

The Kendi: The Long Journey of a Little Water Vessel

By Margaret White

Kendis are almost universal and among the most intriguing vessels to have survived to this day in parts of India, Indonesia, Malaysia and the Middle East. It has been suggested that Arab traders brought them from the Middle East to India and to Southeast Asia in the first century CE. These *kendis* appear to be a variation of the *kundika*, an ancient holy vessel holding water from India's sacred rivers. (Rooney, 2003:5-16) notes that the *kundika* appears in early sculpture and painting as an attribute, often held in the hands of the Hindu gods Brahma and Shiva, Maitreya, the future Buddha and the compassionate Avalokiteshvara. They are primarily used as water pots.

The term *kendi* is a Malay word believed to be derived from the name *kunda*, although the actual origin of the *kendi* remains a mystery. Throughout the Malay Archipelago, some of the local designations for *kendi* are: *gendi* in Java, *gandi* in Macassar, *kondi* in Aceh, *kandi* among the Toba Bataks and *kundi* in Bali (Eng – Lee:1).

According to (Rinaldi, 1989:174) the shape of the *kendi* varied considerably over the centuries, but all have a more or less rounded body, a straight neck and a spout set at an angle on the shoulder with no handle. The *kendi* seems to have been designed specifically to be held at a certain height so water could be poured into the mouth. The bottle is filled from the neck, held by the neck and water drunk from the spout. The advantage of the utilitarian *kendi* was that it could be carried from place to place when water was not freely available and shared without the risk of contamination as lips do not touch the vessel.



Blue and white Vietnamese kendi with large mammillary format, 16th century



Buddha figure at Borobudur with a vessel that may represent a transitional type of ware between the *kundika* and the *kendi*

Many materials were used to produce *kendis*, including earthenware, stoneware, porcelain, brass, pewter, copper and silver alloy, gold and bronze. Even in vessels employing the same material, notable differentiation in size, shape and decoration can be observed. For example, spouts may be straight,

bulbous or flanged, long and thin or zoomorphic. The bulbous or mammiform-spouted *kendi* emblematic of fertility, was probably the most common shape produced in many countries, including Indonesia, Thailand and Vietnam. *Kendis* with thin, curved spouts appeared in China as early as the 14th century, but by the 17th had lengthened considerably to resemble the spouts on Middle Eastern ewers (Rinaldi:177).



Celadon kendi the form of a Hamsa, the mythical Thai bird. Sawankhalok, around the 16th century

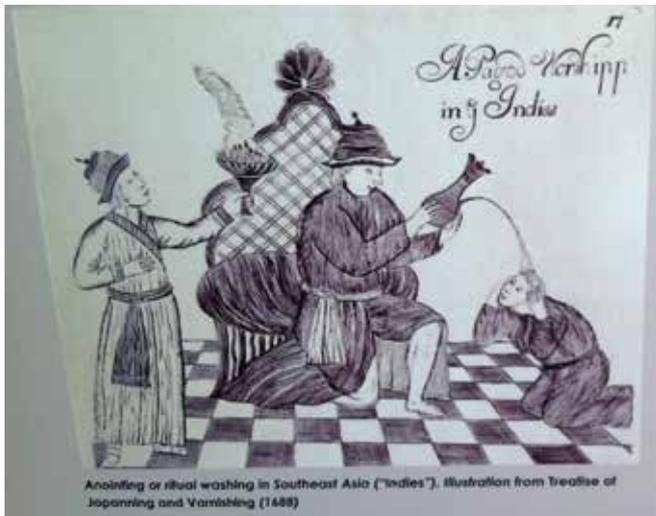
Zoomorphic shapes included elephants, toads and more rarely, bulls and cows.



Chinese blue and white kendi for the export market, 18th century

Kendis formed part of the enormous trade in ceramics that flowed through the Asian region from China, Japan, Thailand and Vietnam between the Song and Yuan periods (10th-14th centuries) to the late Qing (early 20th). The Chinese, noting a Southeast Asian preference for *kendis*, produced them exclusively for this market. They were glazed and more durable than the porous, locally produced earthenware variety as well as being attractively patterned. Between the 12th and 14th centuries, Guangdong and Fujian provinces exported vast quantities of glazed stoneware, including *kendis*, to the ports of the *Nanhai*.

