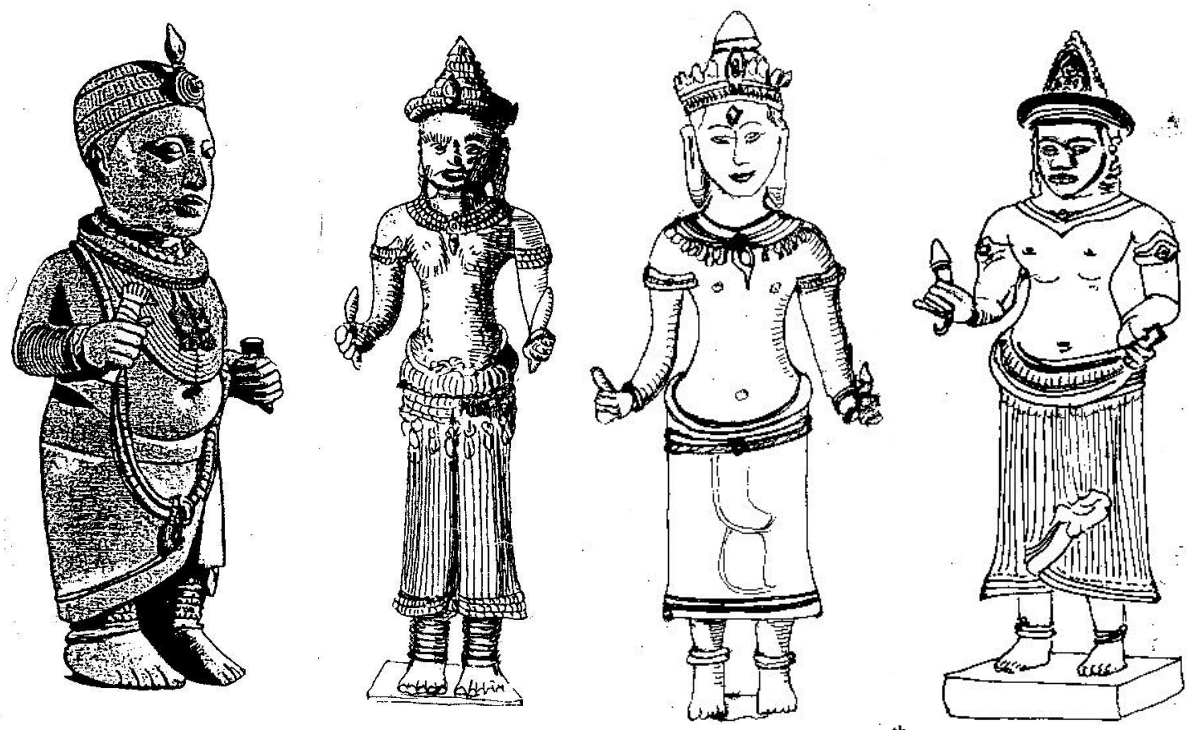
[39] Wolters, O.W. *Early Indonesian Commerce* . 1967 Cornell U. Press p.253

[40] Coedès, G. *The Indianised States of Southeast Asia.* 3rd Ed. University Press of Hawaii. 1963 p.89

[41] Hall, Kenneth R *Ibid.* p. 288 n 79.

Mahayana Buddhists, viewed commerce and travel more positively than either the Hinayana sect, or Hindus whose Brahmins harboured serious misgivings about sailing far from land. It is thought Mahayana Buddhist monks may even have travelled to Egypt with Alexander the Great more than two thousand years ago, possibly influencing the foundation of such sects as the *Therapeuts*, the *Essenes*, and the *Nazarenes* of Biblical note[42]. With Mahayana Buddhism of such importance in Srivijaya, we are constrained to ask:- Did Southeast Asian evangelists take Mayahana Buddhism from the Indonesian islands, to sub-Saharan Africa? … and in what ways are they likely to have left their mark?

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 be observed.



Bronze of Oni of Ife Khmer Uma figurine (Jones): … with another 12th c. Khner Uma ..and Pratnaparamita

In his book *Africa and Indonesia*, A.M. Jones compared the 12th c. Nigerian Oni figure on the left (above) with a roughly contemporary Khmer sculpture, when Mahayana Buddhism was still *de rigeur* in Cambodia. A connection between Khmer and Srivijayan art need not come as a surprise. The vassalage of Cambodia to Java in the Sailendra period was discussed by G. Coedès[43] who illustrated this relationship with an incident in Cambodia, related by the Arab author Abu Zayd Hasan, at the end of the 9th century. When the Khmer king's secret demand for the head of the Srivijayan Maharaja became public knowledge, the plot was foiled, and " … From that moment the Khmer kings, every morning upon rising, turned their faces in the

[42] Kersten H. *Jesus lived in India*. Element Books Ltd, London. 1994

[43] Coedès, G. *Ibid* Page 93

direction of the country of Zabag (Java), bowed down to the ground, and humbled themselves before the maharaja to render him homage".

