

# Why are Aslian-speakers Austronesian in culture?

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>1. Introduction</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>2. Aslians and Austronesians</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>3. The Pleistocene peopling of the Peninsula</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>4. Links with Monic</b> .....	<b>6</b>
<b>5. Pre-Malay Austronesian in Aslian</b> .....	<b>6</b>
<b>6. Chamic elements in Aslian</b> .....	<b>7</b>
<b>7. Malayic elements in Aslian</b> .....	<b>7</b>
<b>8. Austronesian music among the Aslian</b> .....	<b>8</b>
<b>9. An excursion into speculative history: the Aslians reach Australia</b> .....	<b>9</b>
<b>10. Conclusions</b> .....	<b>11</b>
<b>References</b> .....	<b>11</b>

**TABLES**

Table 1. Typical proto-Aslian reconstruction	4
Table 2. Words common to mostly Negrito groups of uncertain origin	5
Table 3. Aslian words with likely Bornean Austronesian cognates	6
Table 4. Aslian words with a Chamic affiliation	7
Table 5. Aslian words with Acehese affiliation	7
Table 6. Aslian words with Malayic cognates	8
Table 7. Proposed similarities with Enindiljaugwa	10

**FIGURES**

Figure 1. Aslian subgrouped according to Benjamin (1996)	2
Figure 2. Orang Asli: fantasy map	2
Figure 3. Orang Asli: more realistic	2
Figure 4. Ban Kao pottery	6
Figure 5. Gua Cha ware	7
Figure 6. Slab grave, Pasemah, ca. 7th century	8
Figure 7. Sakai stamping tubes and nose-flute	9
Figure 8. Semai Jews' harps	9
Figure 9. Struck tube-zithers	9
Figure 10. Modern Aslian music	9
Figure 11. Proposed rout of Aslian speakers entering Australia	10
Figure 12. Evident physical similarities between Aslians and Australians	10
Figure 13. Rock paintings of the Aslian navy	10

**ABSTRACT: Why are Aslian-speakers Austronesian in culture?**

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The Aslian-speaking peoples (Semai, Temiar, Jah hut and others) are often referred to as the aboriginal populations of the Malay peninsula. The Aslian speak Austroasiatic languages, but are of diverse physical type, some apparently Negritos and others 'proto-Malay'. They were foragers or slash-and-burn cultivators until recently, and now live encapsulated among the Malay. However, it seems that they are not actually very ancient in the region, for their languages are all close to one another. The nearest relative of the Aslian languages is Monic and then Nicobarese, and probably their ancestors moved into the Malay peninsula from further north *after* the establishment of Austronesian populations in the region. Nonetheless, it was pointed out by Skeat & Blagden (1906) in the first overview of the Aslian languages, that these languages appear to show residual vocabulary that is common to them but without evident Mon-Khmer etymologies, a point also made in respect of Negrito languages of the Philippines by Laurie Reid. Aslian also contains evidence of pre-Malay Austronesian forms and lexicon arguing for contact prior to the expansion of Malay with now-disappeared languages.

Another reason for considering the Aslian post Austronesian is that aspects of their culture and in particular their music appear to be wholly Austronesian. The tube-zither is dominant in their music and the Aslian also play the jews' harp and the nose-flute, instruments typical of Austronesian-speakers but rarely found in the Austroasiatic world. It is therefore likely that the Aslian took them over from the pre-Malay, diverse Austronesians who once inhabited the Malay peninsula. As the Malay expanded, adopted Islam and a musical culture influenced by Java, only the Aslian maintained the prior musical culture of the region. The paper considers the evidence for these hypotheses and draws out a model of the settlement of the Malay peninsular, integrating these findings with recent archaeological results.

## **1. Introduction**

The Aslian-speaking peoples (Semai, Temiar, Jah hut and others) are often referred to as the aboriginal populations of the Malay peninsula. The Aslian speak Austroasiatic languages, but are of diverse physical type, some apparently Negritos and others 'proto-Malay'. They are hunter-gatherers or slash-and-burn cultivators, and now live encapsulated among the Malay. However, it seems that they are not actually very ancient in the region, for their languages are all very close to one another. The nearest relative of the Aslian languages is Monic and then Nicobarese, and probably their ancestors interacted with migrants who moved into the Malay peninsula from further north. The process whereby the Negritos were converted to speaking an Aslian language is obscure but Negritos in the Philippines similarly became Austronesian speakers and their language only survives as a substrate in Agta and other languages.

