Kendi in the Cultural Context of Southeast Asia *A Commentary*

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Introduction

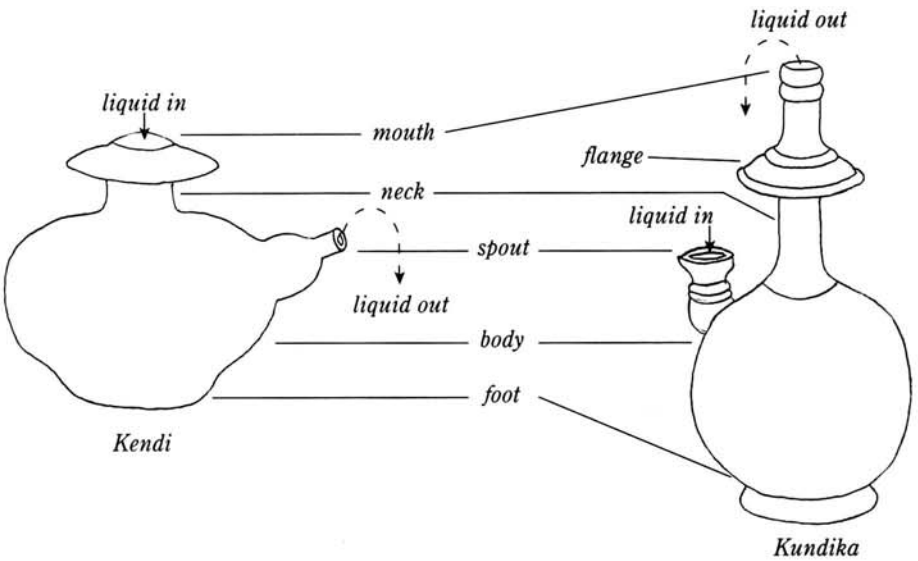
The kendi is a well-known form in the Southeast Asian repertoire of vessels, and it has played a significant role in the rituals and daily life of the region since ancient times. Made of precious metal such as gold, silver or bronze, the kendi and its precursor, the kundika, appear in sculpture and painting as an attribute often held in a hand of the Hindu gods Brahma and Shiva, Maitreya the

White earthenware kendis with a round body, wide neck and a conical spout. Ht. 10-15 cm. Found in East Java. Drawing after Sumarah Adhyatman, 'Kendi'.

Drawings by Pattanapong Varanyanon

future Buddha and the compassionate Avalokitesvara (in Mahayana Buddhism). It was used as a ritual container for holy water, collected from sacred rivers and blessed by the gods, in the coronation ceremony of a king, who cleansed himself with the water as a symbol of purification.

other end of the spectrum, the kendi made of unglazed fired clay has a long, continuous history of use as a humble, utilitarian vessel that was ideal for its cooling properties and for its portability, such as carrying water when travelling from village to village or for a longer journey by boat.



Kendi forms redrawn from examples in 'Introduction' by Eng-Lee Seok Chee in 'Kendis: A Guide to the Collections, National Museum Singapore'.

The renowned ceramic centres in Thailand, China, Japan and Vietnam produced ritualistic kendi made of fired clay and covered with an unctuous greenish glaze or painted with symbolic motifs. It was so revered in Indonesia and the Philippines that it served as furniture accompanying the dead to their grave. The kendi was treasured enough in these two countries to become an heirloom that was passed down through the generations. The decorated ceramic form of the kendi even attracted the European market, and was depicted in Dutch and German still life paintings, and copied in Delftware. At the

Despite its widespread popularity, versatility and longevity, the history of the kendi is fraught with unanswered questions, lacunae in knowledge of development and distribution, and the lack of a standardised definition of the form, which gives rise to misconceptions.

