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Terror from the Sky: Unconventional Linguistic Clues to the Negrito Past

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Abstract

Within recorded history, most Southeast Asian peoples have been of "southern Mongoloid" physical type, whether they speak Austroasiatic, Tibeto-Burman, Austronesian, Tai-Kadai, or Hmong-Mien languages. However, population distributions suggest that this is a post-Pleistocene phenomenon and that for tens of millennia before the last glaciation ended Greater Mainland Southeast Asia, which included the currently insular world that rests on the Sunda Shelf, was peopled by short, dark-skinned, frizzy-haired foragers whose descendants in the Philippines came to be labeled by the sixteenth-century Spanish colonizers as "negritos," a term that has since been extended to similar groups throughout the region. There are three areas in which these populations survived into the present so as to become part of written history: the Philippines, the Malay Peninsula, and the Andaman Islands. All Philippine negritos speak Austronesian languages, and all Malayan negritos speak languages in the nuclear Mon-Khmer branch of Austroasiatic, but the linguistic situation in the Andamans is a world apart. Given prehistoric language shifts among both Philippine and Malayan negritos, the prospects of determining whether disparate negrito populations were once a linguistically or culturally unified community would appear hopeless. Surprisingly, however, some clues to a common negrito past do survive in a most unexpected way.

Keywords

AGTA, Semang, Thunder Complex, Negrito Hypothesis, Language Shift

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ROBERT BLUST¹*

Abstract Within recorded history, most Southeast Asian peoples have been of “southern Mongoloid” physical type, whether they speak Austroasiatic, Tibeto-Burman, Austronesian, Tai-Kadai, or Hmong-Mien languages. However, population distributions suggest that this is a post-Pleistocene phenomenon and that for tens of millennia before the last glaciation ended Greater Mainland Southeast Asia, which included the currently insular world that rests on the Sunda Shelf, was peopled by short, dark-skinned, frizzy-haired foragers whose descendants in the Philippines came to be labeled by the sixteenth-century Spanish colonizers as “negritos,” a term that has since been extended to similar groups throughout the region. There are three areas in which these populations survived into the present so as to become part of written history: the Philippines, the Malay Peninsula, and the Andaman Islands. All Philippine negritos speak Austronesian languages, and all Malayan negritos speak languages in the nuclear Mon-Khmer branch of Austroasiatic, but the linguistic situation in the Andamans is a world apart. Given prehistoric language shifts among both Philippine and Malayan negritos, the prospects of determining whether disparate negrito populations were once a linguistically or culturally unified community would appear hopeless. Surprisingly, however, some clues to a common negrito past do survive in a most unexpected way.

Introduction

Present-day populations of Asiatic “negritos” are confined to three geographical regions: the Philippines, the Malay Peninsula, and the Andaman islands. Folktales about “little people” abound among Austronesian-speaking populations from Taiwan to Hawai‘i (Ferrell 1968; Luomala 1951), but in the absence of ethnographic evidence it is difficult to see these as inspired by actual contact with a pre-existing

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foraging population, particularly in the central and eastern Pacific, where there were no human inhabitants prior to the arrival of Polynesian settlers.

Within the Philippines, all negritos speak Austronesian languages, yet they differ from non-negrito (hereafter “Malayic”) Austronesian speakers in two salient characteristics: physically they are shorter and darker, with hair that tends to be curly or frizzled, and culturally they were invariably foragers at first European contact, an economic adaptation that in some cases has persisted until very near the present day (Headland and Reid 1989; Headland 2002). Many Philippine languages have a word *Agta*(?), *Ayta/Aeta*, *Alta*, *Arta*, *Ata*, *Atta*, *Ati*, or the like, reflecting Proto-Malayo-Polynesian **qaRta*, “outsiders, alien people” (Blust 1972), that refers exclusively to a particular negrito group or to the negrito population of the archipelago as a whole.¹ The distribution of negritos in the Philippines is wide and scattered, a pattern associated in other regions of the world with early populations that have been fragmented by the subsequent migrations of economically more dominant peoples (Blust 1994: 25–30). Reid (this issue) lists 26 “negrito languages” (i.e., Austronesian languages spoken by negrito groups) that are distributed from northern Luzon (*Atta*, *Dupaningan Agta*) to northeast Mindanao (*Mamanwa*), with pockets elsewhere (the *Zambales* mountains of west-central Luzon, the island of *Palawan*, the islands of *Panay* and *Negros*, etc.), and *Lobel* (2012: 55) states that there are “approximately 46,000 Black Filipinos belonging to 28 ethnolinguistic groups.” Several studies in population genetics, including *Omoto et al.* (1981) and *Delfin et al.* (2011), indicate considerable genetic distances between Philippine negrito ethnic groups, implying long separation times.² The likelihood that some Philippine negrito groups have been separated for many thousands of years is also supported by archaeological evidence for a pre-Neolithic population that inhabited the *Tabon Caves* on the island of *Palawan* beginning as early as 47 kya (*Dizon et al.* 2002).³

