

Chapter 2. Hierarchy, Founder Ideology and Austronesian Expansion¹

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Introduction

Is it possible to correlate the earliest colonizing movements of Austronesian-speaking peoples into Taiwan, the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia and the myriad islands of Oceania² with the existence of a hereditary élite stratum of society? How far back in time can such élites be traced and can their genesis be related in any way to the colonization process itself? And how were the social systems of the earliest Austronesian groups, especially in Melanesia, affected by contact with pre-existing societies, perhaps similar in terms of economy and technology but fundamentally different in terms of social ideology?

The literature on aspects of prehistoric Austronesian social hierarchy is very large,³ so in this paper I will focus only on three relatively fundamental topics of enquiry. The first is to document available opinion about the prehistory of rank in its various forms in the early centuries of Austronesian expansion, before approximately 3000 years ago. One of my contentions here is that some degree of perspective on the early history of hierarchy, particularly in the Austronesian-speaking parts of Oceania, can be achieved if one discards the engrained habit of regarding “Melanesians” as a single anthropological entity with respect to other Oceanic peoples such as Polynesians. Many other writers share my misgivings about this (e.g. Douglas 1979; Lilley 1986; Thomas 1989), but few have taken what appears to me to be the obvious approach from a historical-linguistic perspective. This is to focus instead on the fundamental differences that divide the societies of the Austronesian- and the Papuan-speaking populations of western Oceania.

The second topic of enquiry revolves around the widespread occurrence of a “founder-focused ideology” in a great many of the ethnographic Austronesian societies of Island Southeast Asia and Oceania. Founders very frequently tend to be revered by their descendants, and one aspect of this ideology in the societies of eastern Indonesia, Micronesia and Melanesia is that greater status (often of a ritual or sacerdotal nature) is allocated within a community to those who descend from earlier rather than later kin group founders.

The third topic of enquiry follows on from the second. Did the existence of a founder-focused ideology have any influence or causal role in determining the

rate and vast extent of Austronesian expansion? To answer this question I focus on “founder rank enhancement”, a process whereby junior founders moving into relative or absolute isolation (such as a new island, previously inhabited or not) could establish senior lines, aggrandize their resources, and attempt to ensure methods of genealogical inheritance which would retain privileges for their descendants. *Separation*, in short, could have given founders opportunities for aggrandizement of their own and their descendants’ statuses that they might not have had at home. This kind of aggrandizement operated under conditions of foundershship in empty territories as well as through successful intrusion by foreigners into existing ruling élites, as seems to have happened occasionally in certain Oceanic islands. In addition, I will suggest that this type of enhancement was correlated in some parts of Austronesia (especially Micronesia and Polynesia) with continuous tendencies through space and time towards a development of greater structural dependence on inherited forms of leadership.

Early Austronesian Ranking: The Evidence

The most persuasive evidence for the presence of some form of institutionalized inequality in early Austronesian societies comes from comparative linguistics. For the oldest linguistic stages we have the reconstructions of Blust (1980), who offers Proto-Austronesian * *Rumaq* (“house”) as a descent group and Proto-Malayo-Polynesian * *datu* (after Dempwolff) with four possible components of meaning: 1) political leader, chief; 2) priest; 3) aristocrat, noble; and 4) ancestor, grandfather, elder. This range of meaning is admittedly rather wide, and Blust suggests that the * *datu* “probably was a lineage- (or clan-) linked official” (Blust 1980:217). Some such reconstruction is supported by the existence of the term *ratu* in Javanese inscriptions before about AD 800, seemingly referring here to the head of a district polity (*watek*) (Christie 1983). The presence of *ratu* meaning “high-ranking man” as far away as Fiji is worthy of note, but it also appears that a *rato* title in west Sumba today can be earned by a wealthy man able to raise the manpower and wealth to construct a megalithic grave before his death (Hoskins 1986). So the original meaning of * *datu* still presumably floats somewhere in a hazy zone of authority, unspecified as to ascription or achievement.

The more specific claim that Proto-Oceanic (POc) (the ancestor of all Oceanic Austronesian languages except for some of western Micronesia) had terms associated with hereditary chieftainship has been developed by Pawley (1982; see also Pawley 1981; Pawley and Green 1984:132). He has reconstructed POc * *qa-lapa(s)* as “chief, senior person of a descent group”, and * *qa-diki* as “first-born son of a chief” (the particle * *qa* marked a proper name or title). Only * *qa-diki* continued into Proto-Polynesian, where as * *qariki* it took on the meaning formerly ascribed to * *qa-lapa(s)*. The reflexes of * *qariki* have the meaning of hereditary chief in most modern Polynesian languages, whereas reflexes of the

two original Proto-Oceanic terms have been retained in the Arosi and Bauro languages of San Cristobal in the Solomons (Pawley 1982).

