

Irian Jaya Origins

by Wilhelm Solheim II

The prehistory of New Guinea is very little known. Irian Jaya, the western Indonesian half, is archaeologically, the least-known part of Indonesia. The first organised research there began in September 1975, although Irian Jaya was not completely unexplored before.

In 1907, Van der Sande found bronze artefacts in Lake Sentani. Over the next thirty-five years, similar artefacts were reported, considered to be related to the so-called 'Dongson bronze culture' of northern Vietnam. How and when these bronzes come to Lake Sentani remains a mystery. In 1937-38, Josef Roder led an expedition to the Arguni Island area of MacCluer Gulf, western New Guinea, in search of reported cave paintings, which he found. In the final, long-delayed report on this expedition, he mentioned other archaeological materials also discovered in these caves. Following World War II, K.W. Galis kept track of all accidental archaeological finds reported to the Dutch government offices and visited many of the sites.

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Very few archaeological data emerged, however. Recently it was hypothesised that the Austronesian-speaking people¹ the Nusantao, originated in the southern Philippines and eastern Indonesia. The Nusantao's most likely route into the Pacific would have been along the north coast of New Guinea to the Admiralties and the islands of the Bismarck Archipelago.

A survey of the Irian Jaya coast was therefore mounted to collect artefacts these people might have left as evidence of their move into the Pacific.

In an area for which there is so little existing archaeological information, it is very difficult to plan an exploration programme. The problem is mitigated by searching for caves. With little time to cover a wide area, it is impossible to find sites by ground survey. Information must be obtained from local inhabitants who are familiar with nearby caves, many of which were used in prehistoric times for burial, temporary shelter, refuge, or living. Archaeological materials found

there may not necessarily give a cross-section of the cultures of peoples living in or using an area over time, but they provide a beginning.

Padwa Settlement

The best rock type cave formation being limestone, it was the coastal limestone areas that were examined. Four areas were surveyed—the northern and western portions of Cenderawasih Bay (formerly Geelvink Bay), scattered areas near the western tip of New Guinea, the Kaimana area on the southwest coast, and part of Lake Sentani.

The most thorough survey was of Biak and the Padaido Islands, in Cenderawasih Bay. On the south shore of Biak Island exists a *kampong* or settlement called Padwa, consisting of about ten small houses built on piles over the water. To the east of the kampong are two limestone formations with sheer sides extending upwards about sixty metres. The outer formation has two horizontal grooves all the way around, one above the other. The lower groove is still being cut by high tides while the upper one, now about five metres above high tide, was formed by wave action either from an earlier higher sea level or at the present sea level with tectonic movement raising this cut to its present position.

Austronesian languages are those related languages spoken by the native inhabitants of Polynesia, Micronesia, Island Melanesia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, the pre-Chinese peoples of Taiwan, some groups in Vietnam such as the Cham, and the Malagach of Madagascar.

The people living in Padwa speak Biak, an Austronesian language. They are very interested in the history of their kampong and reported that five generations ago, their ancestors arrived on the coast from an interior settlement close by, which had been founded by people moving from a kampong towards the eastern end of Biak. This, and ultimately all Biak kampong, were established by people from *Kampong Korem*, a location several

hundred metres upriver from the present kampong Korem on the north coast of Biak. Legends, partly magical in nature, tell of the original Korem founders, the first Biak-speaking people who came by from the east, probably from the north coast of Irian Jaya. These people have been very successful, first inhabiting Biak Island and later taking over all of Biak and the Padaido Islands from their earlier inhabitants, except for the island furthest east, Padaido Island itself.

