

Rethinking Ascribed/ Achieved Status: Hierarchy and Equality in Oral Histories among the Langalanga, Solomon Islands

Paper presented at the conference 'Hierarchy and Power'
2004, Institute of Ethnology, Academia Sinica

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Abstract

This paper examines the principles of grouping and their hierarchical and egalitarian relationships represented in migration narratives among the Langalanga, Solomon Islands. I argue that the nature of power relations in Langalanga is dualistic—it is both hierarchical and egalitarian at the same time in oral histories. Similar to the concept of 'precedence' widely seen in Austronesian societies, Langalanga people contrasts two sets of hierarchical categories: discovers (*etada'ona*) and latecomers (*burina*), and 'male side' (agnates, *abae wale*) and 'female side' (*abae geli*, or 'born of woman', *futa suli geli*). However, the emphasis is on cooperation and mutual prosperity among discovers and latecomers, and the network between male side and female side leads Langalanga society toward egalitarian at the same time.

Theoretically, this paper aims to rethink several concepts—including precedence, ascribed and achieved status in terms of hierarchy and power among the Austronesians. As Douglas (1979) points out, 'ascription and achievement were not polar opposites, but a matter of emphasis in particular contexts' (p.4). This paper further adds a temporal dimension and argues that in Langalanga, 'achieved status' can become 'ascribed status' in the next generations through the principles of precedence. Moreover, ascribed status has to be renewed from time to time. What is 'ascribed' and what is 'achieved' status is dynamic and has to be understood in cultural context and historical process.