

First Farmers: The Origins of Agricultural Societies

Peter Bellwood

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Introduction

We humans have been occupants of this earth for the past sixty thousand to seventy thousand years (60,000- 70,000ya). Studies in Genetics have found out that the appearance of the first humans took place in Africa during this time interval. Ten thousand years ago (10,000ya/ 8,000BC), the first farming communities began to emerge in the Near East and Anatolia. This has been termed the "Neolithic Revolution" by Gordon Childe. Consequently; by almost four thousand years ago (4,000ya/ 2000BC), urban life began in India, Pakistan, and China (Renfrew; 2003). One of the mysteries surrounding human existence chronology is the fact that despite of our inherent intelligence and ingenuity it took us almost sixty thousand years before we developed settled farming, or agriculture at that. For the better part of our existence, we have remained foragers/ hunters and gatherers. That's almost eighty five percent (85%) of human's worldly existence. Why was agriculture vis a vis urbanization developed only pretty recently? Renfrew calls this the "Sapient Paradox."

In addressing such a problem, the initial task would be to have an analysis of the invention/ development of farming; thereby learning the factors that have contributed to its rise. Renfrew proposes a multivariate approach in doing such an analysis. That is, we should not look at only one factor that sparked the revolution. Instead, there are arrays of factors probably responsible for this.

Some of the archaeologists who have thus far contributed to the discourse of the urban revolution problem are Gordon Childe, Robert Adams, and Kent Flannery. Specialized studies have also been initiated by Robert Braidwood (on the Jarmo of Iraq), Kathleen Kenyon (on pre- pottery Neolithic Jordan), Richard McNeish (on the Tehuacan Valley, Mexico) as well as others. At present, another archaeologist has greatly contributed in the discourse of the Neolithic Revolution problem. This is Peter Bellwood. An English archaeologist produced by the University of Cambridge, Bellwood has spent a considerable chapter in his career looking into the early beginnings of farming. This was not always his forte in his profession. Fresh from graduation, he initially conducted archaeology of the northwestern provinces of the Roman period and the Post- Roman period. He then shifted his attention on early farming when he became particularly intrigued by the value of "Historical Linguis-

tics” in origin studies of agricultural societies, as well as Polynesian origins.

In 2005, Peter Bellwood published his book called the *First Farmers: The Origin of Agricultural Societies*, which examines the factors behind the spread-out, multiple primary origins of agriculture. He tackles the different regional agricultural origins and dispersals of the Middle East, central Africa, China, New Guinea, Mesoamerica, and the northern Andes. His book draws evidences from three disciplines namely: Archaeology, Comparative Linguistics, and Biological Anthropology (inclusive of Skeletal Archaeology and Archaeogenetics). He particularly espouses the belief that Agriculture developed not from one area alone and then diffusing all over the world, instead it started out from many points of origins, and ripened as a result of general factors as well as environment-specific factors.

This book review provides a succinct account of Bellwood’s book, highlighting the important points he uses in reaching his multiple primary origins for agriculture, inclusive of its direction of spread. In ending my book review, I will relate how the book can greatly help out in the research direction I plan to undertake in the future.

The Book

Bellwood’s main goal in writing his book is to provide a historical interpretation of the multitude of data regarding the origins of agriculture from a comparative perspective. He wishes to tackle the large scale Neolithic/ formative dispersals of agricultural systems and communities that can be detected by studying the agricultural record. He came up with his Early Farming Dispersal Hypothesis (E.F.D.H.) which states that the spreads of early farming lifestyles were often correlated with prehistoric episodes of human population and language dispersal from agricultural homelands. He further postulates that modern day distribution of language families still reflects these early agricultural dispersals. In other words different areas/ parts of the world experienced local “major” episodes of human movement from time to time especially regarding the “Neolithic Revolution”. This counters the earlier belief that this shift from hunting and gathering to agriculture was a product of a singular dispersal source (Africa, or the Levant). Bellwood further suggests that a multitude of factors were probably responsible for the advent of agriculture and one of such significant factors is the fact that the hunting and gathering lifestyle couldn’t sustain a growing population (Bellwood; 2005).

Two observations were stated by Bellwood that would come in very valuable to his analysis in his book. These are: 1) Different language families predating the European colonization had already spread out, over and around the world, extending from homeland regions to its peripheries, and such is not a result of conglomerations of languages existent before the spread of such families over its

current area. 2) Archaeological complexes tend to extend out from homeland regions, tending to be younger as one moves away from the region of agricultural origin. These two observations served as a guide for Bellwood in discerning the different origins of agriculture in the Old World and the New World. Another important thrust pointed out by Bellwood is the fact that divergence of culture only occurred through time but initially a common/ homogenous culture existed for each agricultural region of dispersement, such a differentiation probably occurred due to factors like environment, inter community interaction, and knowledge system. Bellwood also saw two processes at work on different early farming communities, these are: 1) the periodic genesis of new cultural or linguistic configuration in homeland circumstances. 2) Dispersal of such configurations into surrounding regions and their subsequent transformations. Finally, Bellwood stated four guiding principles he utilized in his book which are: 1) range of human behaviour can be treated as relatively uniform during the time span of agriculture 2) Ethnographic cannot be accurate as basis for reconstruction of prehistoric past 3) Written/ Historical records are conversely also not accurate as basis for reconstruction of prehistoric past 4) Scale is a significant factor in culture- historical explanation (Bellwood; 2005).

My Ruminations on the Book

Reading the book by Peter Bellwood has been a fulfilling experience for me indeed since the research topic I plan to pursue in the future is a study regarding the Ifugao Rice Terraces. The approach of Bellwood in his book can be applicable for my study. I am particularly impressed with the importance of linguistics in tying up the conclusions that can be derived from the conduct of archaeology. Linguistic relations among language groups can indeed bear semblance to the historical dispersal that occurred in the past.

In the case of the Ifugao Rice Terraces, antiquity determinations can perhaps be greatly aided by a linguistic approach to the problem. We should try to entertain the notion that the Ifugao people could indeed be originally hills- people who were forced out of their former territories due to the pressure exerted by the Spaniards upon entry here in the Philippines. It is very much possible that these people could originally have been from Isabela province before they were eased out by the Spanish "*Reduccions*."

To determine the plausibility of this scenario, we can look at the relationship of the native *Gaddang* (Isabela) dialect and the *Ifugao* dialect. Perhaps we would be able to recognize similarities from both languages thus a huge chunk of information is added to our knowledge of Ifugao origins.

In his book, Bellwood utilized a comparative perspective in approaching the study of the early agricultural communities. In terms of the Ifugao Rice Ter-

rices, perhaps it is noteworthy that a similar approach should be taken, wherein we study the situations of the different rice terraces spread out all over Asia (Vietnam, Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, etc...). We should look into the unique situations that influenced the settled agriculture in such a forbidding terrain. We can then infer the reasons that drive a group of people to defy nature and practice mountain terrace agriculture.

I would give my two thumbs up to the book. The book is particularly useful for studies relating to the early development of agriculture. Quite impressive are the methodologies used by Bellwood in driving towards his conclusion. He revives interest into the role of linguistics in the investigation of human dispersals. His utilization of modern biological and physical anthropological data also further compact his arguments in the book*

References

Renfrew, Colin

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