

The World as a Route: Migration, Contact, and the Concepts That Travel With People

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An exploratory essay on the coastal peopling of the Americas, the contested question of trans-Pacific contact, and the concepts carried by oral traditions across these routes

This essay grew out of an open-ended exploration: not of a single motif or a single culture, but of the world as a whole — the routes along which human beings, and the concepts they carried, moved across the earth. It draws two threads together. The first is the physical route: the well-evidenced coastal migration that carried people from southern Africa to the southern tip of South America over some ninety thousand years, and the separate, far more contested question of whether a later, direct crossing of the Pacific Ocean also occurred. The second is conceptual: specific forms of knowledge — communication with animals, and the acquisition of knowledge through an altered state of consciousness, often used for healing — that recur across traditions positioned along and beyond that route, from the San of southern Africa to the Dogon of Mali to the Yoruba-derived religions of the Americas. The aim is not to weigh these traditions against a Western scientific standard of proof, but to lay the routes and the concepts side by side, so that the reader can see where they run parallel, where they diverge, and where further inquiry might go.

I. The Whole Before the Part

Comparative mythology conventionally divides the world into macro-regions, each associated with characteristic classes of motif: trickster cycles and earth-diver creation stories in North America; five-suns cosmogonies and calendrical cycles in Mesoamerica; transformation myths along the Amazon and maritime cultures such as the Moche on the Andean coast; the Indo-European branching that dominates the textual record of Europe; the deep time-depth and high motif diversity of Africa; Siberia as the hinge between the Old World and the New; the Mesopotamian and Vedic source layers of West and South Asia; the Oceanic migration routes and Jōmon-related coastal cultures of Southeast Asia; the Dreamtime traditions of Australia, among the oldest continuously maintained oral traditions on earth; and the island chains of the Pacific, which functioned historically as dispersal corridors rather than barriers. Taken together, these macro-regions form less a set of isolated boxes than a single connected surface — the surface this essay tries to walk across.

II. The Coastal Corridor: From Southern Africa to Peru

The idea that people could have moved, over tens of thousands of years, from southern Africa all the way to Peru is not speculative in the way it might first sound. It corresponds to a real and well-supported model in archaeology: the coastal migration theory, most influentially formulated as the ‘kelp highway hypothesis’ by Jon Erlandson and colleagues in 2007. The premise is straightforward: productive coastal and marine ecosystems — first the shellfish beds of the southern African coast, later the kelp forests that ring the North Pacific from Japan to Baja California and reappear along the Andean coast — offered a continuous, resource-rich corridor that required minimal cultural adaptation at each step. A population did not need to invent a new way of life to keep moving; the coast itself provided continuity.

The outline of the route, as currently understood, runs as follows. Anatomically modern humans emerge in East Africa by roughly 200,000 years ago, with early evidence of systematic marine resource use at southern African sites such as Pinnacle Point. Around 70,000 to 60,000 years ago, a southern dispersal crosses the Bab-el-Mandeb strait into Arabia and follows the coast toward South Asia. By 65,000 to 50,000 years ago this coastal population has reached, and crossed into, Australia — itself requiring some form of seafaring. A separate, more inland branch moves north into Central Asia and Europe by around 45,000 years ago. Coastal populations reach the Korean peninsula and Japan by roughly 35,000 years ago — the region in which Jōmon culture later develops. Between about 20,000 and 15,000 years ago, people cross the Beringia land bridge, likely combining an overland route with movement along the newly exposed, island-rich southern coast of Beringia. From there the coastal route runs south with striking speed: Monte Verde in southern Chile, dated to roughly 14,500 years ago, is among the earliest confirmed sites in the Americas, and lies far south of Peru, indicating how quickly this final leg was covered. Early coastal occupation in Peru itself, in the region later home to the Moche and Nazca cultures, falls within the same 14,000-to-12,000-year window.

It is worth being precise about what this model does and does not claim. It describes one continuous corridor followed by foot and by

boat, around the rim of the Pacific, not a direct crossing of open ocean. The distance from southern Africa to Peru was covered by contact between adjacent, coastally-linked populations over an immense span of time — not by any single group making the entire journey. This distinction matters for the second question this essay takes up.