The reconstructions of Pawley have more recently been examined by Lichtenberk (1986), who takes a more cautious position on the question of hereditary rank. He suggests that Pawley's Proto-Oceanic reconstructions should be modified to * *ta-la(m)pat* (lit. "great man") for an unspecified type of leader, and * *qa-adiki* for "oldest child". Lichtenberk believes that the linguistic evidence is indeterminate as regards the presence of hereditary leaders in Proto-Oceanic society. However, it is hard to avoid the conclusion from other comparative anthropological and linguistic observations that the likelihood of their presence at this time is very high (Koskinen 1960). Indeed, the term *lapan*, presumably a reflex of POC * *ta-la(m)pat*, is still used today to refer to a hereditary leader in the Admiralty Islands (Otto 1994:225).

In chronological terms these Proto-Oceanic reconstructions refer to the period around 1500 BC when the Lapita culture was undergoing its rapid expansion from the Bismarck Archipelago into Island Melanesia and ultimately, by at least 1000 BC, western Polynesia. Whether Austronesian societies had hereditary leaders before this time is a moot point, and one to which I will return.

Non-linguistic perspectives

For the earliest stages of Austronesian expansion in Island Southeast Asia the archaeological record relevant to social hierarchy is too sparse to merit consideration. However, as I have indicated above, I am willing to accept from the linguistic evidence that genealogically-based ranking, presumably of individuals within descent groups and also of the descent groups themselves within the larger confines of their societies, was present in Austronesian western Oceania by 3500 years ago.⁴

But were Austronesian societies ranked in this way long before the settlement of Oceania, or did hierarchy develop during the actual process of geographical expansion from older non-hereditary forms of leadership? How are we to interpret the evidence that non-hereditary leadership evolved in parts of western Melanesia, contrary to certain modern evolutionary beliefs, out of former hereditary chiefdoms (Pawley 1981)? And where do the Papuan-speakers, descendants of the original settlers of western Melanesia and always the dominant population in New Guinea, fit into the overall trajectory? The Papuan-speakers, after all, are excellent exponents of the view that leadership can be splendid and highly visible and yet have no hereditary component whatsoever.

These are complex and important questions. In order to answer them it is necessary to examine the question of non-hereditary leadership in western Melanesia, particularly the institution of the "big man", a type of leadership currently being intensively examined by many anthropologists in New Guinea

and adjacent islands. As many have asked (Schwartz 1963; Friedman 1982:183; Hayden 1983), if big men (or their “great man” counterparts in the sense of Godelier (1986)⁵) represent the forebears of hereditary chiefs, then why have they not developed into the latter amongst the densely populated, highly competitive and often strongly inegalitarian Papuan-speaking societies of the New Guinea Highlands? This line of questioning suggests that big men and hereditary chiefs are the results of quite different evolutionary trajectories, rather than successive stages of a hypothetical trend towards fully fledged hereditary aristocracy. In addition, the important question arises of why, if ancestral Proto-Oceanic leaders were hereditary chiefs, so many western Melanesian Austronesian societies should have non-hereditary forms of leadership today.

One answer to this latter question, associated with the writings of Friedman (1981, 1982) and Pawley (1981), is that the relatively egalitarian social systems of Austronesian western Melanesia owe their existence to a kind of “devolution”, a process which Friedman explains as due to an increasing density of trade networks over time giving fewer opportunities for chiefly prestige-good monopoly. His basic view, without the emphasis on trade, is paralleled by that of Liep (1991), who suggests that an original type of hierarchical society introduced by Austronesian settlers into the Massim region of western Melanesia has been deconstituted there into a series of small-scale big or great man systems. Some of these systems have continuing hereditary components in the transmission of ritual skills but they lack a distinctive chiefly stratum, except in the Trobriands where aspects of the earlier hierarchical format survive.

Neither Friedman nor Liep give reasons for this deconstitution of former hierarchy in western Melanesia, and increasing trade density is surely an epiphenomenon reflecting other more fundamental socio-economic changes. The question remains why such deconstitution should have occurred so widely in western Melanesia when it appears to be relatively uncommon on this scale elsewhere in Austronesia. The answer may lie with the prior Papuan-speaking settlers of the region.

Basically, there appears to be a major, deep-seated and probably crucial distinction between the Papuan and the Austronesian societies of Melanesia when they are taken as wholes (ignoring the occasional cases of indeterminacy due to intensive historical contact). The big or great man Papuan systems seem to lack totally any concept of genealogically-based ranking, whether of persons or descent groups, whereas those of the Austronesian-speaking groups often do retain some degree of hereditary transmission of ritual statuses and even a ranking of descent groups by genealogical criteria such as the birth-order of founders. It is my suspicion that a great deal of the deconstitution of chieftainship postulated for Melanesia may be due to the results of strong influence and even

cultural take-over by Papuan-speakers of Austronesian social networks (as also suggested by Pawley 1982:46-47), but this process has generally not entirely effaced the prior traces of hereditary rank order amongst the latter.

