



# Heterodoxy, orthodoxy and communities of practice: Stone bead and ornament production in Early Historic South India (c. 400 BCE–400 CE)



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## ABSTRACT

Archaeologists and ethnoarchaeologists have long studied variations in techniques and technology, in order to theorize how they relate to social, cultural, and ethnic groups. I argue that the South Indian producers of stone beads and ornaments should be considered as a single community of practice, not as distinct ethnic groups, as Francis (2002, 2004) suggested. The community of practice in question, that of lapidary workers, was not homogeneous or rigidly bounded, but rather, was a community with members distributed across many sites in the region, connected by their shared practices and knowledge, and a heterodox acceptance of diverse ways of engaging in that practice. We cannot know their ethnic affiliations, and I argue that does not matter. We can instead view them as a community of practice, engaged in the production of stone beads and ornaments, and in the production of more such producers. That they did not all share a single 'way of doing' should not be seen as an indicator of ethnic boundaries, but rather as a heterodox social space of shared, different, and overlapping practices of production.

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## 1. Introduction

*All archeological inference about past societies (including, potentially, the identification of social groups and boundaries) hinges critically upon an understanding of the relationship between material and non-material aspects of culture and society: left with only remnants of the former, we seek to use them to perceive and comprehend the latter* - Dietler and Herbich.

As noted by Dietler and Herbich (1998:233) above, the study of groups and boundaries has been a key aspect of archaeology for many decades. Despite a long history of criticisms, the study of ethnicity, identity, groups, and boundaries in archaeology persists, though in (hopefully) more nuanced and theoretically grounded ways (c.f. Dobres and Hoffman, 1994; Jones, 1997; Dietler and Herbich, 1998; Dobres, 2001; Wallaert, 2012; Wendrich, 2012). Following in this theoretical tradition, beads and ornaments, it would seem, are an ideal category of material culture for the pursuit of social groups and boundaries in the past. Peter Francis Jr.'s conception of South Indian stone bead production is, I argue, an overly rigid conception of the materialization of ethnicity through the techniques of bead production. His view equated material culture technique with ethnic group, which I suggest is problematic. Archaeologists have long referred to the adage that 'pots do not equal

people' to which I would add that techniques for making pots also do not necessarily find easy or simple correspondence with groups of people. Using a revised form of Bourdieusian practice theory, I aim to further nuance the theoretical discussion about how such categories of material culture, and the techniques used to produce them, can be understood to relate to human societies.

The concept of the ethnic group so pervades our everyday lives and academic discussions that the ontological reality of ethnicity is often taken for granted. This makes the cautions and arguments by Brubaker (2002); Brubaker and Cooper, 2000) especially apropos. In particular, Brubaker chides sociologists and anthropologists for their 'groupism', or "tendency to take discrete, sharply differentiated, internally homogeneous and externally bounded groups as basic constituents of social life, chief protagonists of social conflicts, and fundamental units of social analysis" (2002:163).

As archaeologists, starting with the concept of archaeological cultures, we are often equally guilty of reifying social groups and their boundedness. The concept of hybridity seemed like an exciting and promising way to try to think and talk about how fluid identities could be. However, I am inclined to agree with Silliman (2015) that theories of hybridity tend to result in reifying identities and groups in the "before" picture, in order to identify the ways in which these distinct group identities become hybrids, in the "after" picture, usually after contact or colonization. Further, applications of the hybridity concept mostly fail to sufficiently distinguish when hybridity ends, and when a hybrid becomes the new normal (Silliman, 2015: 7).

Instead of thinking of bounded groups and their hybridization, we should look for the flows and exchange of ideas without assuming any

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<sup>1</sup> This article is a substantially revised and expanded version of Chapter 3 of Kelly (2013).

rigid boundedness of cultural or ethnic groups or archaeological cultures. Knowledge, ideas, and practices are culturally embedded, but they are not necessarily restricted in their movement by the same social and cultural boundaries that restrict who can marry whom.

In this article I present an analysis of stone beads and ornaments from the sites of Kodumanal in Tamil Nadu, and Pattanam in Kerala, along with my re-analysis of published data by Peter Francis from Arikamedu (Francis, 1991, 2002, 2004). Using a framework based on practice and communities of practice, I decipher the diversity of techniques and technologies of lapidary production and the meaning of this diversity in terms of the social lives of producers. This framework (which I elaborate on below) is based in part on the early framing of practice (in particular, doxa, orthodoxy, and heterodoxy) laid out by Bourdieu (1977, 1990), as well as theories of socially embedded, 'situated' learning in communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998).

### 1.1. Background

Peter Francis Jr., whom we honor in this special issue, is an important figure in the history of the study of beads. In his detailed analysis of beads, he demonstrated how these objects could serve as an important source of data on trade and interaction across the Indian Ocean world. One important contribution of his research was to move beyond the outward appearance of beads, to focus on the techniques and technologies of bead production. Following in the tradition of the *techniques et cultures* school, he argued that different techniques and technologies of production could be associated with different cultural groups or communities.

