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## ORAL TRADITIONS AND ARCHEOLOGY: Modeling Village Settlement in Palau, Micronesia

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The intention of this paper is to examine the dynamic interplay of oral traditions and archeology in the Republic of Palau. More specifically, attention is focused on a comparison of models for traditional village development and organization based on oral traditions and archeology

Oral traditions are an exceptionally rich source of knowledge among Pacific cultures, especially in the island groups where Western contact was relatively late and indigenous societies have been able to maintain their cultural integrity despite foreign control and the negative consequences of colonialism. It is important to keep in mind that oral traditions are much more than static records of the past expressing the collective consciousness of societies prior to the introduction of writing. On the contrary, oral traditions are living entities, which continue to reflect and mold indigenous Pacific societies (Keesing 1989). This is the case even in highly westernized archipelagos such as Hawaii where modern myths have evolved to validate native rights to the land and resources and reclaim the past for indigenous Hawaiians (Linnekin 1983). The “invention of tradition” has played a central role in the struggle for Native Hawaiian sovereignty and led to considerable debate (Trask 1991).

Oral traditions and traditional historical evidence are an important source of information for archaeologists in the Pacific, having

had a marked influence on the interpretation of archaeological data (see Dye 1989 and Cachola-Abad 1993 for a discussion of the Hawaiian case). Despite the potential contributions from oral traditions and oral history to archaeological interpretation, traditional sources must be used with caution and examined in a critical manner. This is not to say that traditional sources are of lesser value than the ‘empirical proof’ offered by the ‘scientific’ approach in archaeology. Acting as the handmaiden of Western ideology, archaeology has been employed as a tool to justify the actions of a colonial elite and create a version of the past that is politically acceptable (Bray and Glover 1987; Trigger 1984). Despite claims of scientific objectivity, the manner in which archaeologists read the past is also inevitably colored by their cultural baggage.

The intention of this paper is to examine the dynamic interplay of oral traditions and archaeology from the group of islands in Western Micronesia, which comprise the Republic of Palau or *Belau* as it is called by the indigenous inhabitants (Fig. 1 and 2). More specifi-

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cally, attention is focused on a comparison of models for traditional village development and organization based on oral traditions and archaeology. Archaeological data from recent investigations at a complex of three traditional village sites in the state of Ngatpang on the island of Babeldoab are used to test an idealized model of village organization derived from traditional knowledge and archaeological evidence beginning with the initial stages of field investigations.

### **ORAL TRADITIONS IN PALAU**

Although the first European sightings of Palau were made by the Spanish during the first half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the wreck of the English packet *Antelope* in 1783 initiated European intervention in Palauan affairs and the recording of indigenous customs and traditions by foreigners (Keate 1789). Outside contacts increased steadily during the 1800s when visits from first English and later American trading vessels became a common occurrence. Although the Spanish had administrative control over Palau from 1885 to 1898, German commercial involvement in the archipelago expanded during this period and continued to grow after the purchase of Palau from Spain by Germany in 1898. The Japanese took control of Palau at the outbreak of World War I in 1914 and continued to govern the islands until the close of World War II. Since this time Palau has gone through a series of political transformations beginning with administration by the American military until 1951, followed by Trust Territory status, and finally the establishment of the independent Republic of Palau in 1994.

Baseline ethnographic data from Palau was collected during the period of German activity from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Kubary 1885; Semper 1982). Most of our present knowledge of 'traditional' Palauan society is based on the detailed accounts of ethnographer Augustin Kraemer who spent nine months in Palau collecting information as part of the German South Seas Expedition from 1909 to 1910 (Kraemer 1917, 1919, 1926, 1929). A more limited amount of work re-

recording oral traditions was also carried out during the subsequent Japanese period, most notably by the anthropologist Hijikata who also described various elements of Palauan material culture (Endo 1995).

