ORAL TRADITIONS AND ARCHAEOLOGY IN MICRONESIA: AN ATTEMPT TO STUDY PAST IDEOLOGY IN A BUILT ENVIRONMENT

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ABSTRACT

Documentation of Micronesian cultures by the local people has been through oral traditions. It is in oral traditions that one finds norms that govern different situations and differentiate one culture from another. One also learns the proper methods and protocols of constructing a house or a stone path so as not to bring misfortune to a village or one's clan, and to some extent oral traditions influence the pattern of archaeological remains observed throughout Micronesia. This paper investigates the link between oral traditions and the built environment in Micronesia. In another words, can the cultural norms and practices in Micronesia today be projected into the past through archaeological study? The archaeological record in Belau will be examined with specific reference to oral traditions.

Local documentation of Micronesian cultures has in the past been through oral traditions. In non-literate cultures, oral traditions provide norms that govern different situations and differentiate one culture from another. Oral traditions can reveal cultural differences which underlie similarities in material culture. For example, in Belau, *odesongel*, *olbed* and *iliud* are rectangular elevated stone platforms, yet each serves a different function. *Odesongel* are located in front of clan houses; *olbed* are located in front of dwelling houses for individual families; and *iliud* are resting platforms. In other parts of Micronesia, stone platforms can also be found with different functions. In Yap, for example, large stone platforms line dancing grounds and support a series of backrests for the rest and repose of the audience viewing the dance; other functions include use as meeting places. Oral traditions also serve to instruct one in proper methods and protocols of constructing a house or a stone path so as not to bring misfortune to a village or a clan.

This paper investigates the link between oral traditions and the built environment in Micronesia. Can the cultural norms and practices in Micronesia today be projected into the past through archaeological study? The archaeological record in Belau will be examined with specific reference to oral traditions. Several studies in Micronesia have used oral traditions to explain the distribution of archaeological remains, for instance at Nan Madol in Pohnpei (Athens 1980, 1984) and Uluang village in Belau (Lucking and Parmentier 1990). These studies concentrated on settlement patterns across the landscape as evidence of events described in oral traditions.

This paper, however, will attempt to identify normative beliefs and ideology presented in oral traditions and compare them with the archaeological record. More specifically, in Belauan tradition it is believed that a building must be constructed in a certain way so as not to bring misfortune to a family, a clan or a village. A model will be developed based on this belief which will then be tested against the archaeological record. A similar study by Butler (1986) correlated rankings of villages in Imeliik State as described in oral traditions with the sizes of their chiefly meeting houses; the results showed a close correlation.

GEOGRAPHY OF BELAU

Belau is the westernmost island group in the Micronesian region and is located about 7° north of the equator (Figure 1). It is 700 km east of the southern Philippines and about the same distance north of New Guinea. The archipelago stretches 200 km in north-south length and consists of volcanic islands, raised limestone islands, and several atolls. The total land area is 487 km² (Masse and Snyder 1982:1). Most islands lie within a barrier reef (Figure 2) that encloses a total area of 1238 km² (Karolle 1987:96). Three island groups are located outside the barrier reef, namely Ngeaur and the Southwest Islands to the south, and Ngcheangel atoll to the north.

