

ABSTRACT

This study examined stylistic variation in South East Asian blowpipes as a case study for understanding factors responsible for variation in material culture generally. It was found that relevant factors include differences in environmental resources, cultural contact, available technology and the idiosyncrasies of individual manufacturers.

My research indicated there was considerable variation in blowpipe dimensions and stylistic characteristics. There were two main groups based on manufacturing materials and geographic range: bamboo blowpipes were from Peninsular Malaysia and carved wood blowpipes were from Borneo.

The individual manufacturer probably accounted for variation in some blowpipes. The manufacturer's influence was found in the selection of raw materials, dimensions of style features and choice of decoration pattern.

Without access to metal tools, specifically drills, manufacture of hardwood blowpipes would not have been possible. The introduction of metallurgy to the region ca 2000 BP, must also have been a major factor in determining the recent distribution of blowpipe types.

Today blowpipes are rarely made for hunting although recently a cottage industry has developed. These blowpipes are manufactured to a standardised form and lack the individual richness of the traditional weapons.

It is concluded that my small scale study has shown the potential of material culture studies as a source of information useful for interpreting aspects of change in the archaeological record. Similar studies involving larger sample sizes on blowpipes and other items of traditional material culture in South East Asia, combined with ethnoarchaeological fieldwork, are now required.