

Creation Myths and Linguistic Evidence of Migrations

Use the information below to learn about the kinds of evidence scholars use to trace the paths of early human migrations: creation myths and linguistic evidence.

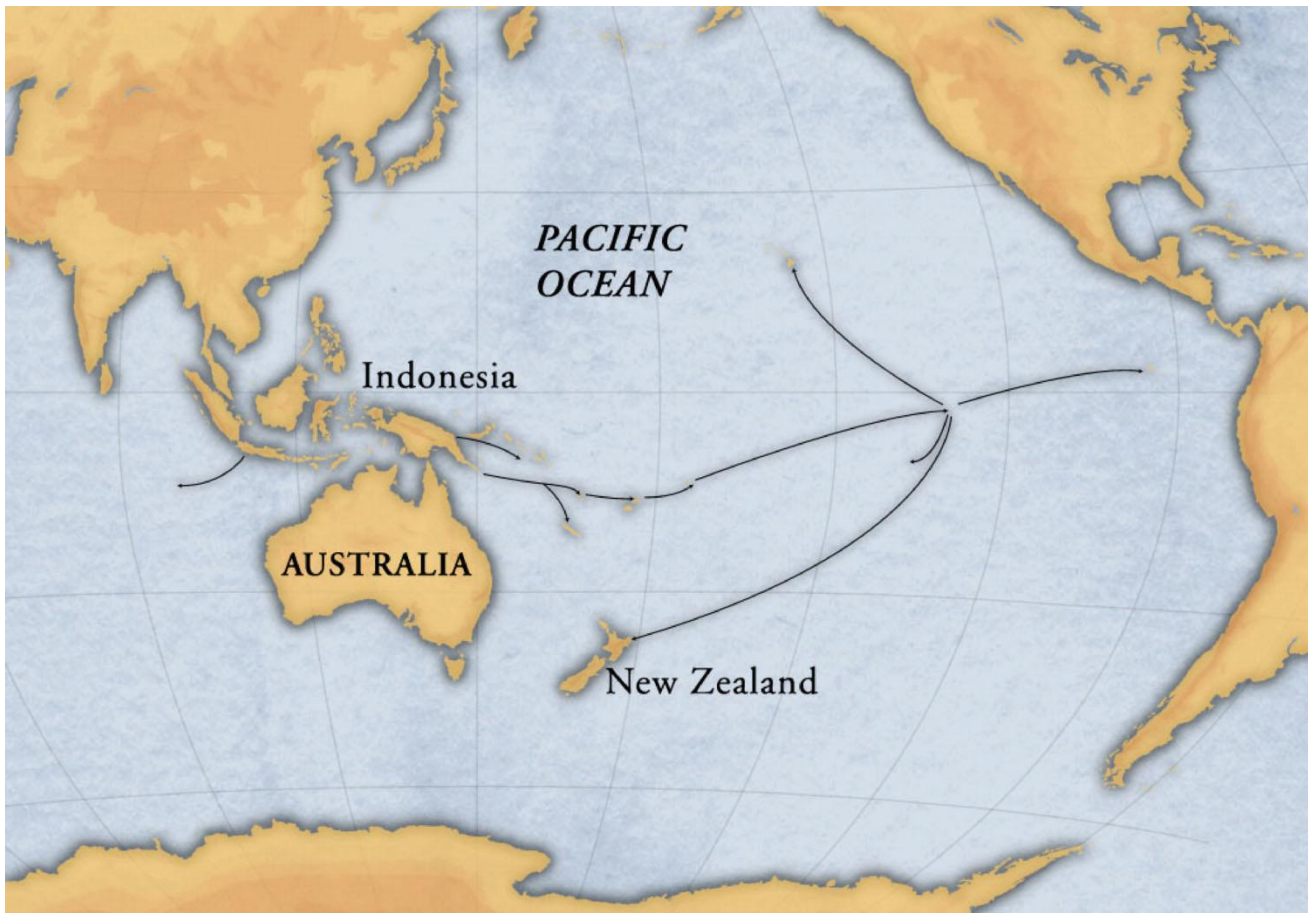
Discuss the issues historians must consider when they use creation myths as evidence of the migrations of humans.

Legends of the aboriginal Kakadu people describe the “Dreamtime,” the era when their world was created. The Kakadu creation story begins with the Great Earth Mother Imberombera arriving in Australia by canoe, her womb swelling with human children. Coming ashore, she creates a world of hills and creeks, plants and animals for her children to inhabit.

In each place she stops on her wanderings, Imberombera, the great mother, bears children and instructs them in language and culture. Meanwhile, her giant consort Wuraka, although equally fertile, seems fatigued by his potency and longs only to rest and join the sun in the east. Wuraka came from the west, walking through the sea. His feet were on the bottom, but he was so tall that his head was well above the surface of the water. He landed at a place called Allukaladi, between what are now known as Mts. Bidwell and Roe, both of which he made. His first sleeping place, after coming out on to land, was at Woralia. He then continued to Umurunguk and so to Adjerakuk and Aruwurkwain, at each of which he slept one night. Imberombera also walked through the sea. She landed at a place now known as Malay Bay, the native name being Wungaran. She met Kuraka at Arakwurkwain. Imberombera said to him, ‘Where are you going?’ He said, ‘I am going straight through the bush to the rising sun.’ The first language they spoke was Iwaidja, that is, the language of the people of Port Essington. Wuraka carried his penis, or *par/a*, over his shoulder. He said to Imberombera, *ngainma par/a nungeroboama*, my penis is too heavy; *ngainma wi/a/u jirongadda*, my camp is close by; *ngeinyimma ngoro breiku/*, you go a long way. (Barbara Sproul, *Primal Myths* [Harper and Row, 1979]: 323–25.)

Discuss how historians might use linguistic evidence to trace the paths of humans in preliterate eras. For tens of thousands of years, while other languages around the world emerged, evolved, and disappeared, aboriginal languages developed in relative isolation from the rest of humanity. These languages no longer have any clear relationship to modern languages in Africa or Asia—suggesting their antiquity in the global story of human languages. At the end of the first millennium CE, the Austronesian language family, which includes Polynesian languages, was the most widespread in the world. During a span of at least three millennia, these languages had been spread across a vast geographic area: from Indonesia to the Philippines, from Madagascar to Easter Island. Speakers of these languages could have migrated across the Pacific in only one way: by boat. The boat-making and navigation skills required for these journeys demonstrated the sophistication of these early mariners. Historians use the linguists’ analysis to trace the spread of the speakers of the Austronesian language family.

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Tracing migrations questions:

How do you think that historians determined approximately when Malays migrated to Madagascar? Would you find linguistic evidence more reliable than folk tales about the migration across the Indian Ocean? Why or why not?