***Deepening a Sense of History in Micronesia***

HPO Conference, Pohnpei 2013

Defining ourselves

* Not bureaucratic office-workers, simply arranging archaeological surveys and issuing permits for building.
* Not repository for reports on surveys and storehouse for documents relating to the past, even the very early past.
* Not keepers of an office that is eligible for US government funds each year, committed to keep the funds rolling at any cost, even if it means faking projects that contribute little or nothing to our sense of the past.
* But an office committed to preserving images of the past, when everyone else is full speed ahead to facilitate change.

Cultivating a sense of history among the public

* Sense of past is promise of the future (Ron Murphy’s point: those in the inner city with a sense of past generations have the sense of time depth to sacrifice for their grandchildren; they can save for the future; they can think three generations and more ahead.) Restoring a sense of the past is critical if we want to confront the challenges of the future.
* Importance of not just speaking about the past, but engaging the public on the past–need to ask them questions, get them involved in reconstructing the past. History is not something that goes on apart from the public, but with their involvement. They can actually contribute to reconstructing the past–it’s not done for them and passed on to them already completed. They work on the puzzle, together with us. After all, it’s *their* past we’re trying to preserve.
* Preservation, then, has an educational component–it’s much more than just saving old buildings and skeletal remains. Use the past to engage and educate the public. This is particularly important when the rate of cultural change is as rapid as it is today. In addition to that, the migration outwards from the islands is heavier than ever before.

How much of the past?

• Post-contact history. We’ve done some great work on preservation of the monuments of colonial history: DeBrum house on Likiep (along with restoration of the photos once kept there); O’Keefe’s trading center at Terang in Yap; the Spanish wall on Pohnpei; Spanish bridges and the Agana Plaza on Guam; relics of the sugar industry on Saipan; Japanese buildings in Palau. Not just preservation of the sites, but further documentation through collection of photos and other related materials. All this has been integrated into history books that have been produced over the past 20 years or longer. Weaving this into a unified history for the public is a further step–eg, in the 7-hour History of Micronesia video series produced by MicSem just a few years ago. HPO support, in funding and access to materials, was crucial for the production of this series.

• What about pre-contact history? HPO has taken seriously the task of preserving the visible remains of a cultural past that predates European contact and the first written records. Some examples are: latte sites in CNMI; monoliths and terraces in Palau; old moats and defenses in Chuuk, along with the petroglyphs at Wichen River on Weno; the old religious sites at Nan Madol and Salapwuk on Pohnpei; the ruins at Lelu and more recently the shrine to Sinlaka on Kosrae; ancient burial sites and caves with petroglyphs on Guam.

• 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; exchanges that occurred between Yap and Palau. The tales related to these places are also resources. How do we protect the memory of these places even as we encourage people to cherish the tales related to such parts of their history?

[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.]

Projects worth considering

Even as we do our inventory work, perform our archaeological surveys and issue our permits, we could undertake more ambitious projects–something that offers them an imaginative sense of what might have happened, something that engages their interest in history and allows them to participate in the making of their own history.

The projects I propose here all have to do with pre-contact history. We’d be taking it back beyond the video history series that MicSem did a few years ago. Beyond the video on traditional Micronesian religion that we put out just a year ago. We would be going back to the beginning of the region and attempting to present some of the puzzling information that we have on early settlement and contact between island groups. Back to the beginning, lost in the mist, and offering what we think we know, while enticing people to contribute what they might have heard.

* Yap-Palau ties. Explore the prehistory of the two island groups, with emphasis on the common ethnographic features and the links between the two groups. The latter would include but not be limited to quarrying stone money. Extra value: This would be a support for the Global Heritage Site application that has already been made.
* Marianas prehistory. Early settlement, linguistic and cultural ties, monoliths (where did they come from?). This could be a digest of the archaeological and linguistic data that is currently available to us. Extra value: a single show that could bring the people of these two entities a little closer in preparation for what might be a common political future.
* Eastern Micronesia. Relationship between Chuuk, Pohnpei and Kosrae–basaltic rock cult, Kachaw ties, Polynesian influence, breadfruit revolution. Use of legends and archaeological and cultural evidence to explore these ties between the core of Nuclear Micronesian-speaking cultures. [Fuller presentation of thoughts on this have been prepared.]

Conclusion

Think big! Do your office work, but let your imagination range beyond this. We don’t need another sailing canoe, or more breadfruit-pounding visuals. We need to explore how the canoes spread from one group to another in ancient times and what they brought. We need to know how breadfruit expanded and what other changes they might have brought. We needed to explore the ties between these islands in the past–ties that have been suggested in oral form before anyone could write.

We need something to open new vistas to the public imagination. You who are anthropologists and archaeologists, you who are custodians of the bits and pieces of data on the past can do more.

To make this contribution, we will have to ponder the three questions that I continually bring up at meetings such as this:

• Who of us can do what to this larger end?

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

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

FXH

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