



On the Wings of Myth. A Review of Serge Dunis's Pacific Mythology

by Giuseppe Sofo

*Break a vase, and the love that reassembles the
fragments is stronger than that love which took its
symmetry for granted when it was whole.*

(Derek Walcott, "The Antilles: Fragments of an Epic
Memory")

Serge Dunis's book *Pacific Mythology, Thy Name Is Woman* (Haere Pō, Papeete, 2009) is a complex work, arguing that the settlement of the Pacific has happened from West to East, relying on a broad variety of studies and disciplines, and making use of all the possibilities offered by today's sciences to trace back the history of the peoples that have inhabited this ocean that covers a third of the world. This work "has been propelled by a kindred sense of mystery, fascination and quest", as Mark Mosko states (2011: 202), and obtained through a work in which "archaeology, mythology, meteorology, ornithology, oceanography and navigation sing the same tune" (Dunis 2009: 181), a multifaceted investigation of all the aspects that could favour a better understanding of how the Pacific has come to life, of how the first settlers have



reached these far-away islands, and of how their cultural background has influenced the new cultures that were born there.

To analyse Dunis's long and complex journey of discovery of the Pacific, I have divided this review in five chapters, focusing on the relationship between climatic conditions, agricultural needs, artefacts and the mythology of these (is)lands, to show how Dunis has succeeded in showing that the birth of the Pacific has been caused by and obtained through migration.

JADE

To discuss the birth of the Pacific, we need in fact to go all the way back to coastal China and Taiwan, and to a Chinese artefact representing the “squaring of the circle” (Dunis 2009: 39), known with the names of *cong* or *ts'ung*. “Round like the sky above and square like the earth” (Dunis 2009: 39), this precious jade represents the “primordial union of the sky father and the earth mother” (Dunis 2009: 39) that is the very basis of Pacific cosmology, thanks to its double identity, its “square exterior and round interior” (Dunis 2009: 40). Because of this, and of the “essential vital force” (Dunis 2009: 40) of jade, this object became one of the most used jades to accompany the dead into their burial, together with the *pi* (or *bi*), circular as the path of the sun, once again unifying the round aspect of the sky (and sun) and the square of the earth. The very meaning of the word “*li*, or ritual” is in fact “to serve the gods with jade” (Dunis 2009: 40). This is proved by the fact that “the jade *ts'ung* tubes were made from the same material, using the same production methods, and with the same markings as jade *pi* disks” (Yang 2001: 52) and that they “were also excavated in the same graves” (Yang 2001: 52). Furthermore, “*bi* and *cong* are frequently mentioned in conjunction or even as a joined term in the Confucian classics” (Teng 2004: 181).

On *ts'ung* can be found the “‘deity-sacred animal-ancestor’ trinity” and on *pi* birds in flight and aquatic animals; according to Hayashi Minao, as quoted by Teng, “these creatures symbolize the *yin* (or feminine element) in complementary relation to the *yang* (masculine element)” (2004: 177). “The study of Neolithic jades”, writes Dunis, “has deepened our understanding of the cosmology and religion of early societies during the formative stage of Chinese civilization” (2009: 43) and it has shown “an intensely dualistic view of the world, in which the ‘round’ elements of the cosmos [...] complemented the ‘square’ elements” (Dunis 2009: 43).

Sky/earth, father/mother, round/square, *pi/ts'ung*, yang/yin: all of these binary oppositions (or better, two halves of the same whole) reflect a common belief in a primordial union/division between the sky father and the earth mother, which takes us all the way from China to the rest of the Pacific. The Polynesian *tiki* is in fact as close as possible to the *ts'ung*, not only because of the similar decorations on it, representing human faces on top of animal ones, “the gods, ancestors and divine animals [that]



formed a trinity” (Teng 1999: 331), “in the same way the bronze vessel displays the ubiquitous *t’ao-t’ie* or animal mask” (Dunis 2009: 44), but especially because they all are “emblematic of a cosmogony which unites the sky father with the earth mother” (Dunis 2009: 44). Something proving, according to Dunis, “that one has to go back to the Jade Age, representational matrix of China, to locate the birthplace of Pacific cultures” (Dunis 2009: 45).

In this continuum from China to the Pacific cultures, the turtle has played a significant role. Its shape is a perfect image of the union of sky and earth, as “for the Chinese, the curved back represented the vault of Heaven and the flat belly the Earth. Thus the simple animal shape in a way symbolised the whole universe” (Luzzatto-Bilitz 1966: 121). For this reason, the turtle is also used for divination, to re-establish the communication between men and gods, as some kind of new “ladder to heaven” (Hsu 2002: 20).

