

Unit 6: New Caledonia: Lapita Pottery

Frederic Angleveil and Gabriel Poedi

Facts	
Capital	Noumea
Main islands	Grande Terre, 3 Loyalty Islands and numerous reefs and atolls
Highest point	Mont Panie (1,628m)
Language	French and 28 Kanak languages
Government	French overseas country (POM)



Figure 6.1. Map of New Caledonia

This chapter is about the cultural site known as Lapita. It is located on the west coast of New Caledonia.

Around 1900, archaeologists discovered pottery in New Britain Island in Papua New Guinea. In 1917, similar pottery was also found in New Caledonia. It was named Lapita Pottery after the place it was found in New Caledonia. Pieces of this ancient pottery have been found on islands stretching from Papua New Guinea to Tonga, over a distance of 5,000 km. Several historians have tried to explain this wide dispersal. In 1979, Professor Roger Green showed that Lapita Pottery was part of a particular way of life – a part of a whole living culture. This culture was called Austronesian. It was a way of life which existed during the original settlement of the Pacific Islands.

At the end of this chapter you will be able to:

- Describe the discovery of Lapita pottery
- Describe the early history of Melanesia
- Understand how the people of the Lapita culture lived, and how Lapita culture spread across the Pacific
- Explain why cultural sites are important

How can you recognise Lapita pottery?

The Lapita pottery containers are large, open and **streamlined**. They were used for holding food, water, and eating and cooking. Some may have been for decoration or given as gifts. They sometimes have handles or feet. They are decorated with dots, or patterns in parallel lines. The edges and lips of containers are often decorated.

The name Lapita comes from an ancient place at Foue in the Kone region on the northwest coast of Grande Terre (See *Figure 6.2*). In the local Haveke language of northern Grande Terre, Lapita is spelt *Xapetaa*.

Most research on these ceramic pots has been in New Caledonia. This site was abandoned before Europeans came to New Caledonia. In 1956, the American archaeologist Edward W. Gifford carried out excavations. By using a method called Carbon 14 dating, Gifford showed the old age of this pottery. He recorded the place under the name 'Lapita' and gave it the catalogue number of 13.

Many archaeological digs had been done in this area. When permission was given to build shrimp farms on the site in 1995, an emergency dig took place. It uncovered two of the best examples of Lapita pottery so far. Excavations, which started again in 1994,

showed that early settlers had extended the shoreline into the sea by using dirt piled against the mangroves as a landfill.

The reclaimed land was used by residents in the Lapita period as a place of occupation. This extension of the shoreline was made in two stages. Before the landfill was complete, oysters had time to attach themselves to broken or unused pottery fragments. This luckily allows us to know that the Lapita people lived on this reclaimed land for quite a long time before it was submerged or covered over with soil. Several hundred years later other land higher than sea level was used by the people for gardens.

Questions and Activities

1. What is New Caledonia's largest island?
2. Where was Lapita Pottery first found in the Pacific?
3. How are Lapita pots decorated?
4. What is the name given to this early Lapita culture or way of life?

The discovery of two whole Lapita pots: A world "first"

In 1995, Christoph Sand, an archaeologist from the Territorial Museum in Noumea, found a pit eroded by tides (see *Figure 6.2.*). It contained pieces of Lapita pots. When they were put together they made two whole pots.

To fully explore the site, 54 square metres of land was excavated. Because a great tide would have totally covered the archaeological site four days after, it was decided to do the dig without the usual slow preparation of equipment and materials. The diggers quickly uncovered fragments. The second pots had already been broken when buried.

The decision to extend the site led to a second great discovery. The pottery in the second site had not been eroded by the sea. The importance of the discovery and the fragile state of the pottery meant it had to be restored by experts. The entire collection of pottery pieces was sent to the Australian Museum in Sydney. It was carefully cleaned of

salt and other rubbish and the pieces were glued together with a special paste. The softness of the pottery and movements in the earth meant that some pieces were so bent it was difficult to put them back together (*See Figure 6.6*).

This restoration has allowed the first study of a nearly complete Lapita pot. The conclusions of this study were that these two large pots, with a diameter of 60cm, were manufactured using three different methods. This is shown by the use of three types of clay. The potter had done this to create variations in the finished pot.

An exceptionally rich site: what material evidence was found at the Lapita sites?

Many fragments of polished adzes also have been found on the surface at the site (an adze is the head of a stone axe or tool. *See Figure 6.3* for details). The adzes found at the site have a particular shape, with a flat square section. It is typical of those used by the first settlers in Melanesia. Later the settlers used rocks discovered in nearby mountains. This site was already well known to archaeologists. They recognized jewellery and bracelet fragments in the rubble near the pots.

Several small pearls were also discovered. The digging also revealed a 6cm broken hook carved from shell. It is the most impressive shell hook discovered to this day in New Caledonia. Its shape is different to others in New Caledonia. However, because it is similar to the hooks at other Lapita sites in northern Melanesia, this hook provides a link between New Caledonia and the rest of Melanesia.

