**Worshiping on the Graves of Our Ancestors**

***PHA Keynote Talk: December 2014***

We are here–this week at our conference, and today in this museum–to worship on the grave of our ancestors. Here in Taiwan, we pay tribute to our Austronesian heritage–the homeland of nearly all Pacific peoples and the dispersal point from which they set out to settle the Asian rim and the islands of the Pacific. But that’s a theme that has already been treated these past few days by others with far more knowledge and eloquence than I could ever muster.

The dead live on, as we know. (This is not just the profession of religious belief by a Catholic priest.) Islanders understand very well the ties that bind the living to the dead–for centuries they have invoked their memory to support land claims, and they have called upon the spirits of the dead to find new fishing grounds or for inspiration in fashioning a new dance.

Historians like ourselves acknowledge this truth as well, for we are forever unearthing the remains of the past to give shape and substance to the present and future. These are the ties that bind–the links between the present and the past.

So here we are, worshiping on the grave of the earliest ancestors of the Pacific family. Even those of us who weren’t born into that family, and those who were slow to recognize the blood lines. I would have to count myself in both those categories.

When I was growing up in the 1950s, my introduction to the Pacific was by way of *Kon Tiki*, the account of the celebrated voyage of Thor Heyerdahl to Hawaii on a raft–an experiment designed to show that settlement of the Pacific could have been from the Americas. We’ve come a long way since then. Linguists and archaeologists, following the lead of physical anthropologists with their data on blood antigens and ear wax, have contributed to the store of evidence making the case for a settlement from the other direction–from right here on Taiwan.

* Tribute to Australia

When it comes to ancestors, we practitioners of Pacific history have another set to honor: that early generation of visionaries in Australia who gave initial impetus to the field.

I still remember my initial visit to Canberra in 1975, when I first entered the hallowed halls and confusing corridors of the Coombs Building at the Australian National University. There I made the acquaintance of Harry Maude, Neil Gunson, Deryck Scarr, Gavan Daws, Stewart Firth, Hank Nelson, Oscar Spate and so many others. (A few years earlier I had met Jim Davidson at the airport in Chuuk when he was doing consultancy work for those islands preparing for self-government.) I left a month later with 44 pounds of photocopied notes and manuscripts, a bellyful of Australian beer and red wine, a head full of ideas on how to practice Pacific history, and a heart encouraged by mentors who took the time to share their experience with a “nobody” like me. Inspired by the generosity of these people, I have tried since then to pass some of this forward.

By that time ANU was established as the capital of Pacific history–a center from which the few interested in the field could work. Other institutions tried to emulate ANU’s success.The University of California system had hopes of establishing the same–initially at UCLA, then at UC Santa Cruz, and finally at UC San Diego–but the universities, as good as they were, never quite achieved the same elan as ANU.

We need make no apologies for what was later seen as a Eurocentric or “colonialist” approach to island history. The approach, which was determined by the tools they brought to the task as much as any hard-and-fast mindset, was a necessary beginning but it was tempered in time. Island-oriented history was soon to follow, as well as later riffs on that theme.

ANU, amid the shifts in historiography that occurred in time, served as the training ground for two or three generations of Pacific historians, including some of the most prominent Pacific Islander historians.

* History in the Pacific

Islanders have always had a keen interest in exploring their past–mostly local, often familial. Sometimes the interest was practical, as when families defended their title to property, or when a lineage supported its claim to superiority on an island by virtue of first settlement or conquest in battle. But beyond this, I think the interest in history was born of the natural desire to know what went before, what went into shaping the island and its people in the past.

The history was celebrated, captured and memorialized not in writing, but in dance and song. Or even in the detailed genealogies that were passed down orally in some parts of the Pacific. On some islands–here I’m thinking of the atolls between Yap and Chuuk–the lives of individuals were memorialized in the same way through the elaborate elegies composed and sung at the their funerals.

Islanders themselves brought not just enthusiasm, but a different set of materials to the project, as we know. The materials were largely oral histories, genealogies, family stories. Could they be integrated into the broader historical framework? Of course. We’ve been doing this sort of thing for centuries–in Europe, for instance, with troubadour’s ballads and sagas woven into historical narrative. Today it is rare, and politically incorrect, to publish a history textbook without attempting to incorporate into it such material.

