Nan Madol's Contested Landscape: Topography and Tradition in the Eastern Caroline Islands

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Nan Madol, a large, ancient complex of monumental stone architecture on Pohnpei, serves to make a series of political points. It is contested landscape symbolizing a host of tensions essential to the cultural life of Pohnpei. Embodied in Nan Madol's mythohistory are important lessons concerning both internal and external political relations. Current disputes over control of the site verify the existence of precisely the threats Nan Madol warns against: the dangers of big government.

"The ownership is blood conquered," averred the paramount chief; "it is proper that if Nan Madol is overthrown, it must be by war" (Whaley, 1993, p. 3). Dialogue from a novel about medieval knights errant? A passage from a nineteenth century account of imperial expansion? No, these are lines from a current news item in Guam's *Pacific Daily News.* Nan Madol, the site at issue, is a large complex of monumental architecture located on Pohnpei, in the Eastern Caroline Islands, now part of the Federated States of Micronesia. Despite its antiquity Nan Madol continues to play a significant role in Pohnpei's cultural and social life.

Massive stoneworks rise from the shallow waters along Pohnpei's easternmost shore at the lone spot where the island's protective barrier reef sweeps landward and turns briefly into a stretch of fringing reef. There, the modern Pohnpei's ancestors built an array of artificial islets and canals and erected upon them temples, crypts, fortresses, and other edifices. The site

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lies within what is today the Madolenihmw chiefdom, and *Nahnmwarki* Ilten Selten, Madolenihmw's paramount chief, is attempting to defend it from a series of encroachments. Thus it happens that in April of 1993, more than a century after Pohnpei first came under the rule of Europeans and a decade after the Micronesians voted to become once again self-governing, a group of Pohnpei were speaking seriously of war.

Nan Madol, known variously as the Pacific's mysterious "city of stone" or an Oceanic "Venice," has been contested landscape from the outset, and in some ways not much has changed in the thousand years or so since work first began there. The demiurban complex symbolizes—in eminently material terms—much of what it means to be Pohnpei, but it is a mistake to think that because of this it belongs to all Pohnpei, a misapprehension that seems to lie at the root of current controversies. Indeed, most of Nan Madol's significance lies in the political messages with which it is charged; these stress the importance of decentralization and local autonomy. Nan Madol encapsulates, among other things, much of the Pohnpei's mythohistory, ethos, and basic views about foreign relations. Current controversies over it are merely the latest in a long history of disputes, a history that can tell us a great deal about politics, power, and reading a cultural landscape.

This essay is grounded in some of Carl Sauer's (1925, 1963) ideas about the cultural meanings of landscape and in David Lowenthal's (1985) treatment of the widespread tendency to view the past as a foreign country. I intend to explain how modern-day Pohnpei read their island's natural and cultural landscapes as commentaries not only on the past and its many vicissitudes but also as a guide to contemporary political life: on the island, within their new republic, and in the world at large. They believe their history provides them with moral guidance, and they read that history in Nan Madol and in every square foot of the island their families have inhabited for 2,000 years or so. The landscape of Pohnpei is contested. Indeed, it encompasses many contests, some of which play a part in my consideration of current tensions on the island. There are distinct contradictions among the multiple versions and variants of Pohnpei's mythohistory; there are oppositions between ethnographic and archaeological interpretations of these oral traditions; there are marked contrasts in the Pohnpei's cultural attitudes toward the center of the island and the reef where Nan Madol sits; there are idiosyncrasies of competing local interests; there are deeply etched oppositions embedded in Pohnpei political theory itself, which juxtaposes the processes of centralization and decentralization that Nan Madol signifies; and finally there are the confrontations that now trouble the Pohnpei, that

is, the polarities between their own indigenous notions of what proper government should be and the ideas of well-meaning foreigners who assume that Anglo-American democratic, utilitarian theory is equally and universally applicable to all the world's societies.

POHNPEI

Pohnpei is the largest of the Eastern Caroline Islands. Its population in 1990 was more than 33,000. Before the first Europeans arrived with an array of new diseases (ca. 1830), the population was perhaps a bit smaller than it is now; a long period of population decline finally reached its low point and began to reverse itself at the turn of the century when only about 3,000 Pohnpei survived (Riesenberg, 1968, p. 6). Pohnpei is now the site of the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM) capital. Many people from other Micronesian islands have come to the island to work for the FSM government and live in or near Kolonia, the island's only town, but most Pohnpei families continue to live on and cultivate their rural farmsteads, sending one or more of their members into town on a daily basis to work for the government, the island's primary source of wage labor.

