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Getting to the Truth of the Matter: Prospects and Limitations of Oral Traditions for Archaeological Interpretation in Pohnpei, Micronesia

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Abstract—Oral tradition is used to sample and interpret archaeological sites associated with the Soukiseleng in the Wene area in Pohnpei. The paper argues that careful investigation of oral traditions can enhance the understanding of Pohnpei archaeological sites and settlements and the discovery of the nature and extent of prehistoric pan-Micronesian relations.

Introduction

Concern over limitations inherent in artifactual data for the reconstruction of prehistoric lifeways was a major factor in the development of the field of ethnoarchaeology. Ethnographic data from contemporary cultures came to be recognized by archaeologists as a valuable aid for the interpretation of prehistoric material remains (Gould 1980, Gould 1978a, Kramer 1979). But, ethnoarchaeology has been a peculiar kind of ethnography, Gould (1978b: 4) has reminded us, one with an "unabashed materialist bias." A focus on behavioral data which produce patterns of disposal was designed, in part, to correct a serious gap in the traditional ethnographic literature. This emphasis was also due, however, to the archaeologists' basic distrust of informant data. Echoing others in the field (e.g., Clarke 1968, Kirch 1978), Gould (1978b) referred to emic data as a "black box" which has remained enigmatic to the archaeologist. Schiffer (1978) argued further that members of a culture do not encode sufficient detail to be useful for archaeological interpretation. Only archaeological scientists, trained to sort irrelevant from relevant facts, could escape certain extinction from a "trivia overload." The message for the ethnoarchaeologist was clear—ignore ideological content; focus instead upon observable behavior.

At issue here is the question of truth—the degree to which emic representations match the archaeological data, in the past and in the present. Cautionary tales warning about possible ambiguities and errors tended to reinforce the basic skepticism towards this kind of data on the part of the archaeologists. Oral traditions, as an especially emic and mental form of cultural information, were doubted as a reliable means of interpreting prehistory.

Coming to grips with the matter of the truth of oral traditions is particularly compelling in the case of Micronesia. For much of this area, Western contact has been a relatively recent phenomenon. Traditional cultures have certainly undergone change as a result of this contact; yet most maintain viable living traditions with rich and varied oral traditions. The potential for oral traditions to inform our understanding of prehistoric lifeways is indeed great and, I believe, underappreciated and underutilized by Micronesian archaeologists.

This paper discusses my own use of oral tradition in archaeological investigation of the Wene area of Pohnpei, Eastern Caroline Islands (Falgout 1987a). Wene is the southernmost area of the island, located within the Kitti chiefdom at the time of Western contact. I hope to reveal the truly vast nature and extent of oral traditions that are known in this culture today and the ways in which they could illuminate the archaeologists' findings. I also hope to show that it is quite possible to evaluate the truth of this source of data. This can be accomplished by taking the collection of oral traditions one step further: by investigating oral traditions as a form of expression within the culture; by considering the nature, management, and use of oral traditions within the cultural context.

Pohnpei Ethnohistory

A systematic archaeological investigation of Pohnpei prehistory was initiated in 1977 by the University of Oregon Ponape Archaeology Survey, under the direction of William S. Ayres. This research was designed to elucidate the complex factors involved in the rise and decline of this highly developed socio-political system. It included a combination of archaeological, environmental, and ethnoarchaeological research (see Ayres & Haun 1980, 1981, unpubl., Ayres *et al.* in press). I joined the ongoing research of the Ponape Archaeology Survey in 1979 in the capacity of project ethnohistorian. My initial research involved an investigation of written sources for Pohnpei contained in collections in Hawaii and Micronesia. The more than 800 sources contained in these collections greatly exceed expectation (see Falgout 1986, 1988). My report concluded that the potential of written sources for archaeological interpretation in Pohnpei was very good. What was needed next was ethnographic research focusing on oral traditions. These oral traditions could be used to cross-check and supplement data from written and archaeological sources of information. In addition, oral traditions would provide important and underrepresented perspectives on the island's prehistory—Pohnpei ones.

My research in 1981 was designed to provide the Pohnpei perspective on Pohnpeian prehistory. The choice of the area of Wene as the research setting was based on a number of criteria favorable to such an approach: the area's discrete geographic and socio-political boundaries, the high quality of archaeological, archival, and oral tradition materials already in existence, and the reported importance of the area as a religious and socio-political center in the past. Earlier archaeological investigations of Wene by the Ponape Archaeology Survey had sampled the major environmental zones; another project had surveyed a road corridor in the area (Streck 1980). Several archaeological sites encountered during these surveys confirmed the area's importance prehistorically. The sites I selected for study were those Pohnpei people themselves considered important and for which oral traditions were known.