Although my forays into the literature on the anthropology of Papuan-speaking societies have been rather restricted, I cannot help but notice everywhere the almost total lack of commitment to principles of ascribed ranking. True, some authors have claimed an incipient presence (e.g. Harrison (1987) for the Sepik River Manambu, and Golson (1982) for the Hagen area immediately prior to European contact), but in no case does the ascription seem to have developed a permanent historical existence, unlike the situation amongst many Austronesian-speaking groups in Melanesia. The general lack of concern amongst Papuan-speaking societies with descent and ascription of rank, whether of individuals or clans, and their focus on synchronic affinal and residence ties rather than the diachronic threads of birth and consanguinity, have been clearly expressed by many authors who have explicitly discussed Papuan-speaking societies rather than Melanesians in general (e.g. Brown 1978:186-187; Foley 1986). As Brown states of the Chimbu:

Chimbu concern for the present is indicated in the patterns of social relations and the absence of genealogical recall. Ties are more common with affines than with kin, and adopted members are not distinguished from birth members of groups ... There are no ever-enduring clan and tribe ties ... Tribes are made up of local alliances, and migrating groups form new alliances (Brown 1972:7).

An even more explicit statement that incorporates some comparative historical reconstruction for New Guinea/Papuan-speaking groups is that of Rubel and Rosman (1978:320-323), although these authors never in fact refer to the linguistic backgrounds of their sample of societies. Their "prototypical structure" for a New Guinea society includes patrilineal descent with a tendency towards virilocal postmarital residence, politically autonomous residential units, formal inter-group exchange patterns involving women and ceremonial feasts, political leadership of the big man type, ritual separation of men and women, and a high significance for male initiation ceremonies. Although this reconstruction is somewhat timeless and placeless, it does hint at the kind of social landscape that might have confronted the initial Austronesian settlers of Melanesia. Taken as a whole, the archaeological and comparative anthropological evidence indicates that some Papuan-speaking societies had evolved dense population networks based on intensive agriculture (Golson 1981) or increasingly efficient forms of exchange, long before the arrival in the region of Austronesian-speakers. In doing so they maintained their ancestral forms of society that allowed the inevitable pressures for inequality to be channelled into non-heritable patterns of leadership and

domination. Large and dense populations in this region, contrary to certain cultural-materialist perspectives, did not produce hereditary chiefs.

But why does the Papuan influence on Austronesian societies in western Melanesia seem to have been so pervasive? It seems quite likely that many of the Austronesian peoples of western Melanesia, in terms of genetic research (see Stoneking *et al.* (1990) and the various discussions in Hill and Serjeantson (1989)), reflect a very high degree of biological input from non-Asian, indigenous Melanesian sources. This input might have been due to continuous intermarriage or even conquest; the finer social details will probably always escape us. The overall result, however, was that some groups of essentially non-Austronesian (presumably ancestral Papuan) linguistic stock transferred their linguistic affiliations to the homogeneous and widely-understood Oceanic Austronesian languages which were being spread rapidly through Melanesia by Lapita colonization around 1500 BC (Bellwood 1989; Pawley 1981; Pawley and Green 1984). As Ross (1988, 1989) has recently noted, the western Melanesian Oceanic languages, which extend from New Guinea to as far east as the southeastern Solomons, show evidence for major interaction with Papuan languages. Furthermore, the Meso-Melanesian languages of the Bismarcks and Solomons, which reveal especially strong traces of such Papuan interaction, have apparently expanded through an area previously occupied (during Lapita times?) by speakers of Central/Eastern Oceanic languages.

From the viewpoint of the coastal Papuan-speakers of the period of Lapita expansion, what better way perhaps to gain some of the advantages of access to a widespread trade network than to learn a language (such as Proto-Oceanic or one of its immediate descendants such as Proto-Central/Eastern Oceanic) which might have been spoken, with only dialectal differentiation, by hundreds of communities spread over thousands of square kilometres of Melanesia — an ethnolinguistic situation that is almost impossible to imagine from the state of diversity in the same region today? Of course, two-way contact between many geographically-contiguous Papuan and Austronesian groups has undoubtedly characterized western Melanesian prehistory continuously during the past 3000 years. But I suspect that a very strong burst of interaction, more Papuan to Austronesian in terms of gene flow but perhaps reversed in terms of language and voyaging technology, occurred right at the start of the Austronesian colonization period.

Having presented a historical stance on the issue of non-hereditary ranking in Austronesian-speaking Melanesia, one that sees the big or great man as in part a transfer from Papuan ideology, I can now return to the issue of ascribed ranking in early Austronesian societies. Were hereditary chiefs a part of the Austronesian social landscape before Proto-Oceanic times, or did they develop purely as an effect of the process of island to island colonization? Are the

nonhereditary Austronesian leaders of western Melanesia purely a product of “Papuanization”, or are there other ingredients derived from the Austronesian expansion process itself?

Founder-Focused Ideology Among Austronesian-Speakers

Tikopia estimation ... rates autochthonous origin as the most worthy and immigrant origin as the lowest ... In Tikopia theory, priority of origins gives status and power (Firth 1961:178).

