

Oral Tradition and the Creation of Late Prehistory in Roviana Lagoon, Solomon Islands

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ABSTRACT. The use of oral tradition or oral history in archaeology is often a contentious issue. In this paper we briefly review methodological issues surrounding the use of such data and follow this with a case study using our research into the last 1,000 years of prehistory in Roviana Lagoon (New Georgia Group, Solomon Islands). We argue that it is not possible to generalize cross-culturally about the historicity of oral tradition/history. However, in the Roviana case, careful use of ethnohistory and archaeology together indicates that: (a) Roviana oral history is linear; (b) there is a close relationship between genealogical age and radiocarbon age; and (c) the modern uses of the oral tradition by Roviana provide a theory of their use in the past. We conclude that the model for the formation of the Roviana Chiefdom which emerges from the working back and forth between archaeology and ethnohistory has much more explanatory power than one based on either source of data by itself.

SHEPPARD, PETER, RICHARD WALTER & SHANKAR ASWANI, 2004. Oral tradition and the creation of Late Prehistory in Roviana Lagoon, Solomon Islands. In *A Pacific Odyssey: Archaeology and Anthropology in the Western Pacific. Papers in Honour of Jim Specht*, ed. Val Attenbrow and Richard Fullagar, pp. 123–132. *Records of the Australian Museum, Supplement 29*. Sydney: Australian Museum.

Archaeologists generally acknowledge the importance of incorporating into our explanations or interpretations data that move beyond the economic and material to the ideological and symbolic, and which encompass notions of agency and structure. Even noted processual archaeologists (e.g., Flannery & Marcus, 1993; Renfrew & Zubrow, 1994) have turned to cognitive archaeology, cosmology and ideology. At the same time, post-processualists have pulled back from the relativist abyss and acknowledged that the material world studied by archaeologists is not totally

malleable or arbitrary in interpretation (Hodder, 1994: 73). Today we see the potential in bringing together the large scale, long-term materialist arguments of the evolutionary models with the short-term variety generating processes of daily cultural behaviour that are foremost in idealist approaches (Preucel & Hodder, 1996: 311). However, as archaeology comes to adopt a realist philosophical position, it is left requiring standards of proof which, although they may not be as methodologically rigid as the positivism of the 1970s, nonetheless require explanation to be based on

arguments whose strength can be evaluated by some non-arbitrary means. What this means in practice for archaeologists interested in ideology and symbolism is the existence of a body of reliable historical or ethnohistorical data (Flannery & Marcus, 1993; Trigger, 1995). But how can these data be evaluated?

Archaeologists have long been wary of the uncritical use of oral tradition. Many argue that there is no scientific way to test the "truth" of such data and often suggest that oral tradition or history is subject to political manipulation and is accordingly more about the present than the past. This, of course, is the fundamental philosophical position of the processualists, although they extended it to refute the processualists' claims of doing objective science. In an attempt to move beyond the relativist impasse for archaeology in general, Wylie (1993) has proposed a realist philosophy where strength of argument is improved, in part, by the convergence of multiple lines of independent evidence. Upon reflection, this appears to be the way in which most effective archaeological explanation is done or attempted. We suggest that oral tradition/history, ethnology and linguistics can all be used as independent lines of argument in the critical "cables and tacking" methodology suggested by Wylie (1993, 2000). Of course, uncritical use of any lines of evidence by themselves in a simple direct reading of the past is unsound, but denying roles to large bodies of relevant data is, at the very least, unwise and unproductive. In the following we discuss our experiences with the use of oral tradition/history and ethnology while investigating the prehistory of the Roviana people as part of our larger project on the prehistory of the Western Solomon Islands (New Georgia Archaeological Survey).

Oral tradition/history and archaeology

Ethnohistory has often been a minor aspect of archaeological research, but has either existed as an add-on to the main archaeological database or as a parallel study with little archaeological cross-over, with notable exceptions (e.g., in the Pacific, Green & Davidson, 1969; Kirch, 1996; papers in Torrence & Clarke, 2000). In practice, however, much archaeological interpretation has made use of analogical arguments from ethnography, which in turn are often heavily reliant on oral tradition. In the Pacific region most ethnography attempting to describe "traditional" snapshots of cultural systems are describing entities, which changed dramatically in the last 100 to 150 years (Carrier, 1992). While processualists have been reluctant to incorporate direct oral history in their narratives, they have been much less reluctant to use the summary results of ethnographic research, if only in model formulation, although often it appears to be used in a simplified analogical fashion which masks both history and recorded variety (Feinman, 1997). Unfortunately, much of the debate over the use of oral history has become confused with the political debate over the "ownership of the past" and negotiations between indigenous peoples, archaeologists and historians. A recent example is the series of papers in *American Antiquity* that are clearly issues related to NAGPRA (the North American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act passed by the American Government in 1990) and other social currents loosely described as the "Science Wars" (Wylie, 2000). These papers reflect polarized positions

around the use of oral history, with the positivist archaeologist Mason (2000: 264) recommending after reviewing the issue that it not be used. This is followed in the same issue with the Native American archaeologist Echo-Hawk (2000) arguing that some Native American oral history provides literal history back to the colonization of North America 13,000 years ago. He concludes his paper, by stating that oral history must be subject to critical scientific evaluation.