Aslian languages turn out to represent a complex palimpsest of loanwords from populations no long present on the Malay peninsula, but whose former residence can be detected from etymologies. These hypotheses can in turn be linked with the archaeological evidence for the succession of cultures in this region. One further type of evidence for these interactions is that Aslian culture and in particular their music appears to be wholly Austronesian. The tube-zither is dominant in their music and they also play the jews' harp and the nose-flute. These instruments are typical of Austronesian-speakers but not found elsewhere in the Austroasiatic world. It is therefore likely that the Aslian took them over from the pre-Malay, diverse Austronesians who once inhabited the Malay peninsula. As the Malay expanded, adopted Islam and a musical culture influenced by Java, only the Aslian preserved the prior musical culture of the region.

This paper<sup>1</sup> presents an analysis of Aslian vocabulary, looking at its possible external references, and then develops a model to explain the pattern of phenotypes among the Aslian and the cultural layers reflected in their lexicon. A further phase would be to tie this to the so far limited genetic evidence for such populations.

## **2. Aslians and Austronesians**

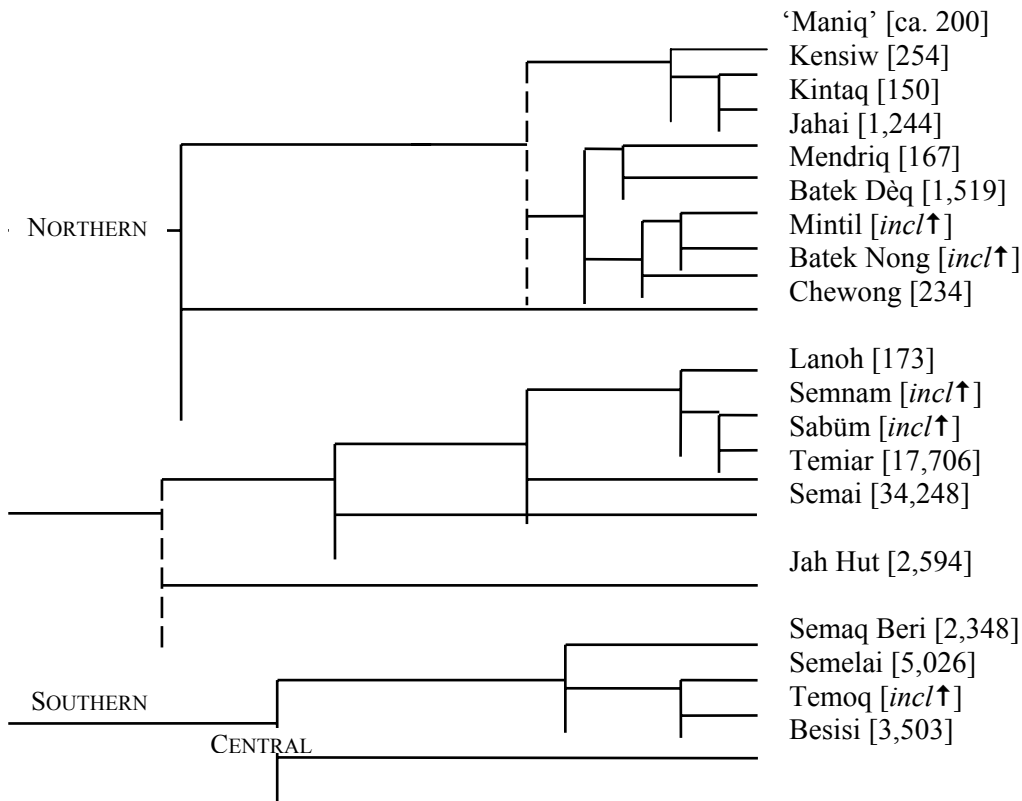
Figure 1 is a recent overview of the Aslian lects and their inter-relationships. Figure 2 and Figure 3 show two maps of Orang Asli distribution, one an official view from the Malaysian State, the other rather more realistic.

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<sup>1</sup> The first version of this paper was presented at the Preparatory meeting for ICAL-3, held at EFEO, Siem Reap, 28-29th June 2006. I am grateful to George van Dreim, Gerard Diffloth and Christophe Pottier for inviting me in the light of my manifest failure to have worked on Austroasiatic in the field. Some of the ideas about the Austral expansion were first developed in a paper given to the IPPA meeting in Manila in March 2006.

Roger Blench. Why are Asian-speakers Austronesian in culture?

Figure 1. Asian subgrouped according to Benjamin (1996)



Aslian is a Mon-Khmer language most closely related to Monic and thence to Nicobarese.

