

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

PETER SHEPPARD,^{1*} RICHARD WALTER² AND SHANKAR ASWANI³

¹ Centre for Archaeological Research, Department of Anthropology,
University of Auckland, Auckland, New Zealand
p.sheppard@auckland.ac.nz

² Department of Anthropology, University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand
Richard.Walter@stonebow.otago.ac.nz

³ Department of Anthropology, University of California, Santa Barbara, United States of America
aswani@anth.ucsb.edu

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.

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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