

## Some Overlooked Complexities in the Study of Pohnpei Social Complexity

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**Abstract**—The social complexity of Pohnpei has been envisioned primarily as a function of the number of levels of socio-cultural integration it had, and the ideology of Pohnpei chieftainship has been mapped in a one-to-one fashion onto the dynamics of Pohnpei socio-political life. As a result the extraordinary complexity of the relationships between Pohnpeian concepts of rank and the actualities of chiefly authority have been overlooked. Ethnographic data and ethno-historical material are used in an alternative interpretation of Pohnpei socio-political complexity.

### Introduction

This paper develops, in programmatic fashion, the proposition that current models of the Pohnpei sociopolity's complexity are entirely too simple. These models concentrate on complexity as being largely—even primarily—a matter of hierarchy, of what Steward (1955) called “levels of sociocultural integration.” On Pohnpei, these levels are the farmsteads, local chiefdoms (“sections”), paramount chiefdoms, and the purported island-wide polity of the Sau Deleurs.

Most current research into Pohnpei's prehistory focuses on the general character of the processes and mechanisms through which this hierarchy evolved, rather than on the specific unfolding of events on Pohnpei. The data used to build these models tend to be drawn from ethnohistorical and ethnographic—rather than archaeological—sources.

The paper points out that a) the extraordinarily complex character of the modern (protohistorical and historical) Pohnpei sociopolity, with its myriad, cross-cutting ambiguities and (at least to Western eyes) contradictions, is fundamentally misunderstood;

b) as a result of this misunderstanding, both the character and the evolutionary dynamics of prehistoric Pohnpeian sociopolitical complexity have been systematically overlooked; and

c) the archaeological data now becoming available will be of much greater use if, instead of being made to fit into ready-made categories, they are studied with an eye to instructing us about specific historical developments which are significant in their own right.

### Current Images of the Pohnpei Sociopolity

The Pohnpei sociopolity is usually portrayed by ethnographers, archaeologists, and historians as a classic feudal structure: complex, hierarchical, and relatively centralized. Pohnpei, its culture, and its people are consistently described in terms of “petty states,” “fiefs, vassals, and feudal relations,” “royalty, nobility, and commoner” (Fischer 1966:

174, Riesenbergs 1968: 8, Alkire 1977: 62). Hanlon maintains that "everything belonged to the chiefs, including the people" and that "the chiefs dominated Ponapean society." He speaks of an "inherent, potentially devastating tension between rulers and ruled" and "the always fragile relationship between a chief and his people" (Hanlon 1984: 151, 158, 185).

The ruins of Nan Madol, in particular, have drawn the attention of archaeologists. According to Pohnpei traditions, Nan Madol served as the seat of a tyrannical dynasty, the Sau Deleurs, and the site is thus taken to symbolize the "centralization of power embodied in the unification and subordination of previously independent polities" (Saxe *et al.* 1980: 93). Stephen Athens calls Nan Madol an "elite centre for a highly developed prehistoric complex society" (1984: 130). Joyce Bath refers to the "political hegemony" enjoyed by this "small, theocratic, centralized" kingdom (Bath 1984: 1). Ross Cordy (unpub.: 6) pronounces the society that raised it a "state," citing "feudal land ownership" and the "marked social distance isolating" the leaders. William Ayres *et al.* (1983: 9) declare the Sau Deleur era "one of the most highly centralized chiefdom level polities in the Pacific Islands."

Though Nan Madol ultimately was abandoned, as a result of a "failure to maintain centralized control," differences between its political system and that of the kingdoms or chiefdoms which succeeded it are not clear-cut. Bath, for example, asks whether or not the early nineteenth century chiefdoms were "centralized miniature replicas of the prior island wide system." She decides that they were not, but the issue is thorny enough to have served as a major theme in her doctoral dissertation (Bath 1984).

In nearly every one of these references the authors qualify their remarks, noting aspects of Pohnpei social and political life which moderated the authority of the chiefs. This is true especially for the ethnographers and historians, who seem to me likely to pay more attention to the realities of social life than to the dictates of formal models. Nonetheless, the overriding image of Pohnpei in the literature is of a sociopolity dominated by powerful leaders arbitrarily running a highly centralized, hierarchical system of government. Anything that tempers this rule is incidental or peripheral, requiring no more than passing notice.

This rather one-dimensional portrayal of Pohnpei is the product, I think, of a relative overemphasis on comparative analysis that precludes more specific consideration of local sociopolitical organization. Cordy, for example, discusses Micronesian political systems by combining counts of social strata and levels of decision-making. Under this system, Pohnpei is categorized as having five "4-level societies": that is, what I would call the five paramount chiefdoms. Cordy terms these "states." They are described as having "marked social distances isolating the upper two levels, large populations and territories, and feudal land ownership. . . . Coercive force was available to these upper levels—each had onhangers to re-inforce their commands" (Cordy unpub.: 5–6). Nowhere in his discussion do we find attention given to the nature of this social distance or coercive force; it simply exists. But was this the case? Typological comparison without attention to the subtleties of the ethnographic data can blind us to the dynamics of individual societies and the evolutionary changes they have undergone.