Despite the unimportance of ascribed rank in many Austronesian societies in Island Southeast Asia and Melanesia, certain features of rank-focused ideology nevertheless stand out as being very widespread in the Austronesian world as a whole. These include a reverence for kin-group founders extending to ultimate deification in some cases, a common practice of naming kin-groups after such founders, and a ranking of status positions by descent, often primogenitural (but not always patrilineal), from them. High rank derived from genealogical closeness to an important founder would also give access to the economic rights usually associated with chiefs: stewardship over land, rights to demand labour and services from other kin-group members, and in some cases polygynous marriages. Most kin-groups obviously recognize successive and multiple founders rather than just one, but often the highest traditional rank is held by the descendants of the first founders and the lineages founded by later arrivals have lesser ritual statuses.

Political contestation, of course, has often allowed younger or intrusive lines, autochthonous or foreign, to acquire considerable authority, to the extent that many societies have dualistic chiefly structures or “stranger king” myths about leadership (Sahlins 1985; and see also Hanlon (1988) on Pohnpei). Nevertheless, despite all such ramifications of rank and aristocracy there does seem to be a common set of principles found right across Austronesia based on what I will term a “founder-focused ideology”. One of these principles, which I will identify specifically as “founder rank enhancement”, was, I believe, an integral part of the phenomenon of Austronesian expansion.

Founder-Focused Ideology: Some Instances

If attention is turned first to the Southeast Asian portion of the Austronesian world, it is apparent that founders and their closest descendants frequently hold central positions of rank.⁶ A comparative survey of forms of ranking in traditional Austronesian societies across Indonesia has recently been presented by Slamet-Velsink, who suggests (Slamet-Velsink 1986:246) that:

As to the tribal societies hitherto treated [mainly Nias, Batak, Ngada, East Sumba, Flores, Timor and Sa’dan Toraja], I think that they may all be called ranked, since they are all marked by differences in status at

least between older and younger branches of a “house” or clan, and between core villagers considered to be the descendants of the village founders and later arrived co-inhabitants of the same village or area ...

This kind of ranking according to founder order seems to be particularly common in the societies of Nusa Tenggara. Forth (1981), for instance, describes it for Rindi, East Sumba, where founder clans have rights of land stewardship and maintain these rights even if secular power is taken from them. Perhaps the most striking description of such a system is that by Lewis (1988:51-60) for the Tana 'Ai domain of Tana Wai Brama in eastern Flores. The founding or source clan (called Ipir Wai Brama) of this domain was founded by two brothers with their male and female followers, according to a tradition translated as “The spread of the people through the firmament for empty land”. The members of this source clan have rights of precedence within the social system, and the domain leader termed “The Source of the Domain” inherits his role matrilineally (from mother’s brother to sister’s son) from the elder of the two brothers:

The Source of the Domain (*tana pu'an*) is heir to the earth of Tana Wai Brama by virtue of membership in the clan that first settled his domain (*tana*) and his descent from the elder of the founding brothers of that clan. It is from the precedence of his clan, which is related in the histories, that his status in the community is derived (Lewis 1988:71).

The descendants of the younger brother hold positions of political and secular authority, thus forming a dualistic status hierarchy similar to that found in many other parts of Austronesia. In addition, the clan Ipir Wai Brama retains ritual rights to and authority over all the lands of the domain. Founders who arrived subsequently to the ancestors of the source clan were given land by it and integrated into a single ritual system under Ipir stewardship. The clans that descend from these later founders are ideally ranked in descending status, the more recent the founder the lower the rank. As Lewis (1988:81) stresses, sequence is a principle that orders much of the social and religious life of the Tana 'Ai.

Within Oceania there are also many instances to be found amongst the societies of Melanesia and Micronesia of founder-focused ideology, together with clan ranking by founder chronological order. Sudo (this volume) gives an excellent example of the traditional ranking of matrilineal clans on Satawal (Carolines) according to sequence of founder arrival, despite the fact that the original founder clan has since been demoted owing to an unfortunate choice of marriage alliance. Elsewhere in Micronesia traces of clan ranking by founder order appear to be almost universal if one collates the observations and surmises of authors such as Oliver (1989) for Micronesia generally, Lingenfelter (1975:90) for Yap, Lessa (1966:27) for Ulithi, and Alkire for the central Carolines (“the Carolinean

explanation of chiefly status emphasizes seniority of settlement on the particular island" [Alkire 1977:47]).

Given the complex prehistory of Melanesia already alluded to above, it need hardly be stressed that founder-focused ideologies and ascribed ranks are obviously very discontinuous in their distributions. Among the Mekeo of coastal Papua, however (Hau'ofa 1971; Mosko 1985:112-114), chiefly titles descend primogeniturally within subclans which are ranked in terms of "prior residence, original land ownership, on the nature of other historical relationships among the subclans themselves, and often on numerical strength" (Hau'ofa 1971:166). In New Caledonia, genealogical seniority (but not necessarily political power) is held by the descendants of original settler clans (Douglas 1979:18), and the same seems to have applied originally in Manus (Otto 1994). Young's observations for the Kalauna community on Goodenough Island also seem relevant here:

Atuaha [ceremonial stone structures] are built by the men, generally a group of brothers, who settle a new hamlet. They name the *atuaha* and henceforth that name may be given to the hamlet. Subsequently, as the patrilineage (*unuma*) expands, it segments and the junior portion will establish its separate identity by building a new *atuaha* ... The original settlers have the status of "elder brothers" to more recent arrivals as well as to junior lines of their own descent group, and they should provide the leader of the hamlet (Young 1971:22).