In his evaluation of the use of oral tradition/history, Mason (2000: 242) has presented the following as major problems:

- 1 Oral tradition is not trustworthy as it depends on memory and verbal transmission;
- 2 The genre by its nature is more an artifact of contemporary culture than a record of the past;
- 3 Oral traditions are closed belief systems, beholden to authority and impervious to external challenge;
- 4 Access to oral tradition may be limited by the keepers.

To these we would more specifically add:

- 5 Much oral tradition should not necessarily be conceived of as literal or lineal history;
- 6 Formulaic ways of relating to time or space may be characteristic of large culture areas and therefore not be reliable accounts of specific past events.

In response, we would argue that the data provided by oral tradition needs to be analysed and interrogated in much the same critical fashion (Vansina, 1985: 186) as any archaeological data, if the goal is the creation of a richer understanding of the past. When such data are available it is counter-productive to ignore it. Working back and forth between archaeology, ethnography and oral tradition/history provides a rich field of data and a product of greater use to an anthropological archaeology (c.f. Green, 2000 on holistic archaeology in the Pacific) and an indigenous community.

The problems noted by Mason (2000) are often present with the use of oral tradition, although it is equally not possible to generalize about the historicity of oral accounts. Societies vary greatly in the extent to which they consider the past important and attempt to remember or manipulate it. Similarly, the notion of history and its use in the present can vary widely. Evaluation of collected information is required to ascertain what kind of data can be created from it. Vansina (1985) has reviewed the methodology by which such evaluation should be carried out. He suggests the utility of the information is dependent on a variety of factors. These include the familiarity of the collector with the culture, his or her competence in the native language, and understanding of the context under which the information was collected. He also points out the importance of using multiple lines of evidence to cross-check the stories, both to determine how variable they are within the society and to assess, if possible from independent evidence, the historicity of the claims. Vansina also defines different classes of data, which may have different kinds of use in the construction of the past. These include specific descriptions of historical events or processes, myths or charters which can inform on cultural structure and/or power relationships and testimony to the function, use or name of things or places in the past. All of these have been used in our study of the last 1,000 years of Roviana development.



Fig. 1. General location map.

Roviana: oral tradition and archaeology

Speakers of the Austronesian Roviana language are today found living beside the Roviana and Vonavona lagoons that stretch 70 km along the southwest coast of New Georgia Island in the Western Solomon Islands (Fig. 1). Since 1850, European traders have been living in Roviana, but it wasn't until 1902 that Methodist missionaries established a mission at Munda in central Roviana. Early missionaries (Goldie, 1909) and the anthropologist Hocart (n.d.), who visited in 1908, recorded a society where political organization was dominated by chiefs, authority was based on genealogy, and power was achieved through effective head hunting and financed by an economy which revolved around an elaborate shell valuable exchange system. Warfare and disease contributed to significant depopulation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (McCracken, 2000), and by 1906 (Edge-Partington, 1907) the traditional cultural bases of head-hunting and ancestor worship were increasingly less central to cultural life and the organization of power in Roviana, although the associated symbols and material features (e.g., shrines, war canoes and shell valuables) remain a useful cultural currency up to today.

In 1996 Sheppard and Walter began, in co-operation with the National Museum of the Solomon Islands, the Ministry of Culture Western Province and the Roviana Area Council, a four-year research program designed to provide a baseline cultural and environmental history for the Roviana Lagoon and surrounding areas. Our greater goal was the investigation of the origins of cultural diversity in the region, but as only very limited archaeology had been carried out and published (Reeve, 1989), our immediate objectives required a baseline study. In 1998 we were joined by Aswani, who had just completed a degree in Social Anthropology (University of Hawaii) after two years fieldwork in Roviana, which involved collection of oral tradition. In 1998 and 1999, he continued to collect oral tradition, both checking on his original research and investigating issues arising from

the ongoing archaeological survey and excavation. Preliminary results arising from the archaeological and ethnohistorical research have been appearing as Annual Reports to the Solomon Island Government and as academic papers (e.g., Sheppard *et al.*, 2000; Aswani, 2000; Walter & Sheppard, 2000; Thomas *et al.*, 2001) and theses (Nagaoka, 1999; McCracken, 2000).

