Hierarchy and Egalitarianism in Austronesia

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Abstract: The current collection of articles includes a discussion of Austronesian peoples living in modern nations situated in East Asia, Southeast Asia, Africa and Melanesia. It thus crosses many long-established boundaries in area studies which tend to develop their own theoretical dialects. While there are many valid reasons for these theoretical discussions, a shift in focus from geographically defined areas to what might be called "Greater Austronesia" brings to light new sets of theoretical problems. Our central concern is the extent to which Austronesian societies value social hierarchy over egalitarianism, and the extent to which political leadership is determined through a rule of succession or other form of status ascription, through the competitive achievements of individuals, or actively resisted in the first place through various mechanisms such as the mandatory sharing of wealth, the denigration of ambition, or the dispersal of populations.

The attempt to say something general about hierarchy and egalitarianism among Austronesian-speaking peoples is complicated by the very diverse geographic, historical and cultural environments in which these systems developed. These include the large, densely populated, and closely packed islands and peninsulas of East and Southeast Asia in which the Austronesian languages first developed; their interaction with Sinitic, Sanskritic and Islamicate state formations on the Asian mainland; their interaction with the peoples of the East African coast in Madagascar; their interaction with populations of non-Austronesian speakers in Melanesia in the western Pacific Ocean; and their occupation of the empty, widely dispersed islands of Micronesia and Polynesia in the eastern Pacific Ocean.

This volume originated in a series of panels organised by Kun-hui Ku that set out to transcend the tendency of scholars working in different geographic areas to become preoccupied with different theoretical issues. The first panels were included in the annual meetings of the Association for the Social Anthropology of Oceania in 2009 (Austronesian Margins), 2011 (Austronesian Linkages), 2015, and 2016, and culminated in a workshop held at the National Tsing-Hua University in Taiwan in December, 2016, where the papers in this volume were first discussed.[1]

The current collection of articles includes a discussion of Austronesian peoples living in modern nations situated in East Asia, Southeast Asia, Madagascar and Melanesia. It thus crosses many long-established boundaries in area studies which tend to develop their own theoretical dialects. Taiwan is normally treated as part of East Asia, an area dominated by discussions of religious pluralism. Madagascar is normally treated as part of Africa, an area dominated by discussions of kinship and the failure of development programs and the postcolonial state. Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu are normally treated as part of Melanesia, an area dominated by discussions of gift exchange, religious conversion, and Dumontian hierarchy.

While there are many valid reasons for these discussions, a shift in focus from geographically defined areas to what might be called "Greater Austronesia" brings to light new sets of theoretical problems. Our central concern is the extent to which Austronesian societies value social hierarchy over egalitarianism, and the extent to which political leadership is determined through a rule of succession or other form of status ascription, through the competitive achievements of individuals, or actively resisted in the first place through various mechanisms such as the mandatory sharing of wealth, the denigration of ambition, or the dispersal of populations.

The order of the papers in this special issue follows the historical movement of the Austronesian speakers, beginning in Taiwan. Austronesian speakers then moved south to settle in the Philippines and Indonesia. From Indonesia, one group of Austronesian speakers moved west across the Indian Ocean to settle in Madagascar. Other Austronesian speakers moved from

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Indonesia east into Melanesia, where they encountered earlier inhabitants of the area who spoke a wide variety of Non-Austronesian languages.

Austronesians in Taiwan: Static Classification versus Dynamic Analysis

The diversity of social organisations among the Austronesians of Taiwan has long been a source of fascination for scholars. Many efforts have been made to describe and theorise the correlation between leadership types and other levels of social organisation (economic, political, kinship, religious), with a tendency to assume that complex hierarchical social formations developed out of earlier simple egalitarian ones). However, linguistic research over the past three decades has suggested that the Proto-Austronesians may have possessed chiefdoms and social hierarchies before their dispersal, and that Taiwan was one of the key sites from which Austronesian speakers originally dispersed. This would imply that egalitarian social formations described in the ethnographic record often developed out of earlier hierarchical ones.

The first essay in this volume, by Kun-hui Ku, begins with an overview of previous attempts to categorise the Austronesian societies of Taiwan in holistic terms based on whether they possessed hereditary offices and ranks, corporate descent groups, and fixed rules of residence. She suggests that rather than trying to identify a rigid set of rules that delineate a fixed "social structure", scholars of indigenous Taiwan societies would do better to draw on the work of scholars of Southeast Asia.They have recognised the flexible and pluralistic nature of the status systems in that region by employing concepts such as "precedence" rather than "hierarchy" to analyse Austronesian societies in which different principles of ranking are applied in different contexts (Hocart [1936] 1970; Goldman 1970; Lewis 1988; Fox 1994:95; Fox 2009:1; Vischer 2009)[2].