There are many obvious similarities between the figures that Jones showed, and the other two (above): beaded collars with pectoral insignia; hands in like positions holding similar emblems; 'skirts' wrapped around their bodies; and bangles on their ankles. But there may be a problem! Jones' Khmer sculpture probably represents Uma, the Indian Mother Goddess who was Shiva's consort; or possibly even Pratnaparamita, one of the 'mothers of all Buddha's'. Though both would be holding a lotus in their hands, their headdresses would be adorned with a miniature Buddha, not a lotus bud. Compounding the problem, Uma, apparently, is occasionally confused with the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara ('The Lord who Looks Down') – sometimes known as Padmapani ('The Holder of the Lotus') who embodied the compassion of all Buddhas, and who plays a more important roll in Mahayana thought than any other Bodhisattva[44]. Confusingly, Avalokitesvara was sometimes depicted as a female. Even if the Ife figure is male and the Khmer figures are female the fundamental similarities … the identical mode of manufacture; and the coincidental dates of the Ife and the Southeast Asian figures, are remarkable.

The use of bronze images in worship was common among Buddhists in mediaeval times. Though some of the finest bronze sculptures came from southern India, the great centres of bronze casting flourished under the patronage of the Pala kings, a Mahayana Buddhist dynasty from Bengal, who ruled a vast territory from AD 750 to 1174 and had close ties with the Mahayana Buddhists of Srivijaya. "Pala bronzes are so numerous", wrote A.L.Basham[45], "that there is no doubt that they were mass-produced." They were exported to South East Asia, where numerous images of Avelokitasvara, six or seven inches high, have been found – and are still being found - in 8th and 9th century contexts in Java and Sumatra. "Nearly all Indian bronzes were made by the 'cire-perdue' process" continued Basham. "The figure was first designed in wax, which was covered with a coating of clay. The whole was then heated, so that the wax melted away, leaving a mould to be filled with molten metal." As the *cire perdue* bronze casting technology responsible for the 8th/9th c. Igbo Ukwu art works, was virtually certain to have been introduced to Nigeria from elsewhere, and as there is no evidence of contacts between the Niger delta region and North Africa or any of the Mediterranean countries, at that time, then – taking into account all the other factors that point to Indonesian legacies in western Africa[46], Buddhist voyagers from Southeast Asia are by far the most likely people to have introduced the techniques of bronze casting to West Africa.

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In 2010 Professor Wim van Binsbergen published an article on his website[47] exploring the possibility of Buddhist influences that covered numerous fields: kingship; musical

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[44] Basham, A.L. *The Wonder that was India* Sidgwick & Jackson. 1954. p. 276/7