The kendi is defined in this article as a vessel with a round body, tall neck, mouth, a spout on the shoulder and a flat base. The two openings make the kendi suitable for both pouring and drinking liquids. It is distinguished from other pouring vessels

such as a jug/pitcher or flagon by the absence of a handle. The presence of a spout on the shoulder places it in the broader typology of a spouted vessel. To drink from a kendi, grasp the neck with one hand; place the other on the base for support if desired; hold the vessel away from the body, point the spout towards the mouth and slowly tilt it to start the water flowing. As the lips never touch the spout, the kendi is a hygienic and convenient communal drinking vessel.

Kundika: a prototype for the kendi

'Kendi' is a Malay word derived from the Sanskrit name 'kunda,' which came from 'kundika,' a particular form of Indian vessel used as a container for liquids in both Hindu and Buddhist ceremonies. It has an oval- or globular-shaped body, a tall neck with a small mouth separated by a circular flange and a cup-shaped spout (often with an attached lid) on the shoulder. Although both vessels have two openings in the same positions, they function in reverse of each other. Liquid is poured into the kundika through the spout and out by the mouth; whereas the kendi is filled from the mouth and the liquid is poured out the spout. Other differences between the kundika and the kendi, are the length of the neck and the shape of the spout. Nevertheless the linguistic link, stylistic similarities and common function support the kundika as a prototype for the kendi.

The kundika was probably transported from India to Southeast Asia in the first wave of contact between the two regions along with Buddhism and Hinduism. Although it is unknown how the transmission took place, a generally accepted hypothesis is that around 2,000 years ago sea routes between India and China were established for trade. Ships initially plied the coastline between the two destinations because of limited shipbuilding techniques and navigation skills and a lack of knowledge about the cycle of the monsoon. Stopovers at coastal ports were necessary to replenish supplies of water and fresh food and they often lasted six months waiting for the monsoon to change direction and bring favourable winds to continue the voyage. Such long lapses in port gave rise to intermarriages between foreign men and native women. Indian ideas infiltrated the local culture and gradually spread inland to the river valleys where early kingdoms of Southeast Asia - Srikshetra by the Irrawaddy; Dvaravati in the Chao Phraya basin; and Champa and Funan in the Mekong delta-formed.

Chinese blue and white porcelain kendi with a bulbous body, tall, narrow neck, flange around the mouth and a mammary spout. Decorated with peony scrolls on the body, a stylized floral motif and religious symbols on the spout, and a band of lotus leaves around the base of the neck and the lower body. 15th century. Ht 15 cm. Adam Malik Museum. Drawing after Sumarah Adhyatman, 'Kendi'.

Chinese white-glazed porcelain kundika with a tall, narrow neck and a cup-shaped spout with two rings. 10th century (Early Song Dynasty). Museum of Ding district, Hebei Province. Drawing after Sumarah Adhyatman, 'Kendi'.

Plate 1: Kundika, Borobudur temple, Indonesia, 9th century

Sawankhalok green-glazed stoneware kendi in the form of a hamsa (sacred goose). 14th-15th century. Ht. 15.2 cm. Drawing after Honda and Shimazu, 'The Beauty of Fired Clay'.

Although elaborately modelled metal and richly glazed ceramic kundika were products of the Tang Dynasty (618-906). A tenth century ink drawing from Cave 17 at Dunhuang, showing a kundika beside a meditating monk, testifies to the presence of the form in northwest China at that time, and suggests that it was a ritual vessel associated with Mahayana Buddhism.[i] Not surprisingly, the kundika was also produced in Japan and Korea where the same strain of Buddhism as in northwest China was practised. Within Southeast Asia, the kundika is far rarer but it does appear in scenes carved in relief on the walls of the ninth century Mahayana Buddhist temple of Borobudur in central Java. The Buddha sits cross-legged with a kundika on his left, and devotees present offerings on his right (Plate 1).

