

Is There Life After Lapita, and Do You Remember the 60s? The Post-Lapita Sequences of the Western Pacific

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ABSTRACT. Speculation on the relationships among pottery styles in the western Pacific started in the 1930s. Jim Specht's 1969 Ph.D. thesis brought this early period of speculation to an end by presenting a well-developed pottery sequence for Buka in the Northern Solomon Islands and relating it to emerging dated sequences from other parts of the Pacific. Following on from this research, and that of Kennedy and others, Spriggs in 1984 argued for cultural continuity between Lapita and post-Lapita pottery styles in Island Melanesia, and that post-Lapita stylistic changes continued in parallel over a large area until at least 1,500 B.P. Direct evidence of prehistoric contact between the various areas concerned seemed to support this idea. Wahome's 1998 thesis provided some statistical back-up to these ideas and presented a detailed pottery sequence for Manus which was then compared to other regional pottery sequences. The redating of the Mangaasi type-site in central Vanuatu by Spriggs and Bedford brought this important site into line with the dates for what was seen to be similar Incised & Applied relief pottery elsewhere. However, recent theses by Clark and Bedford on Fijian and Vanuatu pottery, respectively, have questioned the reality of the claimed stylistic similarities in post-Lapita pottery across the region. Thus, a debate has been opened up on the levels of similarity between pottery styles and the meaning of any similarity found between them. Basic culture-historical questions remain unanswered by the data so far presented and there is a need for further sequence construction and regional comparison.

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This paper is about what may be one of the next big debates in western Pacific archaeology. It concerns claimed connections between the post-Lapita pottery sequences in different parts of the region. The question is whether there

are wide-ranging relationships among them and, if there are, to what social processes do these relationships point? Opening shots in this debate have already been fired at the start of this new millennium.

From “prehistoric” to “modern” views of the problem

Speculation on relationships based on perceived connections among pottery styles in the western Pacific started with Margarete Schurig’s *Die Sudseeöpferei* (Schurig, 1930), and the “prehistory” of this speculation lasted nearly until the 1969 completion of Jim Specht’s Ph.D thesis. Names such as MacLachlan (1939), Surridge (1944) and Avias (1950) need to be recalled. The “protohistoric” phase of this discussion consists of Golson’s paper “Both Sides of the Wallace Line”, originally written for a 1967 symposium and published in revised form (Golson, 1972). I call this “protohistory”, as Golson was just starting to see the first results of archaeological study in the Pacific conducted by his students and staff at the Australian National University: Ron Lampert, Jens Poulsen, Jim Specht, Ron Vanderwal and J. Peter White. Golson (1972) talked of the three great traditions of Pacific pottery—Lapita, Paddle Impressed, and Incised & Applied Relief or Mangaasi ware. It is the last of these traditions we are interested in here.

In his 1969 thesis Jim Specht ushered in the “modern” discussion of the issue by addressing the external relationships of the more than 2,000 year old pottery sequence he had constructed for Buka in the northern Solomon Islands (in the Bougainville Autonomous Region of PNG as it is now styled). It is important to remember where archaeology and related disciplines were situated at the time in constructing the culture history of the region. For the then Territory of Papua and New Guinea (TPNG), Specht had only two other excavated and dated pottery assemblages with which to compare the Buka sequence. One of these he had excavated himself, at Watom Island near New Britain (Specht, 1968). The other was from White’s Aibura site in the New Guinea Highlands, consisting of 16 sherds found above a date of 770 B.P. (White, 1968, 1972). Specht saw similarities between Watom and the earlier part of the Buka sequence, but none with Aibura. He also noted that there were dated sequences “under construction” from Lossu on New Ireland—Peter White’s data later published as White & Downie (1980)—and from Wanigela in Milne Bay District of Papua—Brian Egloff’s research published as Egloff (1979). Specht, however, had no detailed results available to him in 1968–1969 (Specht, 1969: 230).