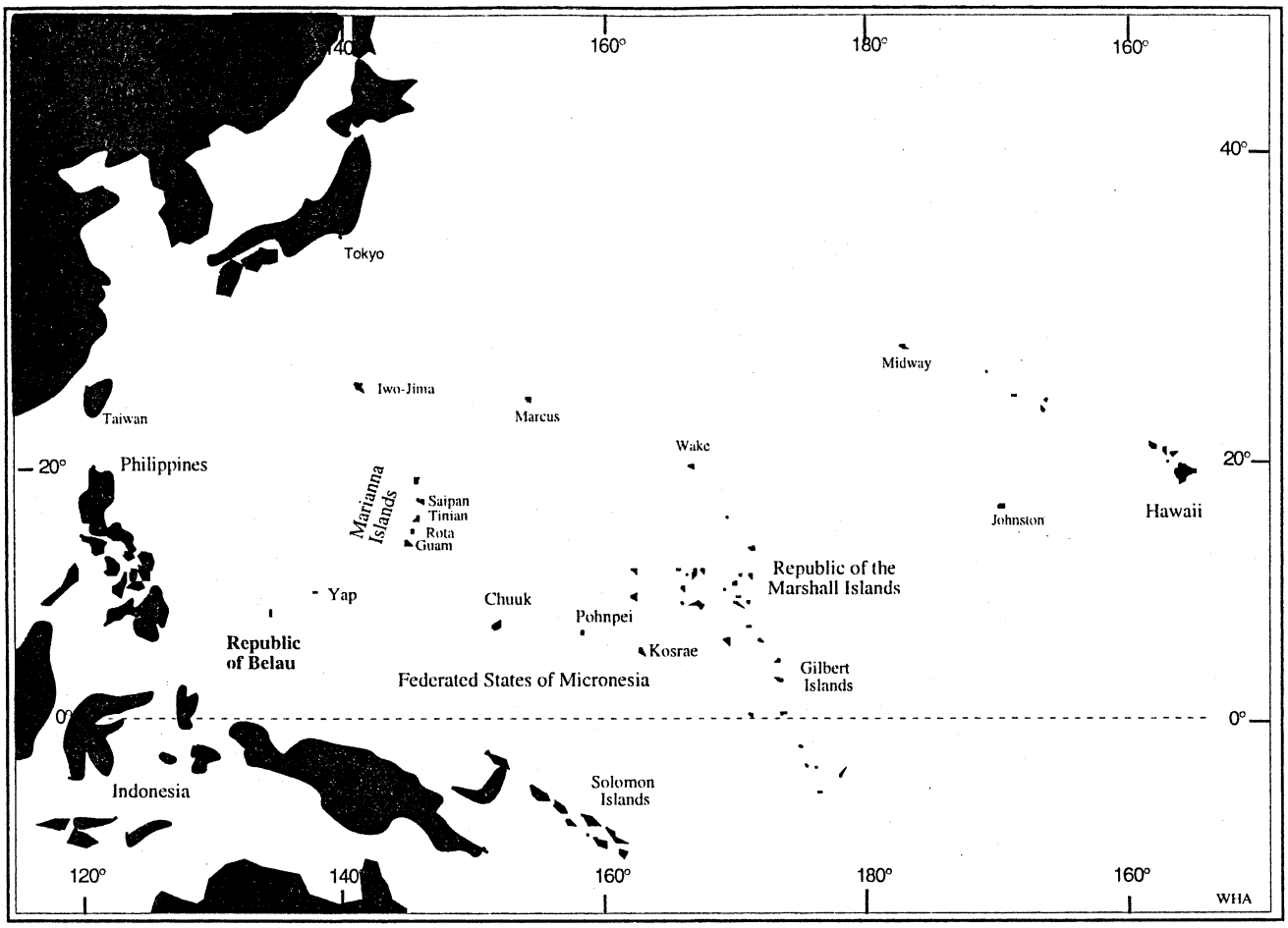

Figure 1: Map showing the location of the Belau Islands.

Babeldaob is the largest inhabited island (Figure 2). It is a volcanic island reaching an elevation of 242 m above sea level with a total land area of 366 km² (Carucci 1983:13). A ridge runs north-south bisecting the island into western and eastern divisions. Each of these divisions differs in environment (McCutcheon 1991:4). To the west, the lagoon is very deep and the barrier reef is distant from the coast. Skirting the coastal area is a dense mangrove swamp with a few short strips of sandy beach. To the east, the reef is very close to the coastal area creating shallow sandy lagoons. The coastal area is covered with a sandy beach that stretches for several kilometres, interrupted by small patches of mangrove swamp.

The capital, Oreor, is located on a mixed volcanic and raised coral island of the same name. Ngeruketabel and Beliliou are raised limestone islands, but only the latter is inhabited. Ngcheangel, Ngeaur and the Southwest Islands are raised atolls and all are inhabited. Other deserted islands are of ancient uplifted coralline limestone referred to as Rock Islands; these lie between Oreor and Beliliou (Figure 2).

Belau has a maritime tropical climate with a mean annual temperature of 27°C and mean annual rainfall of 3730 mm (Cole *et al.* 1987). It rains almost daily, except during the dry season from February to April.

