

Basketry Weaves and Bau-Malay Earthenware Pottery in Southeast Asia

Wilhelm G. Solheim II

Introduction

I presented a lecture at the Sarawak Museum in early November 2004 on my research on the Gua Sireh excavation, 1959. During the lecture I explained that I classified the great majority of potsherds that I had recovered in 1959 as belonging to the "Bau-Malay Pottery Tradition." During the discussion period after the lecture a man in the audience made the somewhat questioning statement to the effect that the slides I had shown of the Bau-Malay pottery were not at all like the "Malay" pottery being made at that time in Sarawak. I include the answer to that questioning statement in this paper.

One problem is that there are many different meanings for the word "Malay." The meaning that I use is an archaeological definition including prehistoric times, very different from the ethnic definition that would be used by present day Sarawak "Malays." One example, the word "Malay" is used for a nation in the term "Malaya" or "Malaysia." This is neither an ethnic nor cultural term but a political one.

My edition of *Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language* has eight different words or combination of words using the base word "Malay." I quote only one of these to indicate part of the problem (Guralnik 1970:856):

Hukay Volume 8, pp. 89–100

"Ma-lay-an (ma la'an) *adj.* same as Indonesian (sense 2)-n.1. same as Malay (sense 1) 2. same as Indonesian (sense 3)." They do not have the archaeological definition that I and many other archaeologists and anthropologists use. There is controversy even among anthropologists specializing in Southeast Asia as to the exact meaning of some of these terms.

In a footnote from an early publication (Solheim 1959a:1) on the two widespread pottery traditions I talk about here I had this to say about the word "Malay":

To me, the term 'Malay' includes small groups of people on the Southeast Asia mainland and peoples in Formosa, the Philippines, [Malaysia, Singapore and] Indonesia. These people may be Christian, Pagan, or Mohammedan and do not necessarily speak Malay, though their languages are related. There is particular confusion amongst anthropologists in the meaning of 'Indonesian' as opposed to 'Malay' and both terms have been further muddled by the two recent nationalities using these names for their own nationals.

Before getting into the basket weaves I go further into the term "Malay" with quotes from a paper on much later "Malay" earthenware pottery in Singapore (Chen 2003:55-58, 68). As will be seen Chen is restricting the term to Islamic Malay peoples and culture.

A preliminary examination has revealed that a certain similarity prevails among the decorated earthenware artifacts found in Singapore's pre-colonial sites. This similarity in appearance and manufacture extends beyond Singapore to several other archaeological sites in the region such as Johore Lama in Malaysia, Tanjong Kupang in Brunei and Kota China in Sumatra.... The material culture of Malay-speaking people may be distinguished from non-Malay speakers based on the differences between earthenware pottery types. Solheim's work on Philippine earthenware is significant in relation to the Bau-Malay pottery complex.... The Bau-Malay pottery complex was conceptualized by Solheim, who hypothesized that the Bau-Malay complex seemed to have originated from southeastern China between 3000 and 2500 BCE. The most distinct decorative style from the Bau-Malay complex is the carved paddle-marked pottery. The Bau-Malay style is thought to have first appeared in southern Philippines not long after 700 CE before spreading to western Borneo, Indonesia and the Malay Peninsula. The Bau-Malay pottery complex seems to correspond quite closely to the earthenware pottery types found in pre-colonial Singapore and other sites that were once inhabited by Malay-speaking peoples....

The existence of this tradition suggests both the common origins of the earthenware and frequent communication through maritime trading activities of the sites, which have yielded this pottery.

I do not use the term "Malay pottery" but rather "Bau-Malay pottery," the word "Bau" being the name of the first archaeological site excavated and producing this pottery with which I am acquainted. I hope that this article will be acceptable as explaining the difference between "Bau-Malay" as I used it and simply "Malay" pottery as used by Omar Chen.

Chen (2003:68 and 71) presented two bits of information that I quote here to have on record. The first is on the location of early "Malay" sites:

Unlike the open plains of Java or the hills and fields that characterize the kingdoms of Thailand, all the sites that contain Malay-type pottery such as Kota Cina, Johor Lama, Tanjong Kupang, the Parliament House complex and Empress Place sites are located in or just adjacent to swampy areas. The reasons for this are manifold. One is their proximity to very rich ecological resources. The huge amount of marine and estuarine shell remains at the Empress Place and Parliament House Complex sites in Singapore attest to the natural abundance of such areas. The mangrove swamp also provided resources essential to survival such as wood for fire, boat-building and housing, as well as nipah palm fronds for attap roofs. Last but not least, the mangrove forests may have afforded inhabitants the opportunity for camouflage as well as hiding places during raids on foreign ships in a region where piracy was seen as a birthright and way of life as late as the arrival of Raffles in the nineteenth century.