The quantity and quality of oral traditions relating to important archaeological sites in Wene was overwhelming. Thirty-two informants were consulted during the six months of field research. The oral traditions they related led to the recording of 47 new sites and complexes, containing 154 features, in 10 of the Wene's 13 traditional sections. Oral traditions presented a rather thorough account of settlement of the area and of the nature and extent of changes in the religious and socio-political systems over time. Contained within oral traditions collected were site and feature names and other details which offered im-

portant clues to site type, function, use, cultural chronology, and, occasionally, to named occupants and important events. Additional conversations revealed the Pohnpei people themselves are astute observers of how changes in the social order are reflected in archaeological sites and settlement patterns.

Revealed in the oral traditions was the importance of Wene throughout prehistory and the early history of contact. *Ononleng*, an alternate name for the area, refers to Wene's important religious role, "to maintain heaven." The leader of these religious activities in Wene was the high priest, titled *Soukiseleng*, "Master Part of Heaven," whose role was to redistribute the bounty of heaven. Many of the prehistoric site complexes recorded relate directly to Soukiseleng and his priestly activities: places of consecration, inculcation, and residence; meeting houses; various places and instruments of worship; and burials. Others were special work areas where section members performed services in support of this realm, such as the production of various ceremonial foods; places of prophecy and of divination; storage areas; and even a hilltop fortress from which the area was successfully defended from invaders from the eastern chiefdom of Madolenihmw. Often, the special activities performed in an area were used as section names. Important historic complexes include a Spanish fort and Protestant and Catholic missions.

The nature of Soukiseleng's and Wene's role in Pohnpei, according to oral traditions, changed over time. These changes are used by Pohnpei people to mark the major periods in the cultural chronology of Wene, which they correlate with the cultural chronology for all of Pohnpei (see Fischer *et al.* 1977). Table 1 compares the cultural chronology for Wene with that of Pohnpei, and will serve as the basis for discussion. The designation I, II, or III will be added to the title Soukiseleng to indicate changes in the nature and extent of this realm. It should be noted that a number of different individuals held this title in any one given period.

While many informants emphatically stated that the Soukiseleng realm dated back to the Period I, Initial Settlement, no stories specifically connected to him were elicited for this period. Numerous tales do relate to Soukiseleng during Period II of Pohnpei prehistory, when the island was to some degree united under the Saudeleur who ruled from the megalithic complex of Nan Madol. During the Saudeleur times, Soukiseleng I was recognized as a religious leader of special abilities. His religious activities centered around a seven-night ceremony, *Pong en Wene*, during which Soukiseleng and his priests prayed to the highest god through the medium of the god of thunder. Although Soukiseleng was appealed to by others in times of difficulty, he was directly responsible for worship only in Wene.

Table 1. Prehistoric cultural chronology in Pohnpei and Wene.

Pohnpei	Wene
I. Initial Settlement	I. Initial Settlement
II. Saudeleur	II. Soukiseleng I
III. Isokelekel—Nahnmwarki	III. a. Soukiseleng II
	b. Soukiseleng III—Nahnmwarki

Soukiseleng figures prominently in oral traditions relating to the conquest of the Saudeleur by Isokelekel, an invader from "downwind," and his followers. Soukiseleng is also accorded an important role in the establishment of the Nahnmwarki system of semi-independent chiefdoms, each of which came to be ruled by a dual line of titleholders. Perhaps for his role in the coup, Soukiseleng II was elevated to the rank of highest priest in all of Pohnpei during the Period III of Pohnpei prehistory.

It was later in Period III, perhaps shortly before contact (Bath, personal communication), that Soukiseleng's role would undergo another dramatic change. When Soukiseleng came to the defense of his relatives at the Battle of Sapwtakai in the west, he was given the additional title of Nahnmwarki and all settlements in Kitti were united under his leadership from Wene. Soukiseleng III acquired an additional, secular, role in Pohnpei. Later, the dual system of socio-political leadership was established in Kitti as it was elsewhere in Pohnpei.

The rule of Kitti by Soukiseleng III-Nahnmwarki from Wene continued into historic times. A smallpox epidemic which spread from Wene to other parts of Pohnpei and other diseases introduced during the Early Period of contact severely decimated the area's population. The death of the last old priest in 1866 and the steady progress of Protestant and Catholic missions further undermined the area's traditional religious role (see Sturges n.d., Hambruch 1932–1936). German land reforms made the capital area private property, and the next Soukiseleng II-Nahnmwarki moved the capital to another area of Kitti.