VEGETATION

Vegetation differs between the low coral islands and the volcanic islands. A more diverse environment on the volcanic islands is reflected in a great variety of plant species. Three ecological zones can be found on Babeldaob Island, namely (1) mixed tropical forest, (2) savanna, and (3) mangrove (Masse and Snyder 1982:3-7). Most of Babeldaob is covered by tropical forest with the dominant plants being several types of hardwood, vines, and ferns. In the savanna areas, dominant plants include grass, shrubs and a few scattered *Pandanus*, bamboo and sometimes coconuts. Most of the coconut trees along the coast were planted in the late 1800s to promote a copra industry introduced during the German administration (Cole *et al.* 1987:12).

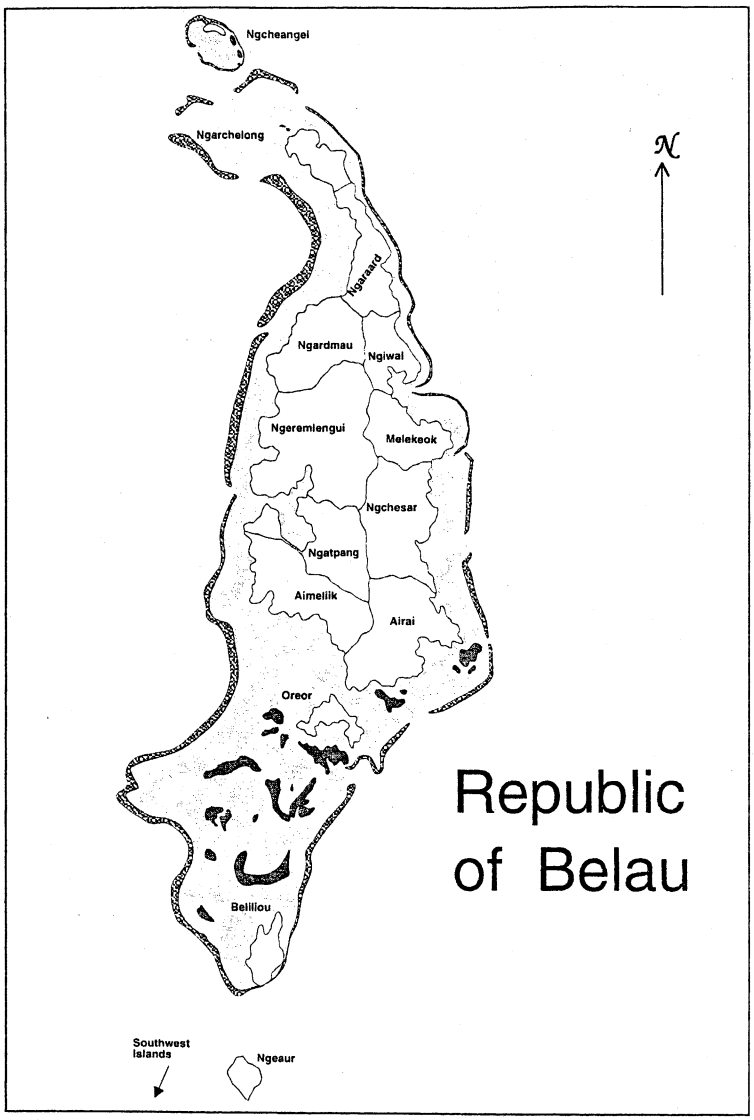

Figure 2: Map of the Belau Islands.

The Rock Islands are a group of uplifted limestone reefs varying from a few to 200 m asl. Poor soil on these islands supports mixed tropical and coastal forest. The mixed tropical forest is dense but with fewer species of hardwood, vines, and ferns compared to the volcanic islands. Coconut trees dominate the beaches.

PREHISTORY

A. Initial Colonization

Recent archaeological studies in Belau have pushed back the initial colonization of Belau from the first century AD to nearly 1500 BC (Liston *et al.* 1998; Liston, Kaschko and Welch 1998; Welch this volume). Charcoal samples were collected from cultural deposits in the vicinity of settlements labelled in previous reports as terraces and traditional villages (Masse *et al* 1984; Masse 1989; Rainbird 1994). Whether these few dates are directly associated with terracing and the traditional villages remains to be investigated.

