

Three locally-made bronzes from South Sulawesi: possible evidence of cultural transfer from Java about AD 1000

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In this article we describe two previously unreported tenth- to eleventh-century *arca* (Ind., bronze statuettes: hereafter, statues, bronzes or figures) from the island of Selayar, South Sulawesi. We also describe a small bronze priest's bell said to have been excavated on the south coast of the peninsula. We contend that none of the three objects are imports, but that all were cast locally, in imitation of more sophisticated Javanese models. We argue that the importance of the three bronzes goes well beyond their intrinsic interest as objects, in that their manufacture suggests a transfer of ideas and religious practices from East Java around the year AD 1000. Such a hypothesis is compatible with the shift from flexed burials to cremated burials by the Makasars, which occurred at about the same time.

The Selayar bronzes

The two statues (figures 1 and 2) were dug up in *dusun* (Ind., hamlet) Sasara in *kecamatan* (Ind., district) Bontoharu, on the island of Selayar, in 1974. The statues, which were found together, are made from bronze, and are intact although lightly corroded. They were bought by the former *camat* (Ind., district head) of Bontoharu, Raja Boma, who still has them in his possession. Statue A in figure 1 is 9.5cm in height and statue B in figure 2 is 9cm in height. The statues are cast in one piece and are hollow up to the waist. Each figure sits on a lotus, half the petals of which hang down and half stand up. From their torso, one figure can be identified as male and the other as female (figures 3 and 4). The male figure wears an elaborate headdress and is ornamented with a necklace and arm and wrist bands. Below his

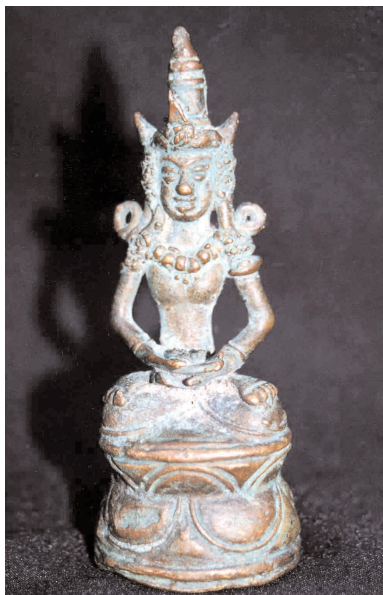


Figure 1 Statue A front view



Figure 2 Statue B front view



Figure 3 Statue A side view



Figure 4 Statue B side view

headdress, two long strands of hair (or hairlike decoration, Jav. *simping*) fall on his shoulder in large loops. The female figure has her hair bound in a topknot, secured by a band or diadem. Her ears are pierced and the holes enlarged so that her lobes form a hanging loop. On her ears she wears ear covers, which appear to incorporate ear plugs which are inserted through her pierced lobes.

The Selayar statues represent minor Buddhist deities and can be dated to the late tenth or early eleventh century. They are modeled on a particular class of East Javanese statues known as Nganjuk bronzes, named after a large group of statues found by farmers cultivating the land in Nganjuk district in Kediri, East Java in 1913. Some statues were sold privately, but the majority, some 40-odd pieces, were acquired by the Bataviaasch Museum (now the National Museum) in Jakarta. The Dutch scholar N.J. Krom published a description the same year, drawing attention to the stylistic unity of the collection as a whole, in terms of details of technique and finish, conformity in decoration, headgear and other features. He divided the Nganjuk group into five categories based on height: the main figure of the tallest group (group one) was 21.5cm. The tallest of the one but smallest group (group four) was 11.1cm and the tallest of the smallest group (group five) was 9.1cm (Krom 1913). For comparative purposes, the Selayar bronzes, being 9cm and 9.5 cm in height, belong to groups four and five. According to Krom, the figurines would have been worshipped in a suitably furnished area of a person's home as part of a *mandala* (Skr., sacred circle) comprising at least five, and possibly hundreds, of bronze deities arranged according to a fixed scheme.

Klokke and Scheurleer claim that the Nganjuk bronzes

do not show stylistical influences from North-East Indian sculpture or any other school of sculpture. They are purely Indonesian, or Javanese to be precise (Klokke and Scheurleer 1988:32).