In modern Roviana two chieftaincies are recognized, that of Kalikoqu in the western end of the Roviana Lagoon, and that of Saikile in the eastern end. Both Chiefs are nearing the end of their lives and the future of the chiefly titles and authority is under active debate. We have conducted archaeological and ethnohistorical research in Kalikoqu and Saikile, but because of land disputes in Saikile we have found access to Kalikoqu easier, and that is where most of our archaeological work has been carried out.

Chiefly authority in Roviana has been and is, albeit in a contested form, expressed through adjudication of land and sea use-rights. People have use-rights based, in the first instance, on ancestral ties to the area in question. In practice, chiefs are the keepers of the genealogy and arbiters of disputes. Their authority is based on their knowledge and this relates in large part to the cultural geography of Roviana and in particular to the genealogies and traditions associated with shrines constructed of stone, which are found throughout Roviana. The shrines where one's ancestors worshipped signify the material geographical references that divide the land and seascapes of Roviana. For most of the twentieth century land has been abundant in Roviana. It is probable that disputes over use-rights were limited and consequently the basis of communal use was not challenged. In the last 20 years, the development of logging by Malaysian and Australian companies has substantially increased the value of tree-covered land, some of which had not been used for many generations. During the initial period of logging, royalties were paid to Chiefs, or to landowner associations headed by the traditional chiefs. However, dissatisfaction with this system has grown and

today many people want their traditional land rights to be transformed into title decided by government courts. Notwithstanding the fact that Roviana people have always had some claim to tenurial autonomy, this is a clear challenge to traditional chiefly authority and threatens to transform the very basis of land tenure in Roviana. At the same time the logging has both revealed shrines located in the deep bush which have been marked and protected by the local people, and made valuable the knowledge of any associated traditions and genealogies held by the chiefs. Throughout the Western Solomon Islands people are now interested in the recording of shrines and associated traditions. Such work helps make the shrines material in a legal sense and provides information of use in land court proceedings.

On the surface, the Roviana situation is a classic case of the past not being value free, but a subject of current politics and potentially highly “biased” in presentation and transmission. However we argue that it is the very fact that the past is important and contested that makes the Roviana data useful. First, the modern activity makes clear the relationships among chiefly power, land tenure and religion, and although it could with difficulty be argued that this is just a modern phenomenon, historical records and comparative Solomon Island ethnology (e.g., Keesing, 1982; Miller, 1980) support its antiquity. This provides a very useful basis for modelling relationships between the archaeologically visible shrines and power in Roviana. Second, all people have some idea of their own genealogy and in this comparatively small society where kinship is reckoned bilaterally, kinship networks are extensive. Given the stakes riding on correct genealogical affiliation and the large number of potential authorities, it would seem very difficult to alter a genealogical affiliation. Keeping accurate

genealogies is important in this society, and although much could be gained by altering them, they cannot be arbitrarily changed (see also Valeri, 1990: 191 for Hawaii). This does not, however, stop people from continually arguing for “new wives” or descendants that have not been reckoned by the hegemonic chiefly lines.

The oral history and archaeology of shrines

Shrines or what Roviana people call *hope* (Lit. sacred place, Waterhouse, 1949) are found throughout Roviana in dense bush, gardens, coastal points, small islets, passages to the open sea and in modern and abandoned villages adjacent to houses. Although *hope* can be unmarked, or have minimally marked locations, large numbers of shrines are substantial constructions made of stone. On the barrier islands most are made from the coral limestone (Fig. 2) that makes up the outer islands of the Roviana Lagoon, although some barrier island shrines contain large amounts of columnar basalt from the mainland. Shrines today are not used in any formal religious or ritual way; however, they are considered *Tambu ples* and, as places of the ancestors, are respected and generally undisturbed. The start of archaeological surveys in these areas was often preceded by a visit from elders to bless the area and make it “safe”. In some major chiefly skull shrines (e.g., Piraka and Kudu), twentieth century graves of chiefly people have been placed in very close proximity, demonstrating that continuity with the past has been maintained after the advent of Christianity.

When asked about shrines people clearly distinguish between shrines for which they have traditions and affiliation, and those for which they don't. On the island of Nusa Roviana, which was the nineteenth century centre of the Roviana polity, people have traditions about the



Fig. 2. Shrine (*hope*) in Roviana c. A.D. 1900 (Courtesy the Methodist Archives Auckland).

functions and ancestors associated with the shrines. These are found throughout the modern village, within the hillfort located above the village, and in abandoned villages that extend along the coastal flats west and east of the village. On the other hand, similar shrines located 5 km to the east in the village of Sasavele, where the present Chief of Kalikoqu lives, have no known traditions and people suggest they are associated with earlier inhabitants. Similarly, virtually all of the shrines located in the mainland bush have no associated tradition. They are recognized as shrines and were protected during logging operations, but are known, with a few exceptions, only to hunters and others who frequent the interior bush.