Prior to the 1970s, the recording of Palauan history and traditions was in the hands of foreigners often directly employed by the colonial administrations. Political activism in the 1970s and 1980s during negotiations with the American administration for self determination led to an increased awareness on the part of indigenous Palauans of a shared cultural identity and the importance of fostering traditional values, including the recording of oral traditions. A variety of projects were initiated during this period, which sought to provide an indigenous perspective on the past and Palauan traditions. Much of this work has been coordinated by the Palau Community Action Agency, including the writing of a history of Palau (PCAA 1976, 1977, 1978) and the compilation of oral traditions by the Society of Historians (1993). The Society of Historians is comprised of respected clan elders who are recognized as knowledgeable guardians of Palauan traditions.

The need for documentation of oral traditions has become more urgent over the past decade as traditional leaders pass away without transmitting traditional knowledge to the next generation. Many of the new generation of leaders no longer see the importance of tradition as the political power base has become more dependent on success in business than the control of traditional knowledge. The increased rate of change has created a cultural vacuum of sorts and produced a generation of Palauans with diminished ties to traditional values and increased reliance on imported Western goods and values.

### **ARCHAEOLOGY AND ORAL TRADITIONS IN PALAU: THE COMPACT ROAD PROJECT**

Osborne (1966) was the first Archaeologist to carry out field investigations in Palau with a survey of sites throughout the archipelago and limited test excavations in 1954. In 1968, Osborne (1979) returned to Palau and conducted excavations at eight sites from which the first

Palauan radiocarbon dates were obtained. Beginning in the mid 1970s, the pace of archaeological activity in Palau quickened in response to the enforcement of laws requiring the assessment of cultural resource impacts for projects funded through U.S. agencies and the establishment of parallel laws in Palau. Much of this work was conducted by personnel from Southern Illinois University at Carbondale (SIU) as part of a long-range research program from 1979 to 1983, the Palau Archaeological Project. Since the mid-1980s, most of the archaeological work in Palau has been carried out by the Palau Division of Cultural Affairs (DCA) within a cultural resource management framework and as part of the ongoing state-by-state survey program. As a result of this program, reconnaissance surveys have taken place in nearly all states, although coverage in many areas remains spotty. Surveys on Babeldaob have concentrated for the most part on coastal locations and much of the interior has yet to be investigated. As the focus of the DCA work has been on recording surface remains and the collection of oral histories rather than excavation, the chronological framework for prehistoric occupation remains sketchy in most areas.

The latest round of U.S. financed projects was stipulated in the Compact of Free Association signed in 1994 and include the installation of improved public utilities and the planned construction of a surfaced road encompassing the main island of Babeldaob, commonly referred to as the Compact Road. These projects have required archaeological survey, testing, data recovery and monitoring, resulting in a tremendous increase in baseline data on Palau's past. A majority of this work has been carried out by the International Archaeological Research Institute, Inc (IARII), including the ongoing investigations for the proposed Compact Road under contract to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. The Compact Road archaeological field investigations consist of three phases: intensive survey, data recovery, and monitoring during road construction. The initial two phases were completed in 1996 and 1997, respectively, along the proposed 95 km long Compact Road corridor skirting Babel-

daob, a volcanic island 40 km long and 15 km wide (Fig. 3).

The Compact Road project has provided an unprecedented opportunity to sample sites in geographic locations across the entire island of Babeldaob and nearly all of the terrestrial environmental zones, from mangrove swamps to forested interior hills and grassland savannas. Over 110 traditional Palauan sites had been recorded and 70 radiocarbon dates obtained by early 1998, close to doubling the previous number of dates from Palau (Liston 1997; Wickler et al. 1997, 1998). As a result of this work, a new chronological framework for Palau is developing with firm archaeological evidence for settlement by the early first millennium B.C. (Wickler 1998) and evidence for anthropogenic disturbance from dated pollen sequences in sediment cores suggesting potential colonization as early as 2000 B.C. (Athens and Ward 1998).