Figure 2. Orang Asli: fantasy map

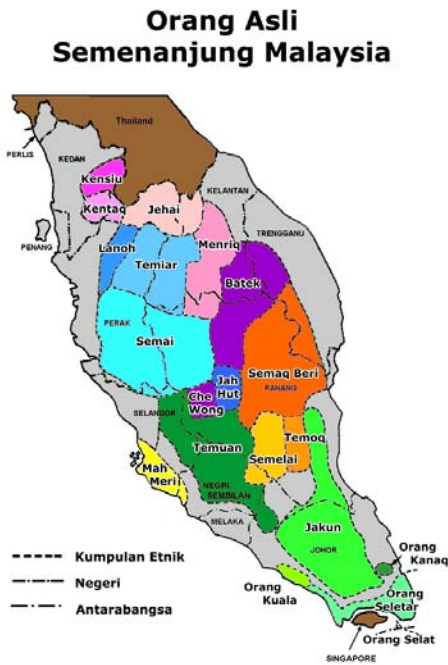


Figure 3. Orang Asli: more realistic

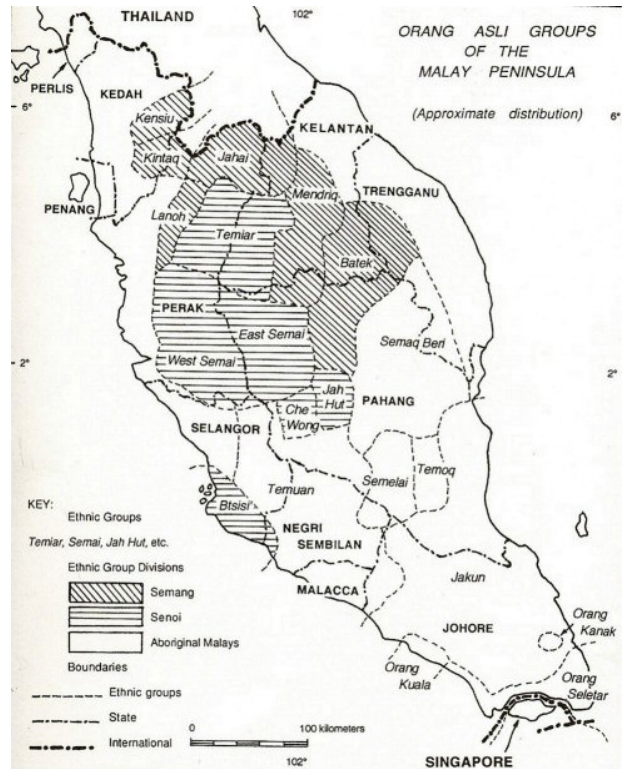
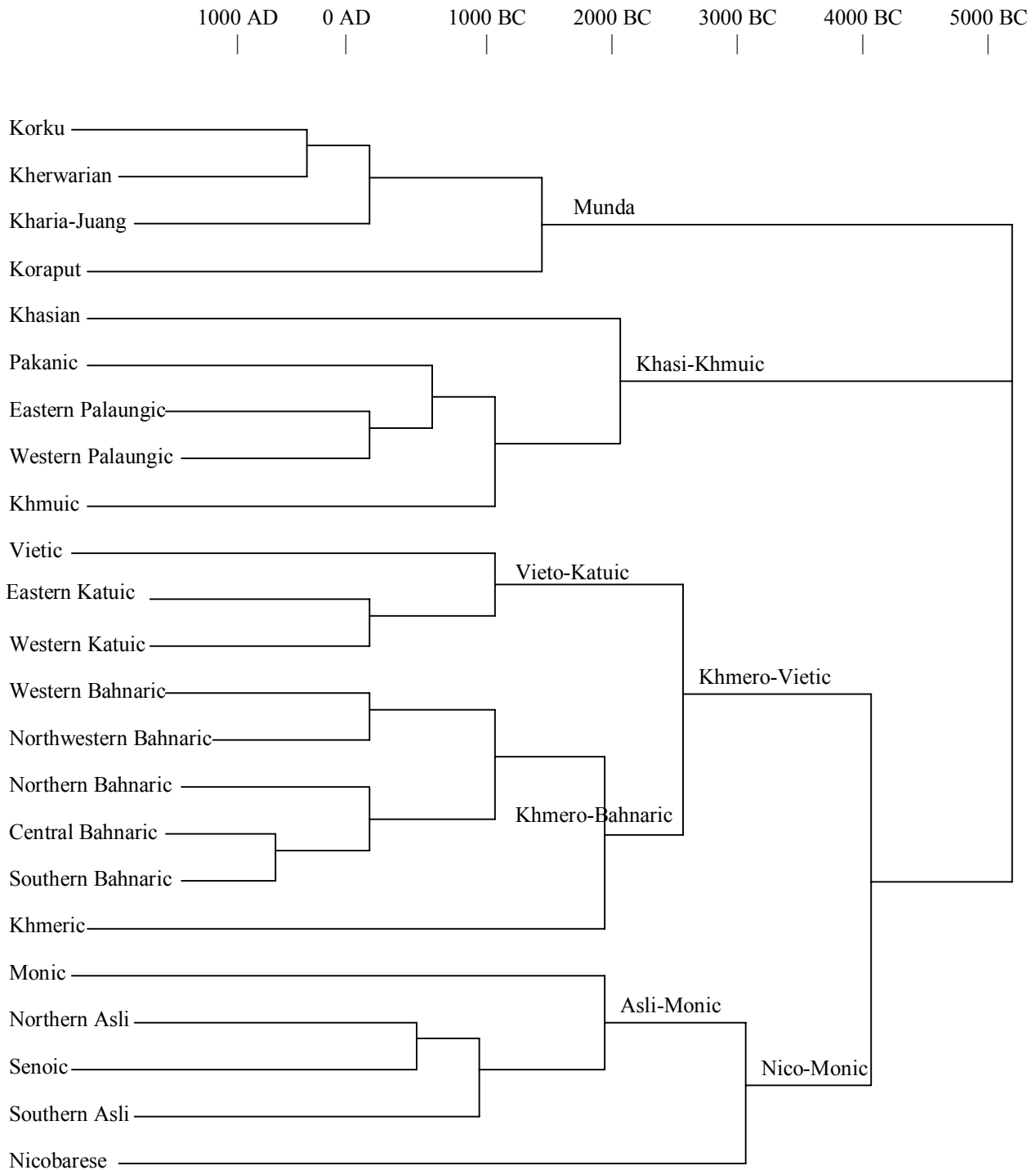