In *Asia's Maritime Bead Trade* (Francis, 2002), as well as in his report on the assemblage from Arikamedu (Francis, 2004), he argued that there was evidence of a community of Western Indian stone bead manufacturers, who used a distinctive technique (grinding), specific materials (agate and chalcedony), and a specific order in the *chaîne opératoire* (drilling before polishing). He also identified a distinctly South Indian stone bead manufacturing community (which he called "Pandukal"), which he argued used a pecking technique, used quartz and related local raw materials, and a different *chaîne opératoire* (polishing before drilling). Francis treated these as completely separate and distinct groups. He (like many others) took for granted the 'groupness' of the so-called "Pandukal people" in the diverse cosmopolitan society of Arikamedu, which he described as comprised of "North Indians, urbanized Tamils, Pandukal people, [and] or (less-likely) non-Indians" (Francis, 2002:30).<sup>2</sup>

In this article I both build on and modify Francis' theories of the socially and culturally determined aspects of bead production in the South Indian context. In particular, both my and Francis' data show a complex picture of variations in technical practice, for which a significantly more nuanced interpretation of the relationship between society and technique must be developed. In doing so, I also present a critique of some applications of the *techniques et cultures* school, as they exemplify a particular type of attempt to identify distinct identities, ethnicities, or social groups through material culture and technology.

### 1.2. *Techniques et cultures*: what is a technique? what is a culture?

Brubaker (2002) argues against several aspects of the use and study of ethnicity and ethnic groups in social life. He argues that we as scholars take as fact the discourse of rigid boundedness that ethnic groups claim for themselves. He also argues for a diachronic view of the process of groupness: the process by which groups form, change, and establish the markers of identity and traditions (which may seem timeless, but never truly are). New groups can form, groups can

merge, and one group can colonize, occupy, or otherwise overrun another group. Who can be counted amongst the group, and who not, can shift even over relatively short time scales. Groupness is itself an active social process, and one that can sometimes, but not always be materialized and maintained through the production of distinctive styles of material culture (Barth, 1969; Wobst, 1977; Hodder, 1982). It is the overuse of rigid models of materialized ethnicity and groupness – in particular the study of techniques and styles of technology as the mode of materialization – that I suggest is problematic. There may be times and places in which groupness has taken distinctive shape and expression through material culture, but it should not be assumed that such correlations of techniques to cultures are always applicable.

The *techniques et cultures* school of thought is a subset of the body of ethnicity/identity literature and research in archaeology and ethnoarchaeology (and, to a lesser extent ethnography).<sup>3</sup> The most important contribution of this school is the use of *chaînes opératoires* as a useful tool for documentation, analysis, and presentation of data about technical practices. *Chaînes opératoires*, or operational sequences, are a means to record and present visually the order of operations in any task. This method allows the researcher to break down a process or procedure into many smaller constituent parts, and identify variations and change over time in the minutiae of production practice. It is most often applied to the production of various categories of material culture, but can also be used to represent the series of operations in a dance, ritual, or other habitual practice.

While I utilize *chaînes opératoires* as an analytical tool (and generally advocate its use to others), I must also critique some important limitations of the research done using the *techniques et cultures* framework. Here I cite as an example, arguments made by Pierre Lemonnier, whose work is an example of some of the best research done using the *techniques et cultures* school. Some might think it unfair to single Lemonnier out in this manner, but I want to make the point that even the best, most nuanced, detailed, thorough, and to some extent diachronic research, using the *techniques et cultures* framework still has significant shortcomings.

There are two ways in which ethnoarchaeologists sometimes make erroneous assumptions and conclusions about the relationship between *techniques* and *cultures*. First, many such studies fall into the trap identified by Brubaker (2002); Brubaker and Cooper, 2000) that is, taking for granted the groupness of the group they are studying. Lemonnier (1983, 1992, 2012) describes and documents the techniques and material culture of 'the Baruya', while taking for granted the groupness of 'the Baruya' culture (also described as a tribe), using the patterns in technique to reify the boundedness of Baruya culture. This creates a problem of circular reasoning.

The second major critique of the *techniques et cultures* approach is the limitation of inherently synchronic ethnoarchaeological studies (a limitation of most ethnographic work), that provide synchronic rather than diachronic views of techniques and practices. The synchronicity of this research makes the results incommensurate with archaeological data, which is by definition diachronic and palimpsestic in nature. Together, these limitations produce results that suggest that there is a way 'group A' does things, and a different way in which 'group B' does them. Lemonnier has been working with 'the Baruya' people in New Guinea for several decades, and as a result, his study is more diachronic than many. However, he still arrives at a conclusion about what 'the Baruya' 'do', outside of the confines of time. Even with the acknowledgment that what they do has changed, and probably will change, we arrive at an essentialized notion of both 'the Baruya' and their technical practices.

There remain some important and valuable aspects of the *techniques et cultures* school of thought. For me the primary one is the use of *chaînes opératoires* as an important analytical tool for documentation and analysis. However, while the recording and documentation of *chaînes opératoires* is a means of both collecting data and representing it, and as

<sup>2</sup> Francis gets the term "Pandukal" from Leshnik (1974), who coined the term to refer to the South Indian archaeological culture, specifically of the Iron Age (circa 1200–400 BCE), also sometimes called the "Megalithic Culture" or "Megalithic people".

<sup>3</sup> cf. Leroi-Gourhan (1943, 1945), Lechtman (1977); Lechtman and Steinburg (1979); Lemonnier (1983, 1992, 1993, 2012), Roux and Pelegrin (1989), Roux (2000), Van der Leeuw (1993), and Audouze (2002). There are many more that follow in this school; it is impossible to cite them all here.

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