[45] Basham, A.L. *Ibid.* pp 374/5

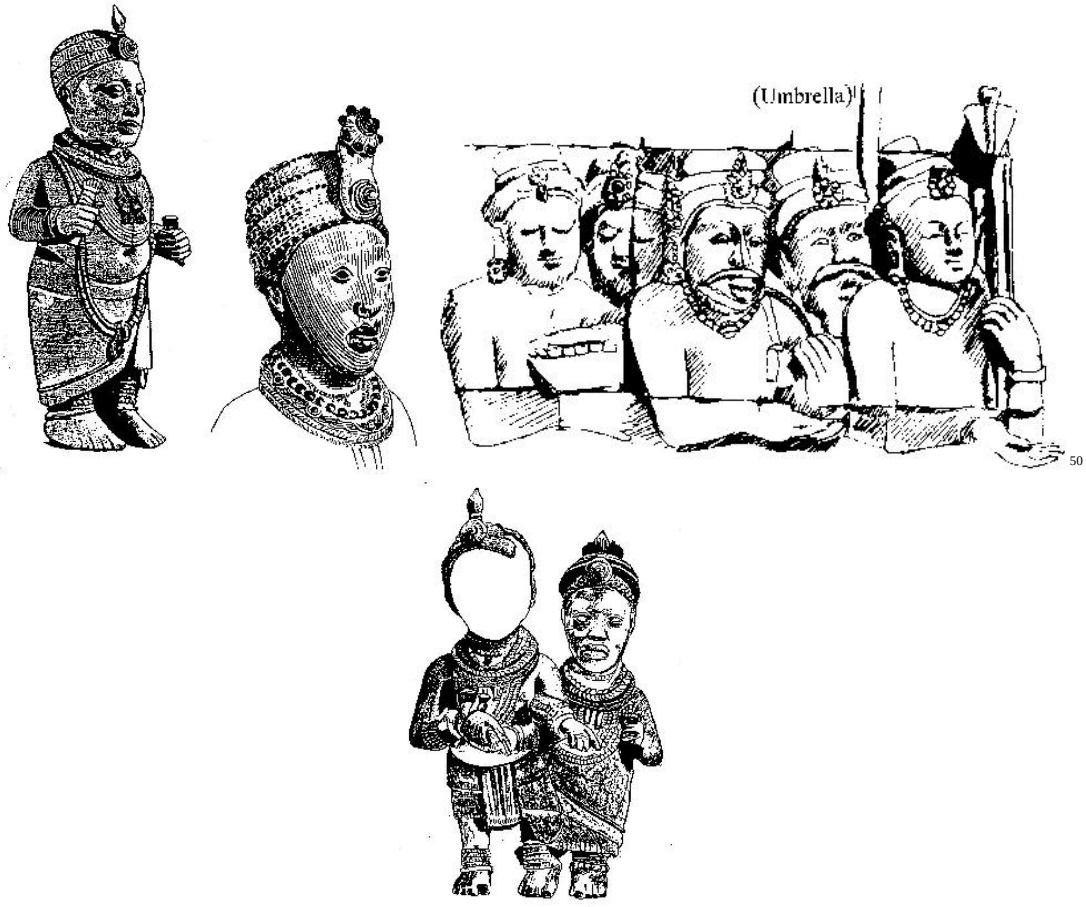
[46] Dick-Read, R. *The Phantom Voyagers: Evidence of Indonesian Settlement in Africa in Ancient Times*. Thurlton 2005

[47] Wim van Bin sbergen. *The Relevance of Buddhism and of continental Soutth East Asia for the study of Asian-African*

transcontinental continuities.

instruments; ceramics; divination; ecstatic cults; boat cults; the use of sunshades; the lotus flower; cowrie shells; bells; and the name 'Buddha'. Regarding the latter were figures he encountered throughout Southern West Africa, that he refers to as the Mbedzi/Mbutsi figure. "In Southern Africa the name Mbedzi appears as the widespread honorific title of cult leaders, as the name of a clan with connotations of sacredness and the colour white … I proposed (In 2003) that the reference is in the first place to Buddha, who in some East and South Asian contexts is referred to as *Butsi*, which in Bantu-speaking mouth would easily become Mbutzi".[48]

A page or two earlier Van Binsbergen recalled the first ecstatic cult that he studied in South Central Africa: "Its founder, Shimbinga," he said, "hailed from Angola and propagated the veneration of the white waterlily, in other words of the lotus."[49] Van Binsbergen linked this, maybe a bit shakily, with White Lotus cults in East Asia. But whether right or wrong, the eight-petalled lotus possibly features in other ways in West Africa, notably in the headdresses of some of the Ife sculptures. The figures wear tiered cloth caps with *aigrettes* rising in the front 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).



Ife figure …with Dhama Wheel? Borobudur figures Ife figures

[48] Wim van Binsbergen. *ibid* p.44

[49] Van Binsbergen. *The Relevance of Buddhism etc."* p.41

[50] Miksic, John. *Borobudur*. Periplus Editions (HK) Ltd. 1990. Photograph: page 90

The second figure from the left (above) is a mid-16th century Ife sculpture of an Oni wearing a unique, and enigmatic, plume on his headdress. These *aigrettes* have been interpreted as eight-petalled lotuses similar to many of those on the Borobudur friezes (centre, above): but this one could be seen as a wheel rather than a flower. We might conjecture that it represents the eight-spoked Dhama Wheel which symbolizes the turning of the Buddhist wheel of truth. But either as either Dhama wheel or Lotus flower it has a strong Buddhist aura.