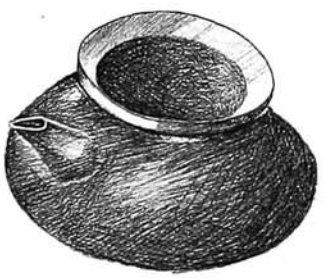
Little evidence exists to support either the wide or extended use of the kundika in Southeast Asia; by the end of the first millennium its successor, the kendi, was the preferred form of spouted vessel. The popularity of one type over the other is probably related to the different function of the vessels. The kundika was made of precious metal and used as a container for holy water in rituals and ceremonies associated with deities and royalty, whereas the function of the kendi as an unglazed drinking vessel had a broader use that extended to everyone, not just the elite. It could be produced economically from local materials, and thus met the daily needs of the people.

Problems of origin, influences and sources

Identifying the origin of and influences for the kendi is plagued by several problems. India has long been considered the source for the form, and China for the potting technology. One scholar, at least, has challenged the idea of the kendi having an Indian origin. Drawing on ethnographic, archaeological and religious data, she has questioned whether or not an etymological link is sufficient evidence to assume that the form itself originated in India.[ii] And the argument against China as a source for the potting technology is that earthenware kendi, reflecting skilful manipulation of the material and a clear understanding of the technology, was produced in Southeast Asia before the arrival of Chinese ware.

Primary sources are limited. Stone inscriptions refer to silver and gold kendi-like forms but since precious metal is easily melted and reused, material evidence of these sumptuous vessels has not survived. Also, translations of the Sanskrit inscriptions may have resulted in different interpretations of the forms. Southeast Asian textual sources are rare, which leaves only foreign accounts, and these are apt to be viewed from the perspective of the author's own culture, thus rendering a distorted account. Carvings on stone reliefs are another valuable source of information. The reopening in 1991 of the historical site of Angkor, in northwest Cambodia, a kingdom who's power extended over most of mainland Southeast Asia between the ninth and the mid-fifteenth centuries, allows firsthand study of the extensive carvings in relief on the temples. While accessibility to this corpus of visual references adds another dimension to our knowledge, it should be used judiciously because it is not possible to determine from the carvings the material of which the vessels were made. The majority of forms carved on the walls of the temples at Angkor appear to be made of metal based on stylistic features such as an angular profile, sharp

Chinese blue and white porcelain kendi with a bulbous body, tall, narrow neck, flange around the mouth and a mammary spout. Decorated with flying phoenix and cloud scrolls on the body, and a band of lotus leaves around the base of the neck and the lower body. 15th century. Ht. 18 cm. National Museum. Drawing after Sumarah Adhyatman, 'Kendi'



Red earthenware kendi with a bulbous body and round base, a short spout and a wide mouth with everted rim. Circa 13th-14th century. Ht. 9 cm. Found in East Java. Adam Malik Museum. Drawing after Sumarah Adhyatman, 'Kendi'.

Red earthenware kendi with a round body and a flat base, narrow neck, and a conical spout. Circa 14th-16th century. Ht. 14.1 cm. Found in East Java. Drawing after Sumarah Adhyatman, 'Kendi'.

Plate 2: Unglazed tubular spouts, surface finds from proposed kiln site near Bagan, Myanmar

White earthenware kendi with a round body, a tall, neck with a carved band and a mouth with a flange. 10th-14th century. Ht. 18.8 cm. Found in East Java. Jakarta Ceramic Museum. Drawing after Sumarah Adhyatman, 'Kendi'.

