**Intangible Culture**

Book Launch on Pohnpei

(March 23, 2015)

***Opening Remarks***

* Publication of “Traditional Knowledge and Wisdom: Themes from the Pacific Islands.” Book is a product of ICHAP (Intangible Cultural Heritage for Asia and the Pacific), under the sponsorship of UNESCO, on Taiwan to celebrate cultures of the Pacific.

Book doesn’t pretend to be all-inclusive.

1) Only certain islands represented–those that responded and submitted articles. But even so, this is a start. Perhaps, PNG and Samoa and French Polynesia in the future.

2) Articles touch a very few aspects of the culture–navigation and ship-building lore, sakau use on Pohnpei. Selective, but suggestive of many other intangible cultural elements that could be written about.

* Why such interest in Taiwan? Austronesian homeland–point of departure for settlement of Pacific 4,000 BC. Taiwan aborigines are distant ancestors of Pacific peoples. Sailed down through the Philippines, into Indonesia, and thence into Melanesia and beyond.
* Intangible culture? What does this mean?

Culture is sometimes defined as the pattern of organization of knowledge, beliefs and behavior in a society that makes us who we are. Culture is distinctive–identifies a people as belonging to a certain group. Includes language; this is an important element but not the only one that distinguishes a culture. [examples of cultural distinctiveness: touching person when teasing the person–sign that this is done in friendliness; picking up phone and being asked “Ihs e me?”]

“Intangible Culture Heritage” is the less dramatic side of the culture–not outrigger canoes themselves, not monuments of the island like Nan Madol, not chiefly lines, not even sakau or betelnut chewing. (Yet all these things can point to important aspects of ICH.) Something less visible, but symbolic of the main features of the culture. “Little things count.” [Examples: use of laughter to hide embarrassment, going out of the way to make others feel included.]

Distinctive cultural products–like sakau or betelnut or canoes–can reveal something deeper and more important about the culture. Examples:

* Betelnut: Yapese saying “Wisdom is in the basket”–pause to reflect so one doesn’t say something impulsive and damaging to another.
* Sakau: Pohnpeian use of sakau (sakauen tomw) to achieve reconciliation for wrongs done.
* Canoe-construction: Apologies to the tree before it is cut down, invocation of the spirits to guide the craftsman as he carves the hull of the canoe.
* Why bother with this? Why a book on it?

To remind ourselves that culture isn’t simply the big features–the physical ones that people would associate with a society. It includes subtle elements of knowledge, beliefs and behavior: magic and belief in spirits, but also respect forms, behavior within the family, and so many other things. All this is part of the culture and should be seen as such.

* What can we do to commemorate this?

First, recognize this “intangible culture” as part of our heritage, and give it its due as part of the culture.

Second, share it among ourselves, and even with others, since ICH helps to define us.

This book is a small start.

***Traditional Wisdom of the Pacific Islands***

Culture comes in all kinds of sizes and shapes and forms, as we all know.

* Eg, respect forms such as stooping, way of passing the sakau cup to another, language used and avoided in presence of women in the family, stories related to family land plots, tools and methods of picking breadfruit and preserving it, etc.

Our interest here is in “preserving” culture. This means not so much making sure it doesn’t get changed at all–this is an impossible task. But ensuring that it is recognized, remembered, and will remain a part of the people’s imagination.... that it remains a part of our remembered past.

* Important in any culture–eg, American. Horseshoes and cowboys are hard to find these days, but they are an important part of our imagined past. So, cowboy movies, dude ranches, historic western towns like Dodge City are all helpful in reconstructing our past, building up our imagination, ensuring that cowboys remain a part of the past. All this was an important feature in my youth.
* Likewise with events in the past–eg, US Civil War, the war that divided the country and almost split it in half. Signs on battlefields, trails pointing out Sherman’s march to the sea, the courthouse at which Robert E. Lee surrendered at Appomattox. The Civil War wasn’t just a trauma (like the Sokehs Uprising), but a historical event that helped define who we Americans are.
* We are a people because we have a shared past as much as a shared culture today.

So perhaps our best strategy for preserving culture today, when so much of it is changing (examples of changing behavior at XHS graduation in 2013), is to track down all the stories we can to refresh our memories and those of our kids when we begin to forget. To do this, we can also find those sites that can generate stories and direct people toward them in the hope that the stories about these places will be retold.

* Example: Nan Madol. The story is not just the size of the rocks and the way they were formed into gigantic walls. It is the answer to the question about why this was done in the first place (Ohlsihpa and Ohlsohpa). It spurs other stories: Isokelekel and his warriors, who were the Saudeleurs, consequences of the overthrow of Saudeleurs.

But let’s not stop at Nan Madol–there are plenty of other sites that should be preserved because they also trigger stories.

Pohnpei

* Salapwuk, site of the old agricultural rites in pre-contact times.
* Spanish Wall, maintained as a defense for the colony for many years.
* Japanese agriculture station, center for crop experimentation during Japanese times
* Langar Island, trading center for Europeans in early 1900s, then utilized by Japanese
* Sugar refinery at Sapwalapw, reminder of the time it was the second largest population center on Pohnpei and site of a growing industry
* Sites of the original churches on Pohnpei: Shalong on Temwen Island, and Nanpei land at Rohnkiti.

Chuuk

* Sites around Tonachaw celebrating cultural revolution following arrival of Soukachaw. (Clan system is said to have originated at that time.)
* Petroglyphs at Wichen River
* Eten as site of the German traders (Chuukese equivalent of Langar)
* Imperial Navy buildings on Toloas, and location of the old town on Toloas during Japanese times
* First Protestant mission school at the site of Mizpah on Weno.

Kosrae

* Stone ruins at Lelu (political rather than religious, unlike Nan Madol)
* Temple to Sinlaka (goddess of breadfruit and everything else) in Walung
* Mission training school at Mwot, at which the early generations of Protestant pastors were trained

Yap

* O’Keefe’s headquarters at Terang, symbol of Yap’s prominent place in copra trading days
* Spanish fort in Colonia near legislature building
* German cable station, first link with the rest of the world

It’s not the sites themselves–they are just the signposts of history. But these sites are valuable for the stories they trigger–stories that shed light on our shared past.

The point is not preserve the sites themselves. It’s to turn them into vehicles for story-telling, sharpening the historical imagination of island people.

Steps in this process: identify these sites, label them to arouse curiosity, and let them become occasions for stories about the past.

Other means can be used for arousing interest in the past.

* MicSem produced five videos as part of a History of Micronesia video series. Offers an overview of island history, but the purpose is not to seal it up and put it on the shelf; purpose is to stimulate thoughts and further questions about our shared history.
* My fond hope is to do a series of three more videos on the region, this time on early links between the islands long before Europeans appeared on the scene. One would show links between Pohnpei, Kosrae and Chuuk in 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.]

Conclusion

If sites and old events are important, it is because they motivate us to recapture stories of the past.

Goal is to gain for us all a deeper appreciation for the past, since this also means a deeper appreciation of who you are as a people. Remember that stories link us. (Don’t let others define you.)

There are unifying features in FSM besides the close relationship of island languages. There is the history we share–in each island as well as in the group that we now call FSM.

“History defines a people or a nation at least as much as their constitution or their flag or even their language.” If that’s the case, then a sense of history has never been more critical for FSM.

We create our own history, which binds us together as families and as nations.