At the same time, we must acknowledge that if we seek to "identify changes in complexity" in order to "explain the development of complex societies" (Cordy unpub.: 8), a

research strategy with which I am in accord, we must first comprehend something of the widespread, underlying complexities common to Oceanic societies in general. Only then can we identify the aspects of Pohnpei sociopolitical organization unique to its own level of complexity, and thereby grasp the evolution of that complexity.

### Some Proto-Oceanic Roots of Modern Pohnpei Political Concepts

In the Pohnpei language there are a number of sociopolitical concepts with great time depth—clear cognates or reflexes of terms that appear to have Proto-Oceanic origins. Their widespread distribution suggests that at certain points in history the terms were used by peoples with relatively little stratification or hierarchy. The terms indicate that there are common Oceanic concepts currently important in Pohnpei life which in no way can be thought to have evolved *de novo* in the course of Pohnpei sociopolitical evolution.

Take, for example, “*mana*,” which in Pohnpei is “*manaman*.” One or another cognate of the term occurs throughout Oceania, and studies of the concept denoted by it are as old as modern anthropology. What the term actually means (or how it might best be translated) and whether it means roughly equivalent things wherever it occurs are important questions but not relevant here (Firth 1967, Pitt-Rivers 1974). More important is that the Pohnpei notion of *manaman*, while central to Pohnpei concepts of chieftainship, is not a unique product of local sociopolitical evolution. It occurs in the sociopolitical lexicon of Pacific island societies which exhibit every sort of political organization, and exhibit varying degrees of hierarchy.

Pawley (1981, 1982) and Lichtenberk (1986) have recently given us two reconstructed terms of rank in the language called by linguists Proto-Oceanic (POC). These are “\**qalapa(s)*” or “\**tala(m)pa*” and “\**qadiki*” or “\**qa adiki*” and appear to refer to leaders and their firstborn sons.

Pawley (1982: 44) suggests that these POC terms referred to leaders of descent groups known as \**kainana* (cf. Pohnpei *keinek* “matrilineage”; Trukese *kainang* “matrilineal sib”). “On present evidence it probably denoted a higher-order descent group whose formal leader was its \**qalapa(s)* ‘chief’, a term which has been lost in most in (*sic*) Polynesian, where it was replaced by \**qariki*, and in the Nuclear Micronesian languages, where various noncognate words for categories of chief or leader have developed.”

The Proto-Oceanic notion of the firstborn, eldest, or senior member (\**qa adiki* or \**qariki*) of the descent group (\**kainana*) who serve as its leader is found in Pohnpei, where the “*kaun en keinek*” “head of a matrilineage” (as opposed to a territorial leader) is ordinarily the “*mesenih en keinek*” “firstborn of the matrilineage.” It may also be seen in the term “*seriiso*”—translated by Riesenberk (1968: 16–18) as “Royal Child(ren);” this refers to children of men in the paramount chief’s line or matrilineage.

Pawley (1982) holds that these data suggest the existence of some notion of chieftainship in POC society. Lichtenberk (1986: 351) challenges this conclusion, arguing that “the literal meaning ‘big, great person’ . . . is compatible with the denotation ‘chief’ just as well as with the denotation ‘big man’.”

Blust (1982: 239), in analyzing certain phonetically complex consonants in Oceanic languages, reconstructs a POC term “\**mwala* ‘commoner’ (as opp. chief, royalty),

worthless." Among other Micronesian reflexes, he cites Pohnpei "*mwahl* 'common, useless, of no consequence', *aramas mwahl* 'commoner'." Pawley (1982: 43) suggests that this reconstructed POC *\*mwahla* "was basically a stative verb or adjective indicating the absence of those supernatural powers, of *mana* and *taboo*, which chiefs possess." Lichtenberk (1986: 352) suggests that the term may have meant "something like 'person of low social status, poor person, person without means.' A term like that can just as easily be applied to commoners in chiefly societies as to poor people in big-man societies."

Gunson (1979) has examined a political concept widespread in Oceanic societies, known in various languages as *hau*, *sau*, *fau*, *au*, with basic meanings of "to fight, combat, injure or kill." He points out that in Samoa, for instance, "*sau-ā*" means tyrant (Gunson 1979: 30). Challenging the notion that in Western Polynesia political power passed in an orderly fashion through lineages "by a process of devolution and entitlement," Gunson (1979: 28) argues instead that "political power, as opposed to sacred status, was always accepted as the prerogative of the most successful chief and that challenge by peers was an essential feature of political life."

