common grounds of malayo-polynesian traditions

As a researcher on Indonesia, I found today there seems to be a controversial tendency in Indonesia to follow, copy, or import cultural elements or trends from several parts of the world. In my view, instead of imitating or importing trends from the United States, Europe, the Middle East, or India, the amazing treasure or richness of local cultural heritage and local wisdom contained in ancient traditions—“the old ways”—should be revived into the contemporary context instead of being neglecting or marginalized as traditional, backward, pre-modern or even primitive as they provide meaningful answers and concepts.

A reversion to the “old ways” is a means of reaffirming local cultural identity and wisdom with the objective to face rapid social change and erosion of local identity brought by modernization and homogenizing globalization trends in order to reestablish and revitalize those old ways meaningfully and effectively for present times and the future. This is a valuable way to secure protection of environment, social stability and social harmony basing on local identity and shared regional history and ancestry.

The first obvious question we need to ask is: What could be such common grounds of “the old ways” throughout Indonesia or contemporary polities speaking the Malayo-Polynesian language phyla? In such an enterprise, we need to identify the roots or ground for a common history of those speakers first. The “Malayo-Polynesian ancestral nations” (excuse the
reification) share a common language heritage: They all belong to the same language family: Austronesian. They also share common patterns of migration, culture and social control.

In 1883, J. D’Ormont coined the terms Melanesia, Micronesia, and Polynesia. In 1889, H. Kern coined the term Malayo-Polynesian language family for the language phyla spoken in the present Indonesian archipelago and the Western-Pacific. Languages in western Indonesia were termed “Western Malayo-Polynesian” and those in Melanesia and Polynesia were termed “Eastern Malayo-Polynesian”.

Ten years later, W. Schmidt introduced the term Austronesian as a substitute to denote the Malayo-Polynesian languages plus the languages spoken in Taiwan. Schmidt found that the Austroasiatic phyla spoken on mainland Asia had split into the Austroasiatic phyla spoken by some mainland Asian people and into the Austronesian language phyla. In consequence, contemporary “Malayo-Polynesians” share a common language heritage: They all belong to the same language phyla: Austroasiatic — if we include Taiwan, or Malayo-Polynesian if we exclude Taiwan.

Today, the Austronesian phyla diaspora covers half of the globe: From Madagascar in the West to the Easter islands in the East, and from Taiwan — Micronesia in the North to New Zealand in the South.

The Austronesian phyla is spoken throughout mainland and insular Southeast Asia, which extends southward from Myanmar to the Indonesian archipelago. At all, four major language groups—Austroasiatic, Austronesian, Tibeto-Burman, and Tai-Kadai—are spoken in the region. The Austronesian phyla is spoken in modern Taiwan, Indonesia, East Timor, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Brunei, Micronesia, Polynesia, the non-Papuan languages of Melanesia, the Cham areas of Vietnam, Cambodia, Hainan, Myanmar, some Indian Ocean islands and Madagascar. (Simanjuntak et al. 2005: 2; Blundell 2011: 76, www.rogerblench.info) The Austronesian languages number about
1,200 and represent 20% of the world’s total languages

Consequently, the appearance of the speakers of Austronesian Phyla Diaspora or the dispersal of the speakers of Austronesian phyla throughout the Pacific triggered the ethno-geneses of the ancestral polities of speakers of Malayo-Polynesian languages that all share a common root of history, culture, ethics, and in my eyes, social control. Those shared traits place the nations that we find today in the above described region as important contributors to the global history of humanity – regarding their mostly undiscovered history which nonetheless reaches back into early prehistory.

Migration and settlement

Most likely, there were continuous waves of migration from mainland Asia to what should become the contemporary “ancestral nations of Malayo-Polynesia”. It seems commonly accepted, that three present-day groups of inhabitants can be categorized which did not speak Austronesian languages (Munoz 2006) and populated Sundaland between 50,000 and 17,000 years ago, thus prior to three floods in 12000 BC, 9000 BC, and 6000 BC:

1. An Australo-Melanesian group, which still represents the dominant group in the eastern archipelago island. They are believed to be the ancestors of the present-day population of Melanesia, Australian Aborigines, and Papua New Guinea (for contemporary research see www.rogerblench.info)

2. A Veddoid group, the term Veddas comes from the Sanskrit Vyadha, which represents hunters with bows. Veddoid communities were composed of nomadic people who survived by hunting and fishing. Small Veddoid communities still exist in Sumatra (Kubu, Sakai) and in Sulawesi (Toala). (for contemporary research see www.rogerblench.info)

3. A Negrito communities were composed of nomadic people
who survived by hunting and gathering. Today, only a few small communities exist in the Western part of the Indonesian Archipelago and in Malaysia. (for contemporary research see www.rogerblench.info)

Ethnohistoric research on those Veddoid and Negrito communities shows a few common features, among others: they were nomadic foragers (hunter-gatherers) living in small family groups. Family relations were extremely loose and fluid: they had no chiefs, recognized no authority, and men and women were of equal status. People were highly specialized to their environment and were able to make use of everything that the jungle offered for food, tools, arms and medicine. (Munoz 2006: 22)

In prehistory, parts of Western Indonesia were linked to the present day Malaysia and the Asian continent (which formed part of a super-continent named Laurasia, including North American, European and Asian plates).