The town of Kolonia, the state of Pohnpei, and the FSM as a whole—each has an elected government and a bureaucracy. Outside of town, the island is still divided into five *wehi,* the paramount chiefdoms, which have hereditary chiefs and multiple lines of political titles of varying rank and status. These chiefdoms are also chartered as municipalities and have elected governments, but daily political life within them makes little differentiation between traditional and elective office. Within these paramount chiefdoms are numerous *kousapw,* or local chiefdoms. Until the onset of colonial administration (in the 1880s), the paramount chiefdoms waxed and waned in number, size, and strength; certain areas of the island have, since ancient times, claimed and often exercised effective autonomy from the larger chiefdoms in which they are now included. Pohnpei's political life entails endless maneuvering within and among all these regions and chiefdoms. These complex, competitive political activities are the stuff of social life on this rich and fertile island, where making a living takes up relatively little of people's time.

Pohnpei dealt successfully with the whalers, traders, and missionaries who provided links to the rest of the world through most of the nineteenth century. In 1886 Spain established a garrison there, but it had little impact

on life outside the fortress. Germany, which had long been cultivating commercial interests in the area, purchased the islands after Spain's 1898 loss of the Philippines and immediately set about implementing a series of economic and political changes. The Germans forcefully put down a 1910 rebellion by the Sokehs chiefdom, and it was at this point that the Pohnpei had to begin acknowledging, even if they never truly accepted, foreign control over their island. The Germans lost the islands to the Japanese and their League of Nations Mandate following the First World War, and the Japanese were in turn replaced by the United States and its United Nations Strategic Trusteeship over Micronesia following the Second World War. After decades of negotiations, the Federated States of Micronesia finally began governing itself under the terms of a Compact of Free Association with the United States in 1986.

POHNPEI'S LANDSCAPE

To provide insight into how the landscape of Pohnpei is contested, I first describe that landscape, particularly as the Pohnpei experience it.[1] The island is volcanic in origin, though active vulcanism has long since vanished. It is roughly circular and large, by the standards of the Eastern Caroline Islands, encompassing 334 km^2. The surface rises steeply in a series of ridges and crests to a pair of 750 m peaks near the center. The rugged topography is everywhere cut by streams and scarred by precipices and scarps. Rainfall is heavy, approximately 500 cm per year at the weather station, which is sited in a drier part of the island, and the weatherman (a Pohnpei) believes that it may reach nearly 1200 cm per year at certain windward points in the higher elevations. At this tropical latitude (7°N), there is very little seasonality. Average daily temperatures remain at about 28°C (82°F) throughout the year and the two "dry months," January and February, receive about two thirds the rainfall of the wetter months. With a few minor exceptions the island is densely vegetated.[2] To begin to understand Pohnpei, one must first grasp the impact of this relentless lushness.

Travel on the island is always difficult. For reasons I shall address shortly, the Pohnpei are not given to a great deal of trail building or maintenance. The steep inclines, heavy vegetation, roaring streams, slippery outcroppings, and ubiquitous mud make overland travel difficult and unpopular. Though they are not accomplished open ocean navigators like their neighbors on the surrounding atolls, the Pohnpei have generally preferred,

whenever possible, to sail around the island's perimeter, safely inside its protected lagoon. The circumferential road, variously constructed and deteriorated during the island's multiple colonial regimes, has once again been completed, and with the advent of relatively cheap light trucks and cars, the Pohnpei now eagerly move around the island itself.[3]

The impenetrable density of the island's vegetation is not quite as it seems to the untrained eye. Though native forest still grows in the island's most interior reaches, the woodlands in all inhabited parts of the island are actually carefully cultivated stands of food-bearing or otherwise exploitable trees, a mix primarily of breadfruit (the staple foodstuff), coconut, banana, mango, and other fruits along with utilitarian growths of ivory nut and nipa palms, kapok and hibiscus, and the all-important kava, the roots of which provide a very mild narcotic used for both ritual purposes and everyday relaxation. The understory is planted in taros, yams, manioc, a few other rootcrops, and myriad ornamental plants. The Pohnpei cut back weedy growths often enough to prevent them from taking over, but infrequently enough to make much of this cropland look like jungle. People here are particularly given to planting boundary areas densely, both to serve as screens and to impress passersby with their industriousness, a valued trait in this highly competitive society.