Ku goes on to demonstrate how misleading the attempt to formulate a single set of coherent principles for a whole society can be for understanding the dynamics of social competition. The Paiwan have often been categorised as a typical example of a "hierarchical society" based on the presence of ascribed, hereditary leadership. Ku presents an extended case study of a dispute between rival houses over the right to assert leadership within an entire Paiwan community to show that matters are much more complicated than this categorisation suggests. She conducted fieldwork after a number of events had disrupted traditional ritual and political practices, the most significant of which was the Paiwan's conversion to Christianity. Christianity displaced the centrality of the traditional system of ritual prohibitions and mystical sanctions through which the nobility asserted their precedence, and replaced the highest-ranked house as a place for public meetings, with the church. The result was intense competition among rival houses for recognition by the whole community as the preeminent house. One house based its claim to leadership on the principle of origin, as being descended from members original ruling house. Another house, originally of commoner rank, engaged in a series of strategic marriages with noble houses over five generations, and was known as the one that

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[2] Similarly, the archeologist White (1995) has suggested the term "heterarchy" for societies in which multiple status systems coexist.

"founded a new settlement" and based their claim to preeminence on the principle of first settlement. After relocation, the descendants of the original ruling house tried to build a replica of the noble house to claim the right to carry out certain rituals in front of it to indicate their superior status. The latter opposed the building of a new house and tried to appropriate its title and prestige for the settlement they had established as a whole. Junior branches of the original ruling house also tried to appropriate the right to the title and to other noble prerogatives.

Ku concludes that despite a large number of apparently rule-governed norms of ascribed social status, in practice, Paiwan social life manifested an unending struggle for social distinction based on the propagation of conflicting narratives about the past and attempts to persuade other houses to attend ritual performances designed to assert a higher position in the ranking system than they thought the sponsors were entitled to.

Austronesians in Southeast Asia: Hierarchy and Egalitarianism in Dialectical Opposition

The Austronesian peoples of Southeast Asia have been engaged in a loosely-integrated regional political economy for over three thousand years. The uneven distribution of soils suitable for the production of a surplus of rice and of ores rich in iron and other metals stimulated an intra-regional trade in staple goods, while internal systems of ranking created a demand for prestige goods from outside the region for use in tribute payments and marriage exchanges among the elite (Gibson 1990b; Christie 1995). The impulse to engage in long-distance trade with the polities to their west soon led Austronesians out across the Indian Ocean, first reaching the island of Madagascar between 600-1000 CE. The Austronesian languages of Madagascar are most closely related to the languages of southeast Borneo, with many borrowings from Malay, Javanese and South Sulawesi languages, indicating that the settling of Madagascar involved many peoples of the Java Sea (Adelaar 2009; Brucato et al. 2016).

The presence of two fundamentally different forms of agriculture led to the coexistence of two radically different kinds of social formation throughout this region. The societies of the highlands that relied on shifting cultivation developed ideological and political systems that included (variously) those in which: equality was ascribed to all members of society at birth (Buid); the status of an equal adult had to be achieved through bravery (Ilongot); everyone started life as an equal but strove to achieve higher status through competitive raiding and feasting (Iban); and those in which there were hereditary classes of nobles, commoners and slaves, but in which there was nevertheless fierce competition between peers (Kayan) (Gibson 2005). Leach (1954; 1960) first addressed this question for the societies of highland Burma. This approach has recently been expanded and updated by Scott (2009) for the central massif of Mainland Southeast Asia as a whole. The point is that Southeast Asian "cultures" have been part of much larger regional political economies since the Bronze Age, and have developed their political value systems in full awareness of and often in dialectical opposition to, those of their hierarchical or egalitarian neighbours.

The societies of the lowlands that relied on irrigated rice cultivation developed centralised political systems and hierarchical ideologies that emulated the Sanskritic states of their

neighbours to the west or the Sinitic states of their neighbours to the north. Royal courts borrowed freely from world religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, and Catholicism to bolster their authority, but continued to rely on indigenous ideologies of divine kingship. Ordinary villagers followed the lead of the courts and converted to world religions as well, but also continued to interact with the nonhuman spirits that populated the Austronesian cosmos.