An innovative aspect of the Compact Road project has been the integration of oral history documentation with archaeological field investigations (Tellei et al. 1997). This process has included extensive literature review, the identification of informants and subsequent interviews, and field visits with archaeologists to identify problems related to the oral traditions of individual sites and features. In contrast to most previous attempts to record oral traditions, all documentation was carried out by indigenous Palauan researchers rather than outsiders. The common language and shared cultural identity of the researchers and informants was an obvious benefit, which facilitated the sharing of traditional knowledge. However, the recording of oral traditions is not without difficulties as traditional knowledge includes privileged information, which is the property of clans, lineages or social groups and cannot be freely shared with individuals outside of a given group. This attitude is directly linked to the importance of knowledge in the maintenance of political power within traditional Palauan society and concomitant loss of power when knowledge is shared with outsiders.

The integration of oral traditions and archaeological data during the Compact Road

project has made it possible to explore the complexities of the cultural landscape and provide a social context for the material remains of past human activity on Babeldaob to a much greater extent than would have been possible from material culture alone. For example, traditional narratives linked to place names, physical features, and structural remains have been of considerable value in understanding Palauan concepts of space and time in an environmental context. Another benefit of oral history documentation has been the close contact with traditional landowners providing them with an opportunity to express their concerns about the potential adverse impacts of the proposed road on traditional sites.

### **A TRADITIONAL MODEL OF PALAUAN VILLAGE ORGANIZATION**

At the beginning of sustained Western contact at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Palauans were living in a number of villages scattered throughout the islands. Villages were generally located on the lower hill slopes just above the coastal plains, which were planted in taro, the major subsistence crop, grown in diked wetland fields. The remains of these "traditional" villages are one of the principal site types recorded during the Compact Road project and provide an excellent opportunity for examining the interplay of oral traditions and archaeological data. A complex of three abandoned traditional villages in Ngatpang State along the proposed Compact Road corridor was recorded in detail through the mapping of structural remains and limited test excavations. As a result of previous research and oral history documentation associated with the current archaeological field investigations, we have extensive information from traditional sources on the function and ownership of individual structural features for portions of these villages. Following a brief discussion of traditional Palauan socio-political structure, archaeological evidence from the three Ngatpang village sites is reviewed to determine how well they conform to an idealized model of traditional village organization.

At the time of Western contact, Palau was politically stratified and divided into numerous polities (Cordy 1986). Ideally, each polity controlled an area of land and a part of the lagoon. The island of Babeldaob was divided among several polities and alliances linked individual villages into federations (e.g., villages in the Ngatpang complex were part of a single federation). The boundaries between polities and the structure of the villages within each polity were constantly changing as new alliances were struck and power shifted.

Within each village were a variable number of ranked clans but the ideal number was thought to be ten (Force and Force 1972). Individual families were ranked within each of the clans. The ability of an individual to obtain and maintain power and status was determined to a significant extent by the rank of the family within the clan, by the rank of the clan within the village, by the rank of the village within the polity, and by the rank of the polity within the society (Smith 1983). Despite the rigid system of ranking which is traditionally viewed as

the cornerstone of Palauan political and social organization, social interaction across ranked divisions was made possible through a variety of institutions such as age-graded clubs for both sexes.

Political leadership at the village level was and is usually comprised of ten members representing the ten highest ranking clans. This is reflected in the village council of chiefs (Parmentier 1987; Society of Historians 1993). The four highest ranking chiefs form a single unit that has ultimate power to control the decision making process at both council and village level. The fifth ranked chief acts as a mediator between this unit and the remaining chiefs. The village council is divided into two equal parts with the first and third chiefs leading half of the village and the second and fourth chiefs leading the other half (Fig. 5). This symmetrical organization is also reflected in idealized designated seating arrangements within the chief's meeting house (*bai*) by a diagonal or lengthwise physical division of ranked chiefs (Fig. 6). The symmetry of the village council extends to the village as a whole, which is divided into two

equal halves. Each half of the village has clubs, which are also organized symmetrically by sex and clan (Fig. 7).