The indigenous population of the Malay Peninsula is conventionally divided into Austronesian-speaking coastal Malays who probably reached the area from southwest Borneo between 2 and 2.5 kya (Blust 1994: 47), and a historically earlier population confined largely to the interior rainforest that is called “*Orang Asli*” (original people) by the coastal Malays. The *Orang Asli* in turn are divided into (1) foraging negrito bands of Austroasiatic speech that in the earlier scientific literature are called “*Semang*” (reportedly a Malay term for negritos in *Kedah* and *Perak*), (2) sedentary, longhouse-dwelling people of southern Mongoloid physical type and Austroasiatic speech that in earlier publications are called “*Sakai*” (Malay for “subject, dependent”; *Wilkinson* 1959) but are now generally called “*Senoi*,” and (3) a collection of non-Muslim Malay-speaking peoples in the southern Malay Peninsula variously called “*Jakun*,” “aboriginal Malay,” or “proto-Malay,” which may represent earlier Austroasiatic-speaking populations that have undergone language shift to Malay, or Malay-speaking populations that have retreated from mainstream Malay culture. *Carey* (1976) maps the distribution of all three types of *Orang Asli*, identifying six negrito ethnolinguistic groups: *Kensiu*, *Kintak* (called “*Kintaq Bong*” in most sources), *Lanoh*, *Jahai/Jehai*, *Mendrik*, and *Batek*. This

map does not include additional negrito groups across the border in peninsular Thailand (Brandt 1961).

There is a curious parallelism in the linguistic relationship between negrito and Malayic peoples in the Philippines and negrito and Senoic peoples in Malaya.⁴ In both cases the negrito population apparently abandoned whatever distinctive language it once had and adopted one or more languages from its sedentary, agricultural neighbors. Reid (1987, 1994, this issue) has commented on this critical cultural transition in the Philippine context, but no similar account of what must have been a similar language shift among foragers in the Malay Peninsula has yet been written. One important difference between the two cases should be highlighted: in the Philippines prehistoric language shift involved the adoption of languages belonging to a single language family (Austronesian). In the Malay Peninsula the indigenous foragers must have also abandoned their original languages when they came into contact with agricultural Austroasiatic-speaking Senoic populations who migrated southward through the peninsula and ultimately to the Nicobar Islands in the Bay of Bengal (Blust 1994). However, over at least the past millennium it is the coastal Malays who have been the dominant economic and cultural presence in this region, and in some cases borrowing from Malay into the languages of the Orang Asli has been so extensive (Benjamin 1976) that over time the genetic affiliation of these languages may become more difficult to determine.

The Andaman Islands are in many ways a world apart. Although the languages of Great Andaman are now all but extinct, what records we have provide little evidence that they were genetically related to Önge and Jarawa of Little Andaman and the southernmost tip of Great Andaman (Blevins 2007, in press). The Andamans are a continuation of the Arakan mountain chain of Burma, and during glacial maxima it formed a larger landmass that was closer to the Asian mainland. Although the archaeology of this area is still too little developed to permit confident statements, it is likely that the negrito population reached these islands either by an overland migration or via a much shorter sea transit than is currently needed.⁵ Following sea level rises that left them in a more fragmented insular environment, the Andamanese experienced millennia of isolation, not only from the outside world but also internally, and this had two major consequences for the history of their languages. First, as already noted, there is little evidence for an “Andamanese” language family that includes the languages of both Great Andaman and what Blevins (2007) calls the “Ongan” family on Little Andaman (and perhaps Sentinel Island). Second, unlike other Asiatic negritos, there is no evidence that the Andamanese have ever experienced language shift in response to the economic and cultural domination of neighboring agriculturalists, at least until the arrival of the British in the mid-nineteenth century and the subsequent passage of the Andamans into the protection of an independent India.

To summarize, taking all three areas into account (and recognizing that our knowledge of the prehistory of the Andamans in all likelihood still contains critical gaps), the simplest hypothesis that accounts for the distribution of Asiatic negrito populations is that they are survivals from a time preceding what might be called

“the Asianization” of Southeast Asia. In other words, it is likely that Pleistocene and perhaps early Holocene Southeast Asia was populated in whole or in large part by foraging populations of physically negrito peoples associated archaeologically with the well-established Hoabinhian pebble-tool tradition (Bellwood 1997: 158). It was only later in the Holocene with the advent of rice agriculture in the middle Yangzi basin around 8.5 kya that physically Asian peoples began to expand southward into the traditional realm of the negrito foragers, driving them increasingly into marginal areas where they were able to survive largely in economic symbiosis with their politically dominant and more populous neighbors.