The people living in Padwa were very hospitable. The survey party stayed in the house of the local schoolteacher, Mr Suabra, sleeping on the floor of his main room, and were accompanied by two officials from the Institute of Anthropology of Cenderawasih University at Abepura (near Jayapura, the capital of Irian Jaya) who were both natives of Biak, so there were no communication difficulties. Problems developed, however, with the neighbouring kampong of Urfu. Disagreements between Urfu and Padwa over the ownership of the two limestone formations east of Padwa reached a climax when archaeological testpits were put down there. News of this reached Urfu and a misunderstanding developed that came close to an open fight. Happily, the elders of both kampongs wished to solve the argument peaceably, and after rather heated discussions several Urfu elders were invited to examine the excavation work. This arrangement convinced them that the work being carried out was neither illegal nor unfairly advantageous to the people of Padwa in their rival claims to this land.

The first settlement of Padwa, called Padwa Mnu, was located on top of the two limestone towers. These were easily defensible if attacked, and provided an unobstructed view of any approach by water. During World War II, the people of Padwa were able to watch the air battle over Biak when the Americans and Australians attacked the Japanese. All the caves close to Biak town had been used by the Japanese, producing much disturbance and leaving considerable equipment, including unfired ammunition and unexploded hand grenades.

The inner and larger limestone tower had numerous vertical fissures as well as upper hori-

Korwars are carved wooden figures representing specific ancestors.

zontal grooves. Several fissures and the westward facing upper ledge contained many burials. In the first cave were deposited human bones and part of an old *prao* (a small to medium sized [ca 46 metres] single outrigger canoe used by the local people)—the remains of the two men who founded Padwa Mnu, their *prao*, and friends who moved there with them. In a small cave immediately above this one were the skeletons of a 'big man', a female, and baby. In both caves broken pottery, beads, and other small artefacts were also found. On the western ledge of the smaller tower, skeletons were found with artefacts and a few unbroken nineteenth century European porcelain bowls and plates, fish spears, other badly rusted iron artefacts and even one polished stone axe. The dead, brought here in a stretcher, were placed on top of earlier funeral remains.

For people considered to be special, a secondary² burial ceremony was held, and their bones were placed in a carved wooden coffin on a ledge of the larger tower. The western ledge continued in active use into the 1930s.

Korwar

West of Padwa, continuing for about 200 metres, was a limestone cliff. In two areas where the upper ledge was particularly evident there were other exposed cemeteries. Associated artefacts were similar to those from the Founders' Cave and included a number of *korwar*. These are carved wooden figures representing specific ancestors. Though greatly valued by art collectors, they rarely appear in museums (mainly in Holland and Germany) and very little was known of their manufacture and use. *Korwars* were particularly disliked by the first Christian missionaries among the Biak. Christianity was first brought to this area in the years preceding World War I by Biak missionaries who themselves had been brought up in Christian missions in eastern Indonesia. In many areas the first missionaries had their converts bring their *korwars* to a large gathering where they were burned. Failing to understand their own traditions, they mistakenly considered these figures to be idols, when they were mainly thought of as vehicles for the ancestor represented by the figure. A figure was carved soon after the death of a man or woman and kept by the family. In times of stress or anticipated stress, the figure was brought out and the spirit of the represented ancestor was ceremonially called for consultation. The spirit then came and resided in the figure during the consultation, leaving the figure after giving advice.

² A primary burial is a burial of the body immediately after death. After some years the primary burial is opened, the bones cleaned and then reburied. The opening of the primary burial, cleansing the bones, and the reburial (secondary burial) involves considerable ceremony.

Most of the korwars are made of softwood but for famous people they were sometimes carved from hardwood. Very rarely were they made of stone; there used to be three stone korwars in Padwa but these were destroyed on the orders of the missionaries. Twenty-nine rather fragmentary korwars, including three made of hardwood, were collected by the survey team. Twenty-seven varied in height between 194cm and 29cm, one was 32cm and the other 40cm.

