

ART OF
THE
WORLD

THE ART OF INDONESIA





ART OF THE WORLD

THE HISTORICAL, SOCIOLOGICAL
AND RELIGIOUS BACKGROUNDS

'NON-EUROPEAN CULTURES'

INDONESIA

THE ART OF AN ISLAND GROUP

BY FRITS A. WAGNER



Translated by Ann E. Keep, Dr. Phil.

← Bas-relief from Borobudur, Gallery 3, North Side. Shailendra dynasty.
Approx. 800 A.D. (Central Java).

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When Holle Verlag asked me to contribute the volume on Indonesian art in the series "Art of the World", I hesitated for some time. For I had first to consider whether it would be possible, within the framework of a book which naturally had to be limited in length, to give a sufficiently clear and profound picture of an art such as that of Indonesia, with its immense diversity of modes of expression, techniques and styles. For the history of this region, which commences with the emigration of the Indonesian people from Yunnan in South China between 2500 and 1500 B.C., is the history of an archipelago of vast expanse, which, moreover, by reason of its location has lain open to all the important cultural and religious influences of the Orient, such as the Dong-Son culture, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam; in several districts, too, Chinese influences may also be traced. Furthermore, in the course of the last four centuries the West has exercised an ever-increasing influence upon the historical development of Indonesia, which has also led to some fundamental changes in the cultural field. Since sea-borne trade naturally opened up the way to penetration by cultural influences, certain areas — Java in particular — were especially exposed to all the influences mentioned; whilst other islands, or parts of islands, on the other hand, were either so inaccessible or so unattractive to traders, (or both), that the tribes which had settled there were able to lead an almost isolated, existence until very recent times. Between these two extremes there is to be found almost every conceivable degree of direct or indirect cultural influence. Thus there is hardly any other area in the whole world which has experienced so many cultural and religious impulses of such diverse kind and force and of such enduring effect. This most varied cultural development is reflected in the art of the Indonesian peoples, although the basic aesthetic conceptions of the indigenous culture which crystallized there in the pre-Hindu era have of course remained more or less formative.

Naturally one has to set oneself limits when dealing with such diverse material, the more so as the art of the Buddhist period will be treated in a separate book. But on the other hand the picture to be drawn must not forfeit any of its clarity or scholarly accuracy. Within this framework space must be set aside for all the important artistic achievements of mankind in Indonesia. Whilst preferential treatment has generally been given to the particularly striking architecture and sculpture of the Hindu-Javanese period, in this volume, on the other hand, no undue attention will be given to any one particular aspect of art.

I was never in any doubt that this would not be a simple task. But my decision to undertake this work was greatly influenced by the fact that Holle Verlag enabled me to supplement the text with some 60 photographs in colour and some 30 drawings. Photographs explain more than long descriptions in words ever can. Apart from this practical point, I was also motivated by a consideration of a more idealistic kind. Although an enormous amount of literature has been published on every possible aspect of Indonesian art, no attempt has yet been made to present it in its entirety. And this I regard as a particularly important and useful task at the moment, when, with turbulent developments taking place in almost every field, a great deal of beauty which at one time signified the wealth and happiness of a people has either been lost or is threatening to disappear, and when every innovation is often over-rated in a striving after the utmost modernity.

I am especially indebted to Doctorandus R. L. Mellema of the 'Koninklijk Instituut voor de Tropen' in Amsterdam, who obtained for this book the 48 coloured illustrations of *objets d'art*, which are gratifying to the specialist and at the same time excellent both from the technical and artistic points of view. These were kindly made available by the Cultural and Physical Anthropology Department of the Institute. I should also like to express my thanks to Miss Nel van Dam, who prepared the maps and drawings and undertook a final critical examination of the text. I also owe thanks to my son-in-law, Johan Smit, who spared no effort in supervising the taking of the original coloured photographs in Java and Bali. Finally, I should like to express my gratitude to many of my colleagues at the 'Instituut voor de Tropen' who rendered me every possible assistance, to L. Langevis, the textile specialist, who gave me many valuable hints, and also three of his magnificent fabrics for reproduction, to Dr. Jaap Kunst, an expert in the field of music, and to my colleague J. A. Mulder. I hope that this work may contribute to better understanding and mutual appreciation between the peoples of the world.