The earliest southern Mongoloid people in Southeast Asia probably were Austroasiatic speakers, and it is likely that they replaced or absorbed negrito populations over the whole of mainland Southeast Asia except in the final southern fastness of the interior rainforest of the Malay Peninsula (Blust 1994). The archaeological picture suggests that Austronesian speakers did not reach the Philippines from Taiwan until about 4 kya (Bellwood and Dizon 2005), at which time they must have encountered fairly flourishing and linguistically diverse negrito populations throughout the archipelago, organized into small bands with a low population density, as is characteristic of foragers globally. Once these contacts were established, an irreversible process of fragmentation and marginalization was set in motion, and more to the point of this article, a process of language shift took place independently in the Philippines and the Malay Peninsula.

Bulbeck (this issue) raises a fundamental question that was anticipated by Omoto et al. (1981; see n. 2), when they concluded that the Ayta of Luzon and the Mamanwa of Mindanao show little genetic evidence of common origin: does the term *negrito* designate a genetically unitary population that arose after separation from other modern human groups following the general exodus of *Homo sapiens* from Africa some 70,000 years ago, or is it simply a convenient cover term for immigrant *Homo sapiens* that did not undergo those mutations that produced lighter skin color, straighter hair, and so on? Similarly, in a broad and careful consideration of the story that genetic markers tell about the unity and external connections of Southeast Asian negritos, Chaubey and Endicott (this issue) argue that they have “demonstrated the joint ancestral affinities between the Onge and Great Andamanese, and the distorting effects of admixture among the latter” (by which they mean gene flow with South Asian populations that were introduced into the Andamans from the time the British began to use the islands as a penal colony). In addition, on the basis of a neighbor-joining tree, they identified a clustering that “places the Onge closer to the negrito populations of Malaysia than to those of the Philippines.” Nonetheless, in their conclusion they note that “At the current level of genetic resolution. . . there is no evidence of a single ancestral population for the different groups traditionally defined as ‘negritos.’” In other words, based on the genetic evidence alone, most scholars currently appear loath to assume the physical and historical unity of a negrito population stratum in Southeast Asia, preferring to leave open the possibility that groups traditionally labeled “negritos” may represent multiple convergent developments from a broader ancestral population of early *Homo sapiens* leaving Africa.⁶

This is clearly a fundamental issue (perhaps *the* fundamental issue) for the “negrito hypothesis,” and in response to it I argue in this article that there is compelling evidence from both culture and language that at least the Philippine and Malayan negritos shared a common culture and language at some undetermined point in the past that probably preceded the end of the Pleistocene. The evidence for including the Andamanese within the same historical circuit is tantalizing, but less certain.

Distinctive Commonalities: Culture

Given the physical similarities of foraging Asiatic negritos to one another, and their clear distinctness from neighboring agricultural Asian populations, one naturally wonders whether there was once a unified negrito culture and language. Since the separation times implied by both radiocarbon dates and genetic studies are in the tens of millennia even for different groups of Philippine negritos (Omoto et al. 1981), let alone in comparing negritos from any of the three great regional groupings with one another, the prospects for finding anything that might indicate a past cultural or linguistic connection would appear a priori to be hopeless. This is true both for language, which is commonly thought to lose all traces of former unity after six to eight millennia, and for culture, for which no adequate comparative method has ever been accepted by a majority of anthropologists.⁷ Before addressing the issue of language, it will be worthwhile to first address the question of distinctive commonalities of culture, as this will lead us naturally into one of the most remarkable linguistic observations that has ever been made in the Southeast Asian context, and one that has been almost completely overlooked by subsequent researchers.

In a carefully constructed monograph, Cooper (1941) argued that exclusively shared culture traits that are not likely to be products of independent invention are valuable markers of historical relatedness. He drew attention in particular to a series of seemingly arbitrary beliefs that appear to be found exclusively among Asiatic negritos and some neighboring Malayic Austronesian speakers, who may have acquired them by contact (pp. 19–42). These include, but are not limited to:

1. A belief among some groups of Philippine negritos, and some Andamanese, that storms will come if a person burns beeswax (p. 29).
2. A belief among some Andamanese and among the Semai of the Malay Peninsula that people must observe silence when the cicada is “singing.” Among at least the Andamanese it is said that failure to observe this stricture will offend both the cicada and the thunder god, and a storm will consequently arise (p. 29–30).
3. A belief that one should not burn off leeches that have become attached to one’s body, reported for the Ayta of the Zambales mountains in west-central Luzon, the Mamanwa of northeastern Luzon, and the Semang of the Malay Peninsula (p. 31).