It has been argued that the symmetry in village level political structure is the main factor influencing the physical layout of the traditional village. An idealized traditional village model reflecting the symmetry of social organization has been proposed by Rita Olsudong, the only indigenous Palauan to date with a graduate degree in archaeology (Olsudong 1995). In this model, the chiefs meeting house (*bai*) is the largest structure in the village and centrally located (Fig. 8). A stone path leading from the *bai* divides the village into symmetrical halves and extends to the ocean where pairs of canoe houses and docks are located. Men's club houses are also located towards the seaward end of the main stone path near the entrance to the village. As a reflection of the duality which characterizes the village council, residential platforms of the first and third ranked chiefs are located in one half of the village, and the second and fourth ranked chiefs in the other half in close proximity to the chief's meeting house.

#### **TESTING THE TRADITIONAL MODEL: THE NGATPANG VILLAGE COMPLEX**

Olsudong (1995) tested her theoretical model of traditional village organization against archaeological data from a set of six abandoned traditional village sites in Ngatpang State. The archaeological evidence consisted of site maps from each of the villages with structural remains mapped by Olsudong and personnel from the Division of Cultural Affairs. The reliability and comparability of these site maps varied considerably due to factors such as site disturbance and the degree of accuracy and detail in the recording of features. Interviews with knowledgeable local informants were carried out in conjunction with the archaeological survey in order to collect oral traditions concerning socio-political organization of the villages and the clan names and function of individual features, particularly stone platforms. Based on the results of her study, Olsudong concluded that the spatial distribution of ar-

chaeological features only partially supports the idealized model of traditional village organization.

Archaeological investigations for the Compact Road project included intensive survey and test excavations at three of the village sites in Olsudong's study. These village sites are components of a tightly clustered complex, which also includes four terraced earthwork sites and extends for a distance of 2 km along the eastern shore of Ngermeduu Bay on the west coast of Babeldaob. The villages, which include Ngimis (Site B:NT-2:1), Ngerumlol (Site B:NT-2:5), and Ngerdubech (Site B:NT-3:9A and B), were traditionally part of a confederation led by Ngerdubech (see Fig. 3 for site locations). The Compact Road investigations were able to provide a more detailed and accurate record of archaeological features at the three village sites than that presented by Olsudong through precise mapping and descriptions of individual features and associated sub-features. Test excavations within and in close proximity to structural features also enabled an assessment of feature function and chronology.

The physical characteristics and spatial arrangement of stone structural features at the three traditional village sites provided only limited support for the idealized village model (see village site maps, figs. 10 – 12). Aspects of the model supported by the archaeological investigations include the central location of the chief's meeting house (*bai*) and some symmetry in the placement of other structures, primarily stone platforms from the residences of the highest ranked chiefs.

As predicted by the model, *bai* platforms are the largest structures at each of the three village sites ranging from 1,112 m<sup>2</sup> at Ngerdubech to 659 m<sup>2</sup> at Ngimis and 223 m<sup>2</sup> at Ngerumlol (Fig. 13). The relative rank of the three villages based on *bai* platform size also agrees with traditional sources that identify Ngerdubech as the paramount village in Ngatpang, followed by Ngimis.

The much smaller platform at Ngerumlol is consistent with its position as a hamlet of Ngerdubech. This reconstruction assumes that

the platforms are contemporaneous, which has yet to be demonstrated. Differences in the construction of bai platforms, which appear to be chronologically significant, were noted between the sites and only Ngerdubech has a chief's bai platform with features typical of those in use during the historic period. Attributes of bai platforms and associated features such as shrines may be linked to their relative age with the chief's bai platform at Ngimis (Fea. 1) exhibiting traits which appear to be transitional between a possible early bai type at Ngerumlol (Fea. 13) and the typical historic period bai platform recorded at Ngerdubech (Fea. 21).

Palauan residential structures were traditionally built on piles adjacent to, and usually behind, stone platforms or pavements, rather than on the platforms themselves. Platforms are the property of individual clans and the family of the clan head resided at the clan platform. Platforms also served as clan cemeteries with graves marked by stone slabs or raised pavements. Residential platforms in the three village sites were separated into two categories on the basis of size and associated features. Chiefs' platforms tend to be large and are commonly associated with features such as multiple tiers, raised pavements, graves, monoliths, and contiguous earth platforms or stone pavement aprons. Platforms belonging to lower status clans are smaller and lack subfeatures. These findings substantiate the identification of high and low status platforms by local informants based on traditional knowledge. Although the size distribution of residential platforms at the investigated sites follows a smooth upward curve lacking multiple modes, there is some degree of separation between small and large platforms at ca. 100 m<sup>2</sup> and internal clustering within each group (Fig. 14). General aspects of residential platform construction such as presence or absence of an earth core and the amount of effort invested in stone facings may also reflect temporal intra-site and inter-site differences between structures.

