

Some Comments on The Importance of Ethnographic Data For Archaeological Interpretations

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Analogies to living peoples have been an important methodological resource for archaeologists in the reconstruction and interpretation of past cultures. There are certain aspects of culture which are not directly observable, by the archaeologists but to which the ethnologists, by virtue of their discipline, are in a position to provide insights and understanding to particular phenomena. It may, however, be stated that collaboration between archaeologists and ethnologists has merits only when applied to the recent past. The validity of using ethnographic data becomes suspect in proportion to the remoteness of the culture being investigated as in the case of pleistocene societies. The following discussions are not all fully documented; the comments are especially addressed to ethnologists to make them more aware of the usefulness of their data for specific archaeological interpretations.

In two articles (e.g. Tenazas 1973) that this author has written on the practice of boat-coffin burial in the Philippines and elsewhere in Southeast Asia, the value of ethnographic data was demonstrated in its applicability to the understanding of this widespread practice in prehistoric times. Ethnographic reports among modern marginal societies in Southeast Asia

where the concept of a soul boat in connection with burial still survives show that the boat as a mortuary symbol is a substitute for the rainbow as a means of access to the afterworld. On the other hand, the use of ethnographic data on, say, the Negritos of the Philippines to elucidate the Philippine palaeolithic way of life will not hold up scientifically. Here, the interpretations would be including parameters of socio-cultural structure unique only to prehistoric setting going back several hundred thousand years and, as pointed out by one scholar, the problem is compounded when the equation involves comparisons with societies of mankind biologically different from our own.

It is an admitted fact that archaeologists owe much to the ethnologists for providing data which are used by the archaeologists as models against which to test their hypotheses. However, this is not to say that it is the sole means by which theories are tested. Sophisticated methods of analyses have been developed involving unique approaches. For example, it has been postulated that the social phenomenon of postmarital residence could be inferred from the archaeological record independent of ethnographic analogies. Studies initiated by the Russian archaeologist P. N. Tretyakov (Binford 1968:269–270) has shown that the form of fingerprints on pottery generally indicated that it was females who manufactured pottery. In societies where matrilineal residence was the rule, the range of variability in pottery types would be much less than would obtain if patrilocality

Based on the article by the same author entitled, "Ethnographic and Archaeological Data as Material for Reciprocal Cultural Interpretation. "Philippine Quarterly for Culture and Society, 11 (1 – 2), 1974, pp. 55 - 87

was the rule, since in patrilocal societies the women are brought in from the outside. Subsequent studies along this line by other scholars have resulted in the establishment of post-marital residence patterns of certain prehistoric communities. This model of inquiry had been used by this author in testing theories concerning the distribution of certain Iron Age pottery complexes in the Philippines (Tenazas, 1977). Testing archaeological hypotheses on the bases of ethnographic models was, however, employed in the same research to find out what factors determined settlement and subsistence patterns in at least two widely located prehistoric communities.

Another important role that ethnographic data has played in archaeological investigations is in serving as models for testing hypotheses which seek to reconcile material and behavioral cultural phenomena. This role is exemplified in the new method of investigation which is termed "action archaeology" or ethno-archaeology. In this method a living community is studied from the perspective of an archaeologist. That is studies are made on archaeologically relevant data among living peoples. Aspects of culture such as functional variability in ceramic studies, the relationship between population size and site size, and the relationship between behavior and the spatial structure of artifacts which are observable only in the archaeological record are given attention. For example, a preliminary analysis of an underwater archaeological investigation off the Gulf of Thailand by the SPAFA Thai Sub-Centre was reinforced by ethnographic analogy when two sets of equipment were identified from the point of view of disposition: the more sophisticated assemblage was found concentrated on the stern of the ship while the more utilitarian artifacts were recovered from the opposite end of the ship. The living arrangement on board the ship was thus inferred: the stern or the more protected section of the boat was reserved for the passengers of high rank while the rest of the crew occupied the main deck (Tenazas 1981; Intakosai 1983).

From the foregoing, we have seen some examples of relationships between ethnographic data and archaeological reasoning. It is urged that ethnologists bear this in mind when conducting their investigations so that both groups of scholars could arrive at a common framework of problem solving, for the words of a well-known archaeologist:

".....Prehistory and ethnology are not independent disciplines, but related parts of the single discipline of anthropology. Although the data available for the study of the past and present are quite different, ethnologists and prehistorians are both concerned with human behavior and the interpretations they offer are influenced by their understanding of the universal properties of this behavior." (Bruce C. Trigger 1968:6).

Ethnologists provide data against which archaeologists test their hypothesis.

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