4. A belief among both the Mamanwa of northeast Mindanao and the Kintaq Bong⁸ of Malaya that one should not play with birds' eggs, as this might precipitate a punitive thunderstorm (p. 31).
5. A belief that no harm should be done to certain large wasps, which are considered either the messengers (Mamanwa) or the companions (Jehai Semang) of the thunder god (p. 32).
6. A belief among the Zambales Ayta and the Mamanwa of the Philippines and the Kintaq Bong and Jehai of Malaya that using a cooking pot to fetch water will offend the thunder god.
7. A belief among the Mamanwa of Mindanao and the Jehai and Kintaq Bong of Malaya that flashing a mirror will cause thunderstorms (p. 33).
8. A belief among the Ayta of Mt. Banahau, southeast Tayabas, Luzon, and among the Semang that intercourse in the daytime will offend the thunder god and hence precipitate a punitive thunderstorm (p. 34).
9. A belief among both the Ayta of eastern Bulacan and the Kintaq Bong that women should remove combs from their hair during a thunderstorm (p. 34).
10. A belief among the Mamanwa and the Ayta of eastern Bulacan that if the thunder god has been offended, a little blood can be drawn from a cut finger or cut in the leg, mixed with water, and tossed toward the thunder god in expiation for the affront.

The Thunder Complex. One cannot fail to notice that many of these strikingly distinctive culture traits that are shared by negrito populations in the Philippines and the Malay Peninsula are connected with beliefs about punitive thunderstorms, and in fact, most or all of the traits mentioned above form part of a larger nexus of beliefs that I have elsewhere called the "thunder complex" (Blust 1981). In somewhat schematic form, what the thunder complex describes is a belief that thunderstorms, which may occur with terrifying force in the Asian tropics, are often precipitated by human actions. Among these actions are mockery of animals, watching or laughing at sexual intercourse among animals, human intercourse during the daytime, incest, taking or playing with birds' eggs, fetching water in a cooking pot, boisterous play or laughter (especially at sundown), women failing to remove decorative hair combs during a storm, and burning off leeches from one's body. As noted in Blust (1991), the common thread that unites most or perhaps all of these offenses against the supernatural is a confusion of categories.

If a thunderstorm is punitive—that is, if it has been caused by any of the above types of behavior—the violent weather will bring about not only such natural consequences as the toppling of giant forest trees and flooding of streams but also supernatural consequences in which the offender and all members of his camp or village are struck by lightning and turned to stone. As already noted, to avert such disaster, those who are guilty of offending the thunder god must quickly draw blood from a finger or the leg, mix it with water, and toss it in the air as an offering of propitiation. In some variants of the thunder complex a strand of hair is instead cut off and burned as an offering.

Given the highly distinctive nature of the thunder complex, which has not been reported outside the region described in this article, it would be difficult to deny that it provides evidence of a historical connection between at least the negrito groups of the Philippines and the Malay Peninsula that must extend back into the Pleistocene. What complicates the picture and requires a more complex historical hypothesis is the observation that the thunder complex is also found among many Malayic Austronesian speakers not only in the Philippines and the Malay Peninsula, where the possibility of diffusion from negrito communities exists, but also in areas such as Borneo and the Lesser Sunda islands of eastern Indonesia, where no negrito populations have ever been historically reported or inferred from archaeological or genetic evidence.⁹

The dual distribution of the thunder complex among widespread negrito populations in Southeast Asia regardless of their linguistic affiliation, and among Malayic speakers of Austronesian languages outside Taiwan—whether or not they are in contact with negritos—presents a challenge to anyone who contemplates the development of a comparative method for ethnology parallel to, yet distinct from, the comparative method of linguistics. This led to a methodological crisis in Needham (1964), who described his personal experience of the thunder complex while traversing the jungles of Sarawak with formerly nomadic Austronesian-speaking Penan. At the end of a long day of negotiating jungle trails through the often damp underbrush, his traveling party stopped for the night and built a campfire preparatory to cooking and sleeping. As most Westerners would do in such a situation, Needham removed his boots and confronted the leeches that had attached themselves to his legs during the day's travels. However, as he struck a match to burn a blood-bloated leech off his leg, one of his Penan companions began to expostulate excitedly, telling him to stop lest this act offend *Balei Liwen*, the thunder god, and they all be struck by lightning and turned to stone. What followed struck Needham most forcibly, namely, a blood offering intended as appeasement of the deity of the storm.

