HPO Symposium

“Resources, Research, Protection”

What are the resources?

1) Historical sites

There are battle sites, buildings and structures–material things easily identifiable

* Guam: Spanish plaza in Hagatna (remains of the center of the old colony), Spanish-built bridges, Magellan landing place at Umatac
* CNMI: Last Command Post, Isley Field, Tinian airfield and bomb pit, Japanese jail, Japanese hospital, sugar refinery
* Palau: Peleliu caves and guns, Japanese buildings (OEK), Shinto shrine
* Yap: O’Keefe’s headquarters at Terang, Spanish fort in Colonia, German cable station
* Chuuk: Japanese Navy HQ on Toloas,
* Pohnpei: Spanish Wall, Japanese agriculture station, Langar Island, sugar refinery at Sapwalapw
* Kosrae: mission training school at Mwot
* Marshalls: German trade center at Jaluit, battle remains at Kwajalein

These, among others, are the visible remains that can be identified from the historical period. They ought to be preserved for sure. But should our work end there?

What about those structures that were important in the past, that defined a certain period of history, even if remains cannot be recovered? For example,

* Guam: Umatac played a key role in the Spanish period; governor’s house located there for a time, and the galleon sometimes put in there, with a week-long bazaar following.
* Palau: Japanese governor’s house on hill, Malakal as site of foreign trade in 19th century
* Chuuk: Eten as site of the German traders (Chuukese equivalent of Langar), first Protestant mission school on Weno, Imperial Navy buildings on Toloas, location of the old town on Toloas during Japanese times
* Pohnpei: Langar as a trade station for German traders
* Marshalls: old post-war district center in Laura

These do not cease to be important for us because we can’t recover them. They play an important role in our historical awareness of that era. Unless we can “restore” them in some way, our sense of the past is defective–and the past defines in part who and what we are now.

What, then, do we do? How can this part of our past be restored? (Photos, site identification, etc?)

2) Prehistorical sites

The visible remains of a cultural past that predates European contact and the first written records

* CNMI: latte sites
* Palau: monoliths, terraces
* Chuuk: old moats and defenses (eg, on Foupe), petroglyphs at Wichen River
* Pohnpei: Nan Madol, Salapwuk
* Kosrae: ruins at Lelu

But there is a whole different class of places that are prominently mentioned in oral history but with no visible remains today.

Examples: sites in Chuuk associated with Sou Kachaw tales, founding place of Marshallese clans on Namu,

The tales, too, are resources. But how do we protect the memory of these places? This may be especially difficult because of the privileged status of such information, the reluctance of most people to share this or offer it for the public. Then there is the additional problem of the contested nature of such information.

Should we insist on Western norms for the preservation of such information rather than the restrictive passing down of such prized knowledge that characterizes the Pacific style?

Proposed Strategies for Preservation

1) The historical sites with evident remains are the least problematic. Problems are generally two-fold: research for documentation and financial aid for restoration (eg, Japanese ag station on Pohnpei). HPO has plenty of experience with this sort of property.

2) Much the same is true of the pre-historic remains. Research and financial aid for restoration are needed. But an additional difficulty is often sorting out the various claims that interest groups have in the properties (eg, claims to custodianship of Nan Madol: state govt, traditional leaders, land owners). What can be done to break logjams of this sort?

3) Historic sites of importance that no longer exist and cannot be restored. (Note: Don’t just think of colonial governments and the wars they fought. Think also of the missions–first churches at Shalong Point on Temwen and in Rohnkiti, the early training schools, etc).

* photographic records of these places (such as MicSem is doing, also Belau Museum, CNMI HPO)
* reconstruction of the layout of the towns (at least on map, perhaps even a diorama)

4) Prehistoric sites with no material remains present the greatest problem. The very identification of the site is sometimes a problem. Added to this is the problem of gathering

descriptive information on the site and a sense of its meaning.

* collection of oral historical information on such sites
* deciding on an acceptable format for the presentation of this information. (Should it be written down or simply tape-recorded? Should everyone have access to it, or just select people in keeping with traditional norms for such knowledge? Might it be used for public education purposes? Or would public dissemination profane this sort of lore? In other words, what sort of property rights should be observed here?)

