

FOREWORD

The Epistemological Event Horizon in Archaeology

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Archaeology, historical linguistics and human population genetics present three distinct windows on the past. Archaeology delves into material culture but, in the absence of decipherable written testimony, tells us little about the ethnolinguistic identity of the people behind the cultural assemblages that are discovered, dated and documented. The time depth accessible to historical linguistics is an order of magnitude shallower than the time depth accessible to either archaeology or genetics. Language families represent the maximal time depth accessible to historical linguists because the relatedness of languages belonging to a recognised linguistic phylum represents the limit of what can be demonstrated by the comparative method. This epistemological barrier represents the linguistic event horizon. Languages, genes and material culture are independent. Yet the probabilistic basis for possible correlations between the genetic markers and the language of a speech community lies in the fact that genes are invariably inherited by off spring from their parents, whereas languages are in most cases, but not invariably, inherited by off spring from either or both of their parents. The relationship between languages spoken by people and their material culture is even more fraught.

The challenge is, therefore, great when undertaking to correlate the different sets of evidence and reconstruct episodes of prehistory by

means of careful epistemologically defensible inferences and sound argumentation on the foundation of hard data and a correct understanding of the findings in diverse disciplines. Manjil Hazarika presents the archaeological case that the northeastern portion of the Indian subcontinent served both as a thoroughfare and the staging area for the peopling of East and Southeast Asia. The descendants of ancient migrants through this region ultimately settled lands as far away as New Zealand, Madagascar, Lapland and the Americas. His interpretative model of the ethnolinguistic data in light of the archaeology and the subsistence patterns which persist in the region to the present day lends support for both Michael Fortescue's Uralo-Siberian theory as well as for the East Asian linguistic hypothesis proposed by Stanley Starosta in Périgueux in 2001, of which I presented a tweaked version in Benares in 2012.

East Asian is conceived as an ancient linguistic phylum encompassing Kradai, Austronesian, Trans-Himalayan also known as Tibeto-Burman, Hmong-Mien and Austroasiatic. In this meticulous piece of work, Hazarika presents the arguments for understanding the archaeology and the palaeobotany of the region as preserved in the archaeological record as well as in the extant forms of vegeculture practised throughout the region in terms of the likely ethnolinguistic identities of the people behind these ancient cultures. Particularly, with reference to the domestication of Asian rice, perhaps *japonica*,

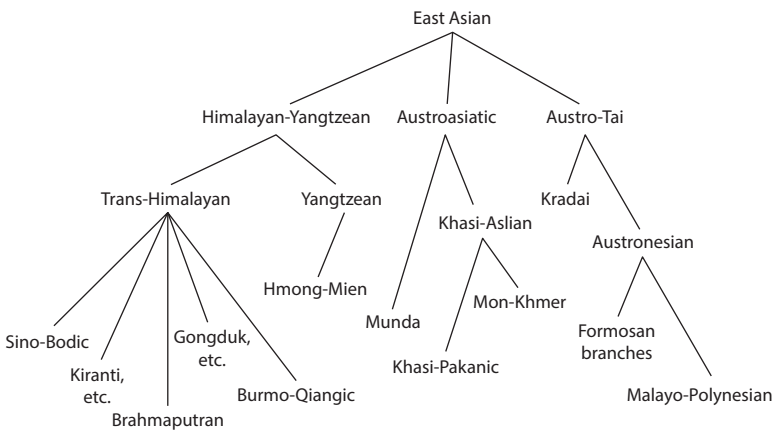


Figure P.1 The 2012 Benares Recension: A revised East Asian phylogeny

indica as well as *ghaiyā* rice, may have first been domesticated roughly in the region of northeastern India. Not only the population genetics of human populations, but also the population genetics of rice appear increasingly to support Hazarika's reconstruction and his central hypothesis. At the same time, his detailed documentary study of ancient subsistence patterns which persist to the present day throws down an epistemological gauntlet to archaeologists and palaeobotanists who, particularly with regard to Asian rice, continue to construe the absence of evidence as constituting evidence of absence.

Hazarika's work annihilates the argumentation of archaeologists who continue to disregard (*a*) areas where archaeological research has not been undertaken, (*b*) areas where archaeological remains, even if they could have been plentiful if the substrate were conducive to preserving them, would instead have been washed out to sea and obliterated by regular flooding, and, especially, (*c*) types of subsistence which are unlikely to have left archaeologically recoverable remains despite their paramount importance to the first domestication and cultivation of staple crops. Just as there is an epistemological event horizon in historical linguistics, Hazarika has outlined the contours of a very real but oftentimes ignored epistemological barrier which we might refer to as the archaeological event horizon.