III. A Separate and Contested Question: Direct Trans-Pacific Contact

The Jōmon–Valdivia hypothesis is not part of the coastal migration model above; it concerns a much later and narrower claim. In 1956, Ecuadorian archaeologist Emilio Estrada identified pottery at the Valdivia site on the Ecuadorian coast that appeared, on typological grounds, to be both older than expected and stylistically similar to Japanese Jōmon ceramics. Working with Estrada, Betty Meggers and Clifford Evans proposed in a 1962 *Science* article, and elaborated in a 1965 Smithsonian monograph, that a group of Jōmon fishermen had been carried across the North Pacific by ocean currents and had introduced pottery-making to a pre-ceramic population at Valdivia, sometime between roughly 3000 and 2500 BCE.

The hypothesis provoked immediate and lasting debate. Critics have questioned whether Jōmon-era watercraft could plausibly have survived an open-ocean crossing, whether the ceramic similarities are close enough to require contact rather than independent invention, and whether older, simpler pre-Valdivia pottery found elsewhere in Ecuador and Colombia undermines the premise that Valdivia ware was too sophisticated to have arisen locally. The consensus among archaeologists today leans against direct contact as Meggers, Evans, and Estrada described it, while the broader question of intermittent trans-Pacific contact after the initial peopling of the Americas remains an active, unresolved area of research rather than a closed case in either direction.

The reason to keep this question sharply separated from the coastal migration story in Section II is not to dismiss it, but to be precise about what kind of claim it is: not a well-evidenced population movement, but a specific, contested hypothesis about a single class of

artifact, argued from stylistic resemblance. Anyone pursuing the Jōmon–Valdivia question — as a supplement to, not a substitute for, the coastal migration model — is entering a live debate, not endorsing or rejecting an established fact.

IV. Concepts Carried by Tradition

Distinct from the question of physical movement is the question of which concepts recur across traditions positioned along, or connected to, these routes. Three are considered here, each as reported within its own tradition rather than measured against an external standard of verification: communication with animals; the acquisition of knowledge through an altered state of consciousness, frequently applied to healing; and the specific historical fusion of West African and South American religious systems produced by the Atlantic slave trade.

Animal communication and animal knowledge

Among the San of southern Africa, the healing dance recorded in detail by Richard Katz in *Boiling Energy* (1982) centers on *n/um*, a potency that healers activate through dance until it produces *kia*, an altered state used to draw sickness out of community members. San rock art, extensively studied by David Lewis-Williams, repeatedly depicts therianthropes — figures that are part human, part animal — which Lewis-Williams and Thomas Dowson interpret, on the basis of both ethnographic testimony and a neuropsychological model of trance imagery, as visual records of this transformation between human and animal awareness during trance. Among the Dogon of Mali, the cosmology recorded by Marcel Griaule in his conversations with the elder Ogotemmêli assigns animals — the pale fox prominent among them — a role as bearers and transmitters of cosmological knowledge, integrated into a wider system of initiation. These are, in each case, claims the traditions make about themselves; ethnography has documented that they are made and how they are practiced, which is a different matter from adjudicating their truth.

Soul-journey and healing knowledge

The idea that a practitioner can leave ordinary awareness and, in that state, obtain knowledge unavailable to waking consciousness — often knowledge used for healing — is documented across an unusually wide geographic range: in San trance-healing, in Dogon initiatory practice, and, under the specific term ‘shamanism’, throughout Siberian and circumpolar traditions, from which the word itself derives. Mircea

Eliade's *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* (1951) remains the most cited synthesis of this pattern across Siberia, Central and North Asia, and the Americas, describing the soul-journey as the structural core of the shamanic role wherever it appears. Comparable techniques are reported among healers in North and South America, including in the Andean traditions that lie at the southern end of the coastal corridor discussed in Section II. Whether this recurrence reflects a single ancient inheritance carried along the migration route, independent invention under similar conditions, or some combination of the two is an open question — but the recurrence itself, across cultures with no plausible recent contact, is well documented by ethnographers working independently of one another.

The Yoruba/Vodou fusion: a different route

The relationship between West African and South American concepts of spirit, healing, and initiation is not a matter of ancient or contested contact at all, but of a specific, well-documented historical process. From the sixteenth through the nineteenth centuries, the Atlantic slave trade forcibly transported Yoruba, Fon, and other West African peoples to the Caribbean and South America. There, their Orisha and Vodun systems fused with the Catholicism imposed on them — in part as active concealment, since enslaved practitioners paired individual Orisha with Catholic saints in order to continue their own devotions under colonial surveillance — producing Haitian Vodou, Cuban Santería, and Brazilian Candomblé as distinct, living syncretic traditions. This is not a proposed route awaiting confirmation, in the way the Jōmon–Valdivia hypothesis is; it is settled history, carried in liturgy, language, and practice that can be traced directly back to named West African peoples and named historical events.