Specht also compared his Buka pottery sequence to surface material collected by Con Key from the Moem site near Wewak on mainland New Guinea, and to material from the Kaup site in the same area collected by Ron Lampert. He concluded: “Both the Moem and Kaup sites show remarkable similarities with my Hangan style” (Specht, 1969: 233).

However, the comparison which really excited Specht was with the Mangaasi pottery from Garanger’s work of the mid-1960s in Central Vanuatu, which at that time was only available in preliminary reports (Garanger, 1966*a,b*, 1969). The 1972 monograph was yet to come (Garanger, 1972, 1982). It was aspects of the Sohano and Hangan styles of Buka which he found closest to Mangaasi. As an aside, it is worth noting that the redating of the Mangaasi sequence by Bedford and myself (Bedford, 2000*a,b*; Spriggs & Bedford, 2001) would make somewhat more chronological sense of such comparisons than Garanger’s original dates.

Specht (1969: 242, 247) noted that Garanger had also seen connections between Mangaasi pottery, Navatu pottery in Fiji and various pottery styles in New Caledonia as recorded by Gifford & Shutler (1956). By association, therefore, these could also be linked to the Buka sequence. Finally, Specht (1969: 253) saw some similarities with pottery from the Mariana Islands in Western Micronesia. His conclusion was: “The similarities between artefacts from Buka and the New Hebrides [now Vanuatu] and Micronesia, in similar chronological positions, can not be ignored, and some historical relationship must be considered. Assuming that they are evidence for population movements, the direction of these movements is uncertain...” (Specht, 1969: 318). He continued:

“[Buka] lies at the junction of three possible routes for the entry of new peoples and ideas; to the north lies New Ireland, offering a link with Micronesia; to the south, Bougainville and the Solomon Islands provide a route to the New Hebrides; and to the west, New Britain links up with the New Guinea mainland” (Specht, 1969: 318–319).

Specht then dipped into a consideration of current linguistic models, though the dominant one at the time was the confused and confusing one of Dyen (1963). Dyen saw Malayo-Polynesian developing not in the northern Philippines as now generally believed (Pawley & Ross, 1993), but in central Melanesia, specifically Vanuatu. Thus an archaeological link between all the areas in question seemed quite plausible from a linguistic point of view.

Specht saw a cultural discontinuity between his Lapita-derived Buka style at the beginning of the Buka sequence and the subsequent Sohano style (1969: 229–230, 257). Similarly, Garanger (1972) saw his Mangaasi style as being distinct from the Lapita-derived Erueti style found at another site in Central Vanuatu. On Garanger’s initial dates it seemed as if Mangaasi began earlier and continued later than the Erueti style. He thus postulated two separate populations, a “Polynesian” Lapita population and a “Melanesian” Mangaasi one (Garanger, 1972). This was an idea going back to O’Reilly’s (2000[1940]) commentary on Meyer’s original finds of both Incised & Applied relief and Lapita pottery at Watom. Specht (1969: 223) himself rejected O’Reilly’s distinction as far as Watom was concerned as having no stratigraphic basis.

The dating of Lapita was extremely confused at this early stage of research and the two populations model was seemingly supported by a number of late, and now known to be erroneous, Lapita dates. Specht reported Garanger’s 2,300 B.P. date from Erueti suggested as having a Lapita association, dates from a Lapita site on Malo Island in Vanuatu of 2,020 B.P., 1,200 B.P. and 940 B.P., and Poulsen’s Tonga Lapita dates which extended over 2,000 years to European contact (Specht, 1969: 238, 247). Specht’s own Watom dates were comparatively late as well. On the evidence available to him at the time there was certainly scope for seeing Lapita as overlapping in time with the various Incised & Applied relief and other pottery styles of the western Pacific, and potentially having a separate origin.