The Penan are a Malayic foraging group that was formerly agricultural and that are close linguistic relatives of neighboring sedentary Kenyah groups (Blust 1974). Although he did not discuss the Philippine cases, Needham recognized the striking similarity of the Penan belief with the beliefs of various negrito groups in the Malay Peninsula that had been described by earlier researchers such as Ivens (1923, 1927, 1937) and Schebesta (1973), and he saw this similarity as presenting an ethnological conundrum: how could historically unrelated peoples (Malayic Austronesian-speaking Penan, and negrito Austroasiatic-speaking Semang) share a belief complex that appeared to be so highly distinctive in global perspective?

Needham's solution to this enigma, which appealed to Jungian "archetypes," contravened basic principles of inference in the analysis of culture trait distributions, as he proposed a universal psychological motivation for the thunder complex, even though its distribution type cannot exclude diffusion (Blust 1981: 285–288). In response, Blust (1981) advanced the following counterproposals: (1) the thunder complex was a set of beliefs shared by a Pleistocene negrito culture throughout

Southeast Asia; or (2) the early Austronesian speakers who reached the Philippines from Taiwan around 4 kya acquired key elements of this culture complex through contact with the aboriginal negrito population they encountered in Luzon and then carried these elements of culture with them as they spread southward and eastward. The latter claim implied that some version of the thunder complex might extend still farther to the east, but only among speakers of Austronesian languages. This prediction was later confirmed by Forth (1989), who reported a variation of it among the Nagé of central Flores, in eastern Indonesia, and further variants of the thunder complex were then traced by the writer to three Austronesian-speaking groups (Taupota, Tawara, Suau) in southeast New Guinea through the use of questionnaires sent to workers in the field (Blust 1991). It is noteworthy that the latter method of data collection extended to both Austronesian-speaking and Papuan-speaking groups in southeast New Guinea but that evidence for the thunder complex was found only in the former.

Because Cooper (1941: 31–32) was aware that the thunder complex is found among both negritos and Malayic Austronesian speakers, he considered the possibility that this belief complex had diffused from “Malaysians” to negritos. However, he rejected this idea since “so far as I can discover, distribution among the Malaysians appears sporadic and spotty and the taboos do not seem to take a premier rank in Malaysian culture, while they are consistently present, and seemingly of premier importance among the marginals” (31). Blust (1981) reached a similar conclusion, namely, that the thunder complex appears to be more highly elaborated, and of greater importance to various negrito populations in the Philippines and Malaya than it is to most Malayic speakers of Austronesian languages. Among the latter, the thunder complex in both the Philippines and Borneo is associated with reflexes of Proto-Malayo-Polynesian **baliw*, “metamorphose, transform,” on account of the belief in the metamorphic power of lightning. Language informants who explained the meaning of *baliw* to the writer during fieldwork in Sarawak in 1971 commented that collections of riverine boulders in some locations were said to be remnants of longhouses (the largest boulder) and its inhabitants (the smaller surrounding ones) that had been struck by lightning and turned to stone in punishment for dressing a monkey in a loincloth, talking to a frog, or the like. In a similar vein, Wolff (1972) notes that Cebuano Bisayan (central Philippines) *báliw* means “divine punishment, usually for incest, consisting of being struck by lightning and turned into stone.”

The question of directionality in the diffusion of the thunder complex is obviously of key importance in the argument to follow, but the probability that this culture trait diffused from Malayic Austronesian speakers to the negrito populations of both the Philippines and the Malay Peninsula is very small for several reasons. First, the thunder complex has never been reported in Taiwan, suggesting that it was acquired after the Austronesian settlement of the northern Philippines. Second, as already noted, the thunder complex has been reported by a wide range of writers, including Skeat and Blagden (1906), Ivens (1923, 1927, 1937), Schebesta (1973), Garvan (1963), and Carey (1976), as a focal cultural theme among both Philippine and Malayan negritos but is of only marginal significance among most or perhaps

all Malayic speakers of Austronesian languages. Third, as noted by Cooper (1941: 29), “The Andamanese must observe silence and do no noisy work after sundown and from sunset to sunrise, or when the cicada is singing, lest offense be given to the cicada and to Puluga [the supreme deity], and a storm come,” a belief that shows striking parallels to the Semai injunction that “quiet must be kept when the cicada sings in the morning and evening” and the “Aeta” belief that “there should be no shouting or loud noises at sunset” (Cooper 1941: 30).¹⁰ This and various other unusual taboos that are shared by Andamanese with Malayan or Philippine negritos, or both, strongly suggest a community of origin, and diffusion from Austronesian speakers is far less plausible.

Distinctive Commonalities: Language?