The second bit of information concerns a specific variety of earthenware pottery made for a specific purpose: "Malay" tradition was to contain the afterbirth or *uri* in *uri* pots and bury these under a tree or near a post of the house where the child was born. "This was a traditional Malay custom which predates Islam, and seemed to have been rather widespread among the people who spoke Malay and its related languages in this area which spread from the Malay Peninsula to Sumatra and Java."

Jose Rizal, the historical hero of the Philippines is still referred to in the Philippines as a Great Malay. In no way is or was he "Malay" in the usual sense. The general Philippine culture, including peoples of all religions, was well along in the process of formation by at least 3,000 years ago. While Indonesia and Malaya had a common ancestry up until roughly a thousand years ago it could be said that specifically Indonesian history would not be distinct before the middle of the first millennium A.C. with the development of "Indonesian" polities in eastern Java. The

earliest beginnings that I can think of for a Malay state would be Brunei and/or Ternate, a sultanate off the west coast of Halmahara. Possibly one or more of the states in peninsular Malaysia, including Singapore, could go back as far as a thousand years. Whatever the case, Filipinos share a general ancestry with Indonesians and Malays from about 5,000 years ago.

In 1981 when I was with the University of Malaya in Kuala Lumpur I gave a lecture in connection with the opening of an art museum at the University. In that lecture I mentioned something about the Malay being a maritime people, a definition generally accepted by the audience.

In the process of checking earlier reports on the Bau-Malay Pottery in preparation for writing this paper I have just realized that my understanding of the Bau-Malay Pottery Tradition and of Basket-Marked pottery as well has changed considerably since I started using these terms in 1959. This understanding came to a focus today. (For my own record it is the 19th of June 2005 that most of this fell into place.)

Bau-Malay and Basket-Marked Pottery

This is not the place to go into this rather sudden change. It has to do with the relationship of the two primary pottery traditions of Island and coastal Mainland Southeast Asia, the Sa Huynh-Kalanay and the Bau-Malay Pottery Traditions. Until starting to pull together my final report on the research I have been doing on the Gua Sireh archaeological site near Kuching I had felt that there was very little overlap in the dating of the two and that the Bau-Malay pottery was later. Now I can see that the two developed first at about the same time in coastal Viet Nam and South China and are related to each other. They were at least in major part a development of the ancestors of the Cham people.

The Cham were a maritime people living along the eastern coast of present day Viet Nam. I must thank the Asian Public Intellectuals program, supported by the Nippon Foundation of Japan, for the grant to do the needed research at the Sarawak Museum to make a final report on the collections I had made at Gua Sireh in 1959. It was through my research with the Gua Sireh pottery that I recognized that the beginnings of the Bau-Malay Pottery Tradition were much earlier than I had thought.

I should explain more about the terms I use before getting to the specific data that is the subject of this paper. First I need to explain the terms "Malay Pottery" and then "Bau-Malay Pottery." I do this by quoting portions of an article I had published on this subject:

The first report with which I am acquainted in which a specific kind of pottery was identified as 'Malay pottery' and equated with the spread of the Malay people was a paper of mine that appeared in this journal [*Sarawak Museum Journal*] in 1959. Hesitating to use the name Malay" for this pottery at that time, I called it the Bau Pottery Complex (Solheim 1959a:2) after the name of the area in which the first published archaeological site was found where this pottery was the primary pottery recovered. The site is Gua Bungoh, in caves near Bau, about fifteen miles southeast of Kuching. The pottery pictured and described (Harrison and Tweedie 1951:173-175, Pl. 2) as coming from this site is, except for three published sherds, typical of the Malay pottery. (Solheim 1982:3)

The pottery of the Bau Pottery Complex was described as being made by the paddle and anvil technique with one or more of the paddles used having geometric patterns carved into their faces which left a geometric pattern in relief on the finished pot (Plate 1).

Previous to my calling this pottery "Malay pottery" there had been one other discussion of this pottery in print which presented a number of very good illustrations of the geometric patterns (Gibson-Hill (1955:185-193). I first used the term "Bau-Malay Pottery Tradition" in the paper I gave in Hong Kong in 1961 (Solheim 1967:20).