Animals and people were walking, floating and seafaring from the Asian continent to Sundaland. Sundaland encompasses the Sunda shelf, parts of the Asian continental shelf, the Malay Peninsula, as well as Borneo, Java, and Sumatra and their surrounding islands. The islands of the eastern part of Indonesia, Australia, and New Guinea were linked as a continent named Sahulland, a separate landmass having a completely different fauna and flora than Sundaland. Thus, human groups speaking pre-Austronesian languages moving eastward from Sundaland may have settled Sahulland.

Undisputed seems the migration history of Micronesia and Oceania.

The islands of the Pacific were originally settled from Southeast Asia by two different groups of people at widely separated points in time. The first settlers of the Pacific, ancestors of present-day Melanesians and Australian
Aboriginals, reached New Guinea and Australia roughly 40,000–60,000 years ago. By 38,000 B.C., these Melanesian peoples had expanded as far east as the northern Solomon Islands. It would be more than 30,000 years, however, before the descendants of a second wave of Southeast Asian peoples, together with the Melanesians with whom they interacted, began to venture into the more remote islands of the Pacific. (“Oceania, 8000–2000 B.C.”. In Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000–. http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/ht/?period=02®ion=oc (October 2000))

Probably between 17000 BC and 3000 BC, the Australo-Melanesian populations that had remained in Sundaland diversified ethnically from those who had moved to and settled in Sahulland. Reasons might be multi-factorial, as probably through a combination of local climatic pressure and a process of mixing with successive waves of migrants, who were of Southern Mongoloid origin – whether originating from mainland Southeast Asia, Southern China, or Taiwan, who moved to the islands in the south.

There is considerable dispute over the area of origin or the homeland of the speakers of the early Austronesian language phyla. The study of origins and a possible homeland of the speakers of Proto-Malayo-Polynesian posits two main models: first, the “out-of-Taiwan” model (Bellwood 1987, Blust 1984-85), second, the native to MSEA – Northwestern Vietnam” – or the eastern part of ISEA model (Solheim 1984, Oppenheimer 1999, 2001, Ishak 2007). The second model basically claims that the complex linguistic and cultural situation in the Western Malayo-Polynesian language groups does not correspond to a simple model of incoming neolithic farmers replacing foragers. (Blench, no year, 129) This dispute cannot be discussed in depth here (for a recent discussion see www.rogerblench.info). The debate revolving around the two models is difficult to reconcile, as not
enough archaeological linguistic, and genetic evidence has been provided. In addition, linguistic, genetic, and archaeological data at times disagree, and there are large gaps in archaeological records.

“One obvious way out of this dilemma would be to assume the exclusive forager model was simply not true, that there were vegetable culturalists in ISEA prior to the coming of the Austronesians. Austronesian speakers simply assimilated them, and largely adopted their agricultural system. In this version of prehistory, early ISEA would have occupied by multiple distinct groups, including scattered foragers, settlers from the mainland in the west and “Papuans” in the more eastern regions.” (Blench, no year, 131)

At any case, the arrival of people with Southern Mongoloid origin gave rise to a new language phyla: Austronesian and its subbranch Malayo-Polynesian. A dispersal model based on linguistic data proposes following dispersal pattern:

As the sea level rose at the end of the last glacial period, those migrants improved shipping and seafaring skills. In consequence, concerning a general pattern of the dispersal of the Austronesian phyla or Malayo-Polynesian (minus Taiwan language group), successive migration waves occurred.

As we only have scarce archaeological knowledge about original shared cultural, religious, legal and political traits of social groups speaking Malayo-Polynesian languages, I can only speculate by summarizing previous research that those groups might have been sharing subsequent themes or patterns in the ancient past of which some traits clearly still can be found today

1. cultural diversity and cultural pluralism
2. heterarchic social patterns (flexibility in status definition, political relations, and lateral differentiation in social and economic realms, in: White
1995: 107) and egalitarian social systems that were quite democratic but that recognized a certain ranking among their members, as in each village the highest in status were the descendants of the group or ancestor who had founded the community ("vanua"), thus Malayo-Polynesian groups usually share the same model of social structure organized by lineage (families), clan and tribe (communities) (Munoz 2006)

3. a close interconnection of spatial, social and religious differentiation marking center and periphery (Tambiah 1976, Tooker 1996)

4. religious activities that centered around animism, shamanism and ancestor veneration

5. Indigenous economies that tend to be characterized by a development of specialized craft communities (White 1995)

A lot of transdisciplinary research has to be conducted.

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