In Pohnpei *sau* is a proper noun—the title of the Sau Deleur (Deleur being a locality). It occurs rarely as a compound element in other titles as well, such as Saudel and Nahnsahu Ririn, and in Awak I have heard it used as a contraction for the title Sou Madau. *Sau*'s primary referent certainly seems to be the Sau Deleur, which is usually translated something like "Lord of Deleur," but it is in fact distinct from Sou, a much more common title which can also be glossed as "Lord" or "Master." It is probably fair to say that an accurate meaning of *sau* in Pohnpei is "tyrant," and that it is indeed a cognate of the widespread Oceanic term *hau/sau*.

Thus in the modern Pohnpei lexicon there are a number of sociopolitical terms and concepts that reflect widespread Oceanic notions and have their roots in the Proto-Oceanic language. "*Lap*" is a Pohnpei political term for greatness or importance, and it also indicates large size; likewise, "*tik*" refers to smallness and junior status. These are obvious reflexes of the POC terms "*\*lapa(s)* 'big, great' and *\*diki* 'small' . . . widely attested, as stative verbs and adjectives, in various branches of Oceanic" (Pawley 1982: 40).

"*Manaman*," a cognate of "*mana*," is fundamental to Pohnpei social life and thought. Likewise, Pohnpei "*mwahl*" reflects POC "*\*mwala*" and Pohnpei "*sau*" appears to be a cognate of "*sau/hau*." The Pohnpeians share the notion of the firstborn's special status, as evidenced by the authority of the "*mesenih*" and the general importance of seniority principles in many aspects of Pohnpei social relations, including title succession and land inheritance.

These shared practices and concepts tell us that what appear to be products of sociopolitical evolution specific to Pohnpei are variations on ancient, eastern-Oceanic themes. Pohnpei terms denoting "great" and "common," "senior" and "junior," and "power" both "sacred" and "secular" do not necessarily reflect the dynamics of developing political processes peculiar to the island itself so much as they are localized manifestations of social patterns that can be found in almost any kind of Pacific island setting. Therefore, the existence of these terms cannot be used a priori to argue the existence of any specific degree of sociopolitical complexity on Pohnpei, since the terms (and, to some degree, their related practices) are used in societies with significantly different patterns of socio-

political evolution. Pohnpei has inherited such terms as “greatness” and “commoner,” and their existence is not evidence of the local evolution of stratification.

This is not to say that the terms and their specific meanings in the Pohnpei language are irrelevant to the study of social complexity and evolution on Pohnpei and in Oceania as a whole. But they are data that must be analyzed in the context of their current meanings in Pohnpei social life if they are to be properly placed in their historical contexts.

### The Nahmwarki System's Recent Origins

Pohnpei's “Nahmwarki system”—its system of dual lines of chiefly titles in each of five independent paramount chiefdoms—is the only stage of the island's sociopolitical evolution for which we have direct historical, ethnohistorical, and ethnographic evidence, and it is generally understood to be the “classic” or native Pohnpei political system. Yet it is clearly of recent vintage. Both oral traditions and historical evidence attest to this.

Riesenberg (1968: 8) writes that “In theory the two series of titles are the same in each tribe; actually they vary.” At the time of initial contact, however, only Madolenihmw and U had fully established this “classic” pattern. Both of these trace their origins back to the same series of events chronicled by traditions: the rise of Isokelekel, first Nahmwarki of Madolenihmw, and the enfranchisement of his son Nahlepenian, first Nahmwarki of U.

The modern Kiti paramount chiefdom did not come into existence until about the time of European contact (ca. 1825). A wide range of oral traditions testifies that the area had comprised three autonomous chiefdoms, one of them called Kiti and possessing a Nahmwarki, until they were unified circa 1810–1820 as a result of the “War at Sapwtakai” (Fischer *et al.* 1977).

Sokehs history is poorly recorded, in part because of the execution or exile of all its people following the 1910 Sokehs Rebellion, and as a result there is a certain vagueness about its title system. It was headed by a Wasahi, not a Nahmwarki, and its was markedly different from those of the other paramount chiefdoms, a fact testified to by the extreme variation in the various rankings of the titles recorded by Riesenberg (1968).

Net, which is now reckoned one of the five “traditional” paramount chiefdoms, did not have a Nahmwarki at all. Its leader was the Lepen Net and its title system, which is also poorly understood today, was quite unlike that of the “classic” Madolenihmw and U series (Riesenberg 1968).

Large areas of Pohnpei seem not to have been fully included in the purview of the five “traditional” paramount chiefdoms. Palikir, by nearly all traditional accounts, was independent of Sokehs, and Awak also operated independently of U. A large area in Madolenihmw known as Leh dau is often accorded a similar status in oral histories. This point is developed in the next section.

The term “Nahmwarki” itself, which now seems to define the modern traditional political system, may not have been of overriding significance in the early nineteenth century. The Irish castaway O'Connell (1972: 121, 151), who lived for several years on the island in the late 1820s–early 1830s, referred to the highest-ranking Pohnpeians as “moon-jobs” (“*mwohnsapw*”) and chiefs as “*aroche*” (“*iros*,” “*arotoç*,” or “*uros*,” according to Riesenberg 1968: 151). In his list of eleven chiefs, of “principal” areas, the

Nahnmwarki title appears only once, referring to U (O'Connell 1972: 123). Andrew Cheyne, who traded on the island in the mid-1840s, on the other hand, translated Nahnmwarki as "a King" (Cheyne 1971: 177).