Reid (1994) has attempted to penetrate the mystery surrounding the pre-Austronesian linguistic history of Philippine negritos by searching for possible elements of vocabulary that are confined to “negrito languages.” Since the languages spoken by Philippine negritos belong to a number of different subgroups, features of language that they share exclusively cannot be attributed to a single subgroup ancestor. Rather, Reid’s argument assumes that vocabulary which is exclusively shared by negrito groups must represent a substratum—a shared linguistic heritage that was present prior to language shift. While this approach is exciting and potentially revealing, it is confined to the Philippines. Even so, given the apparently deep genetic divisions among Philippine negritos, it has the potential to reveal linguistic connections between groups that have not formed a unified language community for many millennia.

The presence of a common linguistic marker reflecting **baliw* in several languages reaching from the central Philippines to central Borneo is evidence that the thunder complex was found in the common ancestor of at least these groups and that **baliw* referred to punitive petrification as a punishment for offenses against the thunder god. However, this term has not been reported from any negrito group. We must then ask whether there is linguistic evidence for the thunder complex that is confined to negritos, regardless of present language family affiliation. In other words, was there a “negrito language family” prior to the intrusions of Asian agriculturalists into Southeast Asia, and if so, can Reid’s method of searching for substratum vocabulary in Philippine “negrito languages” be extended to a wider circle of negrito peoples? Given the present linguistic situation there would seem to be little hope of ever answering this question: Austronesian and Austroasiatic are different language families, and neither is genetically related to any of the languages of the Andaman islands (but see n. 6).

One potential piece of substratum vocabulary that Reid did not mention, and apparently was not aware of, is the name of the thunder god among Philippine negritos. Cooper (1941: 29), citing a manuscript that was written by John M. Garvan early in the twentieth century, but not published until 1963, notes that Garvan recorded the name of this deity among the Zambales Ayta of west-central

Luzon and the negritos of Camarines Norte in southeast Luzon—two groups that are widely separated and have never been in contact within historical times. According to Garvan (1963: 227): “In mid-western Zambales there was a certain *Kadai* together with his wife and family who had power over all other world beings. Thunder was supposed to be the sound of his voice when he became angry with humankind because of the commission of some such thing as murder, incest and so on.” A few lines later he adds: “In northern Camarines I found a certain *Kayai* set up as the chief of all supernal spirits. In appearance he was supposed to be fiery. Like all the inhabitants of the other world he had a family. . . . When displeased he was supposed to indicate his displeasure through the thunder. He had certain likes and dislikes such as for instance that quarry should be quartered in a certain way.”

Garvan was a European who reportedly “went native,” living with various Manobo and negrito groups in the Philippines for weeks at a time, and his testimony is therefore first-hand, and likely to be accurate (Hochegger 1963). Given the specific identity of the thunder god and the highly distinctive nature of the cultural complex in which this mythical being is embedded in both groups, the similarity of these names must be seriously considered as evidence of historical connection. Moreover, in view of the geographical separation of these foraging groups and the phonetic differences in the form of the names *Kadai* and *Kayai*, diffusion does not appear to offer a likely explanation for the agreement. It is naturally possible that this resemblance is a product of chance, but this explanation rapidly loses plausibility as the number of historically independent witnesses that are included in the comparison increases.

A few pages later Cooper (1941: 36) notes that the thunder god among various negrito groups in the Malay Peninsula is called *Kaiei*, *Kaei*, *Karei*, or *Kagei*, and the shock of *déjà vu* is magnified many times over, for two reasons. First, the plausibility of diffusion, either from a Malayic Austronesian source or between Philippine and Malayan negritos, is greatly reduced. Second, the time depth that must be assumed for a common name of the thunder god among Southeast Asian negritos is vastly extended. Because of the obvious importance of these names to inferences about a pan-negrito culture and shared linguistic history prior to massive language shift in both the Philippines and Malaya, it is necessary to ensure that Cooper’s statements are accurate. This seems clear from such sources as Schebesta (1973), who provides repeated references to *Karei*, *Kaiei*, or *Kaei* as the name of the thunder god among various Semang groups, and from Carey (1976: 100), who refers specifically to *Karei* among the Kensiu negritos of Perak, as the arbiter of social values: “Punishment by supernatural means for the breach of the strongest of the taboos, for example, that against incest, is violent death. The offenders are killed by lightning, crushed to death by a falling tree in the course of a thunderstorm, or torn to pieces by wild animals. . . . All these punishments are sent by *Karei*, the deity who watches over the conduct of men.”

Given the working assumptions of nearly all historical linguists it must be stressed that such an agreement is totally unexpected. The arbitrariness of the

linguistic sign and the great number of historically independent markers found in the lexicon ensure that language is perhaps the most reliable indicator of prehistoric connections between widely separated peoples (Saussure 1959; Greenberg 1957). However, as noted earlier, the upper limit that linguists are normally willing to accept for distinguishing similarity due to common origin from similarity due to chance is six to eight millennia (Renfrew 2000). By contrast, the last common language that could have contained a name for the thunder god that passed down to both Malayan and Philippine negritos probably would have been spoken in the Pleistocene, hence by a conservative estimate, at least 10–15 kya.