Coffins Discovered

Near the area where several korwars were found, the survey team also discovered a simple, narrow coffin with a lid containing the bones of an adult woman and those of a baby or possibly a foetus. Next to the coffin was a skeleton in a semi-flexed position with the heels brought up against the pelvis and the leg bones vertical, perpendicular to the body. Another similarly simple coffin containing no bones was also found and taken to the anthropology museum at Cenderawasih University to be included in an exhibition explaining the survey and showing what had been found. Four months later when the survey team returned to Padwa, the local people were shown pictures of the exhibits. Although they felt very proud that Padwa was the subject of an exhibition, they were surprised to see the simple coffin, and not one of the more ornate, carved ones. At their invitation, two carved coffins were chosen from a ledge at the base of the larger tower east of Padwa to take back for the exhibition. In one were the bones of a famous warrior, and in the other those of a woman who had been loved and highly admired by the people of the kampong. Both were known by name and had descendants still living in the settlement.

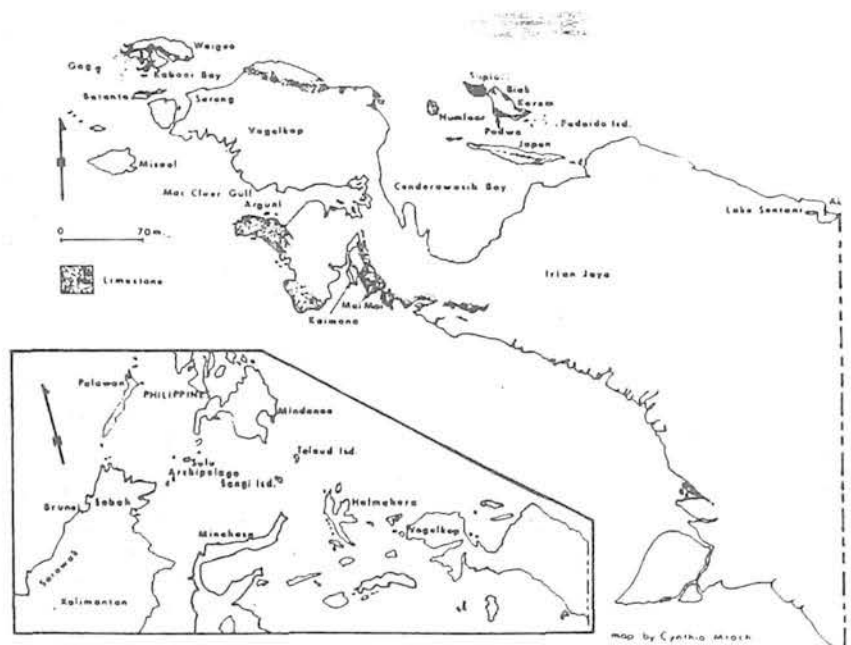
Other Survey Sites

The survey team also visited Gag Island, Waigeo (to the west of Irian Jaya) and Me Island, west of Kam-

pong Salio, a leper settlement run by the Indonesian government. On Me Island, at the base of a limestone cliff, there was a small shrine with a carved wooden image and at its base a very large triton shell, a human skull cap, and an old bronze gong. As this shrine was obviously of local importance, none of its contents were disturbed. Continuing the journey to a small island in the northeastern end of Kaboei Bay, the survey team visited a burial cave which would have been impossible to find without local assistance. Here were many skeletons and wooden bed-like platforms, wooden chests, coffins, porcelains, stone-ware and other artefacts. This cave had been visited a few months earlier by a boatload of Indonesians from Sarong and they had taken artefacts away with them. A very small test pit was put in to see how deep the deposit was and then the survey team was permitted to take one carved platform, a few nineteenth century, mainly Dutch, porcelains and other artefacts from the surface, to make an exhibit in the museum at Cenderawasih University.