B. Terrace System

Belauan terrace complexes were formed by the artificial sculpting of natural terrain. In previous archaeological studies, terraces have been identified as belonging to a distinct settlement system because of dates associated with this major manipulation of the environment (Morgan 1988:4). The majority of terraces are found in savanna areas on Babeldaob island. Several archaeological studies, including those by Osborne (1966, 1979), Lucking (1984), Butler (1984), and Morgan (1988), have been carried out on the terraces. It has been hypothesized that they were used for agriculture, residential areas and defensive purposes, based on different architectural forms. The earliest date associated with the terraces is given by Osborne (in Masse 1989:301) as 1800 ±80 BP, and most of the radiocarbon determinations fall within the period AD 700 - 1200.

C. Rock Island Village System

The Rock Island Village System is associated with stone platforms, stone paths, stone walls, and scattered artifacts (Masse *et al.* 1984:114; Masse 1989:71). These sites were occupied between AD 1200 and 1400 (Masse *et al.* 1984:115; Masse 1990:219). However, midden sites on the Rock Islands have been dated as early as AD 650, with continual use until European contact (Masse 1990:216).

D. Traditional Village System

The Traditional Village System is associated with features such as stone platforms, stone paths, fortresses, bathing areas, docks and scattered artefacts which Europeans documented for the first time in 1783. Traditional villages which were inhabited from western contact to the present include those on Ngcheangel atoll, Babeldaob Island, Oreor Island, Beliliou Island and Ngeaur Island. In the earliest written records (Keate 1788; Hockings 1803) and the earliest ethnographic works (Kubary 1885; Kramer 1919), the village residential areas were described as being located several metres away from the ocean, with a stone path leading from the coastal area to the residential area. Figure 3 is a map of the traditional village of Ngchemesed in Ngeremlengui State showing features, with a stone path leading to the dock.