My first report (Solheim 1959a:2) using the term "Malay pottery" proceeded as follows:

As I am not certain (though I have little doubt) that this pottery complex that I will present does equate with 'the Malay' people, I have given it another name, the 'Bau Pottery Complex'. Pottery of the Bau Pottery Complex was, and still is, made using a paddle and anvil.

In most cases more than one paddle is used on a given pot, and one or more of these paddles has a geometrically carved surface or may occasionally be wrapped or woven with cord or some form of basketry. If the last paddle used has a plain surface the resulting surface is plain, but often the pattern from a carved paddle will show in some areas.

The variety of patterns produced from a carved paddle is great. Among the early varieties, still in use, is a crossed pattern making a square or triangular lattice. This is very possibly an attempt to imitate a basket design. If this is so one could expect to find a true basket design in earlier pottery [as found at Gua Sireh]. From this simple crossed pattern and an equally simple parallel ribbed pattern probably developed the great variety of patterns.

I introduced another new term for Southeast Asian earthenware pottery in 1959. In this paper (Solheim 1959b:181) I stated:

The majority of the Niah vessels and sherds which have been examined are plain. However a sizeable percentage, probably about a third, are paddle impressed. Two major subdivisions of the paddle impressions are carved-paddle and bound-paddle impressed. The carved paddle impression is a lattice work of squares. The bound-paddle impression is either from cord-bound paddles (cord-marked), or from paddles with basket weaves of several varieties woven over their surfaces.

A few years ago I was dividing basket marked into two varieties, heavy and light. With the recent experience of working on the Gua Sireh earthenware pottery I came to realize that some sherds that I have called heavy basket or light basket and some heavy, parallel ribs may have been made with a paddle-wrapped in some sort of narrow vine such as rattan. These "ribs" are broad, usually 3–4 mm and have rounded edges. The "ribs" from a carved-paddle are sharp and narrow and extend slightly above the surface of the vessel. The "ribs" from a paddle-wrapped with a narrow vine result from the spaces between the vines which, on using the paddle, impress the surface of the vines leaving the parallel ribs in between. Both this type of paddle and basket-marked are made with something like rattan so it is likely there could be both a basket weave on a paddle or simply the vine wound around the paddle.

Rattan has clearly identified very fine lines on its surface running either lengthwise along the vine or crosswise to the vine. When the impression from the vine is clear in either the vine-wrapped or basket-marked vessel either one or the other of these fine lines can be seen with the naked eye, but they do not show up well in the photos.

My term "basket-marked" has been a puzzle for some archaeologists, but many of them have accepted and used it. Datan (1993:37) used the classification and notes, "*Basket-marked* (BM) patterns are the most common type of decoration. Essentially, this pattern is formed by parallel vertical lines crossed occasionally by horizontal ones, the latter often very numerous and fine." He further stated: "It is not certain that the pattern was actually produced by the application of a basket-wrapped paddle, but the term is retained here since it has been used by Solheim for the 1959 Gua Sireh assemblage as well as that of Tanjong Kubor."

In 1959 I illustrated six impressions of sherds with different basketry weaves. A middle-aged Malay (not an archeologist) working for the Sarawak Museum was able to identify the weaves and gave me the local names for these

different kinds of basket. I took a picture of these sherds and their impressions but, unfortunately, I have been unable to locate the photo with the list of names indicated. It is likely that my Plate VIII (Solheim *et al.* 1959:168–169) a–c and e–g are the sherds and impressions he identified and I reproduce it here (Plate 2), but without the missing names of the different baskets.

In identifying the “basket-marked” pattern on a sherd it is necessary to see the over-under of the material used to make the basket. There are many different patterns of this over-under, sometimes made with strands of the same material or other times from material of two or more different widths. It is usually difficult to see on the sherd and shows much better on the impression. Datan’s (1993:Plate 15) “basket-marked” sherd on the right side shows the over-under of the weave and the sherd in the middle would probably show it clearly on an impression. The sherd on the right looks like it has a vine-wrapped (wrapped-paddle) pattern, without any over-under. His Figure 15c (Datan 1993:41) is clearly vine-wrapped. While the vine-wrapped pattern can often be found vertically below a plain area on the sherd, the basket-marked varies in many different directions and would probably never be considered as vertical. On most of the surface of a vessel made using a vine-wrapped paddle there are overlapping of the strokes of the paddle so it may look like it was made with a basket-wrapped paddle. Close examination will demonstrate that there is no over-under of a weave.