When a gap occurred in ceramic production in China (1280-1368), Thailand and Vietnam quickly attempted to fill demand. More recently, evidence of *kendi* production and where they were traded has been discovered in the cargo of shipwrecks off Southeast Asian coasts as well as on land



Anointing or ritual washing in Southeast Asia (Indies). Illustration from Treatise of Japanning and Varnishing (1688)

sites. In southern Thailand, many varieties of elaborately shaped *kendis* were produced. For example, *kendis* from the Thai Sawankhalok kilns (1350-1512) exhibit mammiform spouts, slightly splayed feet, underglazed black decorations and vegetal motifs. Others from Sukhothai (14th century) have square carved foot rings and a thick slip under a clear glaze. In Vietnam, (14th - 15th century), the majority of Vietnamese *kendis* were porcellanous stoneware, decorated in underglaze blue with flat, unglazed bases and mammiform spouts. Most resemble Chinese *kendis* in form and repertoire of decoration. After the 15th century, Chinese *kendis* resemble Vietnamese shapes and decorative patterns, indicating further cultural interchange.

Around 1650, with the decline of the Ming dynasty and the transition to the Qing dynasty, Japanese potters began exporting Hizen ware (including Arita, Yoshida and Imari) to Southeast Asia in both Dutch and Chinese ships. *Kendis* also found their way to the Middle East and Europe. In Europe, *kendis* were known as *gorgolets* (from the Portuguese word *gorgoletta*) derived from the gurgling sound they made when water was poured through the narrow spout. European silver mounts were sometimes ingeniously added to a *kendi* to convert it to a ewer. Around this time, the Arabs and Persians used large numbers of imported *kendis* as *nargileh* or water pipes. Glazes varied from green, black and white to blue and white underglaze to polychrome enamels. Perhaps the most common decorative style known at this time was referred to as *Kraak* ware. It was the most popular export type of porcelain made for the West in the kilns of Jingdezhen. Blue and white *Kraak* ware was decorated in panelled cartouches (Kerr, 2011:22).

However, after China re-established its dominance of the overseas porcelain market in the second half of the 17th century, production continued into the 19th ceasing before the end of the Qing period. The competition could not match the technical superiority or the more efficient production methods of the Chinese. *Kendis* from this period were characterised by exaggerated appendages on the neck, such as the lip turned back like a collar, animal-shaped bodies and an 'onion-shaped' spout. *Famille rose* enamelled decoration was in demand in the Middle East and was sometimes customised with Islamic inscriptions.

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Kendis also functioned as ritual and life-cycle objects in many Southeast Asian locations, from Indonesia eastwards to the Philippines. Several examples illustrate their continued use. One is the Thai custom of pouring of water from a *kendi* over the hands of the recipient of a gift. In Singapore today, the Gujerati Indians still use brass *kendis* (*lota*) on special occasions when a hostess passes around a *kendi* for washing the right hand before and after a meal. In Malayalee families, people entering a house wash their feet with water from a *kendi*. In Java, the bride washes the groom's feet with water from a *kendi* during their wedding ceremony. One Javanese belief relates to the ability of a *kendi* to determine the gender of an unborn child – the *kendi* being likened to a womb. A mother-to-be was washed seven times with water from a holy spring and the emptied *kendi* was then smashed on the floor. If the spout remained unbroken, the baby would be a boy.

In Indonesia and the Philippines these vessels have been revered and preserved as tribal heirlooms; either as display objects, as grave goods or even as holders of money or flowers. One of the qualities most valued in archipelagic Indonesia was the degree of resonance possessed by particular ceramic *kendis*. The clear, ringing sound was linked to the power to summon the spirits.

The religious role of the *kendi* in Southeast Asia is less clearly defined than that of the *kundika*. Porcelain *kendis* of the 16th and 17th centuries may be inscribed with stylised quotations from the *Qur'an*, and though they were probably commissioned by the sultans in Aceh for ceremonial purposes; how they were used is not clear. Today, the use of holy water is still a major trait of Balinese Hindus as well as Buddhists throughout Asia and it is likely the *kendi* shape is one type of object used for such functions. (Miksic, 2009:97).

Currently, archaeologists continue to discover new sites, both on land and in maritime zones, while also reinvestigating ancient Southeast Asian sites in an attempt to further unravel the origins of the *kendi* to provide a more rounded picture of its history.



Terracotta kendi with added silver spout. Java probably Majapahit

Margaret White has a long-term interest in the complexity of cultural interactions upon trade ceramics and has been the convenor of the Ceramic Study Group of The Asian Arts Society of Australia (TAASA) for the past 5 years.

Images from the collection of John Yu