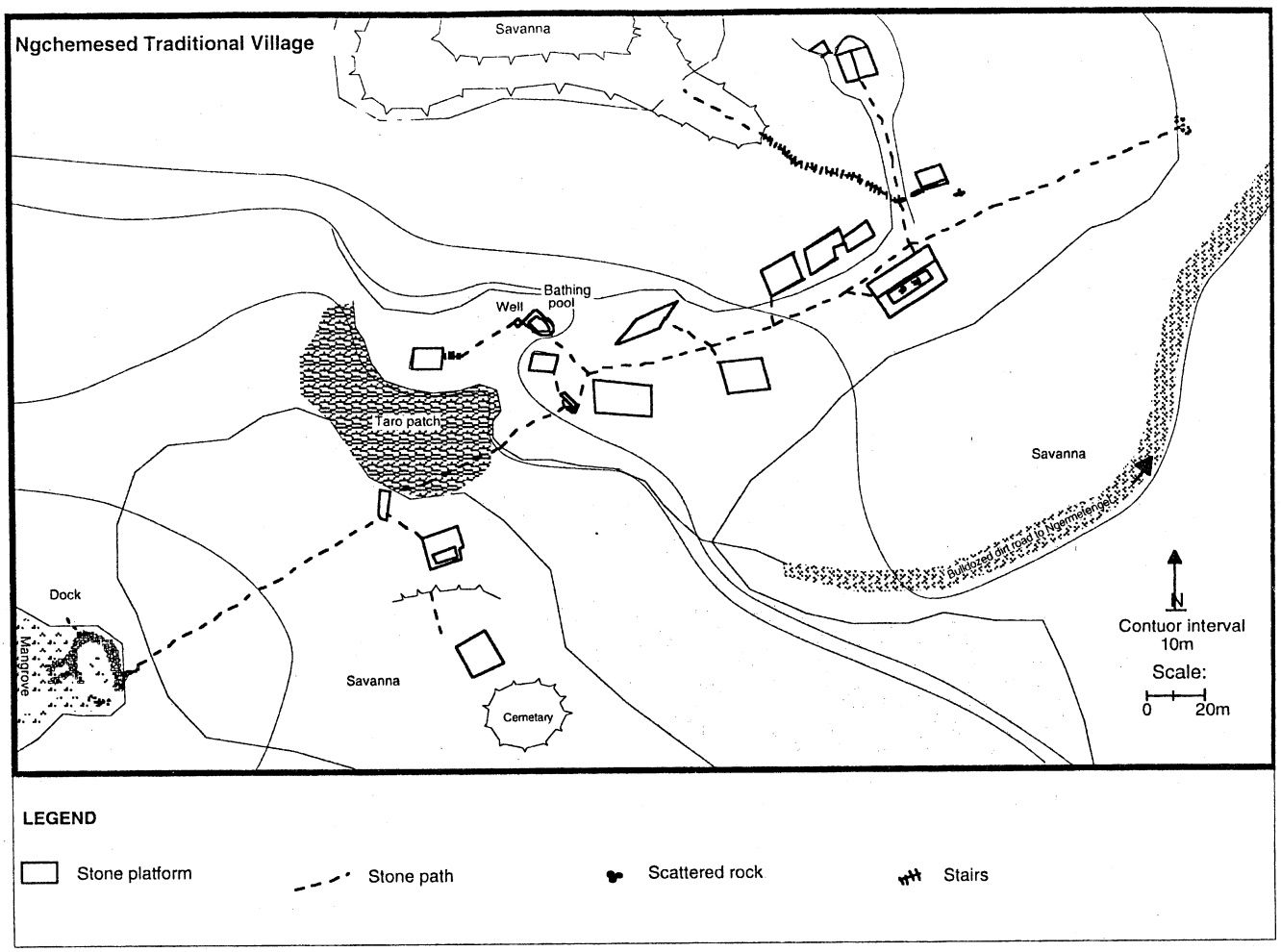

Figure 3: Map of Ngchemesed traditional village.

Typical village layout as described in early reports (Kubary 1885; Kramer 1919) included several stone platforms located in front of houses. In the middle of the village was a chiefs' meeting house on a large elevated stone platform. Other stone paths branched out to bathing areas, docks, and taro patches. The ends of the stone paths marked the end of the residential area.

Butler (1985:2) gives a date of AD 1490 ±60 for a traditional village in Imeliik State. This date was derived from a test pit within refuse dumped near a stone platform. Butler admits that the date cannot be demonstrated to have direct association with the platform, however he still states that the context and proximity of the features strongly suggests that they were associated (pers. comm.). Masse (1990:219) agrees that the date may be related to the founding of the traditional village rather than utilization of the terraces. Recent archaeological studies have produced dates associated with traditional villages around Belau that fall within the same determination (Liston *et al.* 1998). Other traditional villages in Babeldaob have dates that range from AD 1500 to 1700.

METHOD AND DATA

This paper incorporates data from archaeology, ethnographic records and oral traditions to examine possible parallels between contemporary (historical) belief and the archaeological record. Oral traditions and ethnographic records provide data to build a model to be tested against archaeological data. The underlying premise is that ideology sets rules and norms for how a society should function (Barnett 1961).

The model is created from information extracted from ethnographic records and information collected from informants. The informants were elders chosen for their knowledge of Belauan ideology pertaining to construction of houses and *bai* (meeting houses) and traditional village layout. The archaeological data for this paper were abstracted from previous work in Belau, including Division

of Cultural Affairs reports (Olsudong *et al.* 1997, 1998), Masse and Snyder (1982), and Gumerman *et al.* (1981). Six traditional villages were selected for analysis, with one village still inhabited (see Appendix A).

ARCHAEOLOGICAL FEATURES

The archaeological features this paper used to test the correlation of oral traditions and archaeological data are two specific classes of stone platforms: *odesongel* and *cheldeklel a bai*. These two stone platform types have distinct features that differentiate them from other platform types.

Odesongel are elevated rectangular platforms. They serve as clan cemetreies and have stones on top as grave markers called *bluks*. Figure 4 is an *odesongel* for the Sechedui clan in Melekeok traditional village, showing the stone platforms with the *bluks*. The house would have stood within the rock alignment ("hearth slot") with the hearths parallel to its long axis. The reconstruction drawing in Figure 5 shows the relationship between the stone platform and the house.

Cheldeklel a bai are the largest elevated stone platforms in the village. They provide the foundations for *bai* (meeting houses). Each platform has one to three parallel stone alignments marking the positions of meeting houses (Figure 6), each with one or two stone hearths (Figure 7). Six to eight stone posts spaced along both sides of the alignments supported the foundations of the *bai*. Outside the alignments are stones called *oridekill*, stepping stones in front of the entrances. *Bai* platforms usually have many monoliths that serve as back rests for chiefs, as gods, for head trophies, or other functions.

