

ARCHE Seminar Series

Australian Research Centre for Human Evolution

“Neolithic Mortuary Practices, Cultural Identity, and Health at the Kolana Cemetery, Alor Island, Indonesia (3500-2500BP)”

Presented by Pratiwi Yuwono & Stuart Hawkins

Abstract

As the easternmost studied Neolithic cemetery in Wallacea, the Kolana cemetery on Alor Island, Indonesia, provides key insights into mortuary practices, cultural identity, and health during the Austronesian expansion (3500–2500 BP). Excavations in 2023 revealed 20 individuals buried in raised beach deposits in varied styles, including primary inhumations and multiple-jar burials, with shell jewellery, pottery, and faunal offerings. Children comprised nearly half the population, unlike adult-biased colonising groups elsewhere, suggesting high birthrates and either local adaptation or community stress. Age-graded adornments reflect localized traditions within wider Austronesian culture.



Intentional dental modifications were identified on four individuals exhibiting a symmetrical 2I²C¹ tooth ablation pattern, extending the known geographic range of this practice further east than previously documented. One adult female displayed both ablation and betel staining, indicating multiple embodied markers of social identity. These practices occurred in both sexes.

Skeletal evidence from a young child (2.5–3.5 years) shows developmental disturbances consistent with congenital treponemal infection, likely worsened by malnutrition and poor hygiene. This suggests infectious diseases circulated in Island Southeast Asia earlier than previously thought, predating European arrival.

Faunal and botanical data indicate a mixed maritime foraging and horticultural economy. Mortuary practices and artefacts (jade, pottery, shell jewellery) demonstrate Kolana’s connection to extensive Late Holocene maritime networks from Taiwan to Vanuatu and highlight interactions between Austronesian migrants and indigenous Wallacean communities.

Date/Time: Friday, 29 May 2026 @ 2:30pm
Room: N29_0.03 Brisbane South (Nathan)
MS Teams: Meeting ID: 463 035 738 943 9 | Passcode: VL6ih2eH