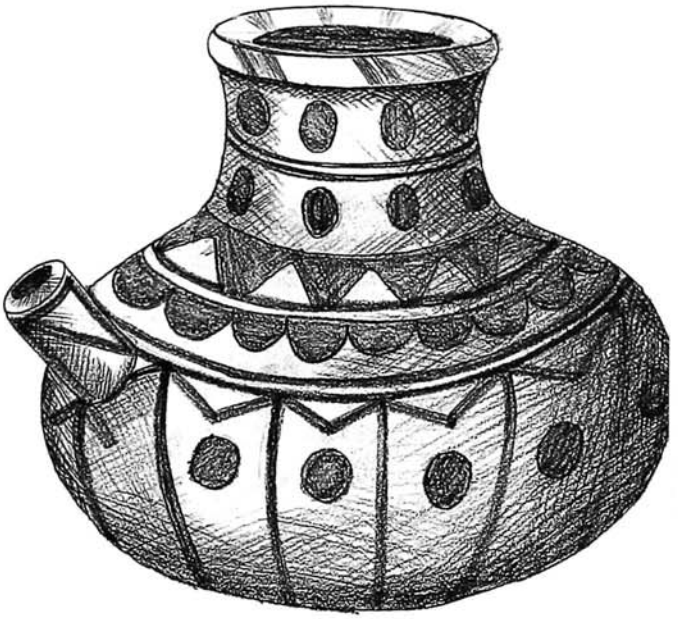
junctures at the neck, multiple flanges around the mouth rim and a predominance of ridges. However, similar Khmer kendi in glazed stoneware are also known. Additionally, the carvings are not clearly defined, either through intent, erosion, or perhaps a lack of completion, which makes exact identification of the form difficult to determine. Lastly, the wares themselves are a source of study, including shards from controlled excavations. Even surface finds such as hundreds of spouts found at a possible kiln site near Bagan in Myanmar (formerly Burma) can provide an indication of potting, clay, form, surface treatment, etc. (Plate 2).

Indigenous kendi

If not India or China, where does one look for sources of the kendi's origin and influence? An indigenous Thai origin, where kendi-like vessels of the prehistoric period and early Dvaravati culture (500-700) are known, has been suggested.[iii] Searching further, it is evident that the unglazed kendi was produced extensively at early sites in the Southeast Asian countries of Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam, yet little research has been conducted or attention given to this aspect of the total kendi production. Conversely, considerable research has been undertaken on the later glazed kendi that was made as trade ware, and which has been found in excavations of habitation and burial sites in Southeast Asia.

The results of this research have helped to establish a chronology and to determine a distribution pattern for the glazed kendi. When

our knowledge of the glazed form is juxtaposed with the lack of information on the unglazed kendi, the disparity between the two reveals a lacuna that needs addressing before we can achieve an understanding of the complete history of the kendi in Southeast Asia.



Modern earthenware kendi with a round body, wide neck, and a short, straight spout. All-over red-painted decoration comprising geometrical motifs (lines, triangles, circles) on a white background. Ht. 29 cm. From Ternate, Indonesia. Jakarta Ceramic Museum. Drawing after Sumarah Adhyatman, 'Kendi'.

Fortunately, efforts are underway with recent archaeological work and new discoveries at various sites. A cache of unglazed buff-coloured kendi found recently in Sisophon Province, northwestern Cambodia, near the border of Thailand and dated to around the sixth century by the National Museum of Phnom Penh, revealed a previously unknown form (Plate 3).[iv] Although the site has already been looted, a substantial number of kendi were retrieved and can at least provide stylistic comparisons.

Plate 3: revised caption] Buff earthenware kendi with a broad shoulder, a narrow foot, a wide mouth with a flange, and a straight spout with a flange. Circa 6th century. Ht. 23 cm. Sisophon, Cambodia.

Sawankhalok iron-decorated stoneware kendi with a cup-shaped mouth and a spout in the form of an elephant's head. 15th century. Ht. 17 cm. Drawing after Sumarah Adhyatman, 'Kendi'.

Archaeologists are re-investigating the ancient Indian-influenced site of Oc Eo in the Mekong Delta (today Vietnam) and the University of Hawaii/East-West Center and the Royal University of Fine Arts, Phnom Penh have conducted research at the site of Angkor Borei in Takeo Province, southern Cambodia since 1995. Both sites date from 100 to 550 and research shows that Oc Eo and Angkor Borei are linked by a network of canals.[v] Kendi with a globular body and fine textured paste that fired to a buff colour have been retrieved as surface finds at Angkor Borei and post-date the third century.[vi]

A rare, sophisticated form, the so-called 'white kendi', was produced in the Ban Kok Moh kilns at Santingpra in peninsular Thailand between the tenth and the fourteenth centuries. A fine-textured white clay from local quarries was used for the low-fired, unglazed earthenware. A round

Plate 4: Kendi, Bayon temple, Angkor, late 12th-early 13th century

body with a short foot and flat base supports a tall neck with a flange at the mouth and a long, tubular spout on the upper part of the body.[vii] The high aesthetic and technical standards of this type of kendi suggest it was made for a discriminating market, perhaps the Kingdom of Srivijaya in Indonesia. The discovery of a canal linking the Ban Kok Moh kiln site to the Gulf of Thailand has been discovered and suggests it may have been used to transport ceramics for export to Srivijaya. White kendis have been found in Central and East Java.

