The early history of the Bay of Bengal: An Austronesian Sea?

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Transcript

My talk today is about maritime traffic in the early Bay of Bengal. I've entitled this An Austronesian Sea in the light of the proposal I'm about to make. So if we look at the Bay of Bengal today, the modern distribution of peoples and languages around it is very different from the situation 4,000 years ago. So scholars such as James Hornell and Moruna Mahdi have long ago pointed to evidence for early population movements, but their works seem rather limited follow up, we can say. So reconstructing this period is hampered by a lack of comprehensive archaeological work, especially along the east coast of India. Nonetheless, there are clues in the distribution of modern day populations. And the two most puzzling of these are the Munda people and the Nicobarese. So both of these speak Austroasiatic languages, but they're very remote geographically from the core area of this language file. And that's approximately in what's now North Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos. So the following map shows the overall distribution of Austroasiatic. Here you are, here's the core area of all the main families are. Here is the Monarch languages now in in northern modern day Thailand, the Astlian languages, the hunter gatherers in the Malay Peninsula, the Nicobar Islands here, and the Munda languages over here in modern day India. Now I have been working on the general pattern of dispersal of Austroasiatic So the yellow circle here shows what I think is the core area, and it disperses in a sort of explosive pattern outwards from Vietnam. One group heads northwest, two groups head into China, some groups head southeast, and some groups head across what would be modern-day Thailand down into the Malay Peninsula. but also, importantly, somehow heading off in a maritime route both to the east coast of India and to the Nicobar Islands. So let's look at the Munda dispersal. The Munda languages are the most far-flung and geographically fragmented branch of Australasiatic, spoken in a broad zone of central and northeast India. It was previously thought that they must have spread by land around the coast, but it's now pretty certain they made the sea voyage across the Bay of Bungal directly. They apparently arrived on the coast, maybe around Odisha, what's now Bhubaneswar, etc. They split very early into northern and southern groups. The Munda lexicon implies a very reduced agricultural package, hence the maritime dispersal would have been post-Neolithic, That's after 4000 BP. So this map gives you an approximate view of the distribution of Munda. These are the South Munda cluster here, the North Munda languages there. I mean, much larger, well-known large languages like Santal and Sora. And this rather intriguing outlier now in central India, the Korku people. So where did this migration start? Well, if we assume a lease moves, we propose modern-day Bangladesh or coastal Myanmar, but we have no immediate evidence for Australia's

presence there. Equally plausible is the West Coast of Peninsula Thailand. OK, we know they brought rice, so there's paddy rice which can be reconstructed in Proto-Austraasiatic. This is a table of evidence. I'm not going to go through all these linguistic tables now. But if you look up my further publications, you can see a lot of data of this type. The puzzling thing, though, is that no Munda groups today are sea going or show even any interest in maritime subsistence. They're all farmers, or even partial foragers. So why did their subsistence change so radically? Well, we think that's because they were carried in ships belonging to another people, perhaps carried as serfs or labourers. So they then take on the agriculture of the Indo-Aryan populations they encountered. Hence the proposal that the Munda must have travelled in Austronesian shipping in the period 3,500 to 4,000 BP, leaving from the south of Myanmar, probably on the Isthmus Accra, but that's, you know, a guess, frankly. There is an interesting parallel for this, the transportation of the Barito people to Madagascar. So we know the Barito are an inland population from Borneo, not sea going pop people at all. Yet they were carried in Malay ships, captainships, we know that, as serfs to East Africa. They ended up in Madagascar, and now the relative of Barito languages is the dominant language of Madagascar, today Malagasy. Okay, let's look at the dispersal of the Nicobarese. The Nicobarese are another isolated branch of Australasiatic, and the speakers are the inhabitants of the Nicobar archipelago, which is today part of India. Remarkably, they were known to the Alexandrian geographer Paul Ptolemy, and they're referred to also in other Indian and Chinese travellers. And I just extracted a quote here. We know that Ptolemy's data is around 2nd century AD, and there are early maps. He refers to these as the islands of the cannibals, which we think are the Andamanese, and the islands of Fortune, which we think are the Nicomarees. We also get references in Indian literature and in a Chinese traveller who was travelling in the 7th centuries. Similarly to the Munda, although the Nicobres are fishing and park farming populations today, none of the lexicon shows any connection with core Austro-Asiatic. Just to give you a quick map, this shows the Nicobar Islands in some detail. On all of these islands, a slightly different dialect of the Nicobar language is spoken. None of these languages are very different from each other, and that shows that they were all dispersed from a single point 3,000 years ago. We're not exactly sure, of course. Just to mention in passing, of course, that foreigners are basically excluded from the Nicobar Islands. There is no significant archaeology and knowledge of some of the languages often is very ancient. Now we do know also that inside Great Nicobar, there are still hunter-gatherers. It's much disputed whether the hunter-gatherers in Great Nicobar are an earlier population that reached the islands or they are just another a version of the main Nicobarese family. But without further better linguistic data, it's really hard to answer this problem. Now, as with Amunda, it seems as if they were carried to the Nicobars in ships belonging to another population when they were still foragers. They had to develop both inshore seafaring capacity and they have no open ocean capacity and agriculture anew. And we can see this because words from both boat and rice are

borrowed from Portuguese. So recent research on Nicoburish languages suggests that in the past there was a period of bilingualism with an Austronesian language. We don't know which one, but we do know, of course, that there was an Austronesian dispersal beginning from southern Taiwan, circa 4000 BP. and they quickly reached Niasse, Angonoa and other islands offshore from Sumatra. So it's not much of a stretch to suppose the Austronesians were the owners of ships and they were carrying other populations around the Bay of Bengal. Okay. This is just a sort of taster for a much broader hypothesis. Case studies of Munda and Nicobarese. The broader picture is the dominance of a maritime culture in the Bay of Bengal some 4,000 years ago. Now, I've written a whole string of papers covering various aspects of this, but we can look at material culture, such as musical instruments and agricultural tools. We can look at the transfer of crops and other useful plants, including possibly the coconut. shipbuilding techniques, and in this case, the way of building ships in the Maldives is a striking example. There is evidence from the transfer of rodent rice field pests, which form a comprehensive picture from the point of view of synchronic ethnography. And it's worth noting again that the shipbuilding techniques in the Maldives provide evidence for the type of boats that were presumably in use in this period. So I imagine the shipboarding techniques in the Morblive have been largely replaced today, but there's still room for a modern restudy, I think. Anyway, we still need to find definitive evidence from archaeology, both on the east coast of India and in key areas such as the Nicobar Islands. Okay, thanks very much for listening. I really would like to thank researchers who've made available documents and unpublished materials over the years, but especially Paul Sidwell for Austria-Ezetic materials. I have tried to visit and document museum collections all around the Bay of Bengal, and I leave you with a map of the distribution of the blowgun. The blowgun is another case which seems to have moved outwards, perhaps from the Austria-Ezetic core area. It appears in places like Borneo, but also appears in southern India. Whether this is some sort of evidence for the transfer of this technology around the area remains still disputed. But anyway, the sort of thing it's it's worth thinking about.