The fundamental role played by Taiwan in this journey could never be stressed enough. According to Tsang, “the importance of Taiwan for Austronesian origins lies partly in its role as a bridge between the Mainland and the Pacific, and partly in its potential role in the connection between the prehistoric cultures and its modern Austronesian speakers” (Tsang 2005: 71). And if Taiwan has served as a geographical bridge, then the nomadic seafarers are most probably those that have served as a human and material bridge, as “transmitters of material culture” (Chen 2002: 53). If it is true, in fact, that “investigation of the pottery, stone tools, jades and other artefacts of these Neolithic cultures show that there is both unity among diversity and diversity among unity”, (Chen 2002: 53), it is also true that “the Pacific ocean is the obvious carrier of this cultural odyssey” (Dunis 2009: 50). An ocean whose cultural womb needs to be extended from the Yellow River and the Yangtze of the Liangzhu culture to the coast of South America, as Dunis's studies on winds of the El Niño Southern Oscillation (ENSO) show.

ON THE WINGS OF WINDS

If the sea is the way through which these cultures have come to terms with each other and the nomadic seafarers have gone and settled in islands that will later form the Austronesian and Pacific cultures, then it should not be surprising that all Taiwanese legends are based on what Dunis terms a “founding flood” (2009: 51). Bringing together these myths from all the different ethnic groups of Taiwan (Amis, Atayal, Bunun, Cou, Rukai, Saisiat, Paiwan, Puyuma, Tao, Thao), several similarities between these floods can be pointed out: the first one being that all of them brought disaster as well as a new birth.

For the Amis the flood was caused by the beauty of Cisiringan (and the love of the sea spirit for her), for the Paiwan the causes are a punishment by the gods and the



carelessness of a child, and the summit of Da Wu Mountain the signal that land was approaching. Another mountain and another child for the Saisiat; Da Bia Jian Mountain and Oppenhaboon, who saved his sister. Two brothers also for the Tao (stone man and bamboo man) and for the Rukai, but for the latter the mountains are only obstacles in their way to a serene lake.

Even though flood myths are not restricted to the Pacific, we are obviously brought to wonder the reasons of such an amount of floods in Taiwanese mythology, and we can recall to this purpose what Rolett tells us about the history of sea-level in China: “the maximum sea-level stand for Southern China”, he writes, “occurred from 6000 to 4500 BP, with the sea level about 2.4 m higher than at present” and “dates for the high-sea level stand fit closely with radiocarbon dates for the Neolithic settlement of Taiwan” (Rolett in Tianlong 2007: 60). To understand what kind of floods these were, the role ENSO has played must be discussed, since according to Dunis, it is “widely acknowledged to have been instrumental in the settlement of the Eastern Pacific” (2009: 53). In his work on El Niño, Caviedes affirms that “during El Niño years, southern China is affected by floods and northern China by cold and dryness [...]”, while “under La Niña conditions, southern China experiences droughts, and the north floods”, and “during the transitional periods between El Niño and La Niña, floods occur in central China around the Yangtze river” (2001: 209).

Further knowledge of the terrible consequences of these winds in China can derive from Couper-Johnston's words:

In human terms, the most significant disasters in the course of China's history have always been those affecting the densely populated valleys of the Yangtze River (Chang Jiang) and Yellow River (Huang He). Flooding on the Yellow River, often referred to as 'China's Sorrow', has probably cost more lives than any other single natural feature in the world associated with disaster. And it is probably no coincidence that El Niño exercises its strongest influence on Chinese weather in these very valleys. (Couper-Johnston 2001: 80-81)

These are the reasons for which Dunis can write that “the spread of the Jade culture does overlap with ENSO in unwitting celebration of the wedding of continental China with the Pacific thanks to El Niño and La Niña joining forces as if inspired by the very forces of the *yin* and the *yang*” (Dunis 2009: 54), making it easier to include these two *niños*, these two kids and climatic phenomena, to the male/female cosmology that has been defined in the previous pages.