Figure 4 shows Diffloth's tree of Austroasiatic excluding Pearic, and indicates the links between Monic, Nicobarese and Aslian.

Figure 4. Diffloth's tree of Austroasiatic excluding Pearic



However, the place of Aslian within a Southern Mon-Khmer group is not the only problem. There are grounds for thinking that northern Peninsular Malaysia and the Isthmian regions of Thailand have witnessed not one, but three, layers of Mon-Khmer-speaking presence. The hundreds of place-names in the Aslian languages that are well-formed phonologically as Mon-Khmer words but which have no meaning in the present-day languages, suggests that there may have been a Mon-Khmer presence prior to the advent of Aslian. And there is evidence that Mon was present as the language of lowland civilisation in the Isthmian tracts and as far south as Perak and Kelantan until around 1200 CE. Khmer too seems to have left some

**Roger Blench.** Why are Aslian-speakers Austronesian in culture?

traces in the same region, and even further south.<sup>2</sup> In addition to their basic character as Mon-Khmer languages, the Aslian languages also contain lexical evidence of secondary contact with both the Mon and the Khmer languages specifically (Benjamin 1987, 1997, Bauer 1992a). Moreover, the Aslian languages also contain many words in their lexicon that are clearly of Austronesian, but not Malay, provenance. (There are many Malay loan-words too, of course.) This, as writers have been noting for over a century now, betokens a rather more complicated linguistic history for the Malay Peninsula than the popular view suggests. There are even apparently Tai loan-words in some Aslian languages.

Comparative published material on Aslian is slight to non-existent, although the linguistic appendix to Blagden & Skeat (1906) represents a masterly synthesis of the material available at the time as well as an etymological mine for suggestions as to external cognates. A recent web document is the Starling database published under the auspices of the Santa Fe institute. The Aslian data is not clearly assigned to an individual, nor are its sources specifically given, but it is likely that Ilia Peiros was responsible. For Aslian the site proposes 304 proto-Aslian reconstructions. Table 1 shows a typical data table and reconstruction;

**Table 1. Typical proto-Aslian reconstruction**

<b>Language</b>	<b>Attestation</b>	<b>Gloss</b>
Proto-Aslian	*KəbVs	die
Semelai	khəbəs	die
Semoq Beri	kəbus	die
Kensiw	gabis, pəkibis	kill
Jahai	kəbis	die
Jah-Hut	kəbɨs, kərbɨs	kill
Temiar	kəbəs, kərbɨs	kill'

Source: Starling database

Most of these forms are not very controversial. However, the proposed Austroasiatic etymologies will probably gain the assent of few specialists in the field.

Austronesian is a linguistic concept that has gained considerable currency in archaeology and genetics. It is widely accepted that a large number of languages (ca. 1000), spread from Taiwan to Easter Island via Madagascar are closely related, and that their likely homeland is Taiwan, where much the greatest diversity is found, linguistically speaking. However, in Taiwan, the Philippines, Borneo and much of insular SE Asia where only Austronesian languages are now spoken, there were resident hunter-gatherers of presumably 'Papuan' type, represented by the few remaining Negrito groups. The many Pleistocene rock-shelters recorded throughout the region are presumably associated with the Negrito populations. A great many linguists and some archaeologists think that these populations were largely overwhelmed, for there seem to be few traces of their underlying culture or their physical type remaining, at least until the expanding Austronesians encountered more numerous agricultural peoples in Melanesia.