A classification of the descendants of the first settlers of a neighbourhood as "elder brothers" also seems to be characteristic of other Austronesian societies in western Melanesia, as amongst the Wamira people of Milne Bay (Kahn 1990:56).

In Polynesia, the richness of tradition about founders has fuelled anthropological debate for over a century. As noted by Buck (1932:16):

most Polynesians recognise the ancestral migrations to the islands they now occupy. The traditional history gives the names of the progenitors who came from another land and usually gives such details as the name of the canoe, the names of those who accompanied him and anything of note that was brought.⁷

There are in Polynesia, however, few clear cases of ranking between kin groups relating directly to the chronological order of their founders, and I suspect this general absence may be due to the optative and non-segmentary methods of kin group recruitment and expansion characteristic of the region. The patrilineages of Tikopia are of course an exception here, as described by Firth (1961) and illustrated in the above quotation (page 24).

In the more stratified societies of Polynesia the patterning of founder-focused ideology has frequently been made more complex by a dualistic separation

between political power and the ritual status derived by descent from an original, or at least more ancient, founder (e.g. Gunson (1979) for western Polynesia, especially Tonga). Developments of this type are certainly not unique to Polynesia and occur in many of the hierarchical social systems of other Oceanic islands, such as Fiji (Sahlins 1985), Rotuma (Howard 1985) and Pohnpei (Hanlon 1988). However, despite these complications due to the usurpation of rank from original founder lines, the elements of founder-focused ideology still occur so widely in Austronesia that one may suspect them of having a high antiquity and possibly of having played a major role in the Austronesian expansion process itself. Some time and place parameters of this expansion now require to be discussed, before moving finally to the process of founder rank enhancement.

Initial Austronesian Expansion: Some Parameters

The Austronesian expansion ultimately extended well over half way round the world, mainly in tropical latitudes, from Madagascar to Easter Island. In its western regions it intruded into a far more complex pre-existing social landscape than did those pioneer navigators who settled the empty islands of Remote Oceania beyond the Solomons (Green 1991). There is a large quantity of linguistic and archaeological information that relates to early Austronesian expansion, and readers are referred to fuller sources (Bellwood 1985, 1989, 1991, 1992; Blust 1988; Ross 1989; Spriggs 1989). I list some major relevant observations.

Dated archaeological assemblages that can be related to Austronesian proto-language inventories (Blust 1976; Pawley and Green 1984; Bellwood 1985:102-129) suggest that Austronesian expansion moved from Taiwan, through the coastal Philippines, into Sulawesi and towards coastal New Guinea between about 3000 and 2000 BC. This represents a hypothetical average rate of “as the crow flies” colonization of perhaps three km per annum, or 75 km per 25-year generation. The rate after about 1500 BC within Melanesia and western Polynesia was apparently much faster; the Lapita culture achieved a distribution from the Admiralties to Samoa within about 300 years (Kirch and Hunt 1988), representing an average of about 13 km per annum, or 325 km per 25-year generation. Obviously the real rate of coastal colonization was much slower than that across sea, but these average rates still give some idea of relative speeds in different areas. The spread into Polynesia might have been equally as rapid as that of Lapita according to the navigational calculations of Irwin (1989), although central Polynesian island groups such as the Cooks and Societies have not yet produced direct archaeological evidence for settlement contemporary with Lapita.

The overall archaeological and linguistic records also suggest that the process of Austronesian expansion can be divided into three roughly-defined geographical units in terms of the pre-existing social landscapes with which Austronesian colonists had to contend. These are a) from Taiwan through the Philippines and Indonesia — pre-existing low density foragers; b) western

Melanesia, Vietnam and Peninsular Malaysia — pre-existing agriculturalists or intensive foragers with high population densities; and c) Remote Oceania and Madagascar — no attested pre-existing human populations at all. Since Melanesia is central to the issues discussed in the presence here of an apparently independent transition to agriculture, especially in the New Guinea Highlands (Golson 1981), but with presumed lowland repercussions, is worthy of emphasis. The rapidity of the Austronesian (Lapita) spread from the Bismarck Archipelago into Remote Oceania may thus be related to the presence of high density prior occupation in many parts of western Melanesia.

Early Austronesian expansion, like that of the Indo-European and Bantoid language speakers, was thus quite a rapid phenomenon when placed in perspective against overall human ethnolinguistic prehistory. In the Austronesian case the archaeological record for Island Southeast Asia and Oceanic Lapita suggests strongly that founders moved onwards to new regions after good coastal locations were occupied, before any major attempts to colonize island interiors. Population pressure alone is thus not an acceptable sole reason for early Austronesian expansion. More feasible ecological and techno-economic reasons which might have contributed to the expansion, especially in its earlier phases, include continuous population growth and fissioning due to the possession of an agricultural economic base; the inherent ability of an agricultural economy to be transported and to support colonizing founder populations; the possession of skilled canoe and navigational technology; a search for prestige goods;⁸ and predilections for special environments such as swamplands for rice and taro or good fishing lagoons.⁹ One purpose here, however, is to suggest that this list, while of undisputed validity, probably lacks an essential component in the sphere of ideology.