Satingphra-type unglazed kendi. Thai white ware with a bulbous body, a tall, narrow neck with tiers around the lip, a conical spout, and a pedestal foot. 10th-12th or perhaps 14th century.Ht. 19.7 cm. Drawing after Roxanna M. Brown, 'Guangdong, Ceramics from Butuan and other Philippine Sites,' an Exhibition Catalogue, the Oriental Ceramic Society of the Philippines and Oxford University Press.

Vietnamese blue and with porcelain kendi with a bulbous body, a short neck with a flange around the mouth and a broad spout that tapers to narrow opening. Decorated with flying phoenix and cloud scrolls on the body and spout, and a band of lotus leaves around the base of the neck and the flange at the mouth. Circa 15th century. Ht. 17 cm. Drawing from example in a private collection.

Excavations at Trowulan in Indonesia, which was probably a major centre of the powerful Majapahit Kingdom (1293-c. 1520) that ruled in East Java, Madura and Bali in Indonesia, confirm a locally produced kendi with thin walls, a round body with a smooth burnished surface, a neck sufficient for grasping and a narrow and a conical spout that ends in a pointed tip. Another kendi excavated at the same site is the forerunner to the so-called mammary spout of the sixteenth century that draws its inspiration from the female breast and symbolises fertility.

At approximately the same time as the white ware of southern Thailand was in production, the kendi form appeared in the repertoire of vessels produced under the direction of the Khmer Empire, which by the eleventh century had extended its territorial boundaries over much of northeastern Thailand. Stone reliefs at the Bayon, the state temple built by Jayavarman VII, in the late twelfth to early thirteenth century, depict a kendi that swells from a narrow base on a low pedestal to a broad shoulder with a slightly curved neck placed upright on the shoulder; a tiered flange on the mouth and lid. The position, held close to the body, signifies a gesture of respect used for presenting objects to kings and gives insight to the function of the Khmer kendi as a ceremonial vessel (Plate 4).

Imported trade wares

Along with the indigenous production of the kendi in southern Thailand and the glazed Khmer form, the export of Chinese ceramics to Southeast Asia was increasing rapidly, and reached a steady level in the tenth century. Between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries, Chinese glazed stoneware produced in Guangdong and Fujian provinces was exported in quantities to ports of the Nanhai ('the South Seas'), the Chinese name of what is known today as Southeast Asia. Although the Chinese kendi has been found in abundance in the Philippines and Indonesia, it is uncommon in China. It seems likely, therefore, that it was made in China mainly for commercial purposes and specifically as an export item for the Southeast Asian market.

Plate 5: Sawankhalok iron-decorated stoneware kendi with a bulbous body, tall neck, flange around the mouth, and a mammary spout. Decorated on the body and spout with floral and geometic motifs. Circa 15th Century. Ht. 22 cm. Private collection.

As the Majapahit Kingdom was flourishing, China underwent a decline in the southern maritime trade to Southeast Asia due to the move of the capital back to the north by the powerful Mongols (Yuan Dynasty, 1280-1368). The Thais and the Vietnamese quickly recognised the vacuum created in the market, and they began to export fine-quality glazed stoneware to markets that were formerly dominated by China. A typical kendi of the Si Satchanalai (Sawankhalok) kilns in north central Thailand has a graceful, sloping profile, a tall, cylindrical neck with a flange near the mouth and a mammary spout on the shoulder (Plate 5). Quantities of Thai and Vietnamese ceramics have been excavated from fifteenth and sixteenth century burial sites in the Philippines and Indonesia.