### 3. The Pleistocene peopling of the Peninsula

The Negrito component is presumably phenotypically representative of the Pleistocene peopling of the region. Examples of a typical 'Hoabinhian' toolkit go back as far as a claimed 70,000 BP in the peninsula. As both Blagden & Skeat (1906) and later Evans (1937) pointed out, Aslian (especially Northern) languages contain significant numbers of lexemes that cannot be associated with any of the known language phyla. Comparison of this residual vocabulary in Aslian with Andamanese yields a few suggestive results but

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<sup>2</sup>This view is in possible conflict with the idea recently proposed by some Austronesianists that 'mainland' Austronesian languages were anciently spoken along a continuous tract of coastal land stretching from central Vietnam all the way to Peninsular Malaysia. While there is no reason to doubt the importance of (Austronesian) Chamic along the eastern parts of that stretch (Thurgood 1999: Chapters 2 and 3), there is good linguistic and archaeological evidence in favour of Mon (and sometimes Khmer) as the main language of the various states that stretched around the Gulf of Thailand before Thai and Malay were imposed on the region as the main languages of civilisation.

**Roger Blench.** Why are Aslian-speakers Austronesian in culture?

nothing conclusive, as we might expect at this time distance. Table 2 shows these words with some possible external cognates, especially with Andamanese languages.

**Table 2. Words common to mostly Negrito groups of uncertain origin**

English	Aslian	Possible external cognates
bad	jebag	cf. Andamanese Biada <i>jábagda</i> , Bale <i>jābōg</i>
bag	cog, senej	?
bamboo	lebeh, genun	?
banana	kukeaw	cf. ? Lao <i>kuēi</i>
bear	telabas	?
beast	ab	?
betel-leaf	bed	? Andamanese Onge <i>baŋe</i>
big	bōo	?
bird	kāwōd	?
blind	koh	?
blood	ɲap	?
body	ley	?
brain	lekem	?
broad	men-ey	?
calf of leg	laŋut	
cloud	sagūb	? source
cloud	āl	? < proto-Chamic <i>*hual</i> , ? Andamanese Onge <i>te-kala</i>
coconut	herpay	?
day	keto	? Andamanese Onge <i>ekwe</i> ,
dog	ek, woh, od	?
earth	kelyid	?
to eat	ya'-gēy	?
egg	makaw	?
entrails	ējwed	?
female	yalu	?
fever	keŋkam	?
fish	begjag	?
fly <i>n.</i>	jeloŋ	?
frog	kam	cf. Nicobarese <i>kay</i> 'frog'
full	ekuōh	
girdle	tentam	
good	bōded	
hand	cas	
heart	kelanjes	
monitor lizard	pateaw	cf. Andamanese Bojigisaab 'iguana' <i>pehtié-da</i> , also ? Jarai <i>pakəke</i>
long	beteg	
middle	tahil	
naked	jeligun	
neck	tabog	
old	bedok, kebed	
palm of hand	hār	
pig	napeg	
quick	melagat	
quiver	gah	
seed	sap siep	
snake	jekob	
spear	ad	
squirrel	wayd	
stone	kula	cf. Onge <i>uli</i> ,
tooth	jaŋko, ɲus	
water I	tom	cf. Andamanese Kede <i>tāūm</i> ,
water II	goyd	
yam	takob	

4. Links with Monic

The links with the Monic languages were established long ago and will not be further discussed here. It would be reasonable to connect the Monic expansion with pottery of the Ban Kao type, notably the tripod pots, which date back >3000 kya (Figure 5). The argument for a further link with Nicobarese is less clear and has not reached print

Figure 5. Ban Kao pottery



5. Pre-Malay Austronesian in Aslian

Aslian languages contain numerous borrowings from early Austronesian languages. Many of these are specifically associated with Borneo. It is likely that migrants from Borneo settled the Malay peninsula 3-4000 years ago and established cultural dominance over the Aslian speakers. Likely borrowings from early Austronesian, particularly Bornean languages, are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Aslian words with likely Bornean Austronesian cognates

English	Aslian	Austronesian cognates
belly	beten	PWMP* <i>beten</i> belly, abdomen weaken to <i>weten</i> in Javanese etc.
blowpipe	seput	PMP * <i>sumpit</i>
buffalo	katidun	cf. Bugis <i>tedon</i> (qa- is an Austronesian prefix, but where is the Austronesian attestation?)
chicken	manuk	PMP * <i>manuk</i>
dead	kebus	cf. Dayak <i>kabus</i>
die	mantai	PMP * <i>ma-atay</i>
defecate	meneh	Katingan <i>mani</i> , Kanowit <i>mene</i>
dog	asu	PAN * <i>asu</i>
husband	sawa	PMP * <i>qasawa</i>
knee	to'ot	PMP * <i>tuhud</i>
monkey	basej	cf. Murut <i>basuk</i> or perhaps widespread words for 'squirrel' e.g. Javanese <i>bajij</i>
old	bakes	cf. Katingan <i>bakas</i>
rain	lesem	cf. Dusun <i>rasam</i> , Visayan <i>lafam</i> ,
spear	bulus	cf. Tagalog <i>bulos</i> , Javanese <i>bulus</i>

These migrations are part of the larger process of Austronesian expansion and would have been reflected in the introduction of red-slip ware which would also be ca. 3500 BP. Probably the pottery brought in by the Bornean migrations resembles typical Gua Cha ware (Figure 6).



