

Panel proposal for the 10th EuroSEAS conference, 10-13 September, 2019

(1) title: Incorporating the foreign: The social meaning of imported goods in eastern Indonesia and Timor-Leste

(2) conveners: Emilie Wellfelt, Stockholm University, Hans Hägerdal, Linnaeus University

(3) brief description of panel, max ½ page:

This panel draws attention to the role of material culture in social interactions and in historical practices in eastern Indonesia and Timor-Leste. We are specifically interested in imported objects and the ways particular categories of foreign objects become a ‘social currency’. To speak with Arjun Appadurai (1986), certain things have social life – but how can we understand this life of things? What things appeal enough to gain social life in the receiving communities? What are the results/consequences of the social lives of imported things?

Working in a European-Amerindian context, the historian Marcy Norton has discussed potential processes behind the transfer of objects across the Atlantic Ocean (Norton 2012). She argues that there might be universal elements that make a category of objects desirable to humans. There might also exist convergences between cultures which allows an object to be valued and attributed meaning in the same way in both contexts. Marshall Sahlins (1999) has labelled a third process ‘commodity indigenization’. In this case, the receiving culture assimilates objects on its own terms, providing meaning according to its pre-existing conceptual world. Another possibility is that meanings travel with objects: in this option the ‘giving’ culture’s use and practices pertaining to an object migrates with the object. In actuality, some or all these processes will coexist. The point is that things and meanings, may, but do not necessarily, travel together.

There is rich evidence in the literature for the importance of foreign material culture in eastern Indonesia and Timor-Leste, hence the focus on this region. The interdisciplinary panel brings together scholars from history, anthropology and human geography, presenting case studies that illuminate significant aspects of foreign objects and foreign approaches to natural resources.

References:

Appadurai, Arjun (ed), 1986, *The social life of things: commodities in cultural perspective*, Cambridge University Press.

Norton, Marcy, 2012, ‘Going to the birds: Animals as things and beings in early modernity’ in Paula Findlen (ed) *Early Modern Things: Objects and their histories, 1500-1800*, Routledge

Sahlins, Marshall, 1999, What is Anthropological Enlightenment? Some Lessons of the Twentieth Century’, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 28: i-xxiii

(4) single session (1 x 90 min.): 4 presenters;

James J. Fox, Australian National University

Hans Hägerdal, Linnaeus University

Lisa Palmer, The University of Melbourne

Emilie Wellfelt, Stockholm University