The settlement pattern is pronouncedly dispersed. While matrilineages and bilateral extended families tend to occupy large plots of land (known as *peliensapw*), individual households tend to be composed of smaller family units.[4] Some Pohnpei say of themselves that they do not like to *dokpene* (loosely, "collide"), and that it is for this reason that they do not live in aggregations or nucleated settlements; others say that the pattern represents a long-established means of preventing raiding parties (coming up from the shoreline) from attacking more than a handful of people at once. The Pohnpei place an extremely high premium on privacy and concealment, as part of a complex of cultural values known as *kanengamah* (Petersen, 1993a). Their settlement pattern, in combination with the dense vegetation, means that the landscape itself mirrors this cultural emphasis; from a distance all life on the island is thoroughly concealed. As one approaches Pohnpei from the sea, much of it appears uninhabited: All that can be seen are the crowns of the breadfruit and coconuts.

Though Pohnpei lies just east of the western Pacific's typhoon belt, it is occasionally hit and damaged by these storms; however, the island's torrential rains have a more frequent and nearly irresistible impact. It is not uncommon to find trails deep in surface runoff (and to encounter eels con-

tentedly exploring them). Despite the heavy vegetation, there is continual erosion. Nearly all construction is undertaken atop the stone platforms (*pehi*) that give the island its name: "Pohnpei" translates literally as "upon a stone platform." These foundations are themselves subject to undercutting, root heaves, and the unremitting ravages of age and gravity. Wind, rain, humidity, and a panoply of industrious insects ensure the rapid disintegration of any and all organic construction materials used atop the stone bases. In short order, structures collapse and trails wash away; vegetation quickly swallows everything that is not actively defended from it. Pohnpei's cultural landscape is at heart an accommodation to the forces of nature. Nearly everything crafted by human efforts is thought of as temporary, and people undertake little maintenance; most trails seem ephemeral; things fall apart and are then raised anew, usually on a different site.

On one hand, then, there is little in sight that is "natural." All the inhabited lands are draped in cultivated crops. But the Pohnpei are not inclined to struggle futilely against the forces of nature: They seek to impose little permanent change upon the face of the land.

The density of the vegetation and the consequent sense that natural growth is always looming have their impact on the Pohnpei's world view. In their mythology, the center of the island is frequently associated with evil, or with antisocial behavior: It is the place where demihuman cannibals abide (or once did), where the earlier inhabitants ate rats and broke incest taboos. Moreover, the Pohnpei sometimes speak of how much they enjoy getting away from the land and onto the lagoon, where fresh breezes can reach them and where they feel less closed in by the land. The Pohnpei love their land dearly, and know it intimately—every plot, even the smallest worksite, is named and bears its share of tales and associations—but they also feel a degree of ambivalence about it. That which is so familiar, so dear, can at times also seem oppressive.

Nan Madol, built with massive stoneworks strong enough to resist storm and tide and only marginally affected by the growth of heavy tropical vegetation, sits out on the water itself, partly immersed at high tide (easily accessible by canoe, the favored means of transport) and away from the stultifying embrace of the land. It stands in marked contrast to the familiar, everyday landscape dominated by nature's profligacy. It is in almost every sense a statement about the Pohnpei's triumph over nature. Both in pure material fact and in rarified symbolic aura, it is different, remarkable, indomitable.

Nan Madol was constructed with naturally occurring columnar basalt blocks of a sort also encountered in such sites as the Giant's Causeway in Ireland and California's Devil's Postpile. The columns were transported to the reef site from some distance and used, along with coral fill, to create a series of artificial islets, separated by canals, covering a total area of approximately .75 km^2. Structures, some of stone, were then erected atop them. The name Nan Madol (literally, "in the space between things") refers to the spaces between the islets, reflecting a particularly Pohnpei emphasis on that which is not: not to be seen, not to be heard, or simply that which is not there, like the silences between the notes of Miles Davis's music or the spaces between the objects in Giorgio Morandi's later still lifes.[5] In the same way that Nan Madol represents, at one level, an openness that can be gained only away from the cloistering ambiance of the island itself, the site's very name calls attention to the openings between the structures the Pohnpei built rather than directly to the structures themselves.

