

Part VI

Synthesis and conclusions

19

Relations between mental and material concepts

19.1 The Lake Sentani ordering system and its implications for Lapita and Dongson orderings

The result of the symmetry analysis conducted in Part III was that the design structures of Lapita, Dongson and Lake Sentani are different. Therefore, there is no continuity between Lake Sentani and Lapita or Dongson design structures. Since design systems are related to mythical and social structures, the absence of continuity between Lake Sentani and Lapita and Dongson design principles implies that structural analogies between these cultures cannot be made. Thus, in this particular case, analogical inference to explain and give meaning to the past is not correct.

In order to shed more light on the ordering principles of Lapita and Dongson, a profound study of their design systems and (archaeological) contexts should be conducted. In this way, patterns in the archaeological context could be compared with the design structure, providing more insight in the ordering principles of the archaeological culture.

19.2 The relation between object, style and society

Based on the data from Part III, IV and V it can be concluded that the design structure correlates with the mythical and social systems⁵⁰. These aspects of society are inextricable intertwined with each other, both giving meaning to the other and both being structured by the same order. Thus, the mental ordering of society and material culture are at least partially similar. Derived from this conclusion, two statements can be formulated.

The first is that the design structure cannot be altered without severe consequences for the entire system, including the mythical and the social. Or, to put it in the correct order, changes in the structural design system are probably derived from changes in the social system, since both form a coherent unity. If the structural layout of society changes while the design system remains the same, discrepancies between the order of the social and material system would occur. This shift in social structure, paralleled by a shift in the structural layout of designs, is visible in Lake Sentani societies and designs. The layout of barkcloth designs changed from a predominance of translation and rotation, towards the individual depictions of central figures (Part III). This shift was preceded by significant changes in the cultural and economic sphere of Lake Sentani societies, turning from coherent, hierarchical societies based on mutual dependency, towards more (hierarchical) capitalistic and individualistic ones.

A second statement is that the arbitrarily incorporation of 'foreign' motifs is out of the question. Only elements that already fit in the design structure or can be transformed to fit, are incorporated in it.

⁵⁰ See for further correlations between the social and mythical system; Hermkens 1996.

For example, the Lake Sentani spirals are so inextricably intertwined with mythical and social ordering systems, that it would be difficult to accept it as a 'foreign' (e.g. Lapita, Dongson or other) element incorporated at random. If this element was 'borrowed' from neighbouring or different groups, the shape, structure and connotation of the spiral was adjusted to the Lake Sentani principles. Some more 'harmless' or neutral elements may be incorporated more rapidly, added to designs as fill-in elements or decorative elements. Thus, in my opinion, the transposition of motifs in one or the other direction, was *not* "simply because it was technically efficacious" (Thomas 1995: 46) but because its appearance *could* be incorporated in the local system, giving it a new, structural place and connotation. According to Thomas (1995: 46), the spiral ornament "does not possess a meaning or a referent but rather *does* something - that is it visually invigorates a spirit, a human, or perhaps a crocodile or bird". The Lake Sentani case-study, however, proves otherwise. The spiral ornaments are related to daily life (Part IV), social structure (Part III, V), mythical events and to ancestors (Part VI). In combination with a specific object, object-shape or space, they *do* have specific meanings, by containing and expressing different narratives. Hence, they do not only visually invigorate a spirit, human, animal or specific feature, they also house these elements.

19.3 Final remarks

Finally, some remarks have to be made about the negative vision many scholars implicitly apply when making comparisons between Southeast Asian and Melanesian designs. The formal analogies between Lapita or Dongson and modern Melanesian material culture, always take the Melanesian people (mostly Papuans) as the receiving party. That is, they are the ones who incorporate foreign motifs and styles in their design system. Thus, besides denying them a history of their own (by not acknowledging independent developments and changes), most scholars ignore the fact that Papuan cultures could have a major (or even small) impact on incoming groups and their design system as well. Although Kirch and others already stated that the Lapita Cultural Complex and its design system has to be regarded as a local development in the Bismarck Archipelago, explicit acknowledgements of Papuan influences on these developments are not made. In this sense, it would be a welcome shift in focus of analysis to search for Papuan proto-types in Lapita art, instead of the other way around.

In Part IV, I already suggested that the figurative, animal elements of Lapita may have been derived from Papuan designs, in which stylized animals play a major role. Other motifs, like the spiral or the Lapita 'face' motif, may have been influenced by local northcoast material culture as well, since masks and depictions of faces also make up an important part of Papuan objects and designs (mainly Sepik and Papuan Gulf). However, in order not to slide in formal analogies again, a synthesis must be arrived at. This would be the acknowledgment of mutual influences, both from the migrating groups and local people, both playing alternatively roles of givers and receivers.