

**THE POETIC POWER OF PLACE:
COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVES ON AUSTRONESIAN IDEAS OF
LOCALITY**

James Fox (Ed)

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The pervasive currency at given times of certain ideas is a familiar phenomenon in academic discourse, and notions of place, space and landscape have been of increasing interest to social scientists in various discipline areas for over two decades, particularly in relation to also-current concerns with identity definition. *The Poetic Power of Place* is a recent and valuable addition to this discourse. Most recent in a series jointly published by ANU's Department of Anthropology and The Comparative Austronesian Project in the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, it brings together nine case-studies (plus an overview Introduction) on ways in which Austronesian-language-based societies conceptualise place and space as part of their cultural and social capital. The case-studies are drawn from several locations in Indonesia, plus Madagascar and New Ireland.

The focus of The Comparative Austronesian Project has provided a welcome alternative to conventional vague and problematic divisions such as those of 'Melanesia/Micronesia/Polynesia,' and provides a thought-provoking model for analytical groupings in future. Historical divisions based on the mindsets of explorers or the politics of colonisation are manifestly inadequate, and frequently misleading, as a basis for cultural and/or social analysis.

However, in this case at least, the virtue of logical boundaries is opposed by the sheer size of the territory and number of societies it spans. Austronesian-derived languages, as will be well-known to readers of TAJA, are spoken by an estimated 270 million people in some 800 societies living over a huge geographical area spreading from Taiwan to New Zealand on one axis and from Madagascar to Easter Island on the other. It is therefore probably inevitable that the sheer scale of the subject group will necessitate some re-fragmentation, evidenced here by the decision to deal with only the western sector of the whole Austronesian language domain.

It must be acknowledged that the limited case-study approach has still, in this instance, delivered arguably more that is generalisable than one might expect from geographical or historical approaches. As a Fiji

researcher myself, I was repeatedly struck by often very subtle affinities, which I had not realised existed, between aspects of Indonesian social knowledge and some in Fiji and its near neighbours Tonga and Samoa. The real point is that like most good research, it leaves one hoping that others will produce studies of similar quality for the 'missing' societies. Perhaps a further volume or two in this series, addressing the southwestern and eastern Pacific?

Fox, in his Introduction, provides a brief and clear overview of current thinking on both place and Austronesians. He points out (p.3) that the anthropological theorisation of place owes much to researchers into Australian Aboriginal culture, citing Stanner, Strehlow and Munn's work between 1964 and 1970, and more recent important contributions by Myers, Keen, Morphy and Williams. He also mentions Parmentier's, Bonnemaïson's, and Rosaldo's important contributions to understanding the importance of place in formulating and maintaining identity in Pacific societies. The Bonnemaïson article he cites appeared in the special issue of *Pacific Viewpoint* (1985, #26) edited by Chapman on the topic 'Mobility and Identity in the Island Pacific,' and in fact many of the contributors highlighted the centrality of place in islander conceptions of selfhood. Also not cited here but deserving mention, in 1990 contributors to the collection *Cultural Identity and Ethnicity in the Pacific* (Linnekin, J. and L.Poyer (Eds), Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press) proposed a 'Lamarckian' approach to Pacific identity construction, encompassing place, as opposed to Western 'Mendelian,' heredity-based approaches to identity which they held to have unduly dominated anthropological accounts — views which seem to be very much in accord with those expressed in Fox's study here, though in different language.

Perhaps the most interesting issue which emerges persistently in this collection of essays is the manner in which Austronesian societies conceptualise kinship and identity in terms of narratives of origins and journeys. Fox (pp. 8-12, 91-102) introduces the term *topogeny* to describe the ordering of successions of place-names in much the same manner as a genealogy, in each case starting with a point of origin. Using the island of Roti in eastern Indonesia as his case study, he points out that 'Certain Austronesian societies give preference to topogeny over genealogy' (p.91), reinforcing the perceptions of Linnekin and Poyer cited above.

Thomas (pp. 22-41) describes the use in Madagascar of associated metaphors for origins and journeys, such as rivers and trees. Extended to signify precedence and status, these recur in Grimes's (pp.116-131) account of Buru in Eastern Indonesia.

Sakai, discussing South Sumatra (pp. 42-62) describes the interrelationship of genealogies and places, and like several other contributors to this volume, reminds us that ritual is the device invariably employed to rehearse and reformulate such knowledge. Waterson also

observes the conflation of topogeny and genealogy in Sulawesi, where myths associated with founding 'houses' and other geographical features validate status as well as recounting genealogies of up to thirty generations. Pannell (pp.163-173) exemplifies how changing meanings and conflicting mythologies associating place with group histories and identities can complicate territorial claims.

McWilliam (pp. 103-115) notes the metaphoric reference to the human body in West Timorese mapping of locations. Eves (pp.174-96) notes this in New Ireland also, but stresses the importance of bodily movement and seating in describing the taking possession of land and becoming identified with it. Finally, Bubandt (pp.132-62) focusses on the spatial language of Buli in northeastern Indonesia, which reveals the extent to which spatial relationship and orientation defines identity in both locative and social terms.

In sum, I can warmly recommend this collection to both a general anthropological and a specialist Asia/Pacific readership. Most of the authors write engagingly, and with only a couple of exceptions, clearly and without obscurantist jargon. The monograph itself is neatly designed, well-printed and strongly-bound, making it a quality production. It is a worthy addition to the series which in 1995 gave us Bellwood, Fox and Tryon's excellent edited volume *The Austronesians*. We must hope the editors and publishers can sustain their energy, and our enthusiasm, at this high level.

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