An easy step from this reality of two twins of opposite sexes generating a world, is incest, which plays a big role in Pacific mythology, probably accounting for the natural consanguinity of such small and hard-to-reach islands. The Rukai tell the story of two eggs from which emerged Gilagilau and Alayiumu, who gave birth to a son and a daughter, who also gave birth to a son and a daughter and so on, until Gayagade is pregnant thanks to a flash of lightning, which opens the way to the first healthy



children. For the Saisiat the woman has to mask herself in order to trick the man and get her baby, while for the Tao both Bamboo man and Stone man could only have abnormal children, until they decided to make their children meet, and they started having healthy babies. Cauquelin says that Pagemuser and Pakmalai, brother and sister, got married and "a deformed being, half-man, half-stone, was born" (2004: 28); after the elder told them to accept their child into their house and became a mountain, "they took the stone and it broke. Out of it came the Amis, the Paiwan, and all the others" (Cauquelin 2004: 28). According to Dunis, "this intimate association between drought, flood, and the incestuous renaissance of the surviving human pair suggests that the birth of the Austronesian culture had the El Niño Southern Oscillation as a midwife" (2009: 55) and, interestingly enough, the turtles that were earlier pointed out as the perfect image of the union between sky father and earth mother of a pan-Pacific cosmology, may have been the very cause of discovery, by these peoples, "of this meteorological anomaly" (Dunis 2009: 55); an anomaly, which is very likely to have caused the birth of Pacific cultures.

A birth, which is also a transformation, "from a hunting to a farming society" (Dunis 2009: 59), as shown by several myths. "In the former society", writes Cauquelin, "men were hunters, and it was they who exercised the functions of shamans" (2004: 189), while in the new society the women have taken up this role, and the Rite of the Deer is there to prove it, together with all the myths connected to it. The relationships between animals and women in other myths, especially the mountain boar of the Cou, and the deer, boar and snakes of the Amis, bring Dunis to conclude that "by taking over shamanism, women expose what men symbolically hide: that the female womb is the one and only ancestor maker!" (2009: 60).

THE WAVES OF MYTH

It is myths and rituals themselves to inform the reader on what way the Taiwanese decided to follow when setting out on the sea. The Puyuma tell three myths of fertility; in the first one Demalaw lands on Orchid Island, marries Tayban and brings millet seeds back to Taiwan in his prepuce; in the second the trickster Patakiu is banished on Green Island, but he succeeds in going back thanks to a great fish, or a whale, which also gives him five grains of millet; in the last one, an ancestor who used to cross the Peinan River finds a poisonous snake in his bag and makes an offering to placate the spirit. Dunis shows how all these myths "point towards the southeast thanks to the river and the two islands" (2009: 61).

The myths of Baleng and Muakaikai both take place in the "day bringing satisfaction", where these two beautiful girls are abducted (by a snake and by an old man), and then go back to their village only in a special occasion. But even more interesting is the Amis myth which brings us directly to "The Isle of Women motif' [...]"



widespread in Polynesia and probably elsewhere in the Pacific” (Lavondès 1975: 411 in Dunis 2009: 62). The Amis man Maciwciw lands on an unknown island inhabited only by women, who get pregnant by opening their arms to the wind. Taken as a prisoner, he is freed with the help of a young woman and goes back home on a whale’s back. In the Marquesas, we are told about Kae who arrives on Pandanus Island, peopled by women who gave birth thanks to the phallic-shaped pandanus aerial roots, but whose womb had to be cut open in the process. Kae taught the chief of the island how to give birth naturally, saving the mothers’ lives, and then became her lover. He later left the island and his new wife on the back of a dolphin; when their son grew up, he asked about his father and was sent on the back of a second dolphin to look for him. In the Society Islands we hear of Mahutari’i, who is brought to an island full of pandanus, thanks to an *‘upa’i* crab.

Whales or islands, it makes no difference for Maui, probably the most important character of Polynesian mythology. From his canoe, he catches an enormous fish, which will become New Zealand. Another canoe, Rata’s, seems to be cursed; his daily work vanishes during the night, until he agrees to help the egret, who had been asking him to do so for three days, and who had told him the canoe would have never been completed otherwise. A third canoe brings Upstream-Amaka to meet Downstream-Amaka, and the latter will learn from his upstream “brother” how to cook food with fire, to use lime to chew, and to give birth to children without the mother’s death.

All these themes and events are as similar as the characters and the backgrounds of these myths. And Dunis puts a final word to all this, when he writes that “the passage from continental China to Taiwan and the Pacific is achieved by jade and myth” (2009: 66).