I’ve done this myself when trying to write the tale of the growth of the Catholic Church in Micronesia. For this task I had access to all kinds of archival materials, of course, but how would you know what this all meant unless you talked with the people on the ground? When I asked one catechist in a village in Chuuk how the villagers responded to the introduction of Catholicism there some sixty years earlier, he told me that the prayer leader who called together people for services in the morning would often find the trident shell trumpet wet. When I asked him why, he offered a sly smile and explained “wet with urine.” That told me precisely what I needed to know about the kind of reception his religious forebears received in the village.

The problem, of course, is not just the mix of materials, but the very different point of view that these island sources represent. But the best in Western history, too, has been a tale not just of kings and their courts, but what was happening in Sherwood Forest and in the alleys of London as well. In other words, history has been much more than the record of the succession of dynasties. It’s been the story of the sea changes in the lives of ordinary people, together with an attempt to explain how they occurred. History at its best, I’ve always believed, is social history.

* The Other

“Oh, East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet.” Thus wrote Rudyard Kipling more than a century ago. At first Kipling’s ballad seems to support the view that the Orient is unfathomable from a Westerner’s point of view. Or, to put it in contemporary terminology, the “other” is radically unintelligible. The cleft between East and West is historical and cultural, but is reinforced by the fact that one side has its way at the expense of the other–as many would see it. The divide between the two not only prohibits understanding, but the matter is further complicated by the added element of the power relationship between those on opposite sides of the divide. The assumption is often made that the strong are trying to reinforce their control, however unconsciously, when they attempt to interact.

But Kipling continues in his “Ballad of East and West” with lines that are generally overlooked:

“But there is neither East nor West, Border, nor Breed, nor Birth,

When two strong men stand face to face, though they come from the ends of the earth!”

He goes on to dramatize a story in which two individuals, one British and the other a tribal chieftain from the lawless north (perhaps Afghanistan), confront one another face to face. The meeting, hostile in the beginning, ends in recognition of one another’s courage, leading to an exchange of gifts between the two and the induction of the son of the chieftain into the British army.

Even Kipling, so often considered the chronicler of European imperialism, seems to be telling us that a face-to-face interaction can end not just in mutual respect but in the kind of exchange that can lead to deeper understanding of the other.

Is this simply poetic fancy? My own experience tells me that it is anything but that. I suspect yours does, too. Is there a single Australian or American or Taiwanese among us who at the end of his or her encounter with island people has not come away with a greater appreciation of the people and their past? Or, to put it another way, narrowed a little the distance between East and West? Wouldn’t we all like to believe that our work has helped give island peoples a little deeper appreciation of what is historically and culturally their own, much as Toqueville and British authors have deepened Americans’ appreciation of what their country is and how it works.

* Blurred Boundaries

A number of things have blurred the boundaries between East and West–or between the islands and the West. The occasional contacts between Islanders and those who strayed to their shores has grown into a steady flow in the past few decades. The “beach,” as Greg Dening famously called it, has become crowded. Some of those who have washed up there have worked their way inland, whether through a modern equivalent of adoption or some other stratagem. With them they have carried their i-pads and built cell phone towers. In addition, their ships have lured islanders off to other places, no longer by the dozens to man 19th century sailing ships, but by the tens of thousands to take jobs in fast food places and convenience stores and nursing homes. So the beach is crowded–not just with in-coming traffic, but out-going as well. It’s hard to imagine any Islander, however far inland he might live, remaining untouched by all the movement. East may still be East, but the easy tags to determine cultural identity are nowhere near as clear to read as they once were.

Then there are the islanders who have migrated abroad–and they are legion, numbered at close to a million a few years ago by the late Ron Crocombe. Just as migration resulted in the settlement of the Pacific a few thousand years ago, it is now thinning out the population of those same islands.

In the course of my own studies of island migration, I’ve met hundreds of Micronesians who have relocated to the US in search of the jobs and standard of living they couldn’t find back home. Most of them cling to any symbol of their island identity–earth oven in the backyard, national flag or local weaving hung on the wall–not just to remind themselves of who they are, but to try to emblazon on their children the same.