TESTING A MODEL DERIVED FROM ORAL TRADITION

According to Belauan ideology, a house stands behind the *odesongel,* parallel to its long axis with the front facing the *odesongel*. The *bai* meeting house stands parallel to the length of the stone platform upon which it is constructed. According to the elders interviewed, the house and the *bai* must stand in such a way that the sun does not travel across their roofs "cutting" the length in half. This means that when the sun rises and sets it does not shine straight into the house or the *bai*. If the orientation of the house or the *bai* allows the sun to ride straight across its width, this is *ulaoch* (a bad omen) for the clan and the village. Therefore, the ideal orientation for the house and *bai* is with the long axis running east-west. In order to test whether this ideal fits reality, compass bearings for the orientations of the *odesongel* and *bai* stone platforms were measured.

Fifty-three *odesongel* were analyzed. Surprisingly, against the expectations of the model, 43 % have a generally

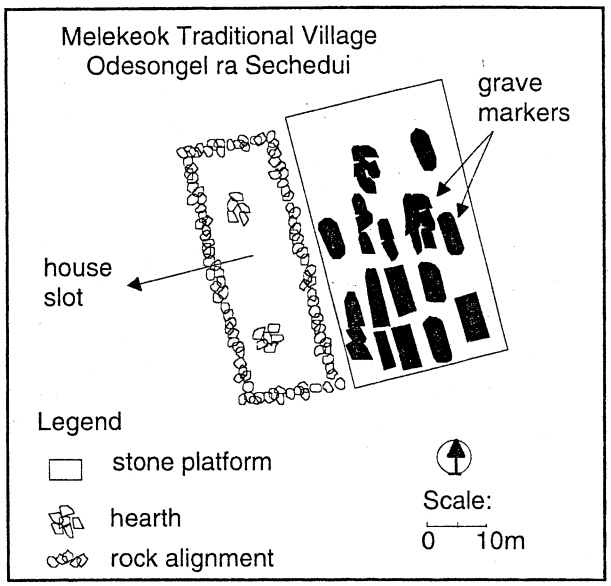

Figure 4: An odesongel *for the Sechedui clan in Melekeok traditional village.*

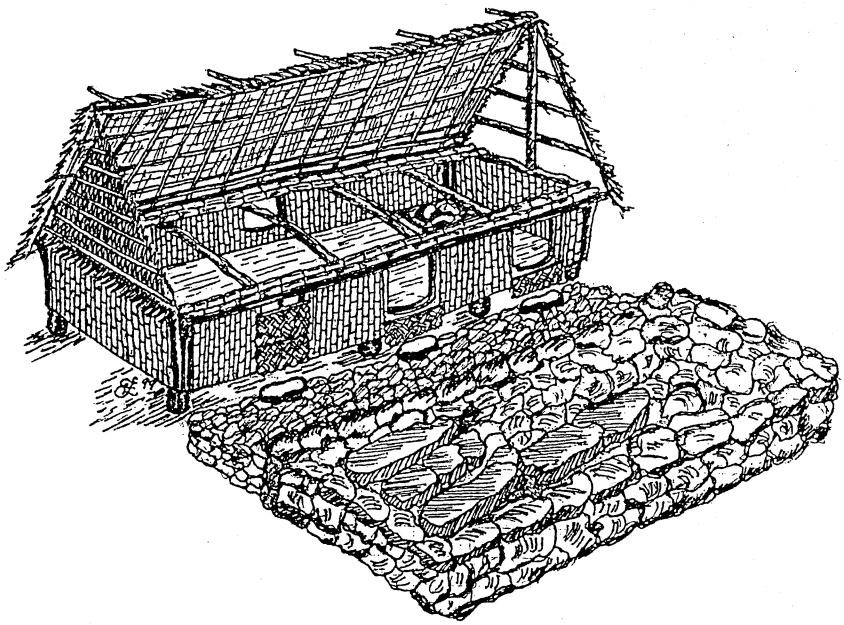

Figure 5: Drawing showing the relationship between an odesongel *stone platform and a dwelling house.*