THE SWEET POTATO

Myths can also inform us on the patterns of migration of the sweet potato; the Rapa Nui Procreation Chant, in the version sang by Ure Va’e Iko, an Easter Island inhabitant of the 19th century to William Judah Thomson and Alexander Paea Salmon, can show how vital this tuber was to these lands. Steven Roger Fischer, in his *Rongorongo: the Easter Island Script: History, Traditions, Texts* (1997) has outlined a clear structure of this chant, “the X1YZ structure (X standing for the copulator, 1 for the phrase ‘copulated with’, Y for the copulatee, Z for the issue)” (Dunis 2009: 141); most of them belong to the plant world, but their unions are not fruitful, as these passages prove:

36 E toto te eki no, kino no, nga roki no, nga rengo no, nga tokatoka ruapapa (no)
There spread only wailing, abomination, the sad, the mutilated, the *ruapapa*
survivors

37 E pu’oko te mauku no, tupa ‘iti no, tupa nui (no)



There sprout only weeds, only little land crabs, (only) big land crabs. (Fischer 1997: 93)

Fortunately, things finally change, when the sweet potato steps into the scene:

46 Ka ma'u te kovare, taratara te kovare

Take the placenta, separate the placenta

47 Turu ki te u'a ma a'ua'u: ma'u, avai, roau

Descend to the waves to midwife: Take, give, celebrate

48 Ka unu kura 'i tu'a; he 'a'anu ki horou; e a'a; e toe tu'a, tanu to ta'ana moko- e aha nangi; e toe 'uhi, e kumara

Drink the best afterwards; spit it out quickly; one should submerge: one should remain afterwards, bury its *moko* cord – one should bite through it; there should be left yams, sweet potatoes. (Fischer 1997: 93)

In this passage, the reader (or listener) gets to “witness the only natural birth in the Procreative Chant, a paradoxically unique birth which endows the former unsatisfying yam economy with the sweet potato” (Dunis 2009: 148). The reason the sweet potato is so fundamental for the agricultural needs of the Pacific, is that it was able to adapt to the different conditions of the remote islands it reached.

The sweet potato allowed Hawaiians to master altitude (plantations are no longer confined to humid valleys, they are possible on the dry slopes) and it allowed Maori to master latitude (New Zealand is in the temperate zone). The acquisition of the sweet potato thus revolutionized the exploitation of the islands. (Dunis in Sofo 2013)

This journey of the sweet potato is also the perfect image for the crossing of the Pacific the early and later settlers have accomplished, as the ability to adapt to a new world is something any migrant must possess, to prosper in a new reality. And the “canoe-portable agriculture” (Dunis 2009: 179) of the sweet potato prospers and gives to the settlers of the Pacific the opportunity to do the same, and to bring their stories and their histories far away in space and time.

A term used to define this fundamental tuber can help once again to connect very distant lands on the Pacific, as “the identical Aymara and Polynesian term, *kumara*, designates the same cultivated plant, the sweet potato, in the heart of the Andes by the inland sea of Titicaca and in the middle of the Pacific ocean on the widely separated ocean archipelagos” (Dunis 2009: 161), something which could even “link the Amerindian mythology of the sweet potato with its Pacific counterpart” (Dunis 2009: 181).



FROM ASIA TO THE AMERICAS

If jade “vanquishes both time and space by making millennium-old forms and ideas endure” (Dunis 2009: 67), and the sweet potato has been able to cross the seas to sustain the agricultural needs of the Pacific, this book also shows that myth is not of weaker substance, because the stories that have travelled from Taiwan to South America have made it possible to trace the sea journeys of the settlers that gave birth to these cultures. Comparing the different variants of myths and putting them in relation with each other, following Lévi-Strauss’s method, Dunis writes that it is no surprise if the Marquesan dolphins and the Maori whales become turtles for the Samoans, because:

At the Tuvalu-Tokelau-Samoa-Tonga crossroads where the Austronesio-Lapita became Polynesians, it seems only natural that the turtles which allowed us to leave the Asian continent behind in Taiwan should be on a par with the two big sea mammals, themselves illustrating the small size of the Marquesan archipelago compared to New Zealand. (Dunis 2009: 67)

Of fundamental value is also Dunis’s step back into continental China, after all what has been explained through these pages, to prove that the migrants who have given life to the Pacific have indeed China in their historical and cultural background:

If ENSO is indeed the prime cultural mover we have highlighted, the flood myth, albeit being a stubborn invariant the world over, precisely because it is tied to real meteorological facts, should be found in southern China with idiosyncrasies similar to those we have pinpointed in Taiwan to make it relevant to our argument. (Dunis 2009: 68)

Anne Birrell solves this doubt, by stating that “forty-nine versions of this minority flood tradition exist, which all follow a similar plot. Their myth tells of a world flood in which the human race perished except for a brother and his sister (...). The couple went on to marry and found a new race of humans” (2000: 70). If the flood myth, somehow a founding myth for the Pacific has its traces back in China, also the Island of Women, which has already been recognized as a recurring motif of the area, has its parallel in the Chinese myth of the Country of Women, which “embodies myths of gender competition, gender roles, matriarchy, virgin birth and the fertilizing power of bathing” (Birrell 2000: 62). To prove this proximity even further, by joining four versions of the flood myth it becomes quite clear “how the stirred waters threaten the world mountain, how Woman Gua severs the legs of a giant turtle to prop up the sky,



how Hufegfish controls the flood with cosmic soil, how the swamped Middle Kingdom is emptied into the sea by Reptilian-Pawprint" (Dunis 2009: 69).