A number of terms of rank were in widespread use at the time of contact, suggesting that there were multiple and cross-cutting concepts about what conferred or constituted rank. *Mwohnsapw* appears to have applied to the highest-ranking chiefs, only a few of whom actually held the Nahnmwarki title. It is still in use today and I have heard it used as a term of reference and of address for both the Nahnmwarki and the holders of historically important titles such as Rohsa and Kiroun en Lehdau. "*Soupeidi*," which tends to refer to a category of high-ranking people, is a thoroughly ambiguous term. My own attempts to define it have met with no more success than those described by Riesenberg (1968: 17). "*Seriiso*" is more clearly defined as sons or children of men in ruling matrilineages (Riesenberg 1968: 16–17); the term apparently reflects the ancient Oceanic practice of marking the sons of leaders (\**qa adiki*).

Riesenberg (1968: 43–44) also amply documents the existence of a large number of "*samworo*" 'priestly' titles that were amalgamated into the Nahnken-line titles during the nineteenth century. This is further indication that the current system is of recent vintage.

While there were Nahnmwarki in the early nineteenth century, they do not seem to have defined Pohnpei politics. As a reflective and reliable Pohnpeian friend said to me a few years ago, "*Nahnmwarki me kapw!*" 'The Nahnmwarkis are new!' Oral traditions trace the beginning of the Madolcnihmw and U Nahnmwarki systems—the prototypes for the more recent development of the others—back perhaps a century or two before contact (Fischer, *et al.* 1977: 64–65, Athens 1983: 55). At the time of contact, then, Pohnpei did not have one political system. There were several different kinds of polities, it appears, and perhaps there was competition between them.

It is therefore difficult to accept the notion that this range of cultural processes should be neatly summarized as "the Nahnmwarki system." Nor do I feel comfortable with summary statements that describe Pohnpei as having five "4-level societies" or "states" described as having "marked social distances isolating the upper two levels, large populations and territories" (Cordy unpub.: 5–6). Such generalizations do not accurately or adequately reflect the complexity inherent in the kind of evolutionary processes that were evidently underway at contact.

### The Cross-Cutting "Levels" of the Pohnpei Sociopolity

The reigning image of the Pohnpei polity, which serves as the basis for discussions of its complexity, is in fact a considerable simplification of reality. The various approaches to the study of Pohnpei social complexity, as they are summarized by Cordy (unpub.: 2–3), are more concerned with general theory building than with a specific comprehension of what proto-historical Pohnpei sociopolitical life was like. These works for the most part pay rather little attention to the kinds of contradictory and anomalous data I have been examining here.

Cordy (unpub.: 4–5) concludes that those who study Micronesian prehistory "are using different definitions for what we call complex societies" and suggests "that as an

initial step towards comparability and understanding the [sociopolitical] changes of interest, we might use a combined approach of counting social strata and major decision-making levels." He finds that there were on Pohnpei five societies with four hierarchical levels, though he does not specify just what these four levels are; I assume they include the *wehi* "paramount chiefdom," *kousapw* "local chiefdom," and *peliansapw* "farmstead," and that the fourth is the individual producer.

If we look at these levels in their own right, however, we find that the complexity of the Pohnpei polity entailed much more than this hierarchy of levels.

Pohnpei "*kousapw*," which are usually called "sections" (Riesenberg's "subtribes"), and which I am inclined to call "local chiefdoms," are not fully distinguishable—at least at all times—from Pohnpei "*keinek*" "matrilineages." The term *keinek* is polysemic: it has multiple meanings. As I describe it elsewhere (Petersen 1982: 20), "While neither the clan ["*sou*"] nor the subclan ["*keimw*"] have been localized, at least in recent Pohnpei history, the matrilineage was often, it seems, a localized, residential, land-holding group. Anyone residing with a matrilineage might be spoken loosely of as a member of the matrilineage. Thus the term can refer either to a descent group or a residence group, depending upon the context in which it is used. Modern Pohnpei sections have in many cases evolved from older localized matrilineages, and in a fashion similar to that of the matrilineages, membership in a section may depend upon either descent or residence."

The area known as Awak at one time included perhaps as many as six named units of the sort Pohnpeians now called "*kousapw*." (This was prior to the depopulation of the nineteenth-century.) People in Awak today can name these, and recall the titles of their leaders. But they speak of these units more often as "*keinek*" ("matrilineages") than as "*kousapw*" ("local chiefdoms"). The ambiguity lies in a transformation that was taking place during (and before and after) the nineteenth century: localized matrilineages have been gradually becoming local chiefdoms.

