

Felicia R. Beardsley

Jungle Warfare 2000

Historic preservation in Micronesia is as much about keeping an encroaching jungle at bay as it is a race to document a precious heritage before it succumbs to the forces of man and nature. Whether it is the pressures of development or benign neglect, the demise of historical resources is accelerating. Plant growth and rising sea levels promote chemical degradation of historic building materials, while economic demands for modernization encourage the demolition of traditional properties without benefit of documentation. Small budgets, few in-place conservation policies and legislation, and raw inertia of governments conspire to check progress on heritage preservation. But the picture is not as bleak as it sounds. Recent archeological work in the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM) demonstrates the potential for historic conservation in the region, and the pride in community that arises as a lost heritage is viewed once again. It also demonstrates the fragile state of these resources, where work one year is easily undone the next.

Within a global perspective, Micronesia covers a vast expanse of the western Pacific. It is comprised of hundreds of small islands, each with its unique history of settlement and occupation, and each facing similar problems in conserving and preserving that history. That the heritage of the tropical western Pacific is in peril is undeniable; it is the resolution to these problems that is more difficult. The demands of heritage preservation are often seen as too costly and impeding progress; with limited personnel and financing, there is simply not enough money to go around. A fully funded heritage conservation program is a *fata morgana*.

In a young, independent country like the FSM, recently emerged from a century of colonial dominance, precedence is given to establishing a post-colonial government where administrative priorities are concentrated on infrastructure development and those goods and services directly affecting the health and welfare of the community. Medical services, schools, clean water, roads, and communications receive top priority. And what

about culture; its survival and transmission to succeeding generations; its role in the persistence and continuity of a unique identity among a people? Is culture waning as traditional practices fragment in response to globalization?

Cultural memory, the very essence of cultural survival, is stimulated and nourished by the properties embedded in tangible and intangible traditional resources. Historical sites and landscapes, oral histories, dances, songs, chants, and other forms of traditional activities are the symbolic agents of culture, the means by which it is transmitted, projected, and ultimately coalesced. This is the heritage of a people and a place, its historical character and the very fabric of its existence. Ennui, denial, lack of interest, or just plain neglect can dramatically tilt the fragile balance of continuity toward an erosion of resources, until the loss of both knowledge and practice is complete.

Island states like Kosrae and Yap in the FSM have recognized the critical need to preserve their heritage. Local historic preservation offices, established during Trust Territory times, serve as stewards of that heritage. They are charged with developing, maintaining, and preserving a bank of traditional knowledge no longer recorded in the memories of younger community members, as well as documenting, recording, and managing the sites of their ancestors. But their responsibilities are daunting. They are faced with limited budgets, a lack of training, and diminishing assistance as the economic Compact of Free Association with the United States comes to an end; they are also facing the ever-persistent and unalterable forces of nature, as well as the inevitable demise of older generations who were the cultural archives in the past.

Today, the region's historical sites and properties are obscured and hidden by heavy vegetation, if not by the jungle then coastal mangroves. This is a part of the world where vegetation growth is extraordinary; a tree cut down one day is sprouted to its full size the next, or almost. It is a place where the features of a site are continually displaced, distorted and gradually lost through the movement of roots, rotation of vegetation regimes, shifts in stream channels, subsidence and uplift, tidal fluctuations, changes in sea level, and the actions of man. Sites are in a constant state of transformation. During their original occupation, pioneering vegetation was held in check as sites were maintained, renovated, and rebuilt. Upon abandonment, however, these same sites were rapidly overtaken by the very vegetation held at

bay for so long; they became subject to the interplay of post-depositional forces, including gardening, materials scavenging, and other uses.

In 1999, during a four-month period in Yap, the jungle was cut away from Dinay Village, an old site by all accounts where names of platforms were no longer recalled (an indication that lineage ties were long forgotten). It is one of the earliest settled villages, according to oral history, the place where pottery and fire were introduced to the people by the spirits. Little remains of the site other than foundations distorted by time and vegetation growth, and the accumulation of later remnants of traditional ditch gardens, Japanese occupation, and defensive fortifications. Dinay is a small, complex village with a network of stone paths, a formal entrance, a series of platforms and compounds, a community well, and a community meeting place. Recording, mapping and documenting the site was a difficult task for the HPO staff, especially keeping the jungle at bay. By the time fieldwork came to an end, the jungle had nearly closed in on the site, once again obscuring it from view. During that brief time the jungle was held in check, community members visited the site, first out of curiosity and then pride at seeing and experiencing a significant part of their history. As of this writing, the jungle has reclaimed Dinay. Limited budgets and personnel and demands for heritage preservation throughout the state preclude continued maintenance.

At the opposite end of FSM, Kosrae is facing a similar problem: the maintenance and conservation of Leluh, its most significant site. Leluh is an artificial island with massive stone constructions,

canals, tombs, and living compounds. During the later part of the island's prehistory, it was the center of the paramountcy; it is here the first Europeans were welcomed to the island. Today, it is not only fluctuating tides that promote chemical degradation of building foundations and materials, but also occupation of the site by mangroves and jungle. Unlike Dinay, Leluh is the focal point of tourism; it plays a key role in the economic cycle of the island. The task of maintaining the site and cutting away the vegetation on a daily and monthly basis has been taken on by the community in partnership with the HPO. Other sites on-island, unfortunately, do not receive the same attention. Some have been scavenged for building materials, others have been swallowed by the jungle and now languish in a near-primordial state.

Heritage preservation, management, and stewardship in the FSM and throughout Micronesia are a challenge. How do you stem the growth and advance of vegetation? How do you protect a site from the ravenous forces of nature? How do you manage a site in light of more pressing community needs? Ultimately, heritage management is an issue that must compete with other societal needs in the legislative and political arenas, where decisions are left to elected representatives. The preservation community, including the struggling island HPOs, must simply keep a sharpened machete in hand.

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