The reef egret also "flies" into the scene, reaching "all the way across this ocean" (Dunis 2009: 70). The bird witnesses the birth of the Austral Islands, "as the five fingers of the hand" (Dunis 2009: 71), from the five children of Hao, "a big atoll in the central Tuamotus" (Dunis 2009: 70), plus the last one, represented by the mother, Maria. Sent to recover Maria's children, the egret can only come back with traces of them, and after it has put the new islands under its wings, "we have re-established the link between the Asian and American coasts of the Pacific ocean" (Dunis 2009: 71), thanks to its flight.

To have some more physical (but not necessarily more solid) evidence of the fact that the West to East direction is the way the Pacific came to be inhabited, and not the opposite, the examination moves to the winds that made it possible for the canoes to travel across this ocean. If it is true that the winds blowing in the opposite direction are more frequent, it has also been proved that:

Westerlies blow fitfully in the summer months all the way from the East Indies to Polynesia. The double canoes and outrigger canoes which were the standard Polynesian vessels in early historical times were fully capable of bringing the Polynesian ancestors from the west through Melanesia or Micronesia by a succession of one-way migrations during westerlies. (Sharp 1963: 123)

And not only is it evident that "during the Months of Novr Decembr & January Westerly winds with rain prevail & as the inhabitants of the Islands know very well how to make the proper use of the winds there will no difficulty arise in Trading or sailing from Island to Island even tho' they lay in an East & West direction" (Cook 1955: 154), but, even more importantly, Cook gives an easy logical solution to the problem of which direction to choose:

At times, during the Summer Months, there are a few days of Westerly Winds, which blow with some violence. The Islanders however prefer to sail with these winds, because they are pretty certain of an easterly Wind to bring them home (Cook 2007: 171).

With a couple further specifications to this scheme, after reaching Polynesia from Taiwan, the canoes of the early settlers can be taken from Western Polynesia right to Easter Island, as "in 1985, Finney showed how the highly anomalous westerlies triggered off by the major 1982-83 El Niño could readily have taken a canoe from Western Polynesia (Samoa) to the Marquesas", and they also "would have granted Marquesans a direct access to Easter Island" (Dunis 2009: 74).



A BOOK THAT COVERS A THIRD OF THE WORLD

Pacific mythology, thy name is woman is a fundamental work to embark on a journey as fascinating as the starting and landing points of this study. As the canoes that have brought people and cultures from inland China and Taiwan, all the way to Easter Island and South America have proved to be very sound, so have the arguments of this book. Setting out on the vast ocean of anthropological research, as the first inhabitants of these islands had set out on the Pacific Ocean, reaching all the way across, Dunis has given his readers the opportunity to land on a unknown country, where the settlement from West to East of the Pacific becomes a fact, supported by a complex amount of evidence, ranging from archaeology to meteorology, from geography to anthropology. And, although “the challenges of 'Oceanian Mythology' undoubtedly overcome those of this work and it will take some more time to validate their scientific validity”, as Raymond Mayer writes, “Dunis has certainly opened the way” (2011: 201, my translation).

However, the most important contribution of this work to the history of cultural formation, not only in the Pacific, is to show that “nature and culture are [...] never at rest” (Mayer 2011: 177), and that “objects and plants never travel on their own: the cultural side is part and parcel of the package” (Dunis in Sofo 2013). Migration, whether of humans, stories, or plants, is the core of this book, because it is the core of life; only what and who moves, meets, and mixes with the rest of the world has a chance of surviving, and of bringing its seeds further, to far-away lands, engendering new life, and new ways of living. Cultures and people meet each other, and discover their own values through these encounters. And through these movements and these transformations, cultures have been shaped and reshaped, thanks to the opportunity of discovering different worlds and realities that migration has been offering since life exists on the planet.

On the wings of myth, as under the wings of the egrets that are of major importance to this journey, this book has come to embrace a third of the globe, the Pacific ocean, with its many islands and its cultures. Sky and earth, father and mother, round and square, the turtle’s back and the turtle’s belly, *pi* and *ts’ung*, yang and yin, El Niño and La Niña: Dunis has definitely come full circle on the history of migration of women and men, myths, artefacts and plants. Or even better, he has squared the circle. And now that we have come to reassemble all the fragments of the broken vase of the Pacific, we can finally enjoy the love of its new symmetry.



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