The evidence for this is found both in the confusing (to me) definitions of "*keinek*" given by Pohnpeians and the ways I have heard the term used. The "*keinek*" term's meanings are shaped by context, without which most definitions are enigmatic. Pohnpei sometimes speak of "that *keinek* over there," yet it eventually becomes clear that the people being referred to constitute what I would call a "local chiefdom." The shift from kin to territorial group is recent enough so that the term still bears both meanings; it gets "disambiguated" (a term I just learned from a philosopher) by the context.

I have suggested previously (Petersen, 1982: 116) that, "because of the many acculturative pressures of the nineteenth century . . . , the corporate descent group, in whatever forms it existed previously, no longer maintained control over land and was dispersed as residence and inheritance patterns evolved. The role of the matrilineage headman slowly disappeared. . . . The section chief—who received his title from the paramount chief—replaced the headman, whose position derived from his status within his own matrilineage."

When the people of Awak, for instance, speak of these ambiguous nineteenth-century units, they refer to leaders whose titles are remembered. It is easy to conflate the men who held these titles with the modern "*soumas en kousapw*," the *kousapw* "chief."

But they could just as easily have been—and some people say they were—“*mesenih*” or “*kaun*” “*en keinek*” “firstborn” or “leader of the matrilineage.” This ambiguity is further evidenced in Riesenber (1968: 31–32).

When I first began work on Pohnpei, and was younger and even more naive than I am today, I thought that such ambiguity indicated that the Pohnpei were confused by their own culture. I now realize that the confusion was on my part, for trying to define what the “real” system is or was, as if it were static and arbitrary rather than dynamic and flexible. The nature of the *kousapw* was not and has not been fixed for all time, and disagreements about what its leaders should be called reflect ambiguity rather than ignorance.

The ambiguous character of these matrilineages/local chiefdoms was paralleled by the ambiguous nature of the “*wehi*.” In present-day Pohnpei, “*wehi*” rather clearly refers to the paramount chiefdoms and to the municipalities of Pohnpei State, which include the five paramount chiefdoms, Kolonia Town, and the five outlying atolls. The term is also used to speak of any substantial political unit outside of Pohnpei, e.g., the government of New York City, New York State, or the United States. (The term, interestingly, is not applied to Pohnpei State, which is defined in the State’s Constitution as “Weipokon en Pohnpei” “the gathered or collective *wehis* of Pohnpei.”)

There existed until recent times on Pohnpei, however, a number of political entities that are invariably spoken of as “*wehi*” but were definitely not paramount chiefdoms. Among these are Palikir (in present-day Sokchs), Awak (U), Lehda (Madolenihmw), and Wene (Kiti). The leaders of Palikir and Awak—whose respective titles were Lepen Palikir and Soulik en Awak—and of Net (which still retains *wehi* status)—whose head was Lepen Net—were called “*pwoud*” (see Riesenber 1968: 44).

There is yet another way in which the term *wehi* is used. Several Pohnpei historians have told me that in the past people spoke of such entities as “*wehin* Lasialap”—“*wehi* of the Great Eel Clan.” The term *wehi*, so used, referred to a political unit defined by a clan or even a matrilineage, rather than a specific territory. As with the vague borderline between the localized matrilineage and the local chiefdom, the *wehi* appears, historically speaking, to have been undergoing a transition: it was shifting from being defined by kinship to being defined by territory.

The term *wehi*, like “*keinek*,” is polysemic, its meaning depending on context for disambiguity. Today, as a result of historical processes I shall discuss below, all the extant Pohnpei *wehi* are paramount chiefdoms; ordinarily, when modern Pohnpeians refer to *wehi*, they are speaking of the paramount chiefdoms. But when they are speaking historically, the term can have significantly different meanings, one of which can be glossed as “sovereign territory” and likened to a palatinate (Petersen 1982: 24).

Areas like Palikir, Awak, and Wene were polities, having ritual and historical ties to particular paramount chiefdoms but effectively independent of them. These areas had subdivisions, as in Awak, which had as many as six. They seemed, then, to stand midway between the *kousapw* or *keinek* and the paramount chiefdom.

Riesenber (1968: 43–44) cites some of this material, considering it rather anomalous. Saxe *et al.* (1980: 91–92, 10–11) also recognize the problem, remarking that “there are good reasons to believe that the political divisions within the Pohnpei polity have not been rigidly fixed through history,” and suggesting that “one or more additional administrative levels once existed below the *wehi* and above the *kousapw* levels.” Ayres

*et al.* (1979: 11) refer to “sub-*wehi*” groupings (an obvious homonym of which makes the term unacceptable to a beleaguered New York City straphanger), but it is not clear whether they refer to the modern “*pwihn*,” which are indeed subdivisions of the paramount chiefdoms, or the older entities. If it is the latter, the “sub-*wehi*” term is inappropriate, since these old entities are invariably spoken of as full *wehi*.