What are we to make of this startling challenge to widely shared assumptions about the durability of linguistic forms over time? Diffusion between the foragers of Luzon and the interior of the Malay Peninsula appears to be out of the question. The most comforting solution would be to treat the similarity in the names of the thunder god in many negrito groups as a striking example of chance convergence, and let it rest at that. But this is unlikely even for the names *Kadai* and *Kayai* within Luzon, and when variants like *Karei*, *Kagei*, or *Kayei* are added from the Semang the probability of common historical origin is strengthened, not weakened.

Questions that inevitably arise in considering claims of distant linguistic relationship also present themselves here: although the medial consonant is variable, and hence can be interpreted as showing sound change, it is almost inconceivable that *k would fail to lenite in any of these languages after many thousands of years. However, since all Philippine negritos now speak Austronesian languages and all Malayan negritos now speak Austroasiatic languages, we have no basis for comparison between them, and determining phonological history is therefore impossible.

Finally, some readers may consider the drawing of any historical inference from a single word a dangerous overinterpretation of the data (but see Blust 2009). I believe this point of view fails to come to grips with the details of the present case. All that really matters in proposing a common historical origin for Philippine and Malayan negritos based on the name of the thunder god is the viability of alternative interpretations. If the startling resemblance in the names of the thunder god among Philippine and Malayan negritos, or even in the names *Kadai* and *Kayai* among widely separated Philippine negritos, is due to chance, one is entitled to know why equally striking similarities in the names of mythological personages are not fairly common among linguistically unrelated groups in other parts of the world. By its very nature, chance convergence will operate in much the same way wherever it has an opportunity to express itself, and if the similarity of these names is a product of chance, there would be no occasion for surprise, since such cross-linguistic similarities among linguistically unrelated peoples would be encountered sufficiently often to blunt the edge of novelty. Moreover, as Cooper (1941) observed, these names are part of a belief complex that shows intricately detailed similarity among Malayan and Philippine negritos and is highly distinctive in cross-cultural perspective, further reducing the probability that the observed similarities are products of chance.

Conclusion

We are left with a strange scientific predicament: the thunder complex together with the name of the thunder god provides signs of an almost certain historical relationship between the negritos of the Philippines and those of the Malay Peninsula, yet this violates widely shared assumptions about the durability of linguistic forms over long intervals of time. Delfin et al. (2011: 228) state that “similarities in physical features and mode of subsistence of FEN [Philippine ethnic negrito] groups have been the main, if not the only (anthropological) support for the inference of common ancestry,” but it is clear that evidence from culture and language also provides support for this interpretation. Although this is most robustly attested through the thunder complex for the negritos of the Philippines and Malaya, it may also extend to the Andamanese. Alternatively, it is possible that the Andamanese had already become isolated from mainland negrito populations before the latter settled those parts of the Philippines that do not lie on the Sunda Shelf. But even if this is accepted, it appears likely that the negritos of all three regions once constituted a historical unity, with the Andamanese separating earliest and the Semang and Philippine negritos at a later period.¹¹

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Notes

1. However, compare Cebuano *ágtá* “1. supernatural man of dark complexion and extraordinary size, said to inhabit trees, cliffs, or empty houses. He is said to play practical jokes on people, kidnap them. He has a large cigar in his mouth, 2. name occasionally given to Negritos” (Wolff 1972). Here, a distant recollection of contact with negrito populations has been transformed into a somewhat grotesque folkloric caricature. In other parts of the Austronesian world, related terms mean “slave,” as in the Sama-Bajaw languages, which are intrusive in the southern Philippines, various languages of Sulawesi, and in many of the languages of eastern Indonesia. In still other areas they mean “person, human being,” while in Manggarai of western Flores (Lesser Sundas) *ata* is glossed, inter alia, as “orang” (person), “orang lain; orang asing; roh” (other person; foreigner, outsider; spirit); and in Erai of the eastern Lesser Sundas *ata* is given as “human being, in certain cases only: *ata mate* ‘corpse, ghost,’ and *ata laik eha* ‘stranger’” (Blust and Trussel 2010–).
2. Omoto et al. (1981: 105), investigating the concentration of carbolic anhydrase-1 in blood samples, found evidence for “different origins of the Aeta and the Mamanwa, although both are usually referred to as Negritos.” Using Y-chromosome data, Delfin et al. (2011) stressed the overall genetic diversity of both negrito and non-negrito populations in the Philippines and a lack of clear genetic markers distinguishing the two. The latter result is almost certainly due to gene flow, and although the authors of this study stated that given the geographical distribution of shared haplotypes gene flow is an unlikely explanation for this similarity, they did not consider the possibility that present population distributions may not correspond to those that obtained at the time gene flow between negrito and Malayic groups may have taken place.