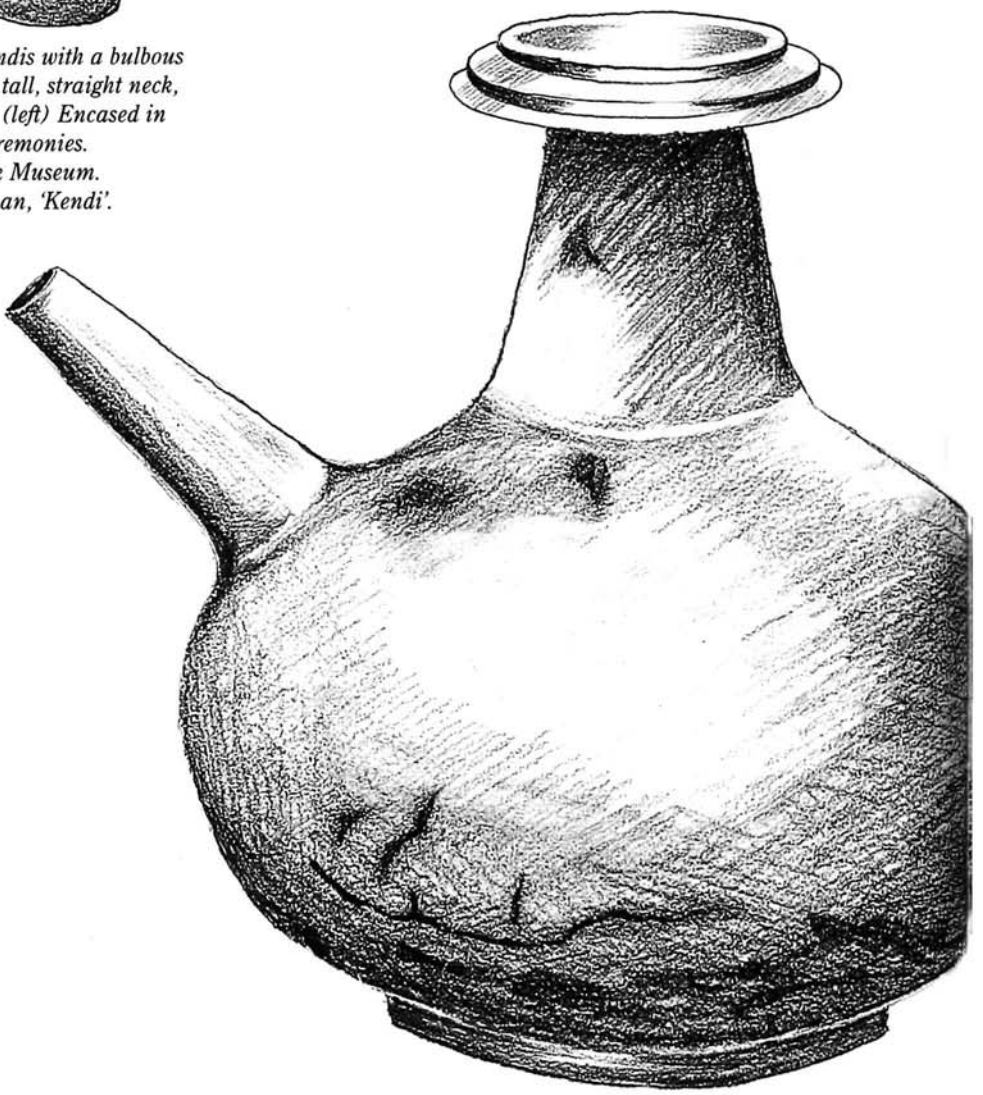
Between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, production of the glazed kendi for the Southeast Asian market continued in China and Japan. The form of this phase of production is characterised by exaggerated appendages on the neck, such as a lip turned back like a collar, animal-shaped bodies and a so-called onion-shaped spout. Many kendi of this period made in China were fitted in Indonesia on the mouth and the opening of the spout with carved silver or brass mountings for decoration.

