

MICRONESIAN

JOURNAL OF THE HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

Vol. 5, n° 1/2

Combined Issue

November 2006

VIRTUAL HISTORIC PRESERVATION Non-Physical Aspects Of Heritage In Micronesia

Dirk Anthony Ballendorf

Micronesian Area Research Center, University of Guam

An understanding of non-physical aspects of historic preservation in the Pacific islands is tantamount to understanding islanders themselves and their cultural values.¹ But, while I encourage such study, at the same time I find the prospect a bit disquieting and urge caution while proceeding. Why, one may ask? Because, simply, in my own experience here in Micronesia, all folklore and mythology is locally and narrowly construed and is political. Back in the 1980s, anthropologist daVerne Reed Smith was conducting research in Palau and was attempting to document the local history of the municipality of Melekiok in Palau.² Not only did she find various versions of the local clans' ascendancy and positions of influence and power, but also encountered anger and resentment among her informants who were being objectively, rather than subjectively, recorded and accredited. Instead of making friends through her work and efforts, she made enemies and has never again even visited Palau.

Back in the late 1970s, just after the publication of *The Book of Luelen* by anthropologists Saul Riesenber, John Fisher, and Ruth Whiting,³ David Hanlon and I were investigating the existence of an original manuscript of this book which was reportedly in the possession of Luelen's family. We succeeded in finding it

and, by appointment, went to the home of a relative who had the manuscript. As we talked with the woman, she set the manuscript on a table and we could see that it was written on several Japanese school notebooks of the period. On closer examination, I concluded that this manuscript was actually a copy of the original which had been taken as dictation by Luelen's daughter. But, of course, it was nonetheless genuine, and undoubtedly had not been seen by outsiders for many years.

Hanlon and I were quite excited over this find, as you might imagine; me, because I had participated in the search, and as an historian helped to locate an important document in the history of Pohnpei; David Hanlon because also as an historian, he was eager to read it. David and his wife Kathy had served as Peace Corps Volunteers in Pohnpei, and were fluent in Pohnpeian. Our initial enthusiasm, however, was crimped when the owner told us that only I could physically hold the document. She stipulated this because she knew—and it was common knowledge around Pohnpei—I could not speak Pohnpeian, nor read it. Hence, I was regarded as a “safe person” to see the manuscript. There are two reasons for this secrecy. The first, and obvious one, is that “lower caste” persons are not permitted to have access

This is a peer reviewed contribution. Received: 22 May 2006 Accepted: 25 May 2006

© *Micronesian Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences* ISSN 1449-7336

HeritageFutures™ International, PO Box 3440, Albury NSW 2640, Australia

Persistent identifier: <http://www.nla.gov.au/nla.arc-65664>

527

527

to “secret cultural information.” The other, more serious, more subtle reason is that rival factions in the society would have their own versions of legends and folklore which would run counter to or different from than ones which might appear in the Luelen manuscript.

Of course *The Book of Luelen* had already been translated by Drs. Riesenberg, Fisher, and Whiting, and published by the University of Hawaii Press. So, we might ask, who was the Pohnpeian who helped them? It was Leo Falcam, who at the time the three anthropologists were working on the manuscript, was a student at the University of Hawaii but subsequently has been the Governor of Pohnpei, the FSM Postmaster-General, and the Vice President of the FSM. So, we might further ask did Falcam translate everything, or did he hold back or disguise some of the original Pohnpeian text?

I think we can leave the matter here. For the general reader, and the Pohnpeian specialist, *The Book of Luelen* can stand as it is as a real contribution to our understanding of Pohnpei and its people. The point I am making with this story is that the preservation of cultural traditional information is fraught with social and political difficulties, and next-to-impossible to accurately obtain.