The recognized shrines are generally described as having certain functions. Large shrine complexes with numerous human skulls located inside skull “houses” and abundant offerings of shell valuables and occasional historical artefacts are described as ancestral skull shrines or chiefly skull shrines. It is these forms that are often associated with historical graves. Other shrines may have few or no human skulls but have artefacts and associated hearth structures, and are described as classes of shrines for specific rituals (e.g., fishing, curing, purification and warfare; Nagaoka, 1999). In the hillfort complex on Nusa Roviana (Sheppard *et al.*, 2000), many of the shrines are traditionally associated with warfare and the *mateana* (lit. meteors) or angels, from which Roviana chiefs descend.

One shrine (Site 79) located to the east of the modern village on Nusa Roviana is traditionally associated with Ididubānara (Nagaoka, 1999: 111), who is said to have been the Roviana chief who settled the island from the mainland, effectively founding the modern Roviana chiefdom. He is said to have established a shrine soon after settling on Roviana as a means of settling “80 protective spirits” in the new settlement. The current Chief of Kalikoqu provides the following account of this movement.

Luturu Bangara, the chief of Bao [a Kazukuru inland settlement], got married and had a child named Ididu Bangara. Ididu Bangara grew at Bao and became the chief when his father died. Although Ididu Bangara lived at Bao he often descended to the coast and crossed over to Dokulu in the barrier island to search for *hio* (*Tridacna gigas*) shells and for fishing. Ididu Bangara got tired of travelling to the coast so he decided to move to the *toba* (barrier islands). So he spoke to his tribe and told them why he wanted to settle in the coast. He spoke, “I want to go down to the *toba* to find *hio* shells so that I can make myself *bakiha* (shell valuables). There are not too many shells at Bao nor do we have the material to manufacture the *bakiha*, so I want to move to the *toba*”. The *butubutu* (tribe) gave its approval and got ready to move. Then Ididu Bangara set the day that they were going to leave Bao and then they left. After settling various areas they finally crossed the lagoon in a bamboo raft to settle the Island of Nusa Roviana. (Aswani & Sheppard, n.d.).

According to the genealogies collected recently by Aswani (1997, 2000), Schnieder (1997), Sheppard and Roga (Sheppard & Walter, 1998) and by Hocart (n.d.) in 1908, Roviana genealogies extend back 15 generations to the ancestor Roviana, and Ididubānara is recorded at 12 generations from 1900. Allowing three generations per century would date Ididubānara to c. A.D. 1500. Roviana oral history therefore would make Site 79, which is associated with Ididubānara, one of the oldest shrines on

Nusa Roviana pre-dating most of the shrines for which there is traditional knowledge.

The archaeology of shrines in Roviana has involved our recording details of location, morphology, construction, associated artefacts and facilities such as hearths, as well as limited excavation in associated hearths and under platform walls to secure dating materials. This work has resulted in our making a fundamental distinction between faced and unfaced shrine platforms. Faced platforms are generally constructed of basalt, which is used in its columnar form to create the outer walls of a platform that is then filled with earth or earth and rubble. On the barrier island, which has no naturally occurring basalt, some faced platforms are constructed of cut coral blocks or sheet coral slabs; however, most have a considerable amount of basalt used in their construction. These platforms are often found as complexes of several platforms and associated large basalt slabs set up on cobbles to form “table stones”. In no case, however, have we found an associated hearth, and in most cases there are no associated artefacts or any cultural deposit or debris. The only clear exception is the presence at three sites (Nagaoka, 1999: 126) of single, rough shell rings called *bareke*, which are considered by Roviana to be early forms associated with priests and unlike the rings used in exchange or as symbols of chiefly authority. Oral traditions suggest that several generations before the regional power shift to the coast, Kazukuru inland dwellers utilized a sole shell valuable known as *ukeana* (in the now extinct Kazukuru vernacular) in their ceremonial and religious prestations (Waterhouse & Ray, 1931). However, accounts recollecting the ensuing amalgamation of inland non-Austronesian and Austronesian groups identify the emergence of a new set of shell valuables (Aswani & Sheppard, n.d.). None of these faced shrine forms are found near residential platforms and with the exception of Site 79, which has a main faced platform and is associated with Ididubānara, none have reported oral tradition.