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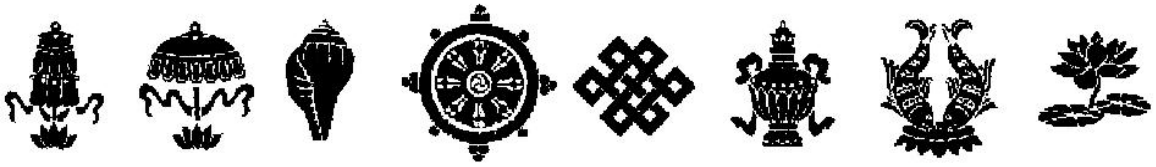
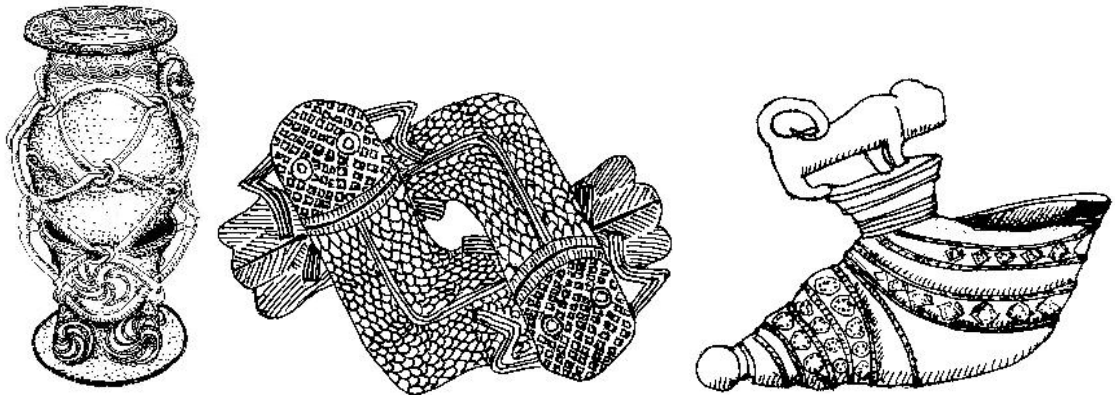
In the Buddhist religion there are eight auspicious symbols revealing the progress along the path to enlightenment. The symbols (below) are: 1) The Victory Banner: Representing a victorious battle. 2) The Umbrella: Signifying Honour and Respect. 3) The Conch Shell: Representing the thoughts of the Buddha. 4) The Dharma Wheel: Representing knowledge. 5) The Knot of Eternity: Representing harmony. 6) The Vase: Representing inexhaustible treasure and wealth. 7) The Fish (Pair): Representing conjugal happiness and freedom. 8) The Lotus: Representing purity and enlightenment.



1. 2. 3. 4. 5. 6. 7. 8.

Though there is always a possibility that some of these occur in Nigerian classical art by coincidence, it is noteworthy that all can be found in the cultures of Igbo Ukwu, Ife, or Benin. Numbers (4) and (8) – the Dharma wheel and the Lotus flower - have been mentioned above. Number (3), the Conch Shell, is an unusual feature of the bronzes found at Igbo Ukwu. In the Buddhist world it is decorated with ornate patterns and is topped with a bright bead, which is to represent good energy.[51] One could conjecture that the lion atop the Igbo conch (below) had the same symbolic value. Number (6), the Vase (protectively bound by cord in the remarkable casting from Igbo Ukwu) is symbolic of inexhaustible treasure, and also the womb. Number (7), the Fish; or more precisely the Pairs of Fish that represent conjugal happiness, freedom and peace. The Pitt Rivers Museum website has this to say of fishes in Nigerian Court Art: "There are many types of fish in Benin art. The mudfish is a symbol of peace, prosperity, and fertility." In Nigeria fish appear in different contexts, but just as in Buddhist symbolism, they seem to be always in pairs. They are found on plaques; as the seat of stools; as the legs and feet of sculptures of the Oba; and in other forms. They were symbols of the king's divinity as well as peace.

[51] Wikipedia.



Igbo Ukwu: Bound jar. Benin: top of Mudfish stool. Igbo Ukwu: Conch shell (with lion)

Concerning royal sunshades, there is a widely held hypothesis that their usage came to West Africa from Egypt. However, writing about Buddhist influences in Africa, Professor Wim van Binsbergen noted that: "…in view of their overwhelming prevalence in South and Southeast Asian royal and religious contexts, an equally plausible hypothesis is that they have reached West Africa as a cultural influence from Asia, via Cape of Good Hope."[52] In this the professor received support from an American scholar, Stewart Gordon who, in an article entitled 'In the Shade of Royal Umbrellas'[53] wrote that … "In sub-Saharan West Africa, the royal umbrella frequently appears in both Islamic *and non-Islamic* kingdoms." He accepted the possibility that the umbrella might have come south from Islamic Tunisia and Morocco, along the Saharan trade routes; and that it could even have been an 'indigenous invention'. But he finished by pointing out that: "Sometime around 800 CE, the royal umbrella began to flourish in Southeast Asia, adopted by kings in Cambodia, Laos, Burma, Thailand, Vietnam and Java. The custom may have come from India or China, as both countries strongly influenced the region at the time."