For many years I puzzled over the problem of what such entities should be called. I have never been able to elicit any Pohnpei term other than “*wehi*.” I had thought erroneously that, if a category exists, there must be a native term that designates it. I struggled to reconcile the absence of any applicable Pohnpei-language term with the empirically unavoidable conclusion that the conceptual category existed. Eventually, however, I came to realize that I misunderstood the meaning of *wehi*. At present the term gets used solely as a referent to paramount chiefdoms. In earlier times, however, the term had a broader, and therefore different, meaning; this older, broader meaning still exists when the term is used in a historical context.

There are, then, two geopolitical concepts in the Pohnpei universe that thwart convenient categorization of Pohnpei levels of sociocultural integration. Both have been in the process of transformation over the last two centuries. In both cases this process may well have begun before contact, in which case we can speak of them as evolutionary processes; the processes accelerated during the contact period; the historical residues continue to remain part of modern Pohnpei political consciousness.

The old localized matrilineages became local chiefdoms. One essential type of political entity—a group of people living and working in the same neighborhood, claiming close kin ties, and having a leader with a formal title—gradually shifted from cultural definition as a kin group to definition as a territorial group.

In the other case, several distinct types of polity shared a single defining term, *wehi*. In time, some disappeared and one type came to encompass the term so thoroughly that it has been difficult to reconstruct the existence of the other types.

In defining the “levels” of Pohnpei society, then, we must confront the existence of these variant categories, and recognize the possibility that an attempt to establish a hierarchy of these levels (in which each is wholly integrated into the next more inclusive level) runs the risk of committing what Ryle (1949) has called a “category-mistake.” (A category-mistake “represents the facts of mental life as if they belonged to one logical type or category [or range of types or categories] when they actually belong to another.” Ryle [1949: 16] illustrates with an example: A visitor to a university sees libraries, playing fields, museums, laboratories, and offices. The visitor then asks, “But where is the University?,” not understanding that “the University” is just the way in which all he has seen is organized. The visitor has mistakenly allocated “the University” to the same category as that to which all these others belong.)

This is problematical when trying to fit the old *keinek* “matrilineage” into the paramount chiefdom. The latter is clearly a territorial unit, while the former is not entirely a kinship group nor fully a localized/territorial unit. It is also problematical when trying to place the old entities like Palikir and Awak into current models. They were not paramount chiefdoms, nor were they local chiefdoms. Their existence is anomalous. Equally, the existence of these old units, which were as much “*wehi*” as the paramount chiefdoms (but were not paramount chiefdoms), demonstrates that the Nahnmwarki system had not yet

been established ubiquitously, and that Pohnpei political life was indeed very much in the process of development and evolution at the time of the contact.

### The Nahmwarki System in the Colonial Era

The establishment of the Nahmwarki system as the "classic" Pohnpei sociopolitical system is in some measure a product of nineteenth-century contact. The world of whalers, traders, missionaries, soldiers, and colonial administrators had a transforming effect on the development of autochthonous sociopolitical relationships; this ultimately shaped ethnographers' understanding of what the "traditional" Pohnpei polity had been (Petersen unpub.).

In short, I believe that a good deal of the ambiguity in Pohnpei sociopolitics can be understood in terms of the multiple roles filled by Pohnpei chiefs, the changing importance of and relationships between aspects of these roles, and the Pohnpeians' deliberate response to the steadily increasing incursions of foreigners throughout the nineteenth century.

Pohnpei oral traditions are laden with references to shifting political boundaries. It appears that in the island's past the slow rise and fall of political units has been a continuing process (Petersen 1982: 23). One role of chiefs was to provide for or resist, depending on the situation, the expansion of these units. Another important role was as the ritual focus and secular mobilizer of the perpetual feasting with other communities. One aspect of their position, then, was, in John Useem's (1952) phrase, "out-facing." This came to apply in particular to relations with foreigners.

Pohnpei chiefs sought to settle European beachcombers in their communities as go-betweens with foreign traders and to thereby control interactions with them (Hezel 1978). But the chiefs also took *direct* control of these interactions. The report of the Austrian frigate *Novarra's* 1858 visit to Pohnpei provides a glimpse of this: "Naneken, although the king of his tribe, nevertheless appears to have no special influence on the intentions of the individual. Thus, for example, we were eyewitnesses, when he could not induce a couple of young natives to carry to the landing place some fruit stems of bananas, which we had exchanged. On the other hand, he appeared to have the decisive voice in everything that concerned trade with foreigners." (Hambruch 1932 I: 227).

While the internal dynamics of Pohnpei chieftainship were complex and ambiguous, the chiefs' role in external affairs was much more clearly defined: they were expected to appear strong to outsiders, as a means of preserving highly-prized local autonomy. "It is the local chieftom, with its face-to-face interactions, that is the pre-eminent political unit of Pohnpei. This is *not* how it appears to most foreigners, be they missionaries, traders, colonial administrators, or anthropologists, but again, it is just as the Pohnpei wish it. The apparent strength of the paramount chief serves to provide local polities with protection from ever-looming tyranny, be it of mythical, neighboring, or colonial varieties." (Petersen unpub.: 6)

By 1870, when the captain of the U.S.S. *Jamestown* forced "all the head chiefs" (Hezel 1983: 232) to sign a treaty with the U.S., there was an evolving consensus about whose authority was required to conduct official negotiations with foreign powers, rather than simple trading activities. In the 1880s the Spanish appointed the chiefs of what had

become “the five chiefdoms” as “*gubernadorcillos*” “little governors” (Hanlon 1984: 264). The German administration officially recognized the rule of these five chiefs, even as it sought to curtail some of their prerogatives, and required their people to make them annual feasts. The Japanese appointed these chiefs as magistrates. It was not until the post-World War Two period and the beginning of American rule that these chiefs stopped serving as key links in the systems of indirect rule of a succession of colonial administrations (Fischer 1974).