The link with northern Melanesia

So far, the most ancient dating of pottery in New Caledonia comes from a shelter under a rock at Goro, in the south of Grande Terre. Sixteen levels of human habitation have been identified. The most ancient dating of materials from Goro goes as far back as 3240BC (+ / - 220 years). If a timeline is made of settlement at all the Lapita sites in New Caledonia, it seems to show a clear movement over many years from the west coast to the south then across to the Loyalty Islands.

This movement of people (and pottery) is linked to the arrival of the first people in Santa Cruz, in the south of the Solomon Islands. They then migrated south to New Caledonia. From New Caledonia people then settled back north to Vanuatu. The choice of the west coast of New Caledonia as the place for a settlement is explained by the importance of the original coastal lagoon, which formed a barrier. This part of the coast of New Caledonia has been occupied on a permanent basis since around 1100BC.

The pottery pieces seem to indicate that Lapita pottery was produced over several hundred years. Indeed Lapita pottery throughout Melanesia has common features. It

has the same fine decoration, complex patterns, and varieties of shapes and size (see *Figure 6.4 and Figure 6.7*). The New Caledonian pottery is similar to that found in the north of Melanesia.

Questions and Activities

5. Where was the pottery sent to be cleaned and restored?
6. Why was it hard to put the broken pots back together?
7. What is an adze?
8. Why is the 6cm shell hook important?
9. How long have humans lived at Goro?

A Life on the Coast; What does the *archaeology* tell us about Lapita society?

These first Austronesian people preferred to settle at the mouth of a river. The remains of fish and shells show they used the resources at the edge of the shore and in the mangroves. The location of their villages near areas of fertile soil shows they also relied on gardening. Studies of Kanak language show that words for tubers and vegetables date back 3000 years. The diet of the first settlers also included bats and birds, as well as fruit and walnuts.

Villages, which were located on the beach, were made up of small groups of huts. Leadership, ranking and politics of the Lapita cultures are not known. We can guess that they had central control, leaders, decision makers and people with special status. Political power and status are always important.

The movement of Austronesians through Melanesia would not have been possible without limits on family size, the learning of navigation, and the organisation of expeditions.

Regular trading with other settlements was essential for these small groups of colonisers to survive. The trade networks between Lapita villages allowed them to arrange marriages and obtain help if natural disasters occurred. The movement of pottery between Grande Terre and the Loyalty Islands, for example, tells us about one of these trading networks. Raw materials, perishable products, tapa and mats were also exchanged.

Keeping in contact

Lapita pottery spans three centuries of history in New Caledonia. The Lapita culture that made the pots was a trading network. They also established permanent communities. The original settlers probably had common origins with people to the north and west.

Lapita culture was a bond between Austronesians scattered throughout the region we now call Melanesia. Similar decorations and shapes suggest there were a number of 'factories' or centres of production. Pottery makers in each new settlement were probably in communication with older pot making communities further back along the migration route.



