It is part of our received wisdom that Japan has had very little historical connection with Java. This article argues that Java has, in fact, had a substantial influence on the development of early Japanese civilization and presents evidence of this contact.

Bronze and iron

Though research in bronze and iron age civilizations in Java has been minimal, it is known that metalworking developed earlier there than in Japan. There is a striking typological similarity between Yayoi artifacts – bells, swords, warehouses, fences, rice-mounds, and Japanese examples is so strong that earlier Japanese and German scholars have remarked on it and wondered what the historical explanation might be.

To provide this historical explanation, I have used a ‘cosmology of induction’ strategy, a term first used by William Whewell (1840) and later by Darwin in Origin of Species. This strategy takes many separate lines of evidence from different groups of phenomena or classes of forms to form an integrated explanatory framework.

Rice, religion and DNA

The relationship between the different types of cultivated rice is complex and cannot be explored here. It is sufficient to point out that Morimaga’s work (1968) has demonstrated that Yayoi rice (javacnus) was the closest relative of ordinary Japanese rice, and vice versa. This establishes the first demonstrably genetic as opposed to typological link between Java and Japan. Rice, the basis of the Yayoi civilization, also had a parallel religious significance in Java and Japan.

This is reflected in the myth, common to both, of the angel who descended from the moon to bring rice to mankind, and whose heavenly robe both Javanese rulers and Japanese emperors must don at the time of their accession.

Other shared myths are that of the sea goddess who rules dominion over the underwater world and the world of the spirits, and the secular myth of the radiant prince, peerlessly beautiful, superbly attired, phenomenally accomplished in all the arts, and of hyper-refined sensitivity. This prince, called Panji in Java and Genji in Japan, epitomizes the highest imaginable attainment.

But the real problem is that there has been no great cultural and technological influence from Java, but also significant numbers of migrants.

Language

It is axiomatic that any contact of the magnitude suggested by the evidence to date must have involved linguistic contact and borrowing. Diverse theories concerning the relationships of the Japanese language have been put forward by linguists from Javanese DNA, which shows that Japanese and Indonesian share sites (particular locations on the d-loop) not found in other Asian populations. This indicates that there has been not only great cultural and technological influence from Java, but also significant numbers of migrants.

Japan’s Javanese Connection

Kumar and Rose (2000) presented data which clearly establish linguistic borrowing (rather than a genetic relationship) by an earlier form of Old Japanese, not from Korea, but from an antecedent of Old Javanese. Linguistic data was statistically evaluated using Bayesian probability. Furthermore, the linguistic evidence elucidates many different aspects of the contacts – directionality (demonstrating that the borrowing was indeed from Java to Japan, not the other way round), precise location of the borrowing, intensity of contact, and inspired ideas and concepts which, by their nature, cannot be found in archaeological remains. Thus we find words referring both to known Yayoi innovations such as swords, warehouses, fences, rice-mounds, plates, cloth, and baskets (material objects) as well as to concepts of king, royalty and divinity, and the idea of the divinity of royalty.

Some of the borrowed words are from the high-culture end of the language spectrum, such as Old Javanese matur, to ‘present, offer, tell or report to a person of high rank’, which was borrowed by researchers, and Japanese has derived from India as is often supposed – it has not previously been realized.

The research also provides a new perspective on the way gender relationships are perceived in different civilizations, since this particular civilization was one in which women were seen as the bearers of precious gifts such as rice and cloth, and divine protectors of kings. Finally, it also helps to explain the resilience of Japanese civilization in the face of external cultural influence and foreign conquest.

References


Kumar, Ann, and Rose, Phil (2000) Lexical Evidence for Early Contact Between Indonesian Languages and Javanese in Oceanic Linguistics, 37: 9-37


Whewell, William (1840) The philosophy of the inductive sciences, founded upon their history, London: J.W. Parker

Ann Kumar is chair of the board of faculties and reader, Centre for Asian Societies and Histories, Australian National University. Her current research interests include Panji theatre in Java and Bali, and Indonesian peace movements.

ann.kumar@anu.edu.au

Just published

Hiroshige’s Journeys in the 58 Old Provinces
by Maryl Janzen
Published 2004, 160 pp., colour illus. ISBN 90 74822 60 6, paperback, £25.99

A Courteous Day
by George

Nationalism and Gender
by Chikako Usui

ASIAN STUDIES BOOK SERVICES now also represents PANAMA in Europe incl. the United Kingdom. To receive full catalogues and subject leaflets, please contact us at the address below.

International Book Services
In the heart of London’s publishing scene

[advertisement]