Informants related the changes in Soukiseleng's leadership in Wene directly to sites and settlements contained in the survey data. Using data from oral traditions, I was able to modify the typology of sites that had been generated by archaeologists largely on the basis of observed form (cf. Gulick 1857, Hambruch 1932–1936, Davidson 1967, Ayres & Haun 1980). Detailed information on site form, function, use and chronology was collected. A few examples should suffice to illustrate the nature and potential of this information available to the archaeologists.

The Pohnpei meeting house, *nahs*, is perhaps the most important site type for archaeological interpretation. The presence of the meeting house designates an important area: a chiefdom capital area; a section center; a special community; an important work area; etc. Variations in style of meeting houses have different functional and socio-political correlates. Many informants stated that the rectangular-shaped meeting house was in use during Saudeleur times; the U-shaped meeting house is a post-Isokelekel innovation. The degree of meeting house elaboration, informants reported, correlated with the level or the strength of socio-political *manaman*, power and authority. For example, a simple U-shaped meeting house with no floor coverings on its sides was usually found at the section level, or could be found at the chiefdom level when the Nahnmwarki's power was weak. The number of rear doorways and kava pounding stones in a meeting house is an important time marker. It was only after the Soukiseleng III-Nahnmwarki period, when the dual line of titles was established in Kitti, that a second rear doorway and a second kava pounding stone were added to meeting houses.

The focus of settlement for the early Soukiseleng realm (Soukiseleng I and II) clusters along the banks of the Sounkroun River. Significantly, the most sacred sites are located in the highest, most interior area of settlement along the river. Called *Olepel*, "abstemious man," this area is described by the phrase *pohnisilap en Ononleng*, "on the

forehead of Ononleng." Informants were quick to point out the special symbolic importance of the forehead in their culture: it is the seat of knowledge, or respect, and is considered holy. These words and phrases describe the principle function of this area: it was the main place of residence and of worship for Soukiseleng and his priests. Entrance into this most sacred area is marked by a stack of basalt prisms, and admission was formerly extended only to Soukiseleng, his priests, and a few select others.

Soukiseleng's increasingly secular role, culminating in his acceptance of the Nahnmwarki title (Soukiseleng III-Nahnmwarki), led to a decline in the use of Olepel. The focus of activities in Wene, and for all of Kitti, was relocated to the western flatlands known as Aleniang. An important rock, *Oneros*, "the end of Wene," was placed in the temple of Olepel. Another, *Onedo*, "Wene comes here," was placed at Aleniang. Aleniang would serve as the capital area for Kitti until German times and would become a center for colonial and missionary efforts in the area as well.

Getting To the Truth of the Matter

How can the archaeologist know the truth of that interesting story? The skepticism that is voiced concerns problems noted in the assumptions of the direct historical method in general, and in the use of oral traditions in particular. Truth for the archaeologist has been scientific knowledge; knowledge is equated with fact, which can be understood on the basis of rational cognition of objective, empirical evidence and further validated by tests. Lurking doubts about the truth of emic data are heightened when dealing with oral traditions which are of a religious nature. Religion, to some archaeologists' minds, connotes irrational thinking, belief instead of fact, or at best only culturally relevant "truth." Suspicion hardens to disbelief when it is learned that stories of stones which have the power to change the seasons or to cause leprosy and sites associated with prehistoric giants or mischevious dwarves are included in the collection.

In part, the suspicions of the archaeologists over the truth of Pohnpei oral traditions are justified. Exploration of Pohnpei epistemology and cultural transmission reveals that the sources of important knowledge (including history), its distribution within the culture, and the methods by which it is evaluated are different from those in Western science. For Pohnpei people, knowledge is not regarded as an abstract, objective entity which is democratically distributed among members of a culture and can be empirically tested. Instead, important knowledge is intimately tied to persons. Knowledge is the lifeforce which animates the human body; important knowledge is highly restricted in its distribution and usually edited in the process of transmission; persons and their knowledge are to be respected and not weakened or demeaned by detailed questioning, much less by obvious comparison or testing. Furthermore, slightly different versions of important knowledge do and should exist, many Pohnpei people maintain (see Falgout 1984, 1987b).

These epistemological differences acknowledged, I hasten to add that all hope is not lost for the archaeologist to determine the truth of oral traditions according to Western scientific standards. Pohnpei people are themselves keenly interested and actively engaged in evaluating the plausibility of various oral traditions. The methods they employ are openly discussed and are available to the archaeologist.

Pohnpei people have a typology of oral traditions, each category denoting the degree

Table 2. Typology of oral traditions in Pohnpei.