Whatever the statuses and roles of the various sorts of precontact chiefs and chiefdoms, there was a steady drift toward standardization during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. While the borders of the paramount chiefdoms are still not agreed upon, nonetheless they have in effect been “frozen;” old processes of fission and fusion and the constant reorganizing of geopolitical entities have ground to a halt.

The German land “reform” curtailed chiefs’ claims to authority over land. It instituted a system of individual, fee simple deeds and patrilineal primogeniture. In early days, the *keinek* “matrilineages” seem to have had de facto control over the lands on which they resided, the de jure claims of higher chiefs notwithstanding. When land was no longer a matter for either the chiefs or the matrilineages to fret over, the title system became increasingly the central focus of Pohnpei politics (Petersen 1982).

The two processes intersected. Indirect rule placed increasing emphasis on the role of the paramount chiefs. The shift to titles as the focus of politics resulted in the codification of the title system. The Nahmwarkis, who had been merely one set of chiefs among a number of chiefly types, came to appear to outsiders (and perhaps to some Pohnpeians as well) as archetypes of the system. What had been complex and evolving in the early nineteenth century became relatively simplified and standardized by the early twentieth century; this is what we now know as “the Nahmwarki system.”

As a consequence of this transformation, we now have an image of a much more centralized, and codified, political system than ever actually existed on Pohnpei. This mistake had given rise to misinterpretations of the nature of Pohnpei chieftainship. Pohnpei chiefdoms were not necessarily centralized, nor were the chiefs necessarily so powerful as they are thought to have been. I am not arguing that there were not some relatively strong chiefs and relatively centralized polities at times in Pohnpei’s past. Rather, I am suggesting that the flow of Pohnpei politics should be understood as having made it possible for a range of different kinds of political activities to flourish.

The complexity of Pohnpei sociopolitics cannot be understood as a simple function of some arbitrary number of levels of sociocultural integration or administration. There were instead multiple cross-cutting kinds of political entities and a range of leadership types.

### Variations in Kinds and Styles of Leadership

Pohnpei notions about the leadership traits a chief properly exhibits are (again, to western eyes) ambiguous and contradictory. In my study of the dynamics of modern Pohnpei chieftainship, I wrote that Pohnpei local chiefs face “the ever-present problem of binding the section together in the face of the various strains that threaten to explode it apart” and that “there exist on Pohnpei . . . powerful, contradictory pulls that are never

fully balanced, with each of the forces dependent on the countervailing thrust of its opposite for its own existence. . . . Among these are the pulls between hierarchy and independence; honor and humility; young section chiefs and old cup-bearing chiefs; and a chief's need to demand participation and avoid alienation" (Petersen 1982: 121–22). A chief must, I concluded, "follow a relatively narrow course between exigence and conciliation" (Petersen 1982: 124).

In real life, of course, few individuals are able to strike a perfect balance between such antithetical ideals. Real Pohnpei leaders vary markedly in their personal qualities and skills. And likewise, the people themselves hold the ideals with varying degrees of commitment and intensity. But more important, Pohnpeians recognize and assert the contrariness of their expectations about leadership.

One way in which this recognition is summed up is in the expression, "*Pihl en pahn mweli*"—"The water trickling under the boulders." It refers to the people's own recognition that their talk against the activities of the chiefs is always present but has no impact, like the water that continually flows beneath rocky outcroppings. The phrase "*Keleunieng*"—"Hibiscus in the wind"—refers to the bending of the hibiscus sapling, a metaphor which reflects people's simultaneous expectations about chiefly reciprocity and favoritism. A number of similar proverbs can be found in Riesenberg & Fischer (1955: 14–16).

Another contrast can be found between the notions "*Sakanakanen soupeidi*" "Misbehavior of the chiefs" and "*Soaren soupeidi*." I have not yet found an adequate translation for *soar*; Rehg & Sohl's (1979) dictionary glosses it as "inner quality," Rufino Mauricio suggests "charisma," Santiago Joab suggests "character." Pohnpei expect and to some degree tolerate misbehavior from their chiefs, whose actions are in some sense excusable because of the privileges of rank (cf. "Drunk as a lord"). Yet they also speak of the shining, even brilliant, attributes of those who are truly leaders—their qualities are manifest.