3. There is, of course, no way to be certain that the inhabitants of the Tabon Caves of Palawan or, for that matter, the Niah Cave of northern Sarawak in Borneo, which has produced human remains from at least 40 kya, were negritos or ancestral negrito populations. However, in the absence of other candidates the attested geographical distribution of Philippine negritos, and the genetic distance between them, strongly suggests a very long continuity from the earliest human remains to the historical populations of indigenous foragers. Palawan (unlike other parts of the Philippines) and Borneo both rest on the now partly submerged Sunda Shelf and so were connected to mainland Southeast Asia during glacial maxima, allowing early humans to settle these islands when they were still part of the Asian continent. Negritos survive in the mountains of Palawan (the Batak) but have never been attested anywhere in Borneo.
4. In the earlier literature, the physical type of the Senoic peoples is sometimes described as “Veddoid.” However, there is no reason to believe that they are historically distinct from southern Mongoloid speakers of Mon-Khmer languages farther north in Cambodia, Laos, or Vietnam, and parsimony favors the view that their entry into the Malay Peninsula was part of the same southward migration of Mon-Khmer speakers that peopled the Nicobar Islands.
5. The earliest radiocarbon dates currently available, which are based on marine shells from midden deposits on South Andaman, are not much more than 2,000 years old (Cooper 2002). However, the chronology of human settlement in the Andamans is almost certain to change dramatically when more extensive archaeological surveying is carried out.
6. On the basis of linguistic comparison, Blevins (in press) adopts a similar position, arguing that the North Andaman languages show tantalizing affinities with the languages of sedentary southern Mongoloid populations of Austroasiatic speakers in mainland Southeast Asia and the Nicobar Islands, while the Ongan languages of the southern Andamans may be distantly related to Austronesian. Although the matter cannot be pursued here, the evidence presented to date for the second of these proposals is far from convincing, and although both proposals merit further study, the profound biological and cultural differences between the negritos of the Andamans and non-negrito speakers of Austroasiatic and Austronesian languages at the very least raise significant questions about the validity of the linguistic comparisons offered for this interpretation.
7. Nichols (1992: 25) holds that “the stock is the highest level reconstructible by the standard comparative method,” and she suggests that this may have a time depth of up to eight millennia. For various other ideas about the time-depth of major language families, see, for example, Bellwood (2000) and Holman et al. (2011).
8. Cooper’s spellings of this and other names of ethnic groups vary with his sources (e.g., Kenta Bogn, Kintak Bong, Djahai, Jehai). As much as possible, I have regularized all of these in agreement with current usage. Where he consistently writes “Eta” I have substituted “Ayta.”
9. *Elements* of the thunder complex, such as the theme of punitive petrification, are naturally found in other parts of the world, but as noted by Cooper (1941), the thunder complex as an integrated whole is unique to the negritos of the Philippines and Malaya, and to Malayic Austronesian speakers in insular Southeast Asia (with hints of related ideas in the Andamans).
10. Cooper uses “Aeta” as a general reference for all Philippine negritos, at least on the island of Luzon, but Jason Lobel (personal communication, 1 April 2013) has reminded me that the term “Ayta” is appropriate only for the negritos of the Zambales mountains, and Mt. Pinatubo, as well as lowland areas in the provinces of Zambales, Pampanga, Tarlac, and Bataan.
11. As noted in Blust (1981: 303), there is a second linguistic term connected with the thunder complex among negrito peoples that may indicate historical connection, although this is less direct than the name of the thunder god: “Both Evans (1923) and Schebesta (1973) recorded a word *terlain*, *telaidn* (with preploded final nasal), and the like, which generally refers to the offense which precipitates a punitive storm. . . . Dentan (1979: 23) reports a similar meaning for *telaid* among the Semai, observing that the word is sometimes shouted out (in confession) at the blood offering. Among the Behrang Senoi Evans (1923: 200) recorded this term as *ter-laik dokn* ‘punitive storm.’ It is worth noting that the Pinatubo negritos studied by Fox (1953:

338) believe that acts offensive to the thunder god (mockery of animals, etc.) are reported to him by a supernatural messenger, *tolan dian*. While the meaning of the Semang-Sakai terms is different from the phonetically similar term used by the Pinatubo negritos, these meanings can plausibly be regarded as related (offense, or warning shouted when offense is committed : messenger who reports offense).”

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