The Palauans have a saying which can be applied to the characterization of traditional knowledge: *Ng kora osebhel a mengur, el di ngara melkolk el mora melkolk*, “Some knowledge, like coconut juice, passes from darkness to darkness.” Undoubtedly there are similar sayings in the languages of all our Micronesian cultures. Traditional knowledge in Micronesia is private, not public, property. And, it is also finite; one must not give it away or it will run out and be lost. This reality presents problems for researchers and investigators from the outside; if one is not properly connected it might be quite difficult to get information.

This reality is just the opposite from what it is like in the West or in Japan. Usually, all an inquirer needs to do is introduce himself and proceed to ask questions. In my own case, hardly a week goes by but that there’s not someone writing, calling, or stopping in at the university to ask questions about various cul-

tural and historical phenomena of our region. A clear expression of their interest is all that I require to begin sometimes lengthy diatribes to help them.

Some traditional knowledge of the islands is benign in character and seems to defy controversy in its gathering among foreigners and locals alike. An example is “the language of flowers.” At our opening ceremony for this conference the other day, the participants were presented with flowered *leis* and *mwarmwars*. These were—as always—colorful and beautiful. I was given a lovely one woven of red flowers and deep green leaves. It was presented from a plethora of a variety of colors, selected arbitrarily. But, in times past there was a language in the wearing of flowers. Certain flowers expressed the mood of the wearers, so that when someone approached another along the path, it could be determined what sort of disposition they were in by not only the color, but also in the way it was perched on the head, thus enabling the observer to know what to say, or not to say, when passing. Today, this language is all but completely gone. Many young people today are fascinated to discover this.

But, if you are gathering traditional information having to do, for example, with the social history of a village, you are getting into political explanations and attitudes of which there are various versions depending on your connections or affiliations. You cannot expect to get objective points-of-view; you will get the version of the particular faction’s representative you are speaking with wants you to hear. How then, is an objective picture to be gained? And, what role does the historic preservation agency play in obtaining this information? The answer to the former question is, of course, that you will not get an objective picture. You will get a subjective picture; the tenacious researcher will get perhaps several subjective pictures. Certainly here, the route to objectivity is through subjectivity.

The answer to the second question—the role to be played in all of this by the historic preservation agency—is more complicated. A quick and simple answer might be: only outsid-

ers should gather information of a political nature. Professor Einstein once said that “everything should be made as simple as possible, but no simpler!” Giving the gathering of cultural-political information would be not only too simple, but also inadequate as well. This approach would be unacceptable to post-modernists, liberals, and to local native practitioners—who also comprise most of the labor force in historic preservation agencies—as well. Such a colonial approach to historic preservation is obsolete.

Still, we should not dismiss this “outsider role” too hastily. People with long experience in the local or regional history will have contributions to make on a perspective to cultural-political information that will be very useful.

My conclusions here remain tentative, and are useful only as directions. First, the gathering of traditional cultural information should be undertaken only by members of the historic

preservation agencies with the longest experience. Second, there should be lengthy and deliberate discussion on the material recorded and its political ramifications. Third, consultations with knowledgeable outsiders, both foreign and local, who may provide important insights to interpretation and meaning of the material, should be held.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Remarks Made at the Symposium on Historic Preservation in Micronesia, 15-20 January 2006, Majuro, Republic of the Marshall Island
- 2 DeVerne Reed Smith, “Notes on Melekiok, 1988,” Field notes taken by Dr. Smith are in the special collections, Pacific Collections, Micronesian Area Research Center, University of Guam
- 3 Saul H. Riesenberg, John L. Fisher, and Ruth Whiting, *The Book of Luelen*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1986.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY AND CONTACT

Dirk Anthony Ballendorf is professor of history and Micronesian studies at the University of Guam's Micronesian Area Research Center. He has lived and worked in the Pacific for more than thirty years, and has written and lectured widely on Micronesian history, culture, and politics

Contact: Dirk Anthony Ballendorf, Professor of History and Micronesian Studies, Micronesian Area Research Center, University of Guam, Mangilao, Guam 96923 USA
email: ballendo@uog9.uog.edu