This is a common pattern in Viet Nam prehistoric sites and goes back there into the late Pleistocene. The French referred to it as “*au panier*” and believed that it had been made by putting a heavy coating of clay on either the inside or outside of a basket and then burning it. This is a possibility for an accidental invention of basket-marking. It does not work, however, for the common basket-marked as there is always overlapping of paddle strokes of the paddle with basketry woven over its surface. I see no way in which a basket (not on a paddle) could be used to make the many overlappings that you always find on the basket-marked pottery.

To complete this paper I illustrate several sherds and their impressions from Gua Sireh of both basket-weave and vine-wrapped patterns (Plate 3 and 4).

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Abstract

Gua Sirih was excavated in 1959, but circumstances at that time beyond my control prevented the research for and writing of a final report on the site. Thanks to a Senior Fellowship from the Nippon Foundation for the Asian Public Intellectuals program I was able to return to the Sarawak Museum in Kuching, Sarawak, Malaysia in 2004 to do the needed research on the collection for a final report. My portion of the final report is on the earthenware pottery, my specialty, and other specialists will be contributing reports on the remaining recovered materials.

After working for about a month on the earthenware pottery sherds I realized that the understanding I had of the different types of pottery from the site was in part incorrect. This paper explains the changes I had to make in my classification of the pottery from that which I had used in publications made on pottery from other sites in Sarawak on which I had worked in 1958-1959. It further explains some problems I had on the using the term "Malay" in naming the "Bau-Malay Pottery Tradition" for use in Southeast Asian comparative research.

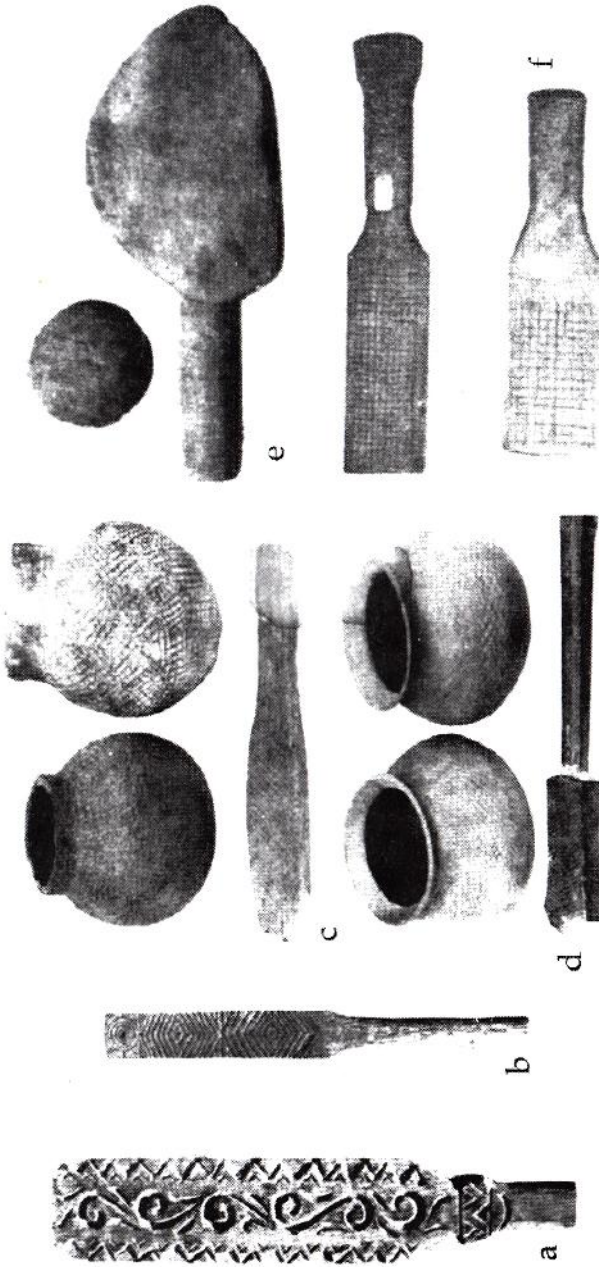


Plate 1

Carved paddles: a-b) Used by Iban in Sarawak; paddles and pots made by c) Bunan and d) Pingpu in Taiwan (Solheim 1967), e) from Fiji (Solheim 1952b; Fig. 1), f) Subanun, western Mindanao (Solheim 1952b; Fig. 8).