But it’s not just migrants who face the problems of blurring boundaries and the identity issues these raise. An American married to an island for many years once ordered 30 copies of the five-part video series MicSem had made on the history of Micronesia. He told me that he wanted each of his grandchildren to have a set for Christmas. Why? Because when the edges of identify are becoming fuzzy, a history–written or filmed–reminds us of who we are and where we came from.

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 Pacific people. It follows that this is not the time for a group calling itself Pacific historians to engage in word games. It’s not the time to divide into little cliques, each claiming possession of a tiny bit of turf and truth. It’s not the time for Pacific Islanders and Westerners to stop talking with one another because of epistemological battles. Blurred boundaries and resulting identity issues should be a call to action, I would think.

* Graves and Strengthening Links

Graves are privileged places, let us remember as we meet on the grave of the ancestors of our Pacific people.

They allow us to recall the spirits of those who have come before this–to recall the past and to celebrate the links between those past and the present. As we do so, of course, we are confirming our identity with our ancestors and preparing ourselves to face the future, strong and confident.

But there is another way in which graveyard ceremonies strengthen linkages. They link the survivors more tightly with one another. In the Marshall Islands, people have the custom of depositing small stones on the grave of a recently deceased person. Once everyone has had their chance to bring the stones to the site, someone chosen by the family will smooth the stones over the grave so that they are level. The smoothing of the stones–or *erak*, as the Marshallese call it–is symbolic. In the past the entire family, together with others from the village, would meet at the end of the funeral and speak frankly about what was bothering them. Often this exchange brought on tears and hugs and reconciliation and healing of old grievances. The purpose of this practice was to ease tensions that threatened to divide the family or community and to reaffirm the unity of the group at the very time that it had lost one of its members. A practice like this was carried out in other parts of Micronesia as well.

So, meeting on the grave of our ancestors, you see, should also be an occasion for reaffirming the unity of the group. In our case, this conference has been an acknowledgment of the family ties between those of us from Taiwan and the Pacific. We memorialize the ties that bind us to one another. But my hope is that this graveyard ceremony–if we can use that term of this conference–might also reaffirm the unity of all in this community of historians, whether Islanders or those who have set up camp on the beach.

We can hope that it will, in the best island fashion, strengthen that oneness of purpose that brought us to our historical work in the first place, that summoned us to this conference, and that is so urgently needed if our work is to have any lasting value for Island peoples.

That is the best tribute that we could pay to our ancestors as we gather on their grave to pay our respects. And as we ask their guidance in helping to pass their heritage to their descendants today.

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*Our* Austronesian heritage? Do we dare use the term “our”–we papangi, pakeha, ribelli, mehn wai, re won–or whatever other expression you want to use? The “our” is inclusive, reflecting the best of island societies themselves–it refers not just to islanders, but to those who have spent their lives with them trying to understand who they are and where they came from.

What can we Pacific historians do?

* We can offer people something that might help them maintain a strong group identity. This is especially true when people must locate themselves as part of a larger group–a nation or a state. This is not always easy. (Example here of trying to get Chuukese to work together and bring their oral clan and island histories to the table to stitch together a broader understanding of the early settlement of the entire state.)
* We can show people examples of cultural resilience in the past so as to strengthen them in the face of the challenges they will face in the future. It’s a matter of cultural identity even in an age of global modernization and migration.
* We can offer them models of collaboration in today’s world that they might find useful in the future. The collaboration here is between Islanders and others, each group with their own contributions. But we can do so only if we keep talking to one another.
* What Next?

1) The goal is to offer a richer understanding of the past. There are multiple reasons for this, but beyond all these is understanding. We are discoverers still.

2) Use the resources available–all of them, oral and written. (Eg, I found gaps that only local people could fill when I began writing my “History of the Catholic Church in Micronesia.” In one particular strongly Protestant village, the catechist reported that the church bell was often wet (with urine) when it was rung in the morning.)

3) Keep the conversation going. Trade materials and visions. It is not the time to hide behind the ramparts and defend our own claims. We’re here to offer a broad understanding of the past so that we all can face tomorrow.

4) Think big, as our ancestors did. We’re discoverers still, helping create pathways to a globalized future in which ethnic identity will remain important, but in which East and West become parts of a mosaic.

*(And the links that bind individuals into families, and families into nations)*