The two Selayar statues, however, are different in style from those depicted in Klokke and Scheurleer. Compared with the sophisticated workmanship of the Javanese bronzes, the casting of the Selayar statues is crude. The faces of the Selayar statues, in particular, are perfunctory in their execution.

In order to establish the similarities and differences of the Javanese and Selayar statues, we will quote from Klokke and Scheurleer's description of the Nganjuk bronzes and follow each extract with a brief description of the relevant features of the Selayar bronzes.

The most striking feature of the Nganjuk group is the spiky ornamentation bedecking the figures. This effect is created not only because they wear more ornamentation than Central Javanese statuettes, but also because the ornaments are heavier and more obtrusive. (Klokke and Scheurleer 1988:33)

The spiky, Nganjuk style ornamentation can be seen clearly on the headdress of the male Selayar figure. While the spiky ornamentation cannot be seen on the female figure, the two Selayar figures are so similar in general style, appearance and execution that they are almost certainly contemporary and from the same workshop.

The loincloth reaches to the ankles and shows an incised pattern. It is held up by a girdle. Below the girdle a sash is tied in such a way that a loop hangs down in front ... and ends in a bow at each hip. On the smallest category of figures the sash converges at the back (Klokke and Scheurleer 1988:33–4).

On the Selayar statues, no patterning is visible on the loincloths (Ind., *sarong* and *kain*). A girdle is possibly depicted on the male figure but the female figure simply depicts the front edge of the *kain*. No sash or bow is visible on either statue. Klokke and Schurleer continue:

In common with the ornamental parts of the statuettes, the body forms are also rendered in great detail. This is most striking on the face and the feet. The oval face is rather large in proportion to the body. *Great attention has been paid to the modeling of the facial features* (Klokke and Scheurleer 1988:34; our emphasis).

On the Selayar statues, both ornaments and body forms are simply rendered. The faces are crude and the mouths are constructed from a simple upper and lower lip.

The eyes are large and half closed. The upper part of the eye-sockets and the brows are indicated by an incised arc. *The nose is long and straight* (Klokke and Scheurleer 1988:34; our emphasis).

Figure 5

*Dhyani Buddha Wajrasattva.
after Krom 1913, plate XX, no. 29*



On the Selayar statues, the eyes are only slightly too large for the face, which is unusually long, especially when compared to the full, round faces on the Javanese statues. The noses could be described as long and straight (at least if considering the noses of modern Indonesians) but they are poorly defined.

Because of the way they sit with the right leg crossed over the left, only the sole of the right foot is visible. Each toe is modeled separately, so as to form a graduated row from large to small, spread out like a fan over the left thigh. The body is slim and, especially in the figures of the smallest but one category, elongated, which has the effect of making the legs seem somewhat atrophied in comparison. The arms are long and thin. *The bend in the upper part of the body of some of the figures makes them look very attractive* (Klokke and Scheurleer 1988:34; our emphasis).

On the Selayar statues, all these features are present, but there is no bend in the upper body of either statue; both sit rigidly upright and have crudely cast, flat backs. Neither figure can be described as aesthetically attractive.

There is only little difference between the male and female bodies; the Taras have a more slender waist, small breasts with folds under them (Klokke and Scheurleer 1988:34).

These three features can be seen also on the Selayar bronzes. A final parallel between the Selayar and the Nganjuk bronzes is that the left arm of the female Selayar figure rests on her left thigh, a pose shared by half of the 30 Nganjuk statues of Krom's groups four and five. Compare for example the group five statuette of the Dhyani Buddha Wajrasattwa. (Krom 1913, plate XX, no. 29; see figure 5).

Our conclusion is that the features of both the Nganjuk bronzes and the Selayar bronzes are closely similar, but that by comparison the Selayar bronzes are unsophisticated, even crude, in their execution. We hypothesise that the statues are the products of a workshop in South Sulawesi, most probably located near the present-day town of Benteng on Selayar where the statues were found. Although there is no direct evidence in the form of archaeologically-confirmed forges, bronze casting appears to have a long history on the south and southwest coasts of South Sulawesi. This is evidenced by the unusual bronze flask (Bellwood 1997:283) and the unique bronze figurines of dogs, dated to between the late first millennium BC and the early second millennium AD (Glover 1997:218–19) which were found near Makassar. The technology required for the casting of such objects is relatively simple. Scheurleer and Klokke (1988:14) write that in ancient Java: 'one could view the bronzesmith ... as a simple craftsman, who worked in a small unit consisting perhaps of one or two apprentices or journeymen.'