Figure 6.2 Christoph Sand unearthing Lapita pottery

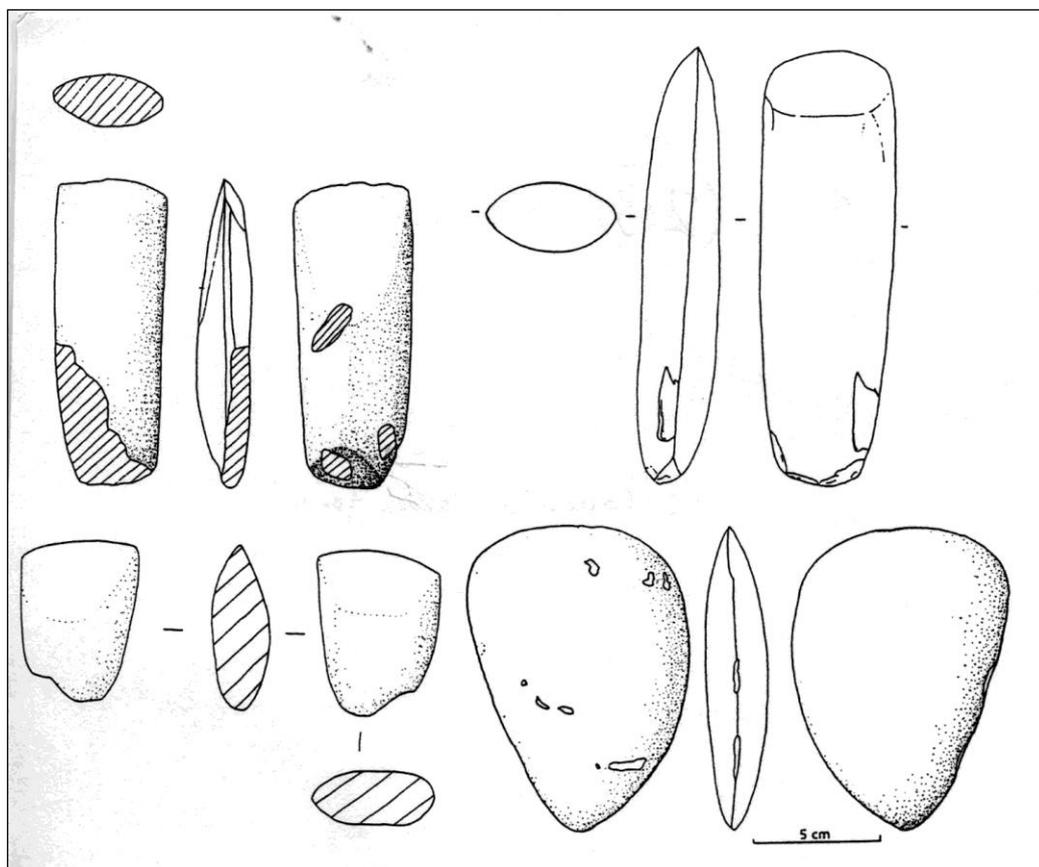


Figure 6.3 Adze Forms New Caledonia

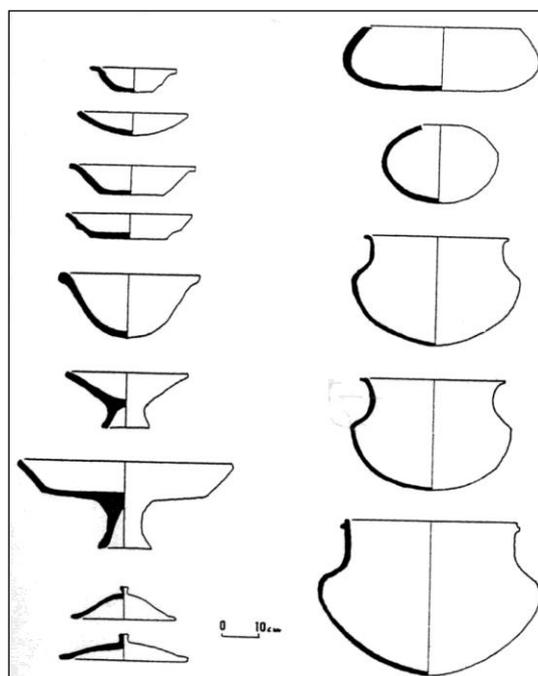


Figure 6.4. Lapita Pottery, traditional forms and shapes.



Figure 6.5 Lapita Pottery in New Zealand Museum



Figure 6.6. Fragment of Lapita pottery

The patterns in Lapita pottery can be linked to the concept of a “house”. The house was a home to people linked by family or clan. Lapita pottery was exchanged between three related groups. This reminded them of their common ancestors and genealogy.

As each new community became established, trade and ancestor links back home were gradually relaxed. The makers of the earlier highly decorated Lapita pottery did not disappear. They simply ceased to manufacture the special pots that linked them to their original ancestors and homelands. Lapita pottery with simple decorations was then manufactured for domestic use in the local village. They now made useful, domestic pots in their new home in southern Melanesia – in New Caledonia.

Questions and Activities

10. Why did people settle on the west coast of Grande Terra?
11. What did the first Austronesian settlers eat?
12. Why were trading networks important for New Caledonia’s first settlers?
13. Why did people stop making the highly decorated Lapita pots?

Lapita from a Kanak point of view: how do the Kanak people relate to the Lapita pottery?

The Kanak oral tradition doesn’t really mention Lapita. So why is the name used? Since anthropologists began studying Kanak culture, the word ‘Lapita’ has spread into common use. Our oral tradition only tells us of pottery, cooking pots and kitchen utensils. It doesn’t tell us about historical periods. This is because these objects came from a long time ago. Therefore, we don’t know exactly during which periods our ancestors used these objects.

Writing and speaking about “Lapita” is highly technical. It uses European logic and European ways of research. This method can tell exactly when the events spoken of in our oral history occurred, when our utensils existed and when they were used frequently.

In my early childhood, stories were told beneath the coffee trees of my native tribe. From time to time, the young people of my generation found shards of pots and lids. With these, we made toys,

car wheels and shields. None of us thought to keep them, because we weren't interested in them. Our culture is not concerned with objects. According to the teaching of our fathers, what is important is keeping alive the spirit of our ancestors.

We think that the value given to the shards is all in the European eye. We don't really understand why, but we now have to collect the shards. Europeans ask us to pick up pieces of broken pots so they can glue them back together before putting them away in their museums.

Bits of carved wood that we see as ordinary, and sometimes use as firewood, often become valuable. So we give the wood to people to give them pleasure. They often take the last remaining object. Schools have also taken part in this process of giving and receiving objects. Now we have to go to libraries to read books about Kanak culture that we didn't write, or to museums to observe and understand things that, a little time ago, were still part of us.

Questions and Activities

Write 2-3 sentences for each question

14. Which is more important to Kanaks; knowing about their ancestors
or collecting the pieces of Lapita pottery?

15. Why have the shards of pottery and pieces of carved wood become
more valuable?

16. Why is a pot in a museum no longer "part of us"?