In contrast to the faced shrine platforms are the unfaced platforms (Fig. 2). These comprise roughly rectangular platforms of coral cobbles, associated skull houses made of sheet coral and stone lined hearths or ovens (*oputu*), numerous shell artefacts (particularly exchange valuables), human skulls, food debris (shell, pig jaws) and often historical artefacts. These shrine forms vary considerably in detail, most likely reflecting functional and temporal differences. They are found throughout the Roviana cultural landscape and are commonly found in close proximity to residential platforms, and as noted above, in modern villages. These shrines often have reported oral tradition and many were clearly in use in the early historical period, as is indicated by the historical artefacts (e.g., iron axes, pot fragments and pipes).

Oral tradition therefore clearly separates shrines with different physical features and artefact associations into early and late, or those with and without traditional associations. Faced shrines, with the occasional exception such as Site 79, have no traditional associations for Roviana people and if pressed, people suggest that they belong to older unrelated people. The radiocarbon chronology which we have developed (Table 1) for the shrine sequence supports the traditional sequence and in particular the posited age for Site 79. This shrine complex associated with Ididubānara is distinctive for the large amount of basalt

Table 1. Radiocarbon dates associated with faced and unfaced platforms.

lab number	site	platform type	sample	¹⁴ C age B.P.	calibrated 1σ range (OxCal version 3.5)
WK-6761	Feature 111 Ex-B1, Oputu	un-faced	charcoal	modern	
WK-6156	Feature 1082 Ex-I2, Site 12, Oputu	un-faced	charcoal	300±45	1,517–1,650 A.D.
WK-6757	Feature 1058	hillfort wall	shell ^a	720±50	1,523–1,653 A.D.
WK-6760	Feature 122 Ex-M2, Oputu	un-faced	shell	810±50	1,459–1,530 A.D.
WK-6758	Feature 122 Ex-M2, Oputu	un-faced	charcoal	250±50	1,524–1,675 A.D.
WK-6756	Feature 773.6 Buni, Oputu #3	un-faced	shell	680±50	1,562–1,673 A.D.
NZA-9457	Site 79	faced	charcoal	556±57	1,300–1,360, 1,380–1,430 A.D.
WK-6155	Feature 118, Ex-J1	faced	shell ^a	1,060±45	1,290–1,365, 1,375–1,380 A.D.
WK-7916	Site 150 Kopo	faced	charcoal	610±50	1,305–1,395 A.D.
NZA-6235	Site 25	deposit near faced platform Site 24	charcoal	468±62	1,403–1,490, 1,608–1,612 A.D.
NZA-10856	Site 145 Bao-14	faced fill layer 2	charcoal	789±70	1,200–1,285 A.D.
NZA-10855	Site 145 Bao-14	faced fill layer 2	charcoal	830±60	1,164–1,270 A.D.

^a All shell dates calibrated with a ΔR set to 0.

which has been transported from the mainland and used in its construction. The complex consists of a main stepped basalt faced platform (10.2×5.5 m) in association with two unfaced platforms within an enclosure defined by a low coral edging. *Canarium* nutshell recovered from the footing trench under the main platform wall suggests a construction date (NZA-9457) after the mid-fourteenth century. This compares very favourably with the date from genealogy of c. A.D. 1500, which was collected prior to the radiocarbon determination.

The oral history of Roviana origins and movement

Surveys of the New Georgia mainland ridges along the lagoon have revealed numerous isolated, faced shrine complexes with no associated settlement, and as we have shown above, these are old. In only one area have we found a concentration of shrines and other stone features. This is in the area called Bao, which is located in the centre of the island of New Georgia behind the coastal region of Munda. Oral tradition states that Bao is the origin point for the Roviana people. It was at Bao that various inland tribes aggregated with non-Austronesian speaking Kazukuru people (Aswani, 2000), and from Bao that *Ididubanara* came down via a series of settlements to settle on Nusa Roviana and establish coastal Roviana, naming the barrier island he settled on after his grandmother, Roviana.

In 1999 we conducted surveys in the Kazukuru region behind Munda in an effort to locate and record Bao. On a high central ridge that looks out towards the north New Georgia coast we found a series of 17 platforms extending 1 km along the ridge. The largest of these (Site 145) was a stepped faced platform (Fig. 3) with tall corner basalt uprights, an internal cyst arrangement, and a rectangular paved approach that extended 20 m east. Situated at a point 10 m along the paved area was a large flat basalt “table stone” (1.0×0.8 m) supported by cobbles. This shrine shared most of its attributes with other mainland faced platform shrines, although it is larger and more elaborate in construction than most. As with other faced platforms, there was no evidence of an oven or hearth arrangement, nor any associated artefacts or food debris. Excavation on the front of the platform (Excavation A) provided samples of charcoal

from amongst the rock and earth fill. Dating of these samples (Table 1) indicates an age of c. A.D. 1200, which makes this the oldest shrine we have dated so far in Roviana. The presence of an atypical aggregation of faced shrines in this area and the associated radiocarbon date are clearly in keeping with the oral tradition relating to Bao, which is described as a large settlement. Informants in Munda state that a series of named shrines exist between Munda and Bao and these mark the movement of *Ididubanara* from Bao, although we have not been able to conduct a survey to record them. Linguistic data (Waterhouse & Ray, 1931) does, however, record that the non-Austronesian Kazukuru language did exist with three dialects recorded (Tyron & Hackman, 1983) at the turn of the century, just before it died out and was completely replaced by Roviana.