The third area surveyed was around Kaimana. The most interesting find was a tremendous number of paintings in wave cuts in the cliffs north and south of Kampong Mai Mai, southeast of Kaimana. The wave cuts resembled those at Padwa, raised about five to six metres above present high tide. The paintings, in different shades of red, were on the back wall above the ledge and protected by an overhanging ceiling. They were similar to those published by Röder from the Arguni area and included human figures, lizards, dolphins and a variety of geometric patterns. In some parts, much of the original painted surface had weathered away, some paintings were superimposed on others, and in many cases, lime in solution from the ceiling above had washed over portions of paintings, blotting them out. These paintings are probably quite old, the people in Mai Mai having lived in this area for a long time. Asked whether they knew any stories of their ancestors arriving from elsewhere, they could tell none and had no knowledge of who had made the paintings.

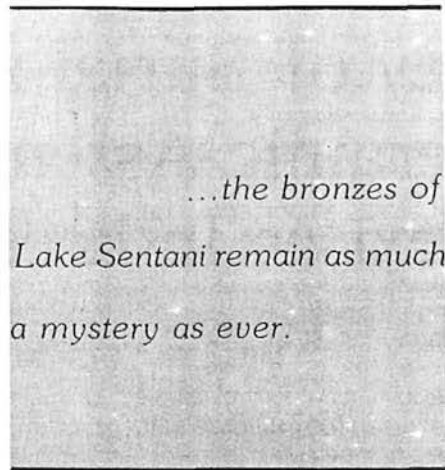
A map of Northeast Indonesia, Southern Philippines and Irian Jaya



On several Sundays, the survey team visited various kampongs on the shores or islands in Lake Sentani. Kampong Abar is the source of earthenware pottery for people around the Lake today and has been throughout the remembered past. Information on their pottery manufacture was gained from several of the women potters. The island of Kwadawari was also visited in the western end of the Lake to find data on carving from the most famous of the Lake's woodcarvers. He had recently died, but his son and other men were continuing the old traditions. Woodcarving had almost died out but a woodcarving revival now seems to be under way.

Bronze Artefact

The local people also told the survey team that nine bronze artefacts had been found on Kwadawari. Around 1906, a large tree near the shore had blown over and six bronze artefacts were found in the roots. In 1958, Professor de Bruyn received permission to dig where the tree had been and he found two more artefacts. The ninth was found when a football field was levelled at the north-western end of the island. De Bruyn took the two that he found away with him. Between 1924 and 1940, a German missionary called G. Schneider was given two. These, he said, would be turned over to the ethnographic museum in Leiden, Holland, but it is not known whether they ever arrived there. The tool found at the end of the island was given to a Dutch 'information officer' in the 1950s. This was a smaller version of the handled round-edged axe. The four remaining tools are in the possession of a Kwadawari elder, who keeps them in a leather bag. When they were taken from the bag to show to the survey team, the old people nearby became quiet and respectful. When the tools were returned to the bag, three elderly men clapped their hands in unison three times. The survey team also excavated a burial area in the centre



of Kwadawari. Much pottery similar to that at Abar was found, but no further bronzes. Indeed, the bronzes of Lake Sentani remain as much of a mystery as ever.

Conclusions

Due to a two-month delay at the beginning of the Irian Jaya survey, the laboratory processing and analysis of the collected materials were not completed. Until this research has been finished, the full results of the programme will not be known. It is most likely that inferences that the Nusantao moved into the Pacific along the north coast of New Guinea would be gained from pottery remains showing relationships to the Lapita pottery of the South Pacific and the Sa-huynh-Kalanay pottery of Southeast Asia. A possible early site found west of Kaimana had pottery and associated shell and stone artefacts which may be similar to whatever lies still buried at the early Sa-huynh-Kalanay sites in eastern Indonesia and southern Philippines. In Cenderawasih Bay and northeast of Sorong, pottery has been found with many of the decorative elements of the Sa-huynh-Kalanay pottery but most of these were proto-historic sites. No specific elements of the early Lapita pottery were noted in the Irian Jaya pottery. Thus, while there is

possible evidence for the relationship with Southeast Asian archaeological cultures there is as yet no close relationship demonstrated with Melanesian archaeological cultures.

Further Reading

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