APATANI IDEAS AND IDIOMS OF ORIGINS

STUART BLACKBURN

My starting point for this essay is a perception that, while a good deal has been written about the origins and migrations of various peoples in the eastern Himalayas, we know comparatively little about their own ideas on these topics. As Robbins Burling makes clear in his essay in this volume, those ideas may have been altered or indeed created by the interest of outsiders keen on establishing the provenance of populations over which they sought civil or spiritual dominion. Other essays in this book explore the accuracy of claims of origins in the eastern Himalayas, the historical, social and economic causes and cultural significance of these claims, as well as their role in the construction of identities and assertion of rights in the context of the nation-state. These various dimensions of current thinking on origins and migration enrich our understanding of the broader, earlier and ongoing debate about traditions reinvented, rediscovered or revived.

As I began to think about the Apatani material in these terms, however, something seemed missing. I could write about Apatani claims of a Tibetan origin and the long migration of the ancestors before settling in the Apatani valley, at about 5,000 feet in the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh. I could then go on to describe Abo Tani, the common ancestor for all the ‘Tani’ tribes in central Arunachal Pradesh and whose name is the Apatani autonym (*tanii*). These imagined origins and narratives of the ancestral past play a pivotal role in current identity politics within the state.

This would be useful, possibly interesting, but would still not answer the question that I had not yet even been able to articulate. Unsure of my own misgivings, I then came across a collection of essays on origins in Austronesian languages and cultures. In his introductory chapter, James J. Fox writes:

One of the perennial preoccupations in Austronesian studies has been with the tracing the origins of the Austronesians. Archaeologists, linguists and historians have all been concerned with this task. A less prominent concern has been to examine indigenous ideas of origin and how they function within Austronesian societies.¹

¹ Fox 1996:5.
Fox goes on to say that while he and his colleagues have written about origins and migrations in this vast region—stretching from Malaysia and Indonesia to Micronesia, Melanesia and Polynesia—they had little knowledge of the local meanings of these ideas. Do Austronesian languages even have equivalents of ‘origin’ and ‘migration’? If so, how are they used? English-speakers talk of genealogical ‘trees’ and migration ‘routes’. What metaphors do Austronesians use?

In looking through the work of his colleagues, Fox found that the concept of ‘origin’ is articulated through a variety of themes—ancestry, alliance, spirit contact, sacred objects—and in a variety of forms: dreams, chants, legends. Underneath this diversity, however, he identified a ‘combination of elements, phrased in common metaphors, and cognate terms…[a] discourse on origins that is distinctly Austronesian.’

A central element in this discourse, Fox concluded, is precedence, both the language and the practice of precedence.

A similar isolation of the idioms of origins that are characteristically eastern Himalayan is the long-term goal toward which this essay takes a small step. Already, several colleagues have succeeded in identifying a few elements that are surely part of this complex. The ritual journey, for example, has now been shown to play a central role in the cosmology of many Tibeto-Burman-speaking populations in the region. Another shared idea of the past is an oral narrative about (typically two) brothers who compete, separate and settle in different locations as a migration story that explains relations to other—usually dominate and literate—groups. Similarly, a myth of multiple suns (and moons), often explaining the origin of mortality, and a legend of lost writing are also told by many populations in Nepal, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, upland Southeast Asia and southwest China. Another kind of common element in a possible eastern Himalayan discourse on origins, and one which recurs in the essays in this book, is the symbolism of water. Other similarly widespread ideas and expressions undoubtedly exist, and a proper comparative analysis is needed in order to identify a common language and practice of origins and migration in the region, if indeed one exists.

As a contribution to that comparative task, I present here my understanding of Apatani ideas and idioms of origins. I will say little about migration because, to Apatanis, it is secondary to more fundamental concepts about origins. While ideas about geographical migration are

---

2 Fox 1996:5.
4 Oppitz 2006; Wellens this volume.