Haarlem, Christmas 1958

FRITS A. WAGNER

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At this point I should like to express my gratitude to the 'Koninklijk Instituut voor de Tropen' in Amsterdam for their kind permission to reproduce the finest specimens from their unique collection. The selection was made by the author, who has been associated with the Institute for many years, but all coloured photographs of objects were taken expressly for this work by Doctorandus R. L. Mellema. The outdoor photographs in Java and Bali were taken under the supervision of Mr. Johan Smit, except for that of the cliff tjandis of Tampaksiring, which was made available by Mr. B. Ph. Groslier. The figures and maps are by Miss Nel van Dam. To all who have collaborated in the production of this work I should like to express my special thanks.

I. THE NEOLITHIC AGE

Out of the mists of the distant past indistinct images have been located upon the radar-screen of time. The work of prehistorians and philologists has made it possible for us to penetrate into the life of prehistoric man. In this way we are able to chart the course taken by important cultural movements even though the limits of time and place frequently remain vague and blurred. Stones which have been discovered bearing traces of working by human hands have enabled the prehistorian to investigate these cultural movements and to define them more precisely, at least within certain limits. No doubt further individual studies will confirm scientifically much that at present is merely conjecture. Comparative philology has also yielded valuable results.

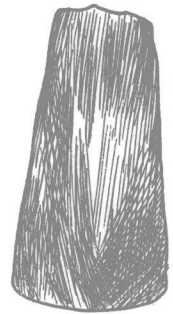
*Cultural
movements*

The cultural movement which was of greatest importance to Indonesia emanated from Yunnan in South China. Various groups and tribes emigrated to Indonesia from this region, where the upper courses of the great rivers Hwang-ho, Yangtze-kiang, Mekong, Salween, Irrawady and Brahmaputra are not far distant from each other. These emigrants first proceeded from Yunnan to Further India, and then moved southwards into the Malayan peninsula. From this south-eastern tip of the Asian continent they embarked upon their great enterprise: in their river-craft, which they rebuilt for the purpose — slender vessels with curved bow and stern — they sailed out into the unknown towards the islands of Indonesia.

This migration must have proceeded very gradually, probably over the course of some thousand years, since large groups will hardly have been able to leave at the same moment. In view of this long duration, cultural influences will probably also have made themselves felt at various stages of the process. The prehistorian R. von Heine-Geldern puts this movement at between 2500 and 1500 B.C.

Despite their different development in other respects, these migrants were in the normal neolithic stage of civilization. The material objects characteristic of this period are chiefly ground and polished stone axes, which are to be found in various shapes. Typical of this culture is the rectangular axe, so called because of its long rectangular cross-section.

R. von Heine-Geldern considers that the centre from which the rec-



Rectangular Axe
(Neolithic)

tangular axe culture spread was Yunnan. Axes of this kind have been found not only in this region but also throughout Further India, as well as in the Málayan peninsula. They constitute, so to speak, the sign-posts on the path taken by the Indonesians towards the south. The fact that these types of axe have also been found further to the west indicates that a similar cultural movement took place in the direction of India. But since this is of no significance, or at least no direct significance, so far as Indonesia is concerned, the problems which this raises will not be considered here.

In the Indonesian Archipelago rectangular axes have been found in central and southern Sumatra, Java, Bali and the other Lesser Sundas, Borneo, Celebes and the Moluccas. Particularly amongst the finds in southern Sumatra, Java and Bali, one comes across specimens of fine expert workmanship and exquisite shape. They are amongst the most magnificent artifacts ever found.