Founder Rank Enhancement and its Possible Significance

It may also be that now and then ambitious younger sons of chiefs, discontented at not being able to attain a higher rank within the community, organized expeditions and left home in order to acquire new lands and there found their own chiefdoms (Akerblom 1968:92-93).

So far, I have reviewed some of the sources of evidence that relate, however shakily, to the prehistory of hierarchy in Austronesia. I am inclined to push back some form of hierarchy, probably hereditary, to at least Proto-Oceanic and perhaps even Proto-Malayo-Polynesian times. Proto-Austronesian, however, still seems to elude the comparativist on such matters. It is now necessary to ask if, and how, founder-focused ideologies of rank, especially through principles of founder rank enhancement, might have influenced the course of Austronesian expansion.

Reasons for individual episodes of Austronesian colonization would, of course, have been many. One thing is certain, however; inter-island colonizations over large distances must have been intentional if they were to be successful, owing to the need to carry a human population with a capacity for reproduction and viable stocks of domestic animals and plants. Current reconstructions of Oceanic canoe and navigational technologies (Gladwin 1970; Lewis 1972; Feinberg 1988; Irwin 1989, 1992) render an undue reliance on unplanned drifting rather unnecessary.

The initial movements of pre-Austronesian-speakers, along the coastlines of southern China and into Taiwan, might have been simply the result of a gradual increase of population consequent upon the development of rice cultivation in southern China between 8500 and 5000 years ago. The Austronesian language family, like those of most other major populations with long histories of agriculture (Papuan, Austroasiatic, Sino-Tibetan, Thai-Kadai (Tai Kadai or Daic), Elamo-Dravidian, Afro-Asiatic, Indo-European, Nilo-Saharan, Niger-Kordofanian) thus commenced its expansion, according to linguistic reconstructions based on patterns of diversity, in a region where agriculture developed in a primary sense from a previous foraging baseline (i.e. without diffusion from an external source). The gradient of population density between cultivators and foragers, even if only slight, would have been sufficient to commence the process, as I have discussed elsewhere (Bellwood 1991).

As the process of expansion continued, however, and as Austronesians moved towards increasing opportunities for isolation in the island worlds of Southeast Asia and Oceania, the process of founder rank enhancement would have come increasingly into play. It matters little whether Initial Austronesians had hereditary or non-hereditary systems of leadership before the expansion process began. The founder rank enhancement process itself would have been reinforced by constant repetition as colonizers moved ever onwards, and in return it would have stimulated, by direct feedback, more colonization.

What were the main advantages in being a founder? We can see that founders in many Austronesian societies were (and often still are) revered by their descendants and provided with enduring fame. Their descendants have also fared well; they occupy positions of high rank in many aspects of social life and clearly have some major advantages in the overall strategies of acquiring land and material goods. We also need to consider that most founders would know of the successes of predecessors, and the more recent the founders the more the successes behind them. In other words, the initial settlers of New Zealand about 1000 years ago would have been heirs to perhaps 3000 years of successful Austronesian expansion, much doubtless recorded in detail in their traditions.

On the material side, the first founder and his/her followers to reach a new territory or island would have had free access to all resources. They would have

been able to choose the best dwelling, agricultural and fishing locations, and they would have had moral rights to claim and mark these against the encroachments of later comers (who presumably would also have been much smaller in numbers in most cases). Naturally, any founder would wish his/her descendants to maintain such rights and privileges, and one obvious way to ensure this, especially in a period of rapid follow-up founder competition (such as might have occurred frequently during the process of Lapita expansion), would be to promote an ideology whereby the offices that gave the needed control over resources should be transmitted within a family or lineage, rather than simply laid open to free contestation in big man style. Enter, no doubt gradually and not without some resistance, the ideology of primogenitural inheritance?¹⁰

From a more diachronic viewpoint it is not difficult to see how continuous founder events, stacked one upon the other into the depths of Austronesian memory and enshrined in ritual chants, would reinforce the worldly status of founders and their direct descendants. They would also reinforce their access to the best of those material resources (including prestige goods) which theory dictates they should have monopolized in order to enhance or aggrandize their statuses. In short, founders had a head start whenever they discovered a new territory, and their descendants knew how to keep the head start within the family, at least until other forces out of their control (fluctuations in population numbers or successful invasion, for instance) overwhelmed them.