Context and evaluation. The Roviana origin story is told by all Roviana chiefs and is well known by elders. It is of particular importance for Chiefs as it is by affiliation to the genealogy, which goes back through *Ididubanara* to Bao and the original ancestor Roviana, that chiefs make their claim to chiefly status. Chiefs’ legitimacy depends ultimately on how close to the *ngati* or “trunk” (Goldie, 1909) of the genealogy they can affiliate. Although the exact details of the genealogy may vary, all Chiefs of Kalikoqu and Saikile tell essentially the same story. There is obviously advantage to be gained by chiefs through modifying this genealogy. However, it seems that such modification, if it exists, is in the branch extending to the current Chief from the trunk. Chiefs jealously guard the right to tell the “correct” genealogy which they have preserved in written form as given to them by their fathers. Others may attempt to tell the story but people generally consider this to be inappropriate and warn of the possibility of receiving an “incorrect” story. People are especially worried that an incorrect version will be written down and published.

The importance of the Bao story is very high as the Kazukuru land around Bao has not yet been logged and people are competing for rights of access to this area from which they stand to derive income. Competition has essentially split the population of the Munda area (Schneider, 1997). In 1998 a group of Munda elders, including one of the contenders for the Chieftainship,

SITE 145
 BAO: FEATURE 14
 17 JUNE 1999
 ROVIANA ARCHAEOLOGICAL SURVEY

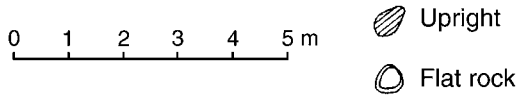
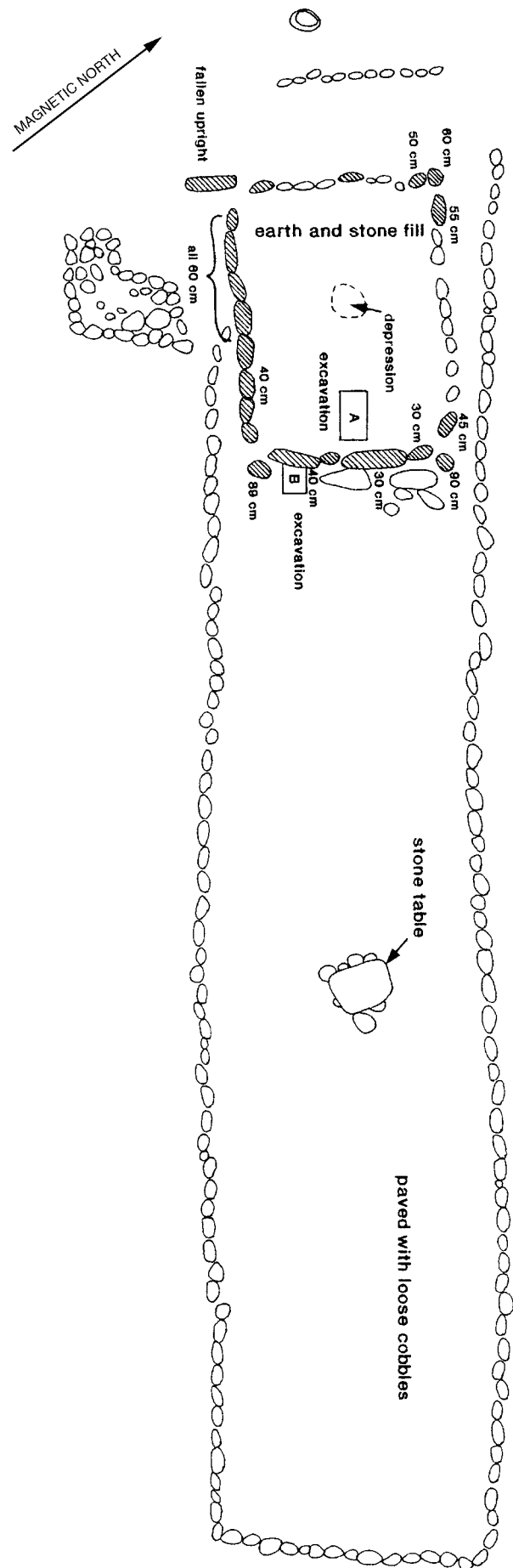