The Metal Connection

Comparative examples of metal and ceramic kendi leave little doubt of a close relationship between the two materials. Each probably influenced the other at various times, dictated by the availability of material and the

Plate 6: Kendi, Bayon temple, Angkor, late 12th-early 13th century

Modern black burnished earthenware kendis with a bulbous body that tapers to a narrow, flat base, a tall, straight neck, a conical spout and a lid. Ht. 25.5 cm. (left) Encased in rattan and used for wedding ceremonies. From Central Java. Adam Malik Museum. Drawing after Sumarah Adhyatman, 'Kendi'.



Red, white-slipped earthenware kendi with a bulbous body, a tall neck and a mouth with tiers, and a long, conical spout. Ht. 17.5 cm. Found in East Java. Drawing after Sumarah Adhyatman, 'Kendi'.

economics of production. A limited supply of metal, for example, may have caused production to turn to ceramic as an alternative. Reliefs on temple walls testify to the use of the kendi in temple rituals and therefore suggest its importance as a vessel, regardless of the material (Plate 6). Precious metals were highly revered in the ancient societies of Southeast Asia. Craftsmen of the region mastered the manipulation of the material, producing kendi of exceptionally beautiful form (Plate 7). John Guy presents a convincing argument for a continual reliance of ceramic on metal, and cites the kundika-kendi as a model example of the cross over between the two materials.[viii]

Plate 7: Kendi, Angkor, bronze, c. 11th century. Ht. 13 cm. Private Collection.

Conclusion

In conclusion, an examination of the research on the kundika/kendi type of spouted vessel in a Southeast Asian context reveals an imbalance. More work is needed to determine the history of the unglazed kendi. There is growing evidence to support a Southeast Asian origin of the form, although the region's debt to at least some input from India and China must be acknowledged. Even if scholars may not agree on the origin of the kendi, it seems likely that the metal form of the kundika was transferred from India to Southeast Asia in the beginning centuries of this era along with the transmission of Buddhism and Hinduism, and was used as a ritual vessel until the end of the first millennium when the kendi became the dominant form of spouted vessel in the region. The concentration of research on the kendi as trade ware has overshadowed the important development of the unglazed version of the form in Southeast Asia in the first millennium, and thus presented an unbalanced view of the total evolution. The possibility that local centres producing a low-fired, earthenware spouted vessel may already have been operating by the time the kundika reached Southeast Asia needs further examination. It seems clear, however, that from early times two streams of development for the spouted vessel in Southeast Asia were taking place and with continuing research on the early sites we move closer to an understanding of the total evolution of the kendi in a Southeast Asian cultural context. ■

Photographs by Dawn Rooney
Drawings by Pattanapong Varanyanon

An art historian specialising in Southeast Asia, Dawn Rooney is a Fellow of the Royal Geographical and the Royal Asiatic Societies in London and an advisor to the Society for Asian Art at the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco. Dr. Rooney, who has lived in Thailand for the past three decades and is the author of eight books on the culture of the region, including a definitive guide to Angkor. She was awarded a Scholar in Residence at The Rockefeller Foundation Study Center in Bellagio, Italy in 2002 where she wrote her latest book, *Thai Buddhas* (Bangkok, River Books, 2003). Dr. Rooney's current project is to preserve her research material on Southeast Asia through the creation of an online digital archive, generously funded by the James H.W. Thompson Foundation.

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[i] Fisher (1993) Thames and Hudson, plt 95, p.103.

[ii] Nugrahani (March 1996) 'Exploring Indonesian kendi', *TAASA Review,* vol.5, no.1, pp.6-7).

[iii] Bhumadhon (May 1996).

[iv] Personal conversations with the Director, October 2001.

[v] Higham (2002) River Books, p.236.

[vi] Stark (April 2002), p.79.

[vii] For examples of Satingpra-type ware, see *Guangdong Ceramics,* plt 150-4.

[viii] Guy (1992)