

*The Austronesians: Historical and Comparative Perspectives*. Edited by Peter Bellwood, James J. Fox, and Darrell Tryon. Canberra: Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, Australian National University, 1995. Pp. viii, 359.

Our knowledge and understanding of the origins, development, and characteristics of the Austronesian-speaking populations of Southeast Asia and Oceania have increased immeasurably through the work of the Comparative Austronesian Project based at the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, Australian National University. The driving force behind this ambitious and wide-ranging programme is James Fox; two other distinguished Austronesian-watchers, Peter Bellwood and Darrell Tryon, have joined with Fox to produce this present high-quality edited text comprising seventeen chapters written by mainly Australian-based specialists. The chapters are divided into two main sections — the first concentrating on origins and dispersals, and the second on interactions and transformations.

The value of the volume lies, as its title suggests, in its adoption of comparative and historical perspectives and in bringing together contributions from a variety of disciplines. There are papers by archaeologists, linguists, prehistorians, biologists, and historians, but, in my view the major orientations and preoccupations of the book are presented in four particular papers: Tryon considers the Proto-Austronesian language and the problems of categorizing the major Austronesian linguistic sub-groups; Bellwood rehearses the themes and issues in the origins and southward expansion of Austronesians from a Taiwanese homeland from about 5,000 years ago, and ultimately from earlier centres of agricultural development and expansion in subtropical southern China; Fox discusses the idioms and metaphors used by Austronesians to define their ideas of origin and subsequent social differentiation; and Clifford Sather examines the context and processes of Austronesian socio-cultural and economic diversification into non-agricultural activities.

More specific chapters, which also make an important contribution to the field, are those by K. Alexander Adelaar on Borneo linguistic sub-

groups and non-Borneo relations, Matthew Spriggs on the Lapita culture and Austronesian colonization of the southwest Pacific, S.W. Serjeantson and X. Gao on genetic markers and differentiation between Austronesian and non-Austronesian populations in Oceania, Tom Dutton on language contact and transformation in Melanesia, and Nicholas Thomas on forms of exchange in Oceania.

More straightforward and familiar commentaries on Austronesian transformations and responses under the influence of the world religions — Hinduism and Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity — and which focus on the themes of cultural continuity and change, are presented in the chapters by S. Supomo, Anthony Reid, and Aram Yengoyan.

The importance of encouraging research on Austronesian history, society, and culture in part stems from the sheer size and diversity of this ethnolinguistic group. The Austronesian language family comprises some 1,000 to 1,200 languages (depending on one's definition of a language), 800 diverse societies, and about 270 million speakers spread from Madagascar in the west to Easter island in the east, and covering island Southeast Asia and parts of the mainland, Micronesia, Polynesia, and areas of Melanesia. It is therefore not surprising that scholars should be exercised by this remarkable distribution, the success of the Austronesian colonization, the reasons underlying it, the features which unite and divide these populations, and the relations between Austronesians and their non-Austronesian neighbours.

There are several matters which are emphasized throughout the volume, some of which for me lay to rest certain previously disputed issues in Austronesian studies. First, it is clear that the Austronesian languages were spread mainly by “colonizing speakers” (p. 3); in other words, they were not primarily a product of exchange and convergence amongst static communities, nor were most Austronesian cultural particulars the product of local developments; instead they were intrusive elements in Southeast Asia and Melanesia. Secondly, although linguistic evidence for the Austronesian diaspora points to sources on the Chinese mainland and, in particular, in Taiwan, and subsequent movements southwards, and then westwards and eastwards, these population movements and the spread of culture and language were complex; various contribu-

tors refer to exchange, borrowing, and intermarriage with non-Austronesians, to small- and large-scale movements, to local innovations and selective adaptations, to processes of leap-frogging, channelling, and counter-streaming, and to “lateral expansion” and “apical demotion”. Thirdly, the linguistic evidence for Austronesian dispersal is also supported by archaeological and biological evidence, though the volume demonstrates that language, culture, and biology should be treated as independent but interrelated variables. Finally, the Austronesians have experienced significant degrees of divergence as a result of internal processes and external influences, and they should not be conceived of as a bounded, “species-like entity”.

On this last point there is obviously scope for much research and reflection. In a lively piece on the Lapita culture, Spriggs notes that his own papers and others in the collection “have inevitably given an Austronesian-centred view of the region”, but that, in Melanesia and Polynesia, “there is a corner of an Austronesian field that is forever non-Austronesian” (p. 127). True, the volume overall presents an Austronesian perspective, but there is also some attention paid to boundaries and Austronesian–non-Austronesian interactions. To my mind some of the most interesting discussions in the volume are concerned with these external linkages. Bellwood touches on these matters when he notes that the Tai-Kadai, Hmong-Mien, Austroasiatic and Austronesian language families “seem to have arisen by a process of dispersal out of subtropical southern China and northern mainland Southeast Asia” (p. 97), in the context of the development of rice and millet agriculture from 6,000 to 3,000 BC. The observations of numerous ethnologists and anthropologists concerning cultural and other parallels between various of the non-Austronesian hill peoples of mainland Southeast Asia and such Austronesian populations as the Ifugao and Kalinga of Luzon, the Dayaks of Borneo and the Bataks of Sumatra certainly require further investigation.

Adelaar’s proposition that Borneo “represents an amalgamation of ethnic groups with often very different origins” (p. 75) and his identification of similarities between Austronesian Land Dayak and Austroasiatic Orang Asli languages are intriguing matters and need further

urgent research. Sather's examination, among other things, of the ethnogenesis of Southeast Asian foraging peoples, and his brief comparison of Austroasiatic hunter-gatherers and Austronesian foragers also provide us with possible future lines of enquiry into the links between Austroasiatic and Austronesian communities as well as into independent and interdependent paths of adaptation and transformation for both ethnolinguistic groups.

In the Oceanic context the chapters by Spriggs; Serjeantson and Gao; Kuldeep Bhatia, Simon Easteal, and Robert L. Kirk; Dutton; Thomas; and Adrian Horridge also throw up a number of questions concerning the development of Austronesian cultural and physical features as a result of processes of both autonomous and interactive development in relation to non-Austronesian populations such as speakers of Papuan languages. As the editors note, Kirsch's and Green's concept of "phylogenetic units", that is, units derived from a common source but subject to divergence, is especially appropriate in the Austronesian case.

Many puzzles remain unresolved in Austronesian studies, but this present volume represents a significant contribution to the debates. For me it raises as many questions as it provides answers — the mark of a good book. This is required reading for all serious students of the societies, cultures, and histories of Southeast Asia and Oceania.

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