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# **\*Banua, \*panua, fenua: An Austronesian conception of the sociocosmic world**

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The aim of this short communication is to argue that mobility is a founding principle of Austronesian languages, social ensembles, conceptions of land, country and landscape, all of which are signified by reflexes of the Proto-Malayo-Polynesian term *\*banua*. The complex relationships encapsulated in this term should be carefully studied in their social, cultural, experiential and cognitive dimensions.

Most of Island South-East Asia and Oceania share some common cultural traits (ritual dyads, primogeniture, ranked siblings according to their age and gender, stranger-kings, house and canoe-shaped social organisations, and so on) generally linked with common ancient linguistic features that have been reconstructed as “proto-Austronesian”. The spread of the language is thought to be correlated with the movement of people who came a few millennia ago from southern China all the way down to Island Melanesia and, as a new cultural complex (Lapita), to Remote Oceania and Polynesia.

For almost two centuries, the relative cultural homogeneity one can still perceive in spite of the local variations made the Pacific Islands a focus for cultural history, evolutionary anthropology and human ecology (Spriggs 2008). Archaeology was one of the tools used to trace these migrations, using material remains such as pottery, basalt artefacts, obsidian flakes, bones, charcoal, pollen, and agricultural features. Kirch (1982) inferred that, at least for the Polynesian area, population has been sustained by an agricultural complex (techniques, seeds, animals) called a “transported landscape”, following Anderson. This proposal strengthened the

materialist constraint-based hypothesis about migratory processes such as the quest for land and food resources or the quest for prestige goods (shells, whale teeth, feathers). Lately, a more cultural paradigm called “frontier ideology” has been proposed by Bellwood (1996): the young siblings of the chiefs would have been inclined to make their way to new islands in order to get political autonomy and establish their own dynasties.

These hypotheses may be valid, but probably underestimate the mobility of societies, many of which are still involved in wide and long lasting exchange networks (D’Arcy 2006). They also ignore other aspects of these societies such as their socio-cosmic organisation (Coppet 1990), which can be defined by the entanglements of the social world (the living, their social institutions and environments) with the cosmos (dead ancestors, the deities and the cosmos that they share with their human descendants). If the fertility of the land, the perpetuation of life and the efficiency of actions depend on the ancestors’ benevolence, conversely, the destiny and empowerment of the gods and ancestors rest on appropriately executed rituals. In this type of configuration – I personally studied the Wallisian case (Chave-Dartoen 2000) – rituals rule the life of the people and the order of the universe (Reuter 2006). In other words, the universe is made social, and social groups would not migrate without the “devices” (names, stones, plants or animals) necessary to transplant their cosmos to new islands, in part or whole. According to Blust (1987) the reconstructed PMP term *\*banua* refers to this kind of conceptual entity: a fertile, life providing land, where a society (or part of a society) develops in mutual custodianship with the ancestors, a cosmos made social.

Different anthropological propositions (within the Austronesian world or outside it) may be useful in order to grasp the complexities of the multiple cultural and cognitive dimensions involved in such a concept. Fox (1997), for instance, traces a direct link between the way Austronesian languages locate things and events, personal and social experience. Ingold (2000) proposed that “landscapes” should be understood as an embodiment of the space, the practices and the temporalities that organize it for the people who experience it. Munn (1996) insists on the fact

that, for Warlpiri Aborigines, the very presence of the ancestors is perceived in the landscape and organises practices and experience of it. Most ethnographies about the societies of Oceania agree that, despite the mutations of these socio-cosmic worlds and of their institutions, they perpetuate the condensed forms that \*banua – and its reflexes – designates. This term refers to the organization of the relationships between the living and the dead, the local society, its land, its cosmos, and the different levels (experience, language, ritual) of its environment's internalisation, embodiment and expression.

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