### 6. Chamic elements in Aslian

The Chamic languages also originate from the Bornean area, although they apparently migrated to Việt Nam, where they became massively restructured under the influence of Austroasiatic languages. Some intriguing lexical material also shows up in Aslian, including the word for ‘elephant’ which is a borrowing into Aslian from Mon-Khmer (Table 4). This shows that Chamic speakers must have first settled in Việt Nam and then come on to the Malay peninsula and co-existed with the Bornean migrants.

Figure 6. Gua Cha ware

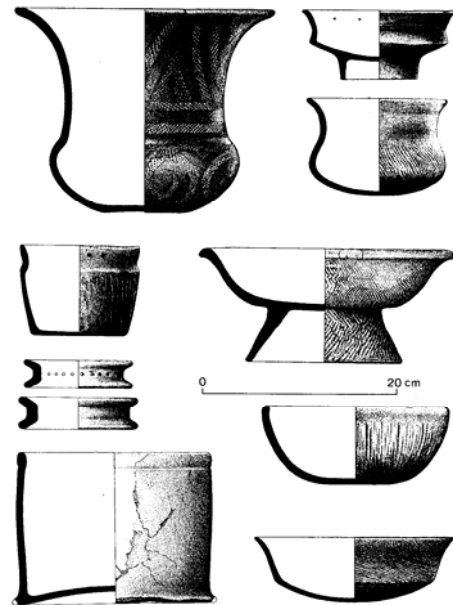


Table 4. Aslian words with a Chamic affiliation

English	Aslian	Possible cognates
blowpipe	tagu	B & S suggest Cham <i>taguḥ</i> bamboo fishing float
sheath		
to break	bekah	cf. proto-Chamic <i>*picah</i> , but also Malay <i>pěcah</i> . Also in Mon-Khmer, proto-Mnong <i>*bəcah</i> . Absence of deep-level Austronesian cognates argues for an Austroasiatic origin
cloth	abāt	cf. Cham <i>aban</i> , Bahnar <i>haban</i> ‘cloth skirt’
elephant	liman	proto-Chamic <i>*lamaan</i>
ripe	taseg	proto-Chamic <i>*tasa?</i>
weak	lemes	proto-Chamic <i>*lamən</i> ? < Mon-Khmer

Source B & S (1907:437)

Chamic speakers must have then also been in touch with Sumatra because of the Acehnese language. Acehnese is either Chamic proper (Thurgood) or Chamic with an Aslian substrate (Diffloth). Either way, Aslian has idiosyncratic loans/cognates with Acehnese (Table 5);

Table 5. Aslian words with Acehnese affiliation

English	Aslian	Possible cognates
finished	telas	Acehnese <i>teles</i> ‘completed’
rattan	awe	Acehnese <i>awe</i>
riverbank	terbis	cf. Acehnese <i>tərbis</i> ‘hole in bed of river’
sand	aney	cf. Acehnese <i>anoy</i> ‘sand’
sleepy	lebod	cf. Acehnese <i>lebui</i>
tame	lagi	cf. Acehnese <i>raghoi</i> ‘tame, of birds’
very	tehet	cf. Acehnese <i>těhat</i>

### 7. Malayic elements in Aslian

Finally, the peninsula was infiltrated, apparently first by Malayic peoples and then by the Malay proper, following the expansion of the Srivijaya empire in the 7th century. This led to the assimilation and

**Roger Blench.** Why are Aslian-speakers Austronesian in culture?

integration of the Bornean-Chamic languages at that point surrounding the Aslian languages. Table 6 shows a sample of words with Malayic cognates as opposed to simple Malay borrowings;

**Table 6. Aslian words with Malayic cognates**

English	Aslian	Austronesian cognates
bee	bani dahan	cf. Batak <i>uwani</i> , Mangkasar <i>bani</i> , Rotinese <i>fani</i> Chamic <i>*hani</i>
black	hirom	cf. proto-Malayic <i>*hitəm</i>
fruit	ba	cf. proto-Malayic <i>*buah</i>
monkey	basej	cf. Murut <i>basuk</i> or perhaps widespread words for ‘squirrel’ e.g. Javanese <i>bajij</i>
nail	kokat	cf. Madurese <i>kokot</i> , ‘claw’.
spear	bulus	cf. Tagalog <i>bulos</i> , Javanese <i>bulus</i>
spear	tarok	cf. Malay <i>tirok</i> , ‘fish-spear’ also <i>tohok</i> in Malay spirit-language
yam	talis	cf. Sundanese, Javanese <i>talef</i>

This process may be reflected in the archaeological record by the presence of 7th century slab graves across the peninsula.