As a result of this sort of complexity, a key problem for anthropologists working in coastal societies around the Indian Ocean has been the coexistence of radically different religious practices within the same society over many centuries, and often within the same individual over the course of a single day (Geertz 1960; Lambek 1995; McIntosh 2015). Over the past century, these religions have been "reformed" in such a way that they can now serve as vehicles for the expression of "modern" ideologies like nationalism and socialism (van der Veer 1994; Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1990; Laffan 2002; Ileto 1979). For many ethnographers working in this area, then, the task at hand is to explain how symbolic elements drawn from a common Austronesian heritage could have been used to conceptualise radically different sets of political values.

The essay by Thomas Gibson explores the way a common Austronesian symbolic system was transformed over time so as to be compatible with two contrasting sets of political values in Island Southeast Asia. While the island of Mindoro in the Philippines was once central to trading networks extending from China to eastern Indonesia, the conflict between the Spanish colonial empire and the Sultanate of Sulu led to the isolation of the island and the depopulation of its coasts. The Buid and other groups of shifting cultivators inhabiting Mindoro withdrew into the interior and practiced a strategy of avoidance toward their lowland neighbours. Well into the twentieth century, they steadfastly refused to adopt many of the agricultural techniques practiced in the lowlands such as the use of draft animals, the terracing of hillsides, or the planting of tree crops. Most Buid continue to reject any form of world religion and remain intimately enmeshed in social interactions with a variety of nonhuman beings. Within the human community, they practice an extreme form of ascribed egalitarianism and personal autonomy in which everyone belongs to a community of equals who are free to marry and divorce whom they please. Ancestral spirits are exiled from the community of the living to the underworld, and all blessing flow from the spirits of the earth.

The Makassar of Indonesia have long practiced irrigated rice agriculture and long-distance maritime trade. Their rulers converted to Islam in 1605 and they are now known as one of the most devout ethnic groups in the nation, despite that fact that offerings continue to be made to the ancestor spirits that occupy a shrine in the attic of each house and that are responsible for the continued health and fertility of their descendants. Makassar houses functioned as bilateral corporate descent groups and individuals were expected to marry according to the long-term strategies of the group's elders. In theory, every house occupied a fixed rank determined by the distance of their descent group from that of royal house, the rank of an individual was ascribed at birth by the rank of both their father and their mother, and women were never allowed to marry a man of lower rank. In practice, men of noble rank were engaged in a fierce competition with their peers to achieve a higher rank than they were entitled to by birth, and to fix this new rank in place by marrying a woman who was born to a higher rank.

The essay by Denis Regnier shows how the ascription of unclean, slave descent forms an insuperable barrier to full social equality among the Betsileo of Madagascar. This was true even though it had once been possible for slaves to regain their freedom and undergo a ritual that cleansed them of their slave status and made them the social equals of commoners. But only the traditional Betsileo nobility had the power to perform this ritual and it had lapsed with the imposition of French colonial rule. The legal abolition of slavery by the French in 1896 created a whole new category of unclean former slaves who could never be assimilated into Betsileo descent groups through intermarriage. The offspring of unions between the descendants of free Betsileo and slaves would forever carry the taint of their slave ancestor, and the burial of an unclean person in the ancestral tomb of a free descent group would taint all the ancestors. The distributed nature of genealogical knowledge meant that no one family could escape the effects of such ancestry. It was in this way that the outside intervention of a colonial state transformed the unequal status of slave, which had once been a matter of redeemable downfall, into a status that involved the ascription of an essentialised identity that could never be erased.

The Austronesian Encounter with Non-Austronesians in Melanesia: Chiefs Versus Big Men

The situation in the Pacific islands was very different from that in Southeast Asia. Some of the earliest and most influential ethnographies of Austronesian-speaking peoples were conducted in Melanesia (Malinowski 1922) and Polynesia (Firth 1936). The small dispersed islands of these areas seemed like a perfect laboratory for the development of a synchronic science of society: the land borders were easily defined by the sea, and written historical materials covered only very recent times. Later comparative studies based on these ethnographies tended to approach each island as a self-contained whole that varied from the others primarily by degree of hierarchy and complexity, as in Sahlins's *Social Stratification in Polynesia* (1958) and "Poor man, rich man, big man chief" (1963). Sahlins posited an opposition between Melanesian Big-Men (achieved status) and Polynesian Chiefs (ascribed status) that has also been deployed to analyse the diverse social organisations among the Austronesians. His initial intention was to assign types of leadership, based on whether status was inherited or not, to different geographical locations that somehow exemplified different social formations. Sahlins (1985) later approached the topic of Austronesian royal hierarchy from another angle in his discussion of "stranger kings" as the mythological founders of pristine states in the Pacific Ocean.