General, open	*poadoapoad* (historical lore)	*soaie* (children's tales)
	koasoaie (conversations)	
	oaralap (general overview)	
Detailed, conservative	*oaratik* (detailed version)	
	ngeis (chant)	

of detail contained and the degree of conservatism over time. (These categories and the amount of detail and conservatism are summarized in Table 2.) A general distinction is made between *soaie*, stories told for the amusement of children and *poadoapoad*, historical lore which is believed to be true (see Fischer 1975). Historical lore can be known and transmitted in a variety of forms. *Koasoaie* are general conversations about an oral tradition and, as such, are quite open to manipulation, personal opinion, and speculation. *Oaralap*, general overviews, are widely known and are relatively easy to obtain. *Oaratik* are detailed versions known only to master storytellers and a few others who have special rights to some areas of knowledge, and they are carefully parcelled out. Often they are learned by rote memorization. *Ngeis*, chants handed down from ancient times which often contain archaic language, are the most detailed and conservative form of oral tradition and their distribution within the culture is limited.

Since important knowledge is highly restricted and carefully managed within Pohnpei culture, the evaluation of knowledge revealed involves an assessment both of the oral tradition and its possessor. Only a select few Pohnpei people have been in a position to learn the detailed versions of oral traditions. Furthermore, the general character of the storyteller must be considered. It is little better to talk to someone known for their trickery and deception than it is to talk to someone less knowledgeable. While this evaluation technique may seem hopelessly complex and time consuming to the archaeologist, who might prefer to let the observable data "speak for themselves" in the first place, it is not. Pohnpei people maintain running biographies on many members of their culture. A *discretely* posed question can elicit information regarding who is both likely to really know a tale as well as the probability of their honesty in revelation.

Summary and Conclusions

Ethnoarchaeology as originally conceived was designed to provide data on the relationship of material remains and cultural behavior as an aid to archaeological interpretation. Questions concerning scientific objectivity led to a research strategy which emphasized behavioral observations and promoted a skepticism toward informant data, including oral traditions. Today, archaeology is at a crossroads (Trigger 1984). The recognition that all pasts are culturally created, even scientific ones, has called into question the archaeologists' claim to reconstruct and represent the *real* past. In other words, the matter

of truth is a question to be asked of both informants' and archaeologists' methods and models (see Dunnell 1986, Leone 1986, Watson 1986, Hodder 1986).

One possible reaction to the question of the truth of archaeological interpretations has been outlined by Watson (1986)—SKEPTICISM. Ultimately, the despondent archaeologist concludes that archaeology is impossible. Yet, seen in another light, this questioning could lead to a reconsideration of other interpretations of prehistory, including the native one. In this spirit, this paper has presented the author's use of oral traditions as a method both to sample and to interpret archaeological sites belonging to the socio-political and religious complex associated with Soukiseleng in the Wene area of Pohnpei. It has provided a brief glimpse at the vast scope and detailed depth of information available from this source. It has also shown how this information can increase the archaeologists' understanding of site and settlement form, function, use, and chronology. It has correlated these sites and settlements with the changing socio-political and religious systems in Wene over time.

The matter of the truth of these emic, mental representations has been addressed for the Pohnpei case. I have shown that an evaluation of such data can be accomplished by a simple, further investigation of oral traditions as a form of expression within its cultural context. Pohnpei people are themselves very interested in correlating oral traditions with particular features, sites, complexes and settlements. While it is acknowledged that Pohnpei epistemology and cultural transmission of important knowledge are very different than in Western science, Pohnpei people do have methods to evaluate reliability. These methods are readily available to the archaeologist as well.

Certainly, I do not propose that archaeological interpretations be based largely on oral traditions; nor do I suggest that the archaeologists limit themselves to native standards of truth. In the Pohnpei case, reliability may be cross-checked by later on-site inspections by major informants, by *quietly* requesting general summaries of the same stories by others, and by consulting older written sources. This information from oral traditions, furthermore, can also be compared with data derived from more traditional archaeological methods. The benefit of this combined approach to archaeological interpretation will not be the determination of the absolute truth about the real past. Instead, it will be the creation of a more richly textured, culturally contextualized and meaningful representation.

The material presented in this paper has been limited to the study of oral traditions and archaeological sites in only one geographic area within Pohnpei. I suggest, however, that this approach could be fruitfully applied to other areas in Micronesia as well. Finally, the value of this information is not restricted to the archaeologists' interpretation of particular sites and settlements or for a particular culture. As Goodenough's (1986) recent article has shown, the information contained in these oral traditions is an important addition to Micronesian ethnology and the ongoing investigation of the nature and extent of pan-Micronesian relations throughout prehistory.

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