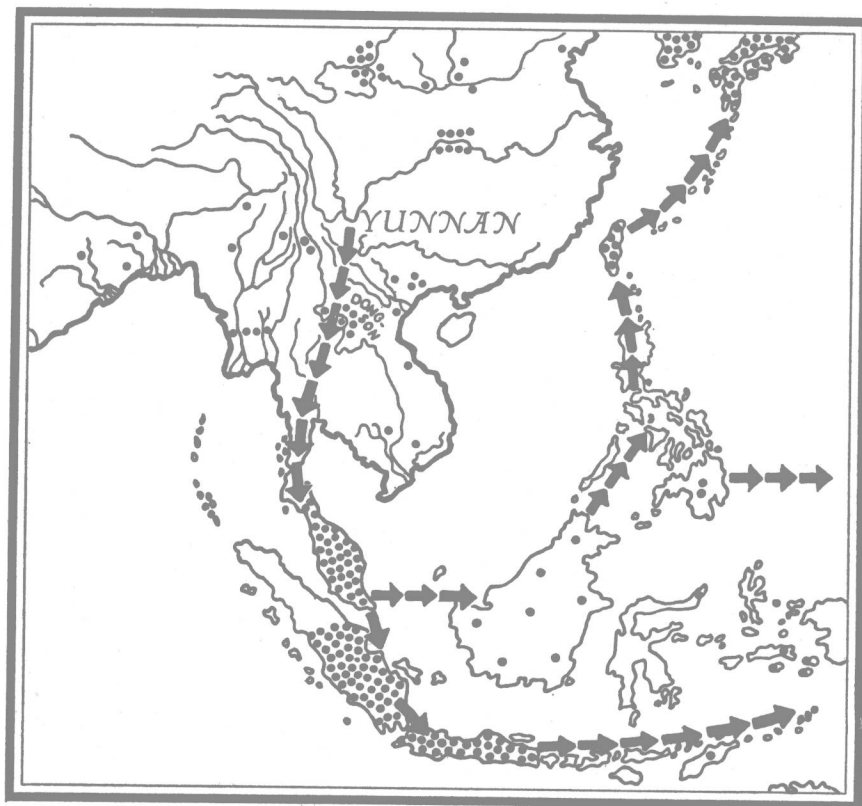
It is beyond all doubt that neolithic man lived in permanent settlements. There must have been special reasons for the migration from Yunnan to the Indonesian islands, but these can only be guessed at, not ascertained with certainty. It is thought that the Indonesians were expelled from Further India by Austro-Asiatic peoples, amongst whom were the Khmer in Cambodia and the Mons in southern Burma.

Neolithic man is generally thought of as barbaric and scarcely civilized. It is hard for modern man to detach himself from his own world, in which technology has opened up possibilities for advance hitherto undreamed of, and to appreciate adequately the progress achieved during the neolithic era.

Those migrants who came to the Archipelago were no longer nomadic. They built rectangular houses supported on piles and developed the planting of rice in artificially irrigated fields. They kept pigs and cattle, but owing to the lack of suitable pastures cattle-raising was of insignificant importance over vast stretches of the Archipelago. They made articles of clothing from the bark of certain trees and receptacles from clay. But as there existed many kinds of bamboo, the canes of which could easily be worked into wooden vessels, pottery was restricted to the so-called coiling technique: the clay was coiled upon itself in concentric rings until the desired shape was obtained. A potter's wheel was not employed in this technique. For the firing of pottery, naturally, only a fairly primitive process was known.

Whether these tribes were versed in the art of weaving cannot easily be ascertained, although this is probable, since ancient receptacles

Spread of the rectangular stone axe from Yunnan, so far as this is ascertainable.



have been found which still bear the imprint of plaited work and woven fabrics. However, it has not yet been possible to date these remains with absolute certainty. Besides the rectangular axes already mentioned, the largest specimens of which were undoubtedly used in agriculture as hoes, one also finds adzes — axes used for the purpose of working wood. This follows from the manner in which these stone implements must have been secured at the haft. These kind of quadrangular axes, which have come down to us in various sizes, testify to the fact that the Indonesians of the neolithic period must have been fairly skilled in the working of wood, as is shown by the finds of small adzes which can only have been employed for woodworking of a more delicate kind.



Detail of woman's cotton skirt. Pattern woven by *ikat* of the warp and supplementary warp weaving technique. Design: ancestral figures, tree of life, birds. A multi-coloured band of beads (*katipa*) with a bird motif is sewn on to the lower border. (East Sumba, Lesser Sunda Islands). Collection of J. and L. Langewis