After Specht’s 1969 thesis—incidentally still the most detailed pottery sequence from the western Pacific—others expressed their opinions on the issue of the similarities between the various Incised & Applied relief pottery

assemblages of the region. Notable among these commentators was Jean Kennedy in the early 1980s, who added a Manus comparison to the Buka/Mangaasi ones and so extended the chain of possible links through to Micronesia beyond New Ireland (Kennedy, 1982, 1983). Kirch & Yen (1982: 329, 340, 341) also discussed these issues in relation to the Tikopia pottery sequence.

In 1984 I published a paper on “The Lapita cultural complex: origins, distribution, contemporaries and successors” (Spriggs, 1984). Building on the comparative research of Specht, Kennedy and others, I postulated that: immediately post-Lapita pottery styles in Island Melanesia, Fiji and (more uncontroversially) West Polynesia derived from Lapita, rather than representing a separate migration into the region by potters of a different tradition: i.e., that there was cultural continuity from Lapita; the post-Lapita ceramic sequences continued “in sync” or in parallel over a large area until at least 1,500 B.P. or so, betokening “a continuing communication network throughout the region” (Spriggs, 1984: 217); and there was direct evidence of some communication between different archipelagoes in the period around 2,000 B.P.: between New Caledonia and Vanuatu, Vanuatu and Fiji, Vanuatu and the southeast Solomons, the southeast Solomons and Fiji, the southeast Solomons and the main Solomons chain, the main Solomons and the Bismarcks, and so on.

After moving back from Hawaii to the Australian National University in 1987, I recruited a Ph.D. student, Ephraim Wahome from Kenya, to work on a seriation of the somewhat fragmentary Manus (Admiralty Islands) ceramic sequence and examine its external relations—particularly whether there really was a unified Incised & Applied Relief tradition. Within the limits of the then rather poorly defined post-Lapita chronologies of the western Pacific, Wahome (1998: 175–181, 187–189; see also Wahome, 1997) concluded that: the earlier Incised & Applied Relief styles were indeed related; changes in these styles did indeed occur in step over wide areas; and these post-Lapita connections were broken particularly after the period 1,500–1,000 B.P. as the number of pottery-making communities declined. After that time the distances between pottery production centres were such that contacts between them were broken and the potters would no longer have seen each other’s products. There was thus an increasing “speciation” in pottery styles taking place on different islands after 1,000 B.P. as this isolation set in.

Interestingly, Wahome’s Incised & Applied Relief tradition specifically excluded the north coast New Guinea pottery of Vanimo and Fitchin styles, which Gorecki (1992, 1996) suggested were potentially ancestral to the Mangaasi pottery of Vanuatu. However, Wahome held out the possibility of including other mainland New Guinea pottery styles. His grouping did include Fiji, but excluded western Polynesia where the same decorative techniques do not occur.

This was essentially the state of play when *Island Melanesians* was published (Spriggs, 1997, but essentially completed by 1995). From 1994 onwards, I have been examining the post-Lapita cultural sequences of Vanuatu, soon joined by Stuart Bedford whose recent Ph.D. thesis is the major overview of this work (Bedford, 2000a). We have worked on Erromango, Efate and Malakula Islands, thus covering the south, centre and north of the archipelago.

Our initial once-over-lightly look at the assemblage from Ponamla in northwest Erromango in 1995 assigned it as a variant of the Incised & Applied Relief or Mangaasi style of central Vanuatu (Bedford, 1999; Bedford *et al.*, 1998). Bedford carried out further excavations on Erromango and on Malakula in 1996. In that same year we started the first of now-seven seasons at the Mangaasi site on northwest Efate in central Vanuatu, in cooperation with the Vanuatu National Museum as a training excavation for its staff.