A bronze bell

The third object discussed here is a priest's bell, purchased in Makassar in 1990 and said by the vendor to have come from the south coast of Sulawesi (figures 6 and 7). Grave robbers on the south coast report frequent discoveries of such bells in graves that they excavate in search of the Chinese and Southeast Asian ceramics which were buried with the dead by the Makasar from about 1300 to about 1650. Finds of such bells are not reported anywhere else in South Sulawesi, which suggests that these come from burials dated earlier than about 1300. Some of the bells are finely made and are evidently imports from East Java; an example of this type of bell can be seen in the La Galigo Museum in Fort Rotterdam, Makassar.

Figure 6

*Bronze bell, reputedly from the south coast
of South Sulawesi, side view.*

Height 9cm

Private collection

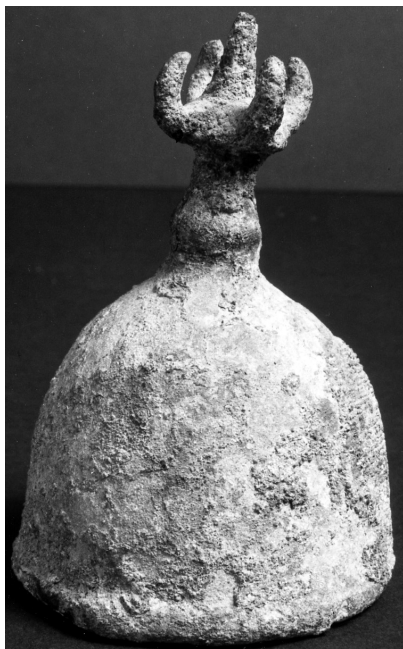


Figure 7

*Bronze bell, reputedly from the south coast
of South Sulawesi, under side.*



The bell under discussion is quite different. In particular, there are two things which strike us as peculiar. First is the absence of symmetry, notably in the lack of balance between the body and the *vajra* (Skr. thunderbolt). The body of the bell is female and the *vajra* is male; both should therefore be of the same length and structural importance. Here, the *vajra*, which leans drunkenly to one side, is an

adjunct to the body, not its symbolic partner. The second is the crudity of execution: note the lack of detail on the stem of the *vajra*, its crude shaping, and the thickness of the body of the bell. Despite its lack of aesthetic appeal, the bell was sufficiently valuable to have served as a grave good; the weave of the cloth in which it was wrapped before being interred can still be seen on the patina of the bell's body. The shape of the *vajra*, with its angular upturns, shows that it was based on an East Javanese and not a Central Javanese model (Klokke and Schurleer 1998:120).

Discussion and conclusion

After consideration of the evidence, we are of the opinion that the statues and the small priest's bell reflect the products of small-scale South Sulawesi bronze-casters. No statues of the type discussed here have been reported from Java (Dr P. Scheurleer, personal communication). While we leave open the possibility of the statues being cast elsewhere in the archipelago, it seems conceivable that around AD 1000 an enterprising individual from South Sulawesi, having visited East Java and learnt something of lost wax metal casting, set up a small foundry on Selayar in order to satisfy local demand with cheaper, workmanlike copies of contemporary Nganjuk models.

This hypothesis is plausible within the framework of South Sulawesi's history. Caldwell and Bougas (2004) present evidence of trade and communication between the south coast of South Sulawesi and other parts of the archipelago in the first and early to mid-second millennium AD. The southern coastline of South Sulawesi is a natural trading partner for the northern littoral of East Java, in that it is possible to sail either way from both coasts in the southeast and the northwest monsoon. Vessels sailing from Java would likely have made landfall in Laikang Bay or Malassoro Bay in kabupaten Jeneponto in order to take on supplies of water, rice and firewood before proceeding eastward. Due to adverse winds and currents, it is difficult to sail from Jeneponto to Selayar, particularly in the northeast monsoon when sailing times of ten days or more are not uncommon. After leaving Laikang or Malassoro, the next safe anchorage is the lea shore of Selayar or, more

usefully, the harbour of the main town, Benteng, which is sheltered by a small island. Evidence that Selayar has long been a stopping place for sailing vessels en route to the Moluccas is provided by some of the oldest trade ceramics found in South Sulawesi (Naniek 1983).¹ Many, if not most, of the Northern Sung and Yuan period ceramics sold today in Makassar are reported to have come from Selayar. The port of Benteng may have functioned not just as a stopping place where ships could replenish essential supplies, but also as an entrepôt for spices and other products from the eastern archipelago. Considering the evidence, it does not seem far fetched to suppose that the two statues were cast near Benteng, where they were found.