The essay by Hao-Li Lin and Richard Scaglion makes a strong case that an ideology of social ranking and succession to high office based on ascribed genealogical criteria developed among Austronesian speakers before they left Taiwan, and continued to characterise many Austronesian societies as they moved outward through Southeast Asia and the Pacific. Drawing primarily on the works of Robert Blust, they identify the following Proto-Austronesian terms indicating the presence of ascribed hierarchy at an early date: *datu*, with a range of meanings including chief, priest, ancestor, and noble; *rumaq*, meaning noble or ancestral house; and *banua*, meaning an inhabited territory including all its human and nonhuman components.

The essay by John Barker covers the interaction between Austronesian and Non-Austronesian speakers in Collingwood Bay, a place in Papua New Guinea that marks a local contact zone that has existed for centuries, as indicated by archaeological findings and the blending of linguistic features. He describes a mixture of hierarchical and egalitarian principles at work among the Maisin-speaking peoples of the southern part of this zone that also exist in most of the rest of the area. The Maisin are divided into two hereditary status groups. Members of superior *kawo* clans are entitled to the exclusive possession of a number of objects, rituals and practices denied to members of *sabu* clans. Traditionally, the *kawo* were expected to provide wise advice to the hot-tempered *sabu* to forestall them from engaging in precipitate acts of violence, and to organise large-scale ceremonial exchanges with other clans as a way of maintaining social equilibrium over the long term. In times of war, however, it was the leaders of the *sabu* clans who took command. Pacification by the colonial authorities in 1900 diminished the importance of these functions, but the introduction of Christianity and a local constabulary soon gave rise to an analogous opposition between the church, seen as performing the *kawo* functions of peace-making and communal feasting, and the police, seen as performing the *sabu* functions of exercising legitimate force. More recently still, conflicts over the sale of logging rights to outside companies has led to the formation of *kawo* groups that have allied with environmental NGOs to fight the logging in court and of *sabu* groups prepared to resist the logging with force. In the face of this threat to local resources by outsiders, there are some signs of the reappearance of chiefly families whose authority is recognised outside their immediate families.

Austronesians in Melanesia: An Example of Dumontian Hierarchy?

More recently, several authors have attempted to apply Louis Dumont's theory of hierarchy to the Austronesian societies of the Pacific. Some scholars have pointed out the problems of assigning a whole society to either an "egalitarian" or a "hierarchical" type based on the rule of succession to leadership because it often ignores historical processes and practices that arise under different contexts (Jolly 1994; Jolly and Mosko 1994). Mosko (1994) has reworked Dumont's concept of hierarchy to highlight its potential for the analysis of Austronesian societies. The Dumontian concept of the encompassment of opposites does not help us to understand the severe competition between rivals that we see in different Austronesian societies, even where there are apparently clear rules of hereditary succession to high rank and office. The authors in this issuethus use the concepts of "hierarchy" and "egalitarianism", and of ascribed and achieved status, as conceptual tools in the analysis of a given social formation without assuming that a single hierarchy of values integrates a social whole.

As several authors in the present issue note, Dumont's notion of hierarchy is only applicable if one assumes that a "society" exists as a seamless whole, integrated by a single set of paramount values. Anthropologists working in Southeast Asia have tended, on the contrary, to assume that several competing value hierarchies have long coexisted in this area (Leach 1954; Geertz 1960; Tambiah 1970; Beattie 1999; Gibson 2007). More recently, the effects of integration into the market economy and conversion to Christianity in Melanesia have given rise to debates over whether indigenous values continue to be paramount despite superficial borrowings, or whether

these developments have caused a fundamental "break" such that religious conversion or economic globalisation has turned the remains of "custom" into superficial trappings. The authors in this issuewho work in Melanesia note that this debate remains mired in the assumption that societies require a single set of values to function. In practice, people in contemporary Melanesia can be regularly observed invoking different sets of values and hierarchies of values in different situations. This is not an observation that would surprise anthropologists working in Southeast Asia, where conflicting sets of values have coexisted for centuries.

