



1

1 Double red-ship *palepai* ceremonial textile, Paminggir peoples, Kalianda peninsula, Lampung, south Sumatra, Indonesia, radiocarbon-dated to the period 1652–1806. 2.95 x 0.61 m (9' 6" x 2' 0"). Thomas Murray collection

ART OF THE AUSTRONESIANS: THE LEGACY OF INDO-PACIFIC VOYAGING

Fowler Museum at UCLA
Los Angeles, USA

24 April–28 August 2016

Reviewed by Thomas Murray

The current exhibition at UCLA's Fowler Museum marks the end of an era. After more than two decades as a tireless advocate for the material culture of greater East Asia, and especially the textiles of Indonesia, it is fully fitting that Roy Hamilton, the outgoing senior curator of Asian & Pacific Collections, should devote his last exhibition there to examining the unifying cultural thread running through all the island societies of Austronesia.

'Art of the Austronesians' is a comprehensive examination of the greatest maritime explorers the world has ever known. Linguistics, archaeology and DNA analysis demonstrate a common origin for peoples stretching from Madagascar to Easter Island.

Beginning their migration from China some 5,000 years ago, the Austronesians were able in due course to make seafaring vessels of great sophistication that would carry them far and wide. The exhibition embraces the 'Out of Taiwan' premise, from whence they headed south to the Philippines, then Borneo, Sulawesi and the Moluccas, before branching

east and west, assimilating or driving out primordial populations.

The migration fanned out through the Indonesian islands, reaching the Bismarck Archipelago, east of Papua New Guinea, no later than 750 BC. Population movement then came to an abrupt halt for a thousand years, being confined to relatively nearby islands.

A great breakthrough occurred in what might be termed the second phase of Austronesian expansion, travelling with large double-hulled vessels able to support a voyage of discovery fifteen hundred years before Captain Cook did likewise. During this time the volcanic Polynesian islands were discovered and inhabited, as well many coral atolls of Micronesia.

Anthropologists have identified several cultural features carried by Austronesians, including customs such as headhunting, ancestor worship—especially as represented by sculptures coming in pairs—and animism, the belief that all things are spiritually animated by a life force and therefore have a psycho-spiritual connection which may be tapped into with the help of a shaman.

Islanders often covered themselves with tattoos with motifs that have talismanic properties. Women tended to weave while men carved. Boats were a favorite recurring subject in art and life, the Yami canoe being a prime example, as well as the boats found on a double red ship cloth from south Sumatra (1).

There was no place that was not deeply affected over time by later waves of culture. Indian, Chinese, Islamic and European cultures had a 'layered' influence, but with the primary Austronesian impulse still recognisable at the heart of the cultural expression.

Great sculpture abounds, yet Hamilton's love of textiles is clear. I was thrilled to see so many great Indonesian textiles, beadwork panels, painted *tapa* cloths, ikats and tie-dyes, Dayak mats, as well as feathered Maori capes and Solomon Islands currency.

We find a brilliant Taiwan cape, hat and beaded tunic; from the Philippines came an Ilocos 'op art' textile from the north, and a Bagobo sarong from the south; from Borneo, an Iban cloud-pattern *pua*, shaman's jacket and warrior's hat as well as Penan Dayak mats; Lampung *lampit* mats patterned with a hot poker; a rare Batak *ragidup* with a diamond twill center; Javanese breast wrappers and a beautiful gilt Balinese textile; from Toraja a tie-dye *pori roto* and a headhunter's painted barkcloth turban, *sigia*.

Woven leaves and grass best describe a treasured heirloom from the Kula ring of the Trobriand Islands. An exceptional Fijian *tapa* exemplifies the Polynesian islands, just as a fine modern cloth from Madagascar elegantly expresses the astonishing range the language and culture of the Austronesian ancestors was to travel over time and space.