CAMBRIDGE ASIAN ARCHAEOLOGY SEMINAR

5 June 2017, 4:00-5:00pm
McDonald Institute Seminar Room
Downing Site, Cambridge

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From stone (bowls) to iron without ceramics; questioning narratives of Neolithisation via the ethnohistory of Northeast India

Globally speaking, the characteristic narrative of Neolithisation involves ceramics, a necessary adjunct to cooking and associated with increased sedentism, storage and transportation. However, the situation in Northeast India suggests the inverse; that the transition to agriculture can occur without ceramics. Northeast India now represents an increasingly anomalous zone; there is not a single stratified archaeological excavation with trustworthy dates and in particular, no archaeobotanical data. As a consequence, we are dependent on undated finds and comparative ethnography.

The research reported here is based on fieldwork in Arunachal Pradesh, 2011-2017. Although rice is a common staple today, there is every reason to think that this is a recent superimposition and that sago extraction and other types of vegeculture were predominant until the last few centuries. Strikingly many groups seem to have no tradition of ceramics; cooking is now done in iron cauldrons. However, stone cooking pots are kept as heritage items and fragments of these have recently been found in archaeological deposits. Much remains unknown; were the stone bowls imported from Tibet or locally made? Why did ceramics not spread up from Assam? When did the transition to iron occur? We know there was no local smelting. The broad argument of the paper is that characteristic narratives of the Neolithic can be seriously misleading and we may need to rethink our understanding of the possible pathways to agriculture and sedentism.

Wine and nibbles will be provided after the talk

All welcome!