

*Origins, Ancestry and Alliance. Explorations in Austronesian Ethnography.* Edited by James J. Fox and Clifford Sather. Canberra: Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, Australian National University, 1996. Pp. viii, 336.

This is the third volume published by the Australian National University to have emerged from its Comparative Austronesian project, coordinated by James Fox of the Department of Anthropology in the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies. In its comparative interests it is very closely related to the second volume in the series (also reviewed in this journal), which concentrated on the common physical, cultural, and linguistic origins of the Austronesians and their transformations in the context of their migrations and settlement, and their interactions with non-Austronesians in island Southeast Asia and the Pacific. This present volume examines Austronesian concepts or metaphors of origin, ancestry and inter-group relations (the “discourse on origins”), and their significance in social practice.

The volume contains many high-quality chapters. There are some beautifully crafted pieces and the majority of contributions provide a thoughtful integration of guiding principles and ethnographic detail. There are two general papers — an introductory one by Fox and an examination of the prehistory of Austronesian social hierarchy, in part necessarily speculative, by Peter Bellwood. Both papers present an informed and nicely framed context for the bulk of the volume (twelve chapters) which is preoccupied with ethnographic narrative (although some contributions are rather more heavily conceptual and analytical than others, for example, those by Sather and Yengoyan). The weight of ethnography is Southeast Asian, with only three chapters from the Pacific; and, of the nine Southeast Asian chapters, six focus on Indonesia (the majority of these on eastern Indonesia). However, it depends how one divides up the Austronesian world, and Fox’s linguistic categorization of his case-studies into Western, Central, and Eastern Malayo-Polynesian gives us a more even spread.

The Indonesian chapters comprise Douglas Lewis on “origin structures” of the Tana ‘Ai and Sikka people of east central Flores; Michael

Vischer on the order of precedence in the domain of Ko'a on the island of Palu'e off the north coast of Flores; Barbara Grimes's examination of two complementary origin structures on Buru island, Maluku; James Fox's comparative study of social metaphors of origin and precedence among six societies of Timor and Flores; Sandra Pannell's chapter on the politics of origins in a Damer village in southwest Maluku; and David Bulbeck's piece on Makassar marriage strategies and politics in the south Sulawesi state of Gowa. Of the remaining contributions, Clifford Sather employs concepts of equality, equity, hierarchy, and inequality to examine the debate about "egalitarianism" among the Iban of Malaysian Borneo; there are two papers on the southern Philippines — Aram Yengoyan considers notions of origin, hierarchy, and egalitarianism among the Mandaya of Mindanao, and Charles Frake contemplates rank, ethnic identity, and origins in the Sulu archipelago. Out in the Pacific Ocean Aletta Biersack explores Tongan affinal politics, Jukka Siikala looks at foreign and autochthonous hierarchy and origin in the Cook Islands of Polynesia, and Ken-Ichi Sudo dissects oral traditions of migrations and their relation to social rank and chieftainship in the central Caroline Islands of Micronesia.

Although there is an obvious concern with origins, a substantial part of the volume explores notions of hierarchy and equality. Several chapters reflect on Louis Dumont's now classic study of hierarchy in *Homo Hierarchicus*, and Fox's reformulation and extension of Dumont's perspectives on hierarchy with reference to Indonesian material in his concept of social and temporal "precedence" and the related notion of "origin structures". This concern with hierarchy is perhaps not surprising since most of the papers included in this present volume were originally presented at a conference on "Hierarchy, Ancestry and Alliance" held in 1990, and another set of contributions to the conference has already been published in 1994 as *Transformations of Hierarchy*, edited by Margaret Jolly and Mark Mosko, as a special issue of *History and Anthropology*. Important dimensions of Fox's concept of social precedence are its relative, contingent, fluid, and contested qualities. Of particular interest and importance in this collection of essays, I think, is the examination of social metaphors of origin which in Austronesian cultures

draw primarily on botanical imagery (in turn related to notions of the sources and flows of life) and the ways in which metaphors are used and manipulated in situations of competition for precedence and the pursuit of status and acclaim. There is therefore a focus on indigenous concepts of superiority, inferiority, and equality and a questioning of such Western-derived categories as “wife-givers” and “wife-takers”. What seems to underpin the volume is an acknowledgement that shared ideas and metaphors of origin can generate different forms of social precedence and that common idioms of origin and ancestry might not be expressed in related linguistic terms. As Fox says, “fictitious etymologies are also frequently devised and elaborated to support narrative claims about origin within this discourse” (p. 5). We are therefore confronted with a language of disputation and controversy, one which does not lend itself to the neat categories beloved of social scientists.

In a general appreciation of the book I do think some dispassionate comments are required from a reviewer who is an anthropologist with an interest in the sociology of development, political economy, and the processes of incorporation of Austronesians into modernizing nation-states and a global economy. One gets an overpowering impression of the “traditional” and the inward-looking “Austronesianist” in this volume; this shortcoming was implied in my review of the second book in the series published in this journal. In other words, in my view, one should also examine the boundaries of and relations beyond the category “Austronesian”, as well as its content. In its attempt to address the issues of modernity, I was attracted to Parnell’s chapter; although her prose is dense, at least she examines local Austronesian discourse in the context of wider structures, in this case the Indonesian nation-state. After all, we are focusing on communities which are part of one of the most rapidly developing regions of the world. What of Austronesians and the wider world? The only paper in this volume which genuinely addresses the issue of Austronesian–non–Austronesian relations is that by Peter Bellwood, although not in a modern context. Bellwood considers the importance of the Papuans in the historical development of certain Austronesian communities. What is more, in a tantalizing reference in his introductory chapter, Fox also reminds us of the occurrence

of botanical metaphors in ancient Greek thought and in the history of Western sciences. I wish the matter had been pursued further. And finally Frake poses an important question in his chapter on Sulu. He says "In talking about hierarchy in our various Austronesian-speaking societies, are we saying anything 'Austronesian'?" Well, this is a serious question, and Frake is sceptical. I do not think that this volume can give us answers to this question. It was not intended to. But I am still troubled that we have established a linguistic category to which we have given the label "Austronesian", and then attempted to provide it with an identity through comparative studies. I must confess that I have also tended to do this in some of my previous writing. Should we not also be looking at negative cases within Austronesian communities, the societies at the margins of the Austronesian diaspora, and the cultural and social parallels between Austronesians and others? Having raised these questions I have to say that Fox and Sather should be commended for assembling and structuring an excellent set of comparative studies within the category which they construct for themselves. As a reviewer one can ask questions about the framework adopted, but one cannot deny the quality of the content.

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