Pohnpeians simultaneously praise chiefs for their generosity and condemn them for their demands. They may speak of a chief's kindness as a virtue or a weakness, of his cruelty as a fault or an asset. Like the fathers to which they are sometimes compared (Hughes 1968), they can be seen as beloved guardians or feared taskmasters. The chief's ability to lead, then, cannot be attributed to any simple factor. Pohnpei leadership is a product of a congeries of qualities, and any particular chief will exhibit (or has exhibited) some particular constellation of them.

Pohnpei leadership is as much a matter of style as it is of social structure or of political organization. Some leaders may choose—or need—to rely on force. Their success depends very much on *how* they go about doing so, since the degree to which Pohnpeians accept the exercise of force is not a matter to be taken for granted. The ideal of personal autonomy is deeply embedded in Pohnpei culture and threats against it are likely to be resisted (Petersen unpub.). Other leaders may eschew force entirely. *Their* success depends very much on their ability to determine what it is that their people want and to what they are therefore prepared to accede (cf. Read 1965: 60).

It is difficult to speak to Pohnpei chieftainship in terms of generalized traits or behaviors. Its manifestations depend on a host of factors, which appear in combinations specific to contexts, situations, and individuals. We cannot definitively say, a priori, what is ex-

pected of or from a chief, and therefore, we cannot say exactly what the role of a Pohnpei chief is. In turn, this means that we cannot abstractly describe or define the social organization of Pohnpei chieftainship. It is too complex a phenomenon to be tucked arbitrarily into preconceived categories.

### Conclusion

To return this discussion to questions of more direct concern to prehistorians, and to draw it to a conclusion, I raise two final issues: culture history, as opposed to ethnology, and time depth. I frame the opposition between culture history and ethnology as one between the attempt to understand the evolution of Pohnpei culture, specifically, and the attempt to synthesize general notions about the evolution of culture. This is not the same dichotomy between specific and general evolution developed by Sahlins & Service (1960). Rather, it refers to the question of how we distribute our efforts between trying to understand the development of social complexity on Pohnpei and trying to “understand and explain the development of complex societies” (Cordy unpub.: 8).

Previous studies of sociopolitical evolution on Pohnpei seem to depend largely on interpretations of Nan Madol and inferred social developments. I have argued elsewhere, at length, that there is much overlooked evidence that Nan Madol *could* have been raised in the absence of the kind of coercive force usually attributed to “the state” (Petersen unpub.). While Nan Madol no doubt represents the mobilization of enormous amounts of labor, I am not convinced that we are now in any position to conclude, with much certitude, how that labor was organized.

When Cordy writes that “4-level organization [i.e., the state] seems to have been present on . . . Pohnpei *since* A.D. 1400” (Cordy unpub.: 9, my emphasis), several points are being made. My attention in this paper is not drawn to an era 600 years past, but to the question of what has taken place “since.” While I may be proved wrong in my contention that Nan Madol could have been built in the absence of a high degree of centralization, my point here is that we need to understand what was actually taking place at contact, not in a prior era.

Pohnpei sociopolitical organization was in considerable flux in the early nineteenth century. Its complexity lay in the multiple, cross-cutting kinds of geopolitical entities and sociopolitical statuses that existed then, much more than in a complexity defined by levels of sociocultural integration. While the Pohnpei lexicon contained terms for “greatness” and “commoner,” the roots of these terms can be traced back five millennia or so, and we cannot use their presence to prove that some kind of class stratification existed. While there were paramount chiefs, their status was very much in the process of developing; it was not a fully-established, “classic” sort of political system. And while some chiefs were certainly forceful characters, chieftainship itself depended too much on personal skill to be conflated with the existence of the kind of centralized power inherent in the state. Versions of Pohnpei social complexity that portray it as having been achieved long ago ignore other kinds of complexity which were clearly in evidence 150 years ago. We cannot use our modern images of the “Nahnwarki system” as indicative of what Pohnpei life was like at the time of contact, nor can we use such an image of that period to explain what had been taking place 400 years earlier.

Archaeological research on Pohnpei is still in a nascent stage. Nearly all the evidence that has been used thus far in reconstructing Pohnpei sociopolitical evolution has come from ethohistoric and ethnographic sources rather than excavations. Danger lurks when, as Maxwell Owusu (1978: 318) describes it, “‘authoritative’ ethnographic or ethnological hypotheses and hunches are treated uncritically as accepted or established facts of native life, i.e., when, as Wagley puts it, ‘classificatory types, formulated in the first place for their heuristic value . . . [are] translated into developmental stages, conceived as having real existence and arranged in a hierarchy which is both chronological and qualitative.’” (Wagley 1971: 121, Owusu’s ellipses and brackets).

Too many hunches have been uncritically put to use in reconstructing Pohnpei social complexity, and too much complexity overlooked. I would like to see archaeologists devoting more effort to study of the development of social complexity on Pohnpei and a little less to the “development of complex societies.”

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I use current Pohnpeian spelling, and for consistency’s sake have used the same spelling when quoting other works.

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