Fig. 3. Plan of the main shrine (Site 145) at Bao, Kazukuru, New Georgia.



attempted to have us meet with them to record their version of the Bao story and the names and locations of the shrines coming down from Bao to Munda. This meeting was repeatedly delayed and finally cancelled after word of it was carried to the Chief of Kalikoqu and he denied them permission to relate the story. Elders who had been pushing hard for us to record their version of the story suddenly became very hard to find even though they would routinely deny that the Chief of Kalikoqu in the inner lagoon had authority over them. This incident clearly illustrates the political nature of oral tradition in Roviana, as well as its role in validating the authority of chiefs and the relationship between shrines and land rights. It also shows that the “authorized” version of the past cannot be easily transformed. Change could be achieved but not without considerable struggle, even in the modern setting, although it should be noted that the presence of the researchers may have made this process more or less difficult. In the past a challenge to Chiefly authority could have had much more serious consequences.

Is the story “true”? It is true that there is an area in New Georgia behind Munda called Kazukuru and that people speaking a non-Austronesian language called Kazukuru lived in Munda at the turn of the nineteenth century. It is also true that a complex of shrines is located along a ridge in the centre of the Kazukuru area. A similar aggregation of shrines has only been recorded once before in Roviana and that is along the fortified ridge on the island of Nusa Roviana, which was the centre of the Roviana polity in the nineteenth century. Despite widespread surveys on New Georgia in the Kalikoqu area we have never found another concentration of shrines or other structures. Mainland shrines are isolated platforms or small complexes (2 to 3 small platforms) on ridge tops without any other closely associated features. It is also true that the largest platform and shrine complex is located at the eastern approach to the Bao ridge and, as predicted by oral tradition, it returns the oldest radiocarbon date recorded so far for shrine platforms in Roviana. There is then a “Bao” and it has many of the characteristics attributed to it. That it is the origin point of the Roviana people who came down to the coast and who, after fighting with local groups came to dominate and form the Roviana polity, can not be “proved” with the present data or perhaps with any possible data.

Stories of interior origins and subsequent coastal movement are common in Melanesia, and “topogenies” (Fox, 1997) or genealogies of place are generally common in the Austronesian world. Miller (1980) has specifically argued that this is a common pattern in the Western Solomon Islands and cannot be considered to be literally true, but simply reflects a “formal model” or cognitive structure where height and consequently ascent to interior heights on small islands is possibly associated with the sacred (Miller, 1980: 455). In Roviana we have not observed any correlation between height and the sacred, even though much of what we have recorded is very similar to the stories Miller recorded during brief fieldwork on Simbo and Isabel. These are areas with which Roviana has close historical connections. Does this then indicate that such traditions are lacking in any kind of historicity?

On islands, the primary geographical referents are coast and inland or sea and bush. People can, of course, move along the coast or come from other islands. In Roviana many people trace their own origins to other islands, in particular to Santa Isabel from whence they were brought as slaves or Simbo with which Roviana had a strong alliance. However, it is also literally true today that large numbers of coastal dwellers can trace their ancestry to people who came to the coast in the last 100 years. Archaeology attests to the presence of considerable numbers of people associated with interior taro irrigation systems and shrines. It is an historical fact that these people, when given the opportunity, moved to the coast leaving the interior of New Georgia completely uninhabited. Even today some groups of Roviana-speaking people living on the coast describe themselves, and are described by others, as Bush People. Why this last coastal movement occurred is undoubtedly related to a series of factors, which would include:

- (a) the end of warfare making the coast safe;
- (b) depopulation of New Georgia as a result of introduced disease and warfare (McCracken, 2000);
- (c) the introduction of *kumara* (sweet potato, possibly as early as 1840 or earlier [Hviding & Bayliss-Smith, 2000: 123]) which would grow well in the poorer coastal and barrier island soils. Today *kumara* has replaced taro in the diet and is the subsistence mainstay of the large coastal villages; and
- (d) the attraction of coastal marine and social resources.