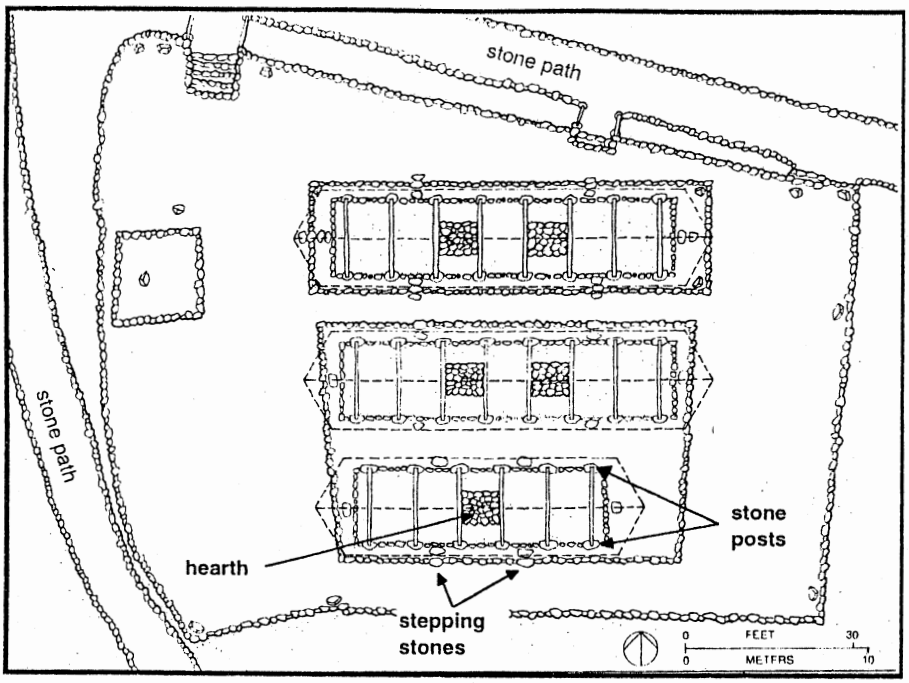

Figure 6: Map of a stone platform in Irrai traditional village that supported three bai *meeting houses.*[1]

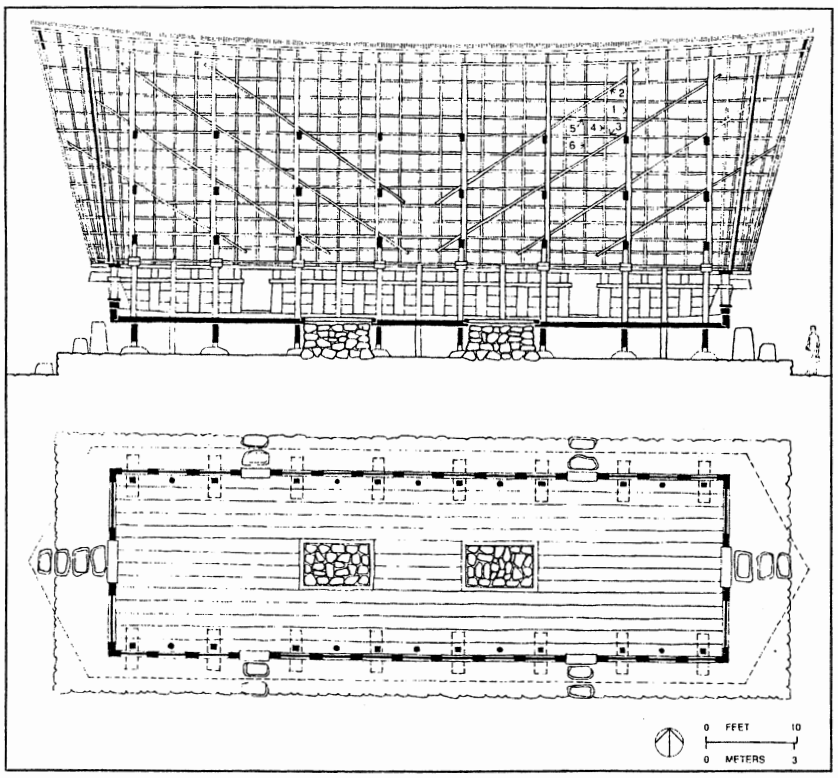

Figure 7: Drawing showing the relationship between the stone features on a bai *stone platform and the meeting house constructed above.*[2]