Some care, however, is needed with the founder rank enhancement principle as offered so far. In the discussion I have been careful to stress the concept of *new* territory, rather than simple fission within an already-settled area. Most founder movements would have been highly local events, like those described in the quotation from Michael Young for Goodenough Island given above at p.26. In these local circumstances founders might have found it hard to enhance rank, especially if they belonged, as many surely did, to junior lines in the parent community. The aim for a really ambitious young man of a junior line might perhaps have been to remove himself and his followers as far as possible from his home settlement in order to convert himself and his descendants into a *senior* line without interference. What better way to do this than to find another island, or at the very least a piece of good land far removed from home? *Spatial* separation thus becomes a factor of importance in the equation.¹¹

It is when the concept of moving to another island comes in that another variable enters the equation — the sea-going canoe capable of carrying viable populations of humans, plants and animals. As Hayden (1983) has stressed, the construction and manning of a large canoe needs manpower, and this may mean that founders who successfully undertook long voyages, such as many of those necessary to colonize Oceania, would already have belonged to a stratum of the

homeland society which might well have had élite privileges. In other words, the need to build and man a canoe would have selected for founders those of relatively high rank, and it is rather irrelevant here if that rank in early stages was ascribed or achieved. A strong chain of authority on a voyaging canoe could have meant the difference between success and failure, as anyone will realise after reading Finney's entertaining account (Finney 1979) of the experimental Hokule's voyage from the Hawaiian Islands to Tahiti in 1976.

If we imagine the founder process occurring into relative or complete isolation time and time again over a period of four millennia, with each major ocean crossing selecting for a leader with at least a better than average access to wealth and manpower and giving that leader a pristine new laboratory in which to enhance his own rank and that of his descendants, then it may not be hard to understand why so many anthropologists have commented on the general west to east gradient in the occurrence of ascribed ranking in Oceania. The big and great men in western Melanesian Austronesian societies may reflect some degree of Papuan assimilation, and if Austronesians had not undergone this experience we might expect ascribed rank to have been more common in this region. But this may not be the only reason for the gradient; the ancestors of the Polynesians and Micronesians, after all, presumably went through more founder enhancing events than anyone else.

In addition, it is worth reflecting that there might also have been a similar gradient, now masked by Indic and Islamic influences, from Taiwan, the Philippines, Borneo, and Sulawesi down into the Malay world, the Sunda islands of Java and Bali, and Nusa Tenggara. This was also an axis of Austronesian colonization, and my overall reading of the literature suggests to me that traditional societies tended to rely more on ascribed ranking in the south (e.g. Java, Bali and Nusa Tenggara) than in many parts of the Philippines and Borneo, where many societies have probably retained stable forms of non-hereditary leadership since initial Austronesian colonization occurred. Clearly, one would not wish to explain the differences between Maori and Hawaiian society, or between the Kayan, the Iban and the Balinese, purely on the basis of the number of decisive founder events in their respective histories. Factors of ecology, production, circumscription (Kirch 1988a) and even perhaps free-thinking ideology surely had roles to play as well, as in all societies, not to mention the influences of India and Islam. But there is something attractive about the concept of a founder event that leads to a complete separation between a homeland and a daughter settlement. After all, this is precisely how many biologists would explain the process of speciation in living organisms. Perhaps small human founder groups in isolation can produce massive cultural changes, just as, if given far longer spans of time, their animal cousins can create species.

Some Afterthoughts

The processes of founder rank enhancement did not only operate when founders settled empty lands or islands. Indeed, the importance of secondary invaders from without has bulked large in recent writings on Pacific anthropology. In many islands an original founder-focused ideology of rank was clearly replaced by an invader-focused one (Howard 1985; Sahlins 1985; Hanlon 1988), although as Sahlins himself points out these stranger king myths probably reflect “indigenous schemes of cosmological proportions” (Sahlins 1985:76) rather than any necessary historical process of conquest by true foreigners. Nevertheless, in the few instances where conquest by true foreigners does appear to have occurred (and the examples discussed by Sahlins and Howard may not be within this category), these foreigners clearly managed to aggrandize their rank rather spectacularly in the process of separation from their homeland community.

Two examples of this would appear to be recorded archaeologically. The most striking must surely be the huge Nan Madol elite dwelling and sacred complex on Pohnpei, established by the immigrant Saudeleur dynasty after its two founders arrived from an island to the west between AD 1000 and 1200 (Hanlon 1988:9; Morgan 1988). In mortuary terms, however, the accolade surely goes to Roy Mata, whose rather gruesome burial complex (c.AD 1250) was committed to the afterlife on a small island off the western coast of Efate in central Vanuatu. As recounted by the excavator (Garanger 1972), Efate traditions record Roy Mata and his followers as emigrants into the region, possibly from the south, although the direction is uncertain. I have summarized the main elements of the burial complex as follows (Bellwood 1978:270):

The body of a man, who can hardly be any other than Roy Mata himself, was found extended on its back in a pit which also contained, to his left, a man and woman side by side, to his right a single male, and across the feet of these four parallel bodies, a young girl ... The pit was marked on the ground surface by two large slabs of stone ... Around it were slightly shallower burials of 35 individuals, of which 22 comprised men and women buried together in pairs ... In Garanger’s words, the women “seemed always to be seeking the protection of their companion, clasping him by the neck, waist or arm, with their legs frequently interwoven with those of the man, and their fingers and toes clenched” ... it seems that the men may have been stupefied with kava before burial, while the women were in many cases buried alive and conscious.