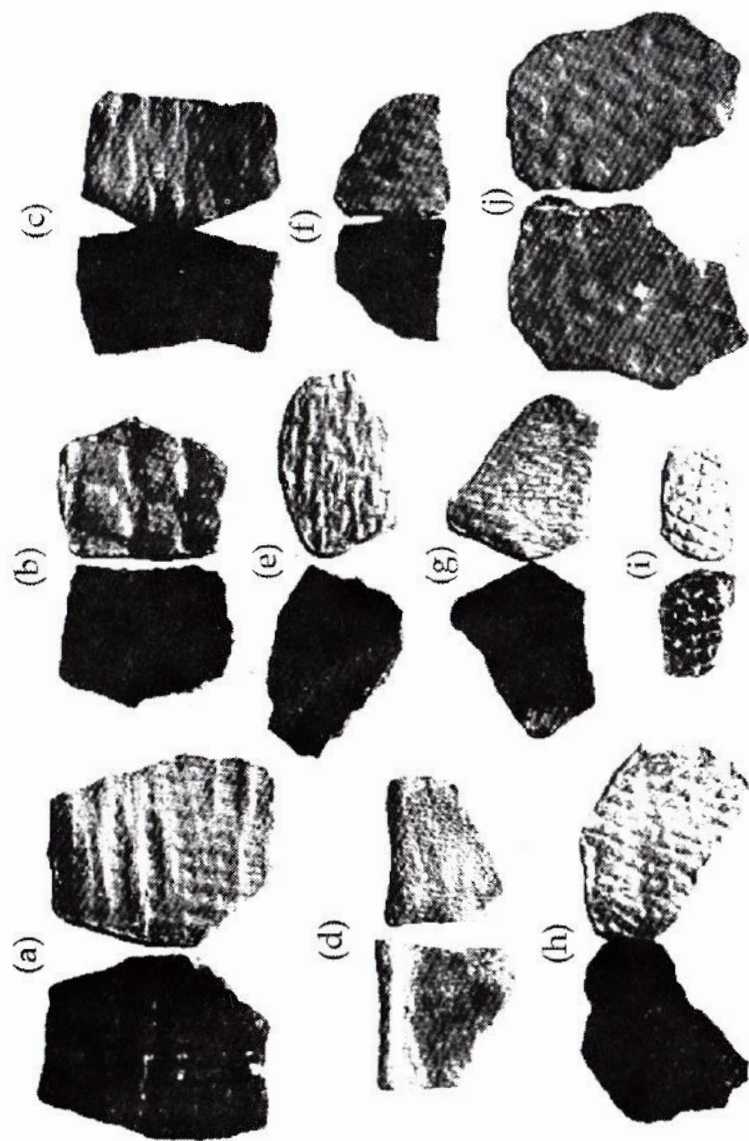


Plate 2

Impressed, Bound-Paddle, Basket-Marked (a-c and e-g); d) Cord-Marked and (h-i) possible Carved-Paddle imitations of Basket-Marked (Solheim *et al* 1959).

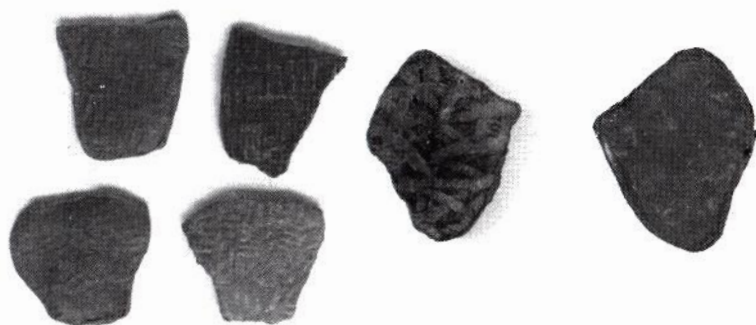


Plate 3
Basket Weave patterns

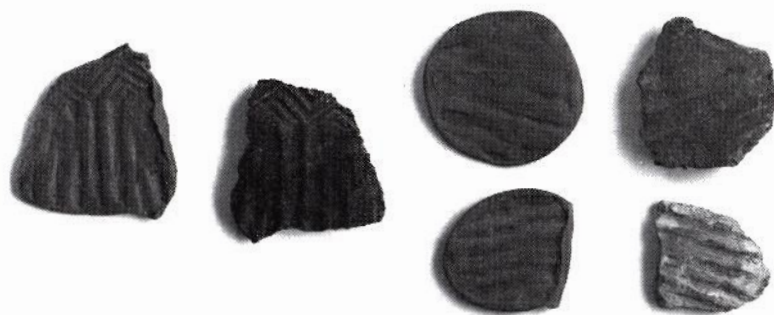


Plate 4
Vine-Wrapped patterns