Mangaasi, the type site for the Vanuatu Incised & Applied Relief pottery, had been excavated by José Garanger in the mid-1960s and fully published in 1972 (Garanger, 1972, 1982). As mentioned above, in the late 1960s both Golson and Specht, relying on Garanger’s preliminary reports, had linked Mangaasi to the Buka sequence and other Incised & Applied Relief sites (Golson, 1972; Specht, 1969). In 1969 Specht had worried whether there were similarities between his Sohano style pottery at about 2,200/1,800 B.P. and the Early Mangaasi which began about 2,700 B.P. calibrated. He wondered if he should push back the beginnings of the Sohano style to reflect this connection (1969: 255). Our more recent research has led to a major revision of the Mangaasi sequence (Bedford, 2000a,b; Bedford & Spriggs, 2000; Spriggs & Bedford, 2001; and unpublished data), demonstrating a continuity from Lapita-derived Erueti style pottery through to the classic Mangaasi style ceramics. The latter began not at 2,700 B.P. as previously postulated, but on the latest dates about 2,300 B.P.

Recent research has also narrowed down the production of dentate-stamped Lapita pottery to the period from about 3,300 to 2,700 B.P., with the possible exception of the island of New Britain where it might have continued later (Anderson & Clark, 1999; Bedford *et al.*, 1998; Burley *et al.*, 1999; Sand, 1997; Specht & Gosden, 1997). The supposedly late dates for Lapita from Tonga were long ago refuted by Groube (1971). There was thus clearly no longer an overlap between Lapita pottery and Incised & Applied Relief assemblages, and the ultimate derivation of the latter from the former seemed supported.

By 1999 we could point to a whole series of contemporary Incised & Applied Relief styles which all seemed to be related. From north to south these included: Puian ware of Manus at c. 1,650 B.P. (Wahome, 1998), Sohano style of Buka from 2,200–1,800 to 1,400 B.P. (Specht, 1969, dating revised by Wickler, 1990, 1995, 2001), Sinapupu ware of Tikopia in the southeast Solomon Islands from 2,000 to c. 750 B.P. (Kirch & Yen, 1982), the Pakea material from the Banks Islands dating to around 2,000 B.P. (Ward, 1979), the Mangaasi style itself dating from 2,300 to 1,200 B.P., and the Plum tradition of New Caledonia dating to 1,800 B.P. (Sand, 1995, 1996). The Mussau sequence might also be included, but the dated sequence as published in preliminary form does not extend into the period under consideration (Kirch *et al.*, 1991: 151–152,160). The purported links between Mangaasi and the Fijian Vunda Phase from c. 900 B.P. seemed indirect, but plausible on this chronology. Wahome’s (1998) research thus seemed vindicated with better chronological control from subsequent research.

However, it was not to be. We can now look back on that period around 1999 as the peak of the “modern” period of study on this question; and so to the “post-modern” era.

The world turned upside down

For Fiji, Geoff Clark in his recent Ph.D. could see no links between Fijian post-Lapita pottery and any other pottery styles outside the Fijian archipelago (Clark, 2000). Stuart Bedford, working on a broader geographical canvas, concluded in his thesis (Bedford, 2000a) that there were only rare examples of uniquely shared designs in the immediate post-Lapita period, until around 2,500 B.P. Apart from these, he concluded that the resemblances that others have seen between post-Lapita pottery styles such as Mangaasi and other Incised & Relief assemblages from Manus to New Caledonia are merely superficial. He believed they derive from shared inheritance from Lapita rather than continuing connections. The two “young turks” have combined their views for a seminal position paper (Bedford & Clark, 2001).

For Vanuatu, after a short period of post-Lapita plainwares, Bedford now sees significant divergence by 2,500 B.P. in elements such as rim form and decoration between the Erromango pottery and Erueti and later wares from Efate. He cautions against using decoration technique as a defining element, noting that Mangaasi has been a convenient term, indeed too convenient as it has masked a lot of post-Lapita variability. Bedford further points out that too often Mangaasi or Incised & Applied Relief are terms used as shorthand for any post-Lapita pottery (except for Paddle Impressed wares). Comparisons have been made using small sherds where the full design is unclear. We have not usually been comparing full motifs and complete vessel forms.

The work of Bedford and Clark is important for raising a series of significant questions: How similar is similar? Clearly there is a divergence of views. If there are similarities, are they because of shared ancestry or because of contemporary connection? And how can we tell the difference between the two? Their work suggests that the foundations for Island Melanesian cultural diversity were laid at the end of the production of dentate-stamped Lapita pottery 2,700 years ago, rather than largely in the last 1,500 to 1,000 years.