Not only was Roy Mata both a founder and an invader according to tradition, but his burial extravaganza, worthy of a Sumerian or Shang Chinese king, is totally without precedent in the anthropological and archaeological records of Oceania. We may never know just why he was considered worthy of human sacrifice on such a scale, but there is little doubt that Roy Mata owed much of

his “success” (if we can call it that) to foundership, a success which might have been denied to him were he just another locally-born man of charisma.

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Notes

¹ This was a difficult paper for a prehistorian to write, but as a migrant myself I have some personal experience of what I hope has been founder rank enhancement. I would like to thank James Fox, Roger Keesing, John Liep, Andrew Pawley, Clifford Sather and Matthew Spriggs for commenting on the manuscript in draft form. They have all given me useful information and references that I might otherwise have missed.

² I exclude Madagascar from consideration in this paper, although hopefully some of my conclusions could still apply to the settlement of this island.

³ Much of the archaeological literature on prehistoric Austronesian ranking is not discussed in detail in this article since it relates to late or terminal prehistory rather than to the early phases of Austronesian expansion with which I am primarily concerned.

⁴ This is not to deny the importance of individual achievement in the quest for leadership, as in all human societies. This paper is concerned with general trends rather than specific historical situations.

⁵ In this section I do not wish to discuss further the distinction between so-called "great man" and "big man" types of leadership, a distinction dealt with in great detail recently by many anthropologists working in Melanesia and one which seems to operate within both Austronesian- and Papuan-speaking societies (Lederman 1990; Lepowski 1990).

⁶ The wide occurrence of patterns of ascribed rank in Island Southeast Asia tends to negate the claims of historians such as O'Connor (1983) and Wolters (1982) that pre-Indic leadership in those regions later Indianized was of a rather unspecified big man type. Wheatley (1983), with his pre-Indic "chiefdoms" subsequently promoted to state-like polities by the identification of their leaders with Siva, is perhaps closer to the mark.

⁷ Another aspect of a concern with canoe-borne founders might also have been the common practice of symbolizing kin-groups as canoes, as in New Zealand, Tahiti or the Cook Islands (Koskinen 1963:31),

or, more distantly, in southern Vanuatu (Spriggs and Wickler 1989) and central Micronesia (Thomas 1987:59 for Satawal).

⁸ Hayden (1983), following Friedman (1981, 1982) has suggested that a demand for prestige goods by a Lapita élite led to a dispersal of traders looking for new sources of supply. Hayden's view has been supported by Kirch (1988b), who has specified the Lapita prestige good system in terms of actual artefact types in shell, stone and pottery. However, while I am willing to agree that a search for new supplies of exotic raw materials might have contributed something to the rapidity of the Lapita dispersal within Melanesia and western Polynesia, materials such as shells or potting clays are common in many environments and their supply seems rather an unconvincing cause for fully-stocked voyages of exploration into the unknown. Although obsidian has very localized geographical sources, the finding of 188 chips of this material, some from a New Britain source 3000 kilometres to the east, in a midden of discarded shells, fish bones, stone tools and other debitage at the Bukit Tengkorak site in Sabah (Bellwood and Koon 1989) suggests that it was hardly an item of great prestige (as opposed to utilitarian) value (Specht *et al.* [1988] also doubt its function as a prestige good in New Britain). A desire for exotic valuables alone thus seems unlikely to have fuelled the whole process of Austronesian expansion, even though the early archaeological record of virtually all Oceanic communities, including eastern Polynesians, contains elaborate artefacts of shell, whale teeth, bone and stone which might have functioned to reinforce the visible status of hereditary chiefs.

⁹ The phenomenon of recent Iban expansion, evidently mainly for reasons of prestige and headhunting rather than a need for new agricultural land (King 1975-76; McKinley 1978), may at first sight seem relevant as a parallel for early Austronesian expansion. However, two factors make this unlikely; first the free availability amongst the Iban of iron tools, and second the lack of evidence for any such rapid agricultural spread in prehistoric times into an area of truly equatorial and perhumid rainforest. Early Austronesian colonists were almost certainly coastal and inter-island in orientation and were, of course, only supplied with stone tools.

¹⁰ Some may ask why the process of founder rank enhancement as here described does not appear to have influenced the Papuan-speaking peoples if, as I suggest, they took over parts of an Austronesian social network from about 3500 years ago. As the primary inhabitants of some very large landmasses (including New Guinea) perhaps they did not need to make any major or sustained long distance moves. In addition, with certain marked exceptions (such as the Mailu), the Papuan-speaking peoples seem not to have adopted many maritime skills.

¹¹ The anthropologically-renowned expansions of the egalitarian Iban of Sarawak (Freeman 1981) have clearly not led to any obvious development of ranking within Iban society, and indeed the most recent migrants seem to be the most egalitarian, as King has pointed out (1978:32). Perhaps this situation reflects continuous contact with homeland communities, thus offering few opportunities to those who might have wished to place their privileges as founders of a new community on a hereditary footing. However, amongst the nearby Kantu of Kalimantan it appears that founders are able to accumulate considerable wealth and prestige (Dove 1985:13).