north-south orientation, and 57% have an east-west orientation. Nine *bai* were examined and shown to have similar orientations; 56% north-south and 44% east-west. Several suggestions can perhaps explain this discordance between the model and the archaeological data. One might suggest that normative ideals in a society are not always put into practice; or that cultural beliefs today are different from the past; or that physical constraints such as topography and terrain may have been significant factors, i.e., that people attempted to follow ideals but were limited by geography. Some other analyses have tested models based upon cultural beliefs against the archaeological record, and have had some success (see Butler 1984). Others, such as Snyder (1997), argue that past beliefs change through time, and that this is evident in different architectural forms across the landscape in Palau. The analysis carried out here indicates that understanding past belief systems and their expressions in material culture require consideration of a multitude of factors.

CONCLUSION

Using oral traditions to study the culture of the past may reveal interesting patterns that will assist in our understanding of that past. Micronesia is rich in oral traditions and in some cases people still retain very real ties with archaeological features. In the absence of a written record, it is difficult to understand how reflective the material culture is of the lives of the people of the past – oral histories therefore should not be ignored when addressing archaeological issues. However, some archaeological material extends beyond the boundaries of oral history, and in these cases more data and advanced technology are required in order to interpret the past.

APPENDIX A: ARCHAEOLOGICAL DATA

1. Imeliik State
Imull Traditional Village

Feature No.	Bearing east of North	Length in metres	Type of Feature
01	98°	16.90	*Bai* platform
03	124°	10.40	House platform
04	58°	9.60	House platform
06	116°	17.00	House platform
07	9°	22.00	*Bai* platform
09	80°	9.40	House platform
10	160°	15.80	*Bai* platform
11	158°	9.60	House platform
14	10°	8.00	House platform
15	22°	9.00	House platform
16	178°	14.30	House platform

2. Imeliik State
Ngebedech Traditional Village

Feature No.	Bearing east of North	Length in metres	Type of Feature
1	126°	9.00	House platform
2	160°	11.00	House platform
3	25°	22.00	*Bai* platform
4	160°	10.00	House platform
5	126°	8.80	House platform
6	34°	14.70	House platform
7	64°	5.00	House platform
8	152°	9.00	House platform
9	82°	9.00	House platform

3. Ngeremlengui State
Ngesisech Traditional Village

Feature No.	Bearing east of North	Length in metres	Type of Feature
02	130°	10.70	House platform
04	164°	10.00	House platform
06	100°	15.60	House platform
08	158°	11.30	House platform
10	118°	10.60	House platform
12	46°	9.30	House platform
13	144°	14.60	House platform
19	140°	43.00	*Bai* platform
23	24°	9.70	House platform
24	16°	15.60	House platform
31	130°	19.50	House platform
33	142°	7.60	House platform

4. Melekeok State
Ngeburch Traditional Village

Feature No.	Bearing east of North	Length in metres	Type of Feature
1	175°	26.00	*Bai* platform
2	10°	20.00	Stone platform
3	0°	11.90	Stone platform
4	10°	18.00	Stone platform

5. Irrai State
Ngerullak Traditional Village

Feature No.	Bearing east of North	Length in metres	Type of Feature
1	100°	10.50	Stone platform
2	95°	12.00	Stone platform
3	105°	31.00	*Bai* platform
4	92°	12.00	Stone platform
5	100°	9.50	Stone platform

6. Irrai State
Irrai Traditional Village

Feature No.	Bearing east of North	Length in metres	Type of Feature
02	87°	40.00	*Bai* platform
06	0°	16.00	House platform
21	85°	14.00	House platform
27	85°	12.00	House platform
28	85°	19.00	House platform
29	86°	12.00	House platform
30	85°	13.00	House platform
32	144°	10.00	House platform
33	80°	15.00	House platform
36	76°	13.00	House platform
37	152°	14.00	House platform
38	156°	9.00	House platform
40	85°	11.00	House platform
41	86°	17.00	House platform
42	83°	16.00	House platform
51	88°	12.00	House platform
52	100°	15.00	House platform
55	128°	22.00	*Bai* platform
65	85°	7.00	House platform
67	89°	9.00	House platform
68	12°	11.00	House platform

NOTES

1. Reprinted with permission from University of Texas Press from Morgan 1988:21
2. Reprinted with permission from University of Texas Press from Morgan 1988:22.

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