5) Another type of resources that are relevant here–the non-material artifacts of a culture that help to define that culture. Eg, dance chants, nose flute recordings, religious chants, etc. There are others besides: recipes for magic and love potions, healing arts, martial arts techniques, etc.

* collection of old music is important–and readily possible today with audio digitization (Scott Stege in Majuro, radio station on Yap, MicSem). More should be involved.

Preservation (Payoff)

At the end of it all, what do we have? Just a collection of loose materials? A rat’s nest of old junk? No, we have the raw material for a public education program that never quits–one that goes on and on.

A public education program is by no means the same as attempting to incorporate this material in an elementary school or high school curriculum. Sometimes young people just aren’t ready to use material of this sort. On the other hand, we get more questions as we become older and possibly more curious about our own past.

Example: St. Ann’s School. The school that my father and his entire family attended. At one time the largest school in the world with over 3,000 elementary students. German parish with priests who were quick to use corporal punishment when deemed necessary (and it often was so deemed). I heard the stories many times over at family parties when I was a kid, but they never meant much to me. No interest in the school or the parish. We had moved out of the parish and I was happier where I was. As I got older, my curiosity was tweaked about the place. What had gone into making my father the man he was? What was it like to be taught in German by missionary priests in my own country? How high were the ceilings, and how did they heat such a big place in the Buffalo winter?

My curiosity spread to the rest of the neighborhood. What did my grandfather’s small store sell? Pickled eggs in jars, like the neighborhood taverns? What kind of candy did he offer? Where was the sauerkraut made and how was it done and who did the work? Did someone really come around and light the street lamps each evening? When did electric street lights arrive?

I would have killed for some good photos of the school in operation and our family store, but the only photos we had were those stiff old formal shots of the family, nothing on the surroundings. When I visited Buffalo, I sometimes went to see the family lot, but there was no house there any longer. It was just a vacant lot in a rundown neighborhood. I could see the church, but I’d have to use my imagination to see it filled with German immigrants attending mass, with clouds of smoke from the incense and gold glittering on the altar, and the priest climbing the winding stairs to the pulpit high overhead. (I would have had the same problem imaging mass at the old German church in Kolonia if I didn’t have photos of it in its heyday.) Imagine the added attraction of being able to hear the kind of music the organ and choir produced at those masses.

Let me run through this personal saga again, trying to draw some conclusions that are relevant to our work in Micronesia.

* My fascination with the past grew as I matured, and perhaps as I became ever more distant from it. My guess is that this happens with most of us. If so, the real payoff of public education is not in our early years, but later in life as we wonder about what went into making us and our families and our communities. (Similarly, the thirst may be even greater among those who have moved to Oklahoma or Florida–we find some evidence for this on our MicSem website.)
* The church and school are still there to see, and many of us make pilgrimages to the neighborhood to see these grand old buildings. They’re marvelous to see, but they are shells without the vibrance they once had when they were part of a community’s everyday life. To make these places come alive, I need stories (let’s call this oral history). The stories were recorded in print, thanks to the efforts of my aunt, who wrote long letters filled with remembrances of the old days.
* The letters my aunt left us will never be published, but everyone in the Hezel family knows how to access them. The non-Hezels have their own stories, I suppose. If they don’t, they can always write or email one of us, and we will be happy to share with them.
* My grandfather’s house and store no longer exist, although these are as important a part of my remembered past as the church and school. Restoring the school would be a worthy project, but that only gets us so far. What about the family store? What about the tavern at the corner of Broadway and Emslie that my uncles used to frequent? Here’s where we need photos, music, sketches. They assist us enormously in imaginatively recreating the neighborhood for ourselves. (The Georg Fritz photos do this for German times, just as the Joachim DeBrum photos do for Marshalls at the turn of the 19th century.)
* The end product of all this is not just to satisfy my curiosity, but to deepen my understanding of the environment and the forces that went into shaping my family and, ultimately, me. I think I can say honestly that the more I understand what went into making us in the past, the more conscious I am of my own identity.

Conclusion

This is what I see as the goal of our work. I have also tried to show on as broad a canvas as possible what needs to be done.

The questions I have are essentially the same as those I posed at our last gathering, on Saipan.

1) Who of us can do what?

2) How can we collaborate and share resources to get the job done?

3) How can we educate the public–or at least provide what the public needs to educate itself?