**Figure 7. Slab grave, Pasemah, ca. 7th century**



## 8. Austronesian music among the Aslian

One reason for considering the Aslian post Austronesian is that their culture and in particular their music appears to be wholly Austronesian. The tube-zither, plucked and struck is dominant in their music and they also play multiple stamping tubes, the jews’ harp and the nose-flute. These instruments are typical of Austronesian-speakers but not found elsewhere in the Austroasiatic world, with the exception of the Jews’ harp. It is therefore likely that the Aslian took them over from the pre-Malay, diverse Austronesians who once inhabited the peninsula. As the Malay expanded, adopted Islam and a musical culture influenced by Java, only the Aslian maintained the prior musical culture of the region. Figure 8, Figure 9, and Figure 10 show these instruments as they were in use.

Figure 8. Sakai stamping tubes and nose-flute



Figure 9. Semai Jews' harps

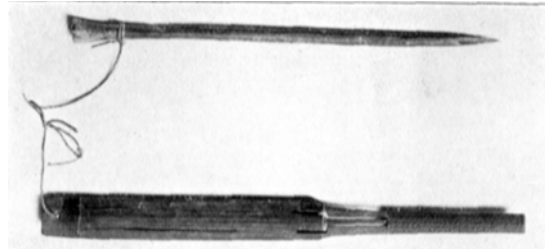


Figure 10. Struck tube-zithers

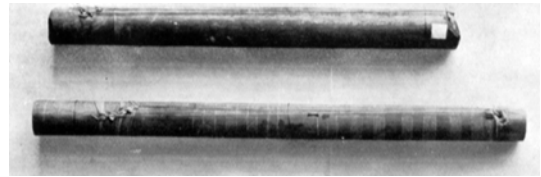
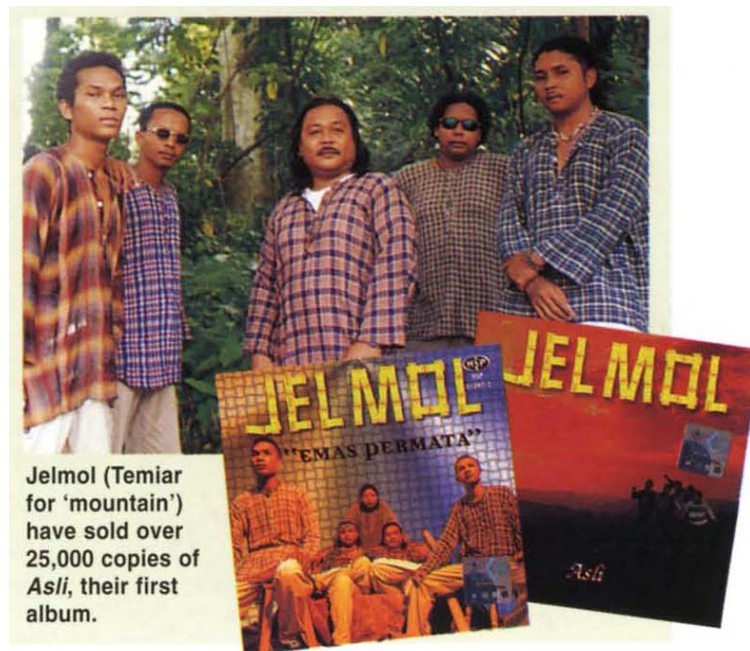