What are the implication of such a conclusion? Recent research has pointed to the stimulus of Javanese culture as a key element in the emergence and development of kingdoms in South Sulawesi after about A.D. 1300 (Bulbeck and Caldwell 2000:103). The initial source for this cultural transfer appears to have been the East Javanese kingdom Singhasari under its ruler Kertanagara (ruled 1268–92), who began the process of bringing large parts of Indonesia under East Javanese suzerainty. Kertanagara's program was brought to the height of its fulfillment by the Majapahit prime minister Gajah Mada in the mid-fourteenth century.

The bringing of much of the archipelago, or at least its coastal areas, under nominal Javanese suzerainty, was marked by a major expansion of trade, which acted as a stimulus for the political centralisation now documented in remarkable detail right across South Sulawesi from the fourteenth to the sixteenth century. However, if we are correct in identifying the Selayar bronzes, which date to about the year 1000, as locally-cast objects, and not mere imports, we push back evidence of the beginning of this process a further three hundred years.

This is because of the vital distinction between accidents of history, such as the arrival in South Sulawesi of exotic objects which may have no consequence other than the excitement of local curiosity, and the moments in which a creative individual recognises in a foreign object or cultural practice the superiority of the culture that produced it and desires to imitate it.² We argue that it is this process of cultural imitation and adaptation by pre-civilisational communities living on

the fringes of a growing civilisation that best accounts for the casting in South Sulawesi, modeled on Javanese exemplars, of the three bronzes discussed here.

It is possible, too, that the same phenomenon of cultural imitation may account for changes in Makasar mortuary practices that took place around the same time. The ways in which societies dispose of their dead are conservative in nature and provide important cultural markers for archaeologists and prehistorians. Bulbeck (1996–7: 1029–31) provides evidence of flexed or defleshed burials in earthen jars among the Makasars in the late first millennium AD. This method of disposing of the dead was not uncommon in prehistoric Austronesian speaking societies (Bellwood 1997:306–7). Importantly for our argument, flexed burial was superseded around AD 1000 (according to radiocarbon dating) by cremation, and the burial of the ashes of the deceased in earthenware jars. Cremation is both a Hindu and a Buddhist practice, and its adoption on the south coast of South Sulawesi suggests influence from Indianised parts of the archipelago. Many or most cremated burials were accompanied by grave goods comprising bronze, iron, gold and early tradewares. Bulbeck (1996–7) provides examples of cremated burials from the heartlands of Makassar; similar finds are reported by grave robbers in Jenepono and Bantaeng (Bougas 1998; Caldwell and Bougas 2004). The crematory tradition was replaced by the fifteenth century by a new practice of extended burial in an east-west orientation, the corpse accompanied by metal and ceramic grave goods.

To conclude, we wish to raise the possibility that the earliest evidence of voluntary imitation in South Sulawesi of Javanese culture is to be found on the coast between Makassar to Selayar, which forms a natural trading partner with the northern littoral of East Java. We argue that both the casting in South Sulawesi of Javanese-Buddhist religious images and bells of a type still used today by Balinese Hindu and Buddhist *pedanda* (Bal., priest) and the shift from flexed to cremated burials around AD 1000, may be interpreted as evidence of cultural transfer from East Java, perhaps not long after the relocation of the centre of Javanese civilisation from the Yogyakarta region to the Brantas valley.

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Notes

1. And, famously, a bronze Don Song drum belonging to the early first millennium AD.
2. Compare the horde of three bronze Buddhist statues, stylistically dated to the seventh or eighth century AD, collected in Bantaeng in the early twentieth century, which provide no evidence of cultural transfer (Scheurleer and Klokke 1988:111–13).

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