In a traditional model of Palauan village organization, residential platforms serve as centers of domestic production in contrast to bai

platforms, which are the focus of community-wide activities (Gumerman et al. 1981; Snyder et al. 1983). Investigations of residential platforms at the three village sites revealed four types of features associated with food preparation and related domestic activities: low stone faced earthen platforms, small stone pavement aprons, extensions giving platforms a notched appearance, and probable hearths or cooking mounds. Inter-site variability in the distribution of these features may be chronological as well as functional. Excavations within and near bai and residential platforms revealed cultural deposits with shell and bone midden suggesting that food preparation and consumption took place at both types of platforms.

### **A CHRONOLOGY OF VILLAGE SETTLEMENT**

Investigations of traditional village organization and settlement have commonly assumed that villages were occupied over a relatively brief period of time during the late prehistoric to historic period and that oral traditions can be a reliable source of information on these sites. One consequence of this model has been a tendency to discount the potential for long-term occupation and multiple building phases in traditional villages. The assumption that the occupation of traditional villages was relatively brief and structures were roughly contemporaneous simplifies the task of explanation, but the validity of this assumption must be critically evaluated. Radiocarbon dating results from the three Ngatpang village sites demonstrate that occupation extended over a longer period of time and began significantly earlier than previously thought. The collective results document up to three periods of village settlement on the basis of stratigraphic evidence and radiocarbon dates. The most recent period of occupation covers a period of roughly 300 years beginning at around AD 1650. A majority of the existing structural remains and the oral traditions referring to them undoubtedly date to this period. Multiple cultural layers suggesting two earlier temporally distinct periods of occupation were recorded in excavations at the village sites. The nature of site use during the

earliest period (AD 1250 – 1450) remains uncertain and may reflect horticultural activity or temporary habitation of the terraces on which the existing villages are built prior to any kind of village settlement. A series of radiocarbon dates provide firm evidence for nucleated village settlement by the first half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century and signal the beginning of the second period of site use (AD 1450 – 1650). Subsurface features such as postholes and refuse pits as well as dense midden concentrations demonstrate the presence of structures and more intensive habitation than during the previous period. It is also possible that some of the stone structures visible on the surface today were initially constructed before the end of this period.

#### **ARCHAEOLOGY AND ORAL TRADITIONS: A DYNAMIC PERSPECTIVE ON THE PAST**

The collective results of archaeological investigations at the Ngatpang village sites illustrate the need for considerable caution in the interpretation of traditional village settlement in Palau based on traditional sources alone. In addition to the oft-cited caveats concerning the questionable utility of traditional sources in societies where Western impacts have radically altered indigenous perceptions of the past, oral traditions must also be viewed critically as the reflection of attitudes held by certain segments of society, particularly in highly ranked societies such as Palau.

Although oral traditions have definite limitations as a tool for interpreting the past, they are an invaluable source of thought provoking models providing a starting point for archaeological inquiry. This is especially true in Palau where we are fortunate to have a wealth of detailed knowledge concerning the socio-political role of archaeological remains in villages as concrete expressions and powerful symbols of collective identity and social order. The importance of platforms and other village structures as a means by which individuals legitimized their membership in groups defined by kinship, sex, age and status has played an important role in preserving traditional knowl-

edge despite two centuries of foreign impacts on Palauan society.

Only through the active integration of oral traditions in archaeological research, not merely as an afterthought or supplement to archaeological evidence, will it be possible to provide a holistic perspective on village development and the history of Palauan settlement in general making use of the full range of resources at our disposal.

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