Figure 11. Modern Aslian music

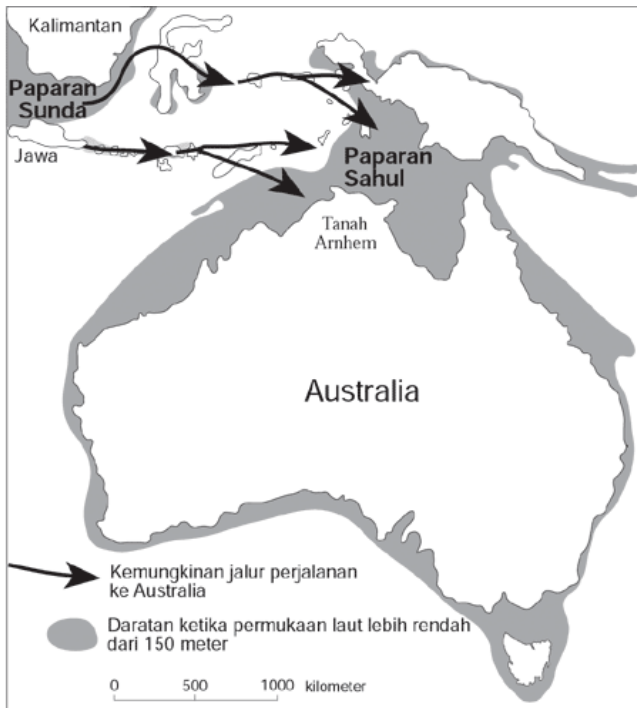


## 9. An excursion into speculative history: the Aslians reach Australia

Some scholars cling to a conventional view of the historical process, but bolder spirits have proposed that the Pleistocene colonisation of Sunda and Sahul can be demonstrated by direct links between the Aslian peoples and the Australians.

**Roger Blench.** Why are Aslian-speakers Austronesian in culture?

**Figure 12. Proposed rout of Aslian speakers entering Australia**



**Figure 13. Evident physical similarities between Aslians and Australians**



**Figure 14. Rock paintings of the Aslian navy**

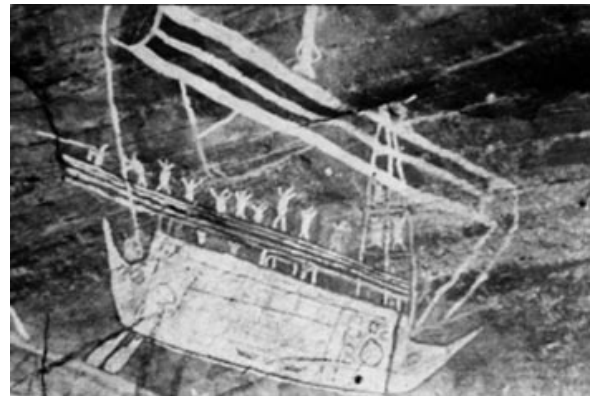


Table 7 shows a table of proposed similarities with the Enindiljaugwa language, although oddly these are not with the Aslian languages but with Malayic. Probably the Aslian merchants hired Malay ships?

**Table 7. Proposed similarities with Enindiljaugwa**

<i>ajira</i>	air	Mel
<i>Balanda</i>	Belanda	Mel
<i>bara</i>	barat	Mel
<i>bula</i>	buluh	Mel
<i>jara</i>	jara	Mel
<i>libaliba</i>	lepa-lepa	Mak & Bug
<i>rupiah</i>	uang	Mel
<i>umbakumba</i>	ombak-ombak	Mel

(Mel=Melayu; Mak=Makasar; Bug=Bugis)

## 10. Conclusions

The argument can thus be broadly summarised as follows;

- ❖ The Malay peninsula was entirely inhabited by Negrito populations until ca. 4-5000 years ago. These were the bearers of the Hoabinhian stone tool culture
- ❖ Their language was unknown but it is presumed to have a deep relationship with Andamanese and other Austral languages
- ❖ Monic languages must have spread to much of southern Thailand and the northern Malay peninsula. This is surely a reflection of 'Ban Kao' type assemblages which appear between Thailand down to the peninsula ca. 4000 BP and are identified by characteristic 'tripod' vessels
- ❖ Perhaps the first Aslian speakers were foragers living on the southern edges of Monic territory interacting with the Negrito populations
- ❖ A dominance relation must have grown up, to persuade all the Negritos to drop their language and speak Aslian, albeit in pidginised forms
- ❖ Ca. 3500 years ago Austronesian speakers from the west coast of Borneo invade the Malay peninsula
- ❖ They populate much of the land area and drive the foragers into residual locations. At the same time, they assert cultural dominance over the foragers so that they adopt cultural patterns and lexicon from the incomers without losing their language
- ❖ Apart from the expansion of Ibanic and other Bornean languages, the speaker of Chamic languages were expanding during the same period
- ❖ Some went to Việt Nam, interacted with Mon-Khmer and then came to the peninsula, presumably for trade. Chamic languages must once have been spoken on the peninsula, which would account for the Chamic loans in Aslian.
- ❖ One group of Chamic speakers must have encountered and assimilated an Aslian group to account for the genesis of Acehnese, later crossing to Sumatra. This accounts for the Acehnese loans/cognates in Aslian
- ❖ During this period the Mon expansions (Bronze age?) would have resulted in a secondary layer of Mon loans in Aslian
- ❖ Prior to the expansion of Malay proper, Malayic peoples began to penetrate the peninsula and assimilate the resident Bornean/chamic/Aslian languages. Hence the Malayic loans as well as loans from Malay proper.
- ❖ The expansion of the Śrīvijaya trading empire from the 7th century would then have begun to.
- ❖ This period is probably reflected archaeologically in the construction of slab graves
- ❖ Bornean languages then disappear from the mainland leaving only traces in loanwords and cultural practices.

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