This last factor has in the past 150 years included access to the western economy and mission facilities. Prior to 1850 the coast would nonetheless have been extremely resource rich. The large lagoon system is enormously productive (Aswani, 1997) and in the past, marine produce was likely commonly procured at the coast or traded inland by the coastal people. The Ididubanara story itself suggests that he came to the coast to have better access to the clamshell needed for the manufacture of shell valuables. The coast also provides easy communication and access to the resources of other islands, as well as potentially lower incidence of malaria on the small off-shore islands where breezes and less standing fresh water may have reduced the numbers of mosquitoes. Archaeology on the barrier islands reveals the presence of large village complexes similar in size to those seen today. The sociality of these places would have been attractive to people living in small interior transitory hamlets. The coast then would have always been

a very strong attractor in the social geography of New Georgia, forming a fundamental social and economic tension. This tension is reflected today in the basic saltwater-bush people dichotomy found throughout the Solomon Islands. In this context it is also important to note that often the distance from the central interior to the coast along most of the long thin islands of the Solomon Islands can be covered in half a day’s walk. Bao is less than a half day’s walk from the coast, and for very fit people the distance would have been trivial. It seems probable that both the physical and social distance from Bao to the coast was short as kinship links would have covered broad areas, as is the case today. We need not interpret the Ididubanara story as literally reporting the movement of all the interior people to the coast c. A.D. 1600, as we know for a fact that Roviana people lived inland in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. However, it is likely that at that time the focus of what was becoming the Roviana polity shifted along a web of relationships from the interior to the coast, where it increasingly came into conflict with the pre-existing coastal populations. At this time we also see a fundamental shift in shrine forms and exchange media (Sheppard *et al.*, 2000), suggesting a major shift in Roviana socio-political organization. It seems unlikely that all these changes are simply the result of one chief shifting residence but in Roviana history, as told by Roviana, this broader change is represented through a shift in residence, and in the establishment of new shrines on Nusa Roviana, initially in the old style, by a powerful leader.

Miller (1980) is likely correct in arguing that origin or descent stories in the Western Solomon Islands follow a similar cognitive structure, but we would argue that the structure itself is founded in a real and fundamental historical tension between coast and interior. Social movement from the interior to the coast and vice versa under changing circumstances is a basic historical process that has been played out over millennia in the Solomon Islands. In addition, as we see people moving back into the interior of New Georgia today, the result of population pressure and the opening of the bush by logging, we see the start of another cycle which will re-establish the old tension. People today say their ancestors came from the interior and for most people this is most definitely a recent historical fact that fits well within an ancient tradition and cognitive schema.

Discussion and conclusion

Our research has shown that oral tradition in Roviana does contain chronological information and that Roviana oral history is in large measure linear. We were able to show a fairly close relationship between features dated by genealogy and by radiocarbon methods: in general, those features that people felt were old because they lacked associated oral tradition turned out to be old. Without exception our radiocarbon dating followed collection of oral tradition regarding the dated features and in no sense did our chronological information lead our questioning of informants. However, once relationships between archaeological chronology and oral tradition were developed, we did feel we could extend the relationship to develop hypotheses about the age of shrines based on oral tradition (e.g., the age of undated faced shrines for which people have no traditions and we have no dates).

Traditions of origin which relate movement from the interior to the coast are to some extent formulaic in the Western Solomon Islands. However, in the Roviana case, we were able to confirm that cultural features, including unique concentrations of shrines and other platforms which in many respects mirror the historical features on Nusa Roviana, do exist in the nominated location in the interior of New Georgia. This, of course, cannot confirm the history of movement of Roviana populations but the fact that the largest shrine at Bao—stylistically very similar to coastal faced shrines—has provided the oldest date for a shrine in Roviana, is fully consistent with Bao as an origin or ancestral point. In conclusion, it does seem likely that Roviana was created as part of a struggle between bush and coastal peoples, and was personified by the story of the movement of Ididubanara, some time in the sixteenth century, when we see a radical change in the archaeology of coastal shrines and the building of fortifications (Sheppard *et al.*, 2000) on Nusa Roviana.

Our research has proceeded (1996–2000) in an interactive manner, moving between lines of evidence in a tacking process much like that proposed by Wylie (1993). Roviana oral tradition and the current interests of the Roviana people have influenced our research, but as with ethnography the uses and interpretations of the data generated move beyond the direct “emic” perspective and naturally reflect the research perspectives of the archaeologists. We believe the final historical construction is a more powerful understanding of the Roviana past than could be provided by archaeology or oral tradition alone.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS. The New Georgia Archaeological Survey involves collaboration among staff from the University of Auckland Centre for Archaeological Research (Sheppard and Aswani, Department of Anthropology), the University of Otago (Walter, Department of Anthropology) and the University of Western Australia (John Dodson, Department of Geography).

We would like to thank the people of Roviana for their permission and assistance in the conducting of this research, which was funded by the Marsden Foundation of New Zealand, the American National Geographic Society, the University of Auckland and the University of Otago. We would also like to thank the organizers of the symposium at the Australian Museum at which this paper was originally presented. Finally we would like to thank Jim Specht for his good humour and stimulating discussions over the years outside the Museum side entrance.

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