The essay by Keir Martin begins with a detailed analysis of the very terms of the debate over hierarchy and egalitarianism as that debate migrated out of South Asia and into the Pacific. He notes that the relational egalitarianism of traditional Melanesian societies as analysed by Marilyn Strathern is very different from the individualistic egalitarianism of market-based Western societies as portrayed by Locke and Smith. He also notes that the holistic hierarchy of traditional South Asian societies is very different from the market-based inequalities currently being generated in both "hierarchical" Polynesia and "egalitarian" Melanesia. In the second part of his paper, he shows how among the Tolai at certain moments one version of the social whole may be evoked by a set of actors while at others a completely different version may be evoked by the same set of actors. Tolai Big Shots who are newly rich from their participation in the urban market economy portray themselves as upholding traditional relationality by organising and financing discrete customary rituals, but refuse to dissipate their wealth through day-to-day economic transactions with their poor village relations. Grassroots Tolai portray traditional village Big Men as having engaged in an endless process of relational transactions, and insist that it was this that gave them the authority to organise customary rituals. 'Hence for the Big Shots a partial individuation is the strategy maintained in order to help preserve relationality, whilst for the grassroots it is the sickness that threatens relationality.' In fact, however, both sides to this dispute sometimes prioritise relationality and sometimes individualism.

Martin also notes that for Levi-Strauss, totality is always a retrospective achievement imposed by the human mind on an ever-changing reality generated by the techno-environmental infrastructure. A single, coherent ontology is never more than an aspiration; certain members of some cultures, such as the Brahmin priests of classical India or the social theorists of modern France, may spend their lives trying to achieve it, but such coherence is forever elusive and subject to the vicissitudes of history.

In the final essay, by Knut Rio, the question of the relevance of Dumont's conception of hierarchy to Melanesia is again raised. In this case, the ideological notion of society as a hierarchical whole is strongly resisted by the people of Ambrym themselves nowadays, in much the same way as the peoples of the Amazon basin resisted the ideology of society as a unified whole under the authority of a chief, at least according to Pierre Clastres. Rio notes that there were always competing ritual hierarchies in Ambrym society, and that achieved status in one hierarchy was not transferable to the others. But in the late 19th century, the Maki ritual complex appears to have achieved temporary hegemony, perhaps due to the massive demographic upheaval of the time. The goal of the senior men who organised these rituals was

to transform themselves into living dead who were so spiritually hot they had to live in seclusion until their physical death. The end product of these rituals were permanent displays of material objects such as megaliths. The introduction of the Christian God as the ultimate sovereign, along with a range of humans holding political authority by the colonial government, disrupted the Maki complex. Huge displays of root crops and pigs and distributions of cooked food still take place upon occasions such as the funeral of a wealthy man, but now the objective is to dissipate whatever wealth had been accumulated in order to avoid the possibility of the old hierarchical system coming back into being. Meanwhile, a greater encompassing totality has emerged in the form of the nation state, but it reproduces itself not through local rituals but through the school system, a main function of which is to produce a form of subjectivity in which individuals are free and equal. He concludes that there were many reasons for Melanesians to embrace both Christianity and the market as offering a liberation from the repressive force of traditional totalising ideologies, but that they also recognised the dangers of uncontrolled capital accumulation represented by the new set of institutions.

Conclusion

In light of Ku's detailed ethnography of what is involved in successfully asserting a claim to precedence within a territory among the Paiwan, and of Gibson's account of the endless competition between noble men to marry above their station among the Makassar, it should be stressed that "ascribed leadership" is in fact a matter of ideology. In practice, it may require a great deal of effort to achieve a position of acknowledged leadership within an entire community or polity. The narratives that make leadership appear to be the result of a simple application of a rule of succession are usually the product of an ongoing series of discursive struggles between rival claimants. This does not mean, however, that there is no difference between societies that possess an ideology of hereditary chiefship and those that do not. As Lin and Scaglion argue, the competition for preeminence among "Big Men" in the parts of Melanesia where people speak Non-Austronesian languages is qualitatively different than that among rival candidates for hereditary chiefship in Austronesian speaking societies.

Further, the principles of egalitarianism and hierarchy can co-exist in any single society in different forms, so that placing a whole society within a typology does not really help us to understand the nature of the society but rather to obscure it. "Ascribed" and "achieved" statuses can often co-exist in different contexts and sometimes ascribed status can be "lost" and achieved status can be integrated into the system of ascribed prestige. Even where an ascribed status exists, one still has to successfully claim that status for oneself or one's relatives, and to find a way to hand it down to ones heirs through appropriate marriage alliances and legitimate forms of descent.

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