

Human ecology & biodiversity in Austronesian societies

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Introduction

Austronesian peoples radiated out from Taiwan and populated the islands of Oceania where they faced many challenges such as extreme climate and European exploration. In these extreme conditions, these peoples created interesting relationships with the fauna of the region as well as the animals brought over by the Europeans. This study ventures into the different relationships and interactions these cultural groups have formed with these animals.

This study acts as a review of background information found in literature that will be used in a follow up multi-sited research project held in the region. The information this project will provide will both further the understanding of these relationships and will also provide information useful in biodiversity conservation efforts and in affirming indigenous rights over natural sources.

Fish and marine animals:

- Use in legends³
- Inspiration for art¹
- Valuable food source dictating where populations settled¹⁵
- Fishing conducted as a gendered task, aided by children⁹
- Magic for better yields¹⁰ or keep fish away from enemies¹⁴
- Ceremonial fishing trips¹³
- Fish and shellfish staple in diet⁹
- Social rules regulate fishing¹⁶
- Shark tooth and sting ray skin in art production¹
- Shark tooth in ornamentation¹⁷ and tools⁵
- Fishing practices include poisoning, spearing, nets, etc.⁵
- Whale teeth ornamentation,⁵ whalebone for tools¹⁸
- Symbolic difference in ocean fishing and reef fishing¹⁹

Pigs:

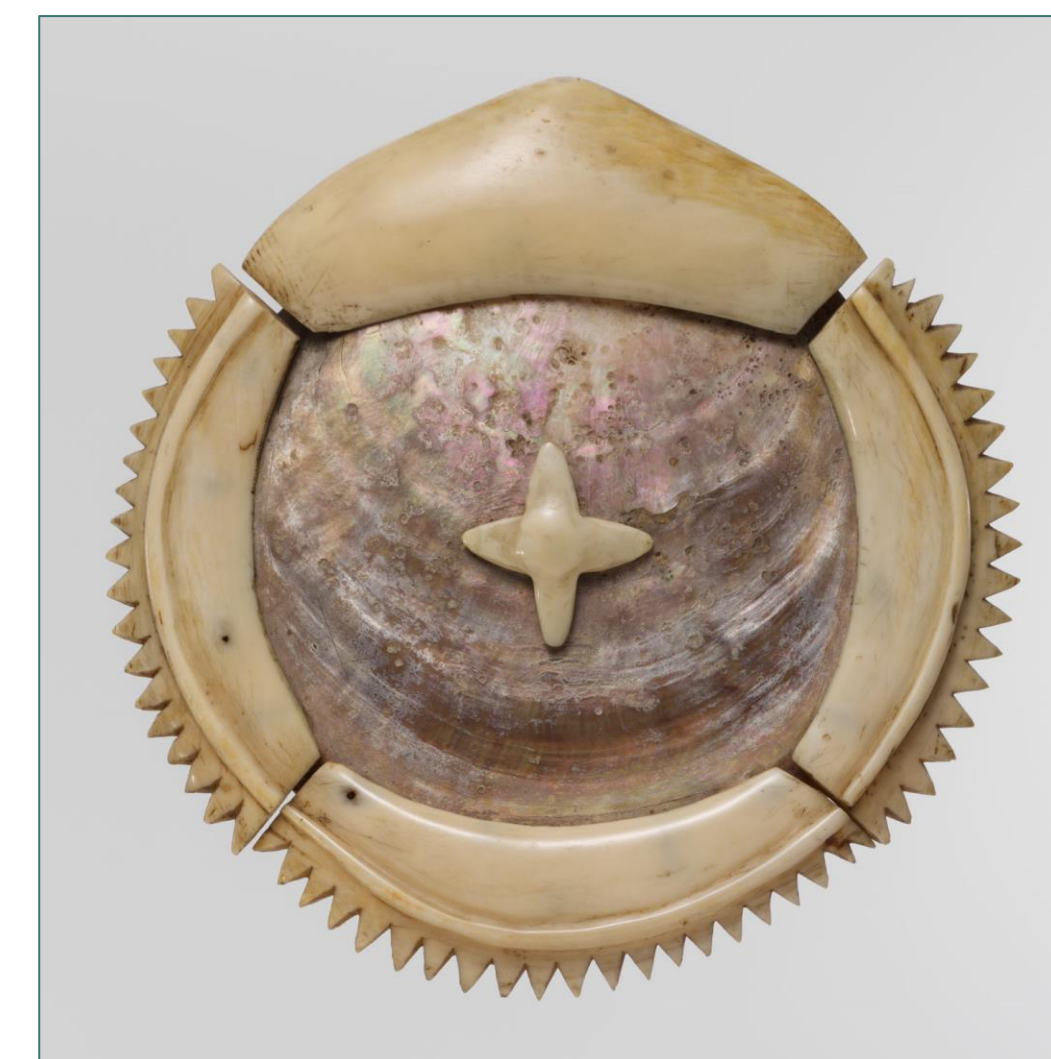
- Inspiration for art¹
- Domesticated⁶
- Wild population as well¹¹
- Introduced by Austronesians²⁰
- Staple meat²
- Use in legend and spirituality¹²
- Use in ritual¹³
- Strong personal relationships¹⁴
- Rules dictating relationship¹¹



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Birds:

- Inspiration for art¹
- Wild population²
- Use in legend³
- Feather use in ornamentation⁴
- Hunted with stones, spears, nets, mahuket, etc.⁵

Dogs:

- Introduced by Austronesians²⁰
- Domesticated⁶
- Pets or livestock⁷
- Use in spiritualism and legend⁸
- Dog's teeth in ornamentation,⁴ high in symbolic and economic value⁸

Rats:

- Invasive species²
- Use in legend, deemed threatening to man³

Fowl:

- Introduced by Austronesians²⁰
- Staple meat²
- Domesticated⁶

Methodology

Take a random sample of the all the documents on the Austronesian cultures on the eHRAF database.



Study all material marked with fauna related tags.



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Turtles/Tortoises:

- Wild population²
- Source of meat⁹
- Tortoise shell used in jewelry, symbolic value¹⁰
- Turtle meat reserved for priests and chiefs, in Marquesas⁵
- Proposed as tribute to chief to create peace, in Marquesas⁵
- Tortoise honoured as chief in Tonga²



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Conclusion:

Drawing from all the data, across many different cultural groups, patterns arise. First, the incredible impact of the above listed animals, many of which are not native, is of note. In most situations, these animals, instead of native animals, become the primary meat source. Pigs, in particular, are integrated in Austronesian societies and have a special, close bond to the people. Most surprising of all the finds was the level of respect and honour attributed to turtles.

Differences exist between each culture despite the similarity in origin and in fauna that can be attributed to Austronesian settlement and physical proximity. Some of these differences can be explained through variations in relief altering ways of life. For example, in Tonga, the lack of running freshwater limits the wildlife diversity.² Today, the peoples are westernized but the roots of their culture still remain. Interactions with fauna have been reduced through importing canned meats.⁹ However, these relationships remain and studies to help maintain that these relationships are not interfered with are still important.



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