V. Toward Actualization

The purpose of tracing these routes and concepts side by side is not archival. The stated aim of this line of research is to bring older, orally carried knowledge — from the San and the Dogon in particular — into contact with concepts developed more recently, such as dual space, in order to actualize it: not to subordinate the older knowledge to the newer framework, nor the reverse, but to place them in relation to one another and see what becomes visible. That work remains open and belongs to a further stage of this inquiry; what this essay offers is the groundwork — the routes and the concepts laid out clearly enough to be built on.

Annotated Bibliography

The following sources allow a reader to pursue each thread raised above in greater depth. They are grouped by section.

[The coastal migration route](#)

Erlandson, J. M., Graham, M. H., Bourque, B. J., Corbett, D., Estes, J. A., & Steneck, R. S. (2007). The Kelp Highway Hypothesis: Marine Ecology, the Coastal Migration Theory, and the Peopling of the Americas. *Journal of Island and Coastal Archaeology*, 2(2), 161–174. The founding statement of the kelp-highway model discussed in Section II; a collaboration between archaeologists and marine ecologists explaining why kelp-forest ecosystems could have supported a continuous coastal migration route around the North Pacific rim.

[The Jōmon–Valdivia hypothesis and its critics](#)

Estrada, E., Meggers, B. J., & Evans, C. (1962). Possible Transpacific Contact on the Coast of Ecuador. *Science*, 135(3501), 371–372. The original short paper proposing the Jōmon–Valdivia connection on the basis of ceramic similarity, dating the resemblance to roughly 3000–2000 BCE.

Meggers, B. J., Evans, C., & Estrada, E. (1965). Early Formative Period of Coastal Ecuador: The Valdivia and Machalilla Phases. *Smithsonian Contributions to Anthropology*, vol. 1. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution. The full monograph elaborating the hypothesis and the Valdivia ceramic typology on which it rests; the primary source for anyone wanting to assess the original evidence directly.

EBSCO Research Starters. Anthropologists Claim Pottery Shows Transpacific pre-Columbian Contact. A concise, accessible overview of the debate, including the main objections raised by skeptical archaeologists and the discovery of older, simpler pre-Valdivia pottery that complicates the diffusionist argument.

[Animal communication, trance, and soul-journey](#)

Katz, R. (1982). *Boiling Energy: Community Healing among the Kalahari !Kung*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. An eyewitness ethnography of the San healing dance, *n/um*, and the *kia* trance state, based on extended fieldwork among the Ju|'hoansi; the primary modern source on San trance healing referenced in Section IV.

Lewis-Williams, J. D., & Dowson, T. A. (1988). The Signs of All Times: Entoptic Phenomena in Upper Palaeolithic Art. *Current Anthropology*, 29(2), 201–245. Sets out the neuropsychological model linking San trance experience to the therianthrope imagery of southern African rock art, later extended to Palaeolithic European cave art.

Griaule, M. (1965). Conversations with Ogotemmêli: An Introduction to Dogon Religious Ideas. London: Oxford University Press for the International African Institute. (Originally published 1948 as Dieu d'eau.) Griaule's record of thirty-three conversations with the Dogon elder Ogotemmêli, the foundational — though later contested — source for Dogon cosmology, including the role of animals as bearers of knowledge.

Eliade, M. (1964). Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy (W. R. Trask, Trans.). Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. (Originally published 1951 as Le Chamanisme.) The classic comparative synthesis of soul-journey and trance-healing practices across Siberian, Central Asian, and American traditions; still the standard reference point for the pattern discussed in Section IV, though its claim of a near-universal shamanic core has since been debated by specialists.

[The Yoruba/Vodou fusion](#)

Zeidler, J. A. (2008). The Ecuadorian Formative. In H. Silverman & W. Isbell (Eds.), Handbook of South American Archaeology. New York: Springer. Standard archaeological reference for the Valdivia culture itself, useful for grounding the Ecuadorian side of Section III independent of the transpacific debate.

Various authors, summarized in: 'Afro-Caribbean religions: Voodoo, Santería, and Obeah' and related overviews of Haitian Vodou, Cuban Santería, and Brazilian Candomblé. Accessible overviews of how Yoruba and Fon Orisha and Vodun systems, carried by enslaved West Africans, fused with imposed Catholicism to produce these distinct living traditions — useful starting points before moving to specialist historical and ethnographic literature on each tradition individually.

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