Discussion and conclusions

My own view is that both Clark and Bedford are overstating their case, but perhaps not by much. There remain some intriguing connections across wide areas revealed by Wahome’s earlier analysis (Wahome, 1998), that they have not yet convincingly explained away. Also suggested by Bedford and my recent research in Vanuatu (referenced above) is the potential significance of northern Vanuatu for an understanding of interconnectedness within and between archipelagoes, particularly between Vanuatu and Fiji. Key islands in the north, such as Maewo, Pentecost and Ambae are archaeologically almost completely unknown.

Concrete connections such as Banks Islands obsidian being found in post-Lapita Fijian sites (Best, 1984, 1987) show that it is to northern Vanuatu we should turn when examining similarities between Fijian and Vanuatu ceramics of any period. Banks Islands obsidian does not occur in central and southern Vanuatu post-Lapita sites, excluding

them from consideration. However, we do not yet know how long pottery production continued in various parts of the north. To European contact perhaps?

There is now no real point in comparing Vunda phase pottery of Fiji, which begins about 900 B.P., with central Vanuatu Mangaasi, as the latter seems to have gone out of use before that date. Any connection would have to be with the so far completely unstudied northern Vanuatu pottery of the period.

Pottery is often used as a proxy for other kinds of interconnections, or lack of them. It is interesting that on Bedford’s (2000a) analysis, southern Vanuatu quickly diverges from central Vanuatu in pottery style before 2,500 B.P. This divergence is in fact paralleled in the major linguistic split in Vanuatu languages—that between the Central-North Vanuatu and South Vanuatu linguistic sub-groups (Tryon, 1996). In addition, a humanly-introduced rat, *Rattus praetor*, is found in early central and northern Vanuatu sites, but is not in the south (White *et al.*, 2000). Nor is it found in New Caledonia, as Sand (2001: 69) has recently discussed. He further points out that the early distribution of the domesticated narcotic kava (*Piper methysticum*) also excluded southern Vanuatu and New Caledonia. Both *Rattus praetor* and kava *are* found in Fiji, however, and Fijian languages go back to an immediate ancestor spoken in northern Vanuatu, perhaps on the island of Ambae according to Lynch (1999: 441–442). Anson’s (1983, 1986) analysis of Lapita pottery decoration pointed up a particularly close connection between the Malo Island Lapita sites in northern Vanuatu and early Fijian Lapita assemblages.

There remains a major problem of culture history to be addressed. Many Fijians, Ni-Vanuatu, Kanaks of New Caledonia, and southeast Solomon Islanders do not look Polynesian in appearance. These areas, however, like Polynesia are part of Remote Oceania (Green, 1991). They all represent a region first settled by Lapita-using populations, the ancestors of all Polynesians. Either Lapita was not the first culture present in the eastern parts of Remote Oceania, as some have argued (Galipaud, 1996; Gorecki, 1996), or there must have been significant post-Lapita gene flow down the chain from the main Solomon Islands or from further north into Vanuatu, New Caledonia and Fiji. Pre-Lapita occupation is most unlikely for these areas on current archaeological, pollen and other evidence. Clearly a detailed comparison of post-Lapita northern Vanuatu assemblages with other Island Melanesian and Fijian pottery is needed. We are thus still left with an interconnectedness between these various areas which may in the end turn out to be tracked in part by similarities in post-Lapita pottery styles. That is, if we can agree on what it is we see when we look at them.

The way forward remains the same as when Jim Specht first considered these issues. We basically need better dated and described assemblages in each area under consideration. In the late 1960s, Specht for his immediate region had, you will recall, only two pottery assemblages for comparison with his Buka sequence. We now have several more, but they remain of variable completeness and as I suggested above they are not necessarily from the most crucial locations. Well may Jim say, “Plus ça change”.

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