The last of the Buddhist symbols that appears repeatedly in Nigeria is the *shrivatsa*, the '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*.

Referring to divination, J.A. Wadell wrote in the Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics early in the 20th century[54]:- "Among 'Northern' or Mahayana Buddhists, divination is almost universal." They used a system mainly similar to the Chinese method, I Ching: whereby …"In arriving at the calculations an important part 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."

It raises the question:- If there *was* substantial Buddhist influence in the lower Niger region, could Ifa Divination have been derived *directly* from Indonesians of the Buddhist faith and not be, as some would have us believe, an introduction by Arab intermediaries?

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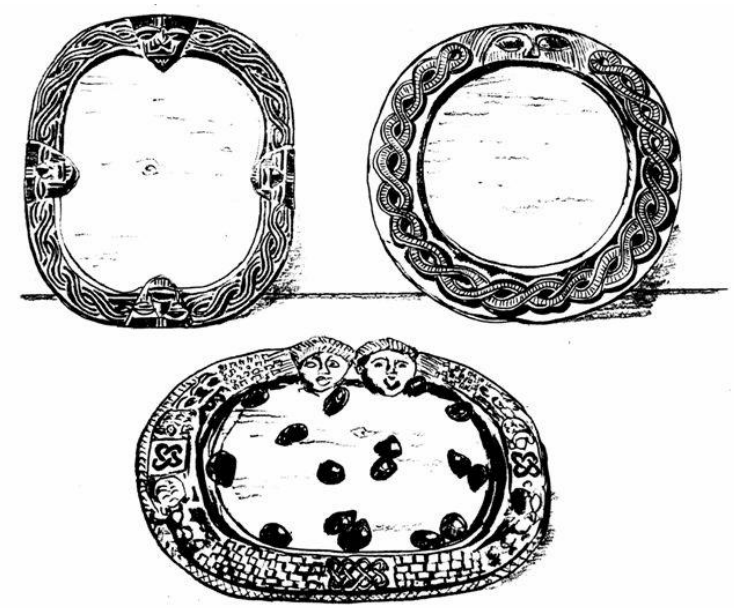
[52] Van Binsbergen. *The Relevance of Buddhism etc."* p.49

[53] Gordon, Stewart. *In the Shade of Royal Umbrellas.* Saudi Aramco World. July/Aug 2011 pp 8-15

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

Whereas there is no doubt about the Nigerian *Atimi* having been introduced by Arabs, there is considerable doubt about the far more complex *Ifa* which has apparent links with systems as far flung as the Caroline Islands in the Pacific.[55]



Ipon-Ifa with endless knot designs

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Borobudur was a Buddhist creation of the 8th/9th century. The most dramatic depictions of boats on any ancient Indonesian building were those on the walls of Borobudur in which sailed the merchant Maitrakanyaka, son of a merchant-traveller from Benares, the great Indian centre of brasswork.[56] Maitrakanyaka visited several romantic, far away, places that may appear to be mythical, but were surely based on reality. We cannot know where he and his men actually went; but as the seas of Southeast Asia and China were well known by then, the suspicion must be that it was a more distant destination that merited so much contemporary attention. With Srivijaya at the height of its power, Africa would make sense.

Maitrakanyaka's earliest business, so his story goes, was that of a perfume dealer: and where better to go for some of the essential ingredients of perfumes, ambergris and frankincense, than the east coast of Africa? Later he became a goldsmith – and the ancient goldfields of 'Zimbabwe' would surely have been of interest to him. Who knows, but perhaps for an intrepid voyager, his last destination, the mythical city of Ayomaya, was round the southern tip of Africa and up to the Niger delta where he was able to

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[55] Lessa, W. *Divining from Knots in the Carolines.* J. of the Polynesian Soc. 1959

[56] Krom, N.J. *The Story of Maitrakanyaka* from the Valahassa Jataka, retold by Krom in *Barabudur – An Archaeological Description*

(Google: N.J.Krom. Borobudur.)

Miksic, John. *Borobudur*. Periplus Editions (HK) Ltd. 1990 p.91

impart the metallurgical knowledge handed down from his father before ultimately meeting his fate and becoming a renowned Bodhisattva.

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

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