NAN MADOL: THE MYTHOHISTORY

We are fortunate to have available to us a large corpus of Pohnpei's mythohistorical accounts. Close study of this material tells us that one of the few generalizations we can make about these accounts is that they are highly contradictory. At times it seems as if every rendition of a tale has its equal and opposite version, and the Pohnpei themselves say that as a consequence of these variations, the truth of any matter is, like a fallen coconut, "lost in the weeds" (Petersen, 1990a). Or, as David Hanlon (1992, p. 26) has phrased it, "all knowledge of the past on Pohnpei is contested." Although the details of the island's mythohistory are perpetually in dispute, we can tease some general patterns from it.

Pohnpei's "modern" polity (i.e., the current system of chieftainship) traces its roots back to events purported to have taken place at least several generations before the arrival of the first Europeans and the start of written history on the island. These events in turn draw upon earlier historical episodes, running, in some versions, back to the very earliest occupation of the island. In summary: After the island itself had been built up out of the water by people who journeyed there from the south or east and had been provided with food, shelter, fire, and so forth by other travelers, construction of a center for islandwide religious worship was undertaken. Led by local savants or voyagers (or both) from the west, the people built Nan Madol as

a site for islandwide religious rituals. In time, Nan Madol became the seat of a dynasty of tyrants, the Sau Deleurs, who ruled the entire island. Eventually, local discontent and the intervention of deities provoked an invasion by the culture hero Isokelekel, who—though son of one of these Pohnpei deities—had grown up in Upwind Katau, a legendary land to the east (often identified as Kosrae, but see Goodenough, 1986). It is important to stress here that most of the Pohnpei's mythohistorical accounts are marked by variant traditions; there are few elements in this summary that do not have contrasting or contradictory versions, including, for instance, the notion that the entire island was under the sway of the Sau Deleurs. In the current context these variants need not be examined, but they have been explored in detail elsewhere (Petersen, 1990a).

Isokelekel and his troops overthrew the last Sau Deleur and presided over the dismantling of Pohnpei's centralized political system. Following much deliberation, the island's new and remaining leaders instituted the modern system of multiple, autonomous paramount chiefdoms. Today's Madolenihmw chiefs trace their ancestry back (matrilineally) to Isokelekel, and all the modern chiefdoms are organized around principles of decentralized government. Unlike some Polynesian polities, in which the chiefs claim to be foreigners, the Pohnpei believe their leaders to be indigenes, but they suggest that the political system itself, which they hold in the greatest respect (*wahu,* the term for respect, can in some contexts refer to the entire political system), was in part shaped by a foreign intervention.

Several themes can be distilled from these cycles. One is especially relevant in this context, encapsulating as it does some basic Pohnpei political theory. Originally there was anarchy; then the people organized themselves in the process of constructing Nan Madol; they then created a system of centralized government; this deteriorated into tyranny; the tyrant was overthrown and his regime was replaced by a decentralized set of locally autonomous chiefdoms. The modern polity, then, is in part the result of trial and error, as it were, and in part a product of deliberate, carefully considered decisions about the proper nature of government. It is viewed as now having withstood the test of time. Good government is decentralized and provides for maximum local autonomy.

To be sure, these themes are themselves contested. Some chiefs, clans, and matrilineages have sought to expand their landholdings or spheres of authority and to assert their rights to do so. Some leaders abuse their authority. But in the flow of daily Pohnpei social life these proclivities are

dealt with in a manner that keeps such contests from erupting into open challenges. As I have explained elsewhere (Petersen, 1993a, pp. 347–348),

> At their kava sessions and feasts, the Pohnpei repeatedly comb through the minutiae of daily life. And across the vast expanses of time they devote to this eminently political act, over and under and through the cracks of *kanengamah*, people come to grasp not simply the sentiments of single individuals but the sense of the community. The truth thus becomes that which the community is willing to move upon: it is pragmatic—what works. And because it is never expressly articulated, it always remains contingent. No one can be sure that his or her views have carried the day. No one can convert the structure of power—chieftainship—into the fact of power, because in a society that discounts the likelihood of learning the truth, those with credibility are those who assert nothing.

Having lost the truth, as it were, "in the weeds," the Pohnpei must seek moral guidance in their shared experience of equality, the more obvious hierarchical aspects of their polity notwithstanding. This is a pattern that is characteristic of all chiefly societies in the Carolines (Petersen, 1993b).

Nan Madol, perched out on the island's windward shoreline, facing the rising sun, is by all Pohnpei accounts a religious and ritual site with significant martial overtones. Mythohistorical accounts largely agree that it was built as a place of worship and only then subverted into a military cantonment occupied by the tyrants who perverted its original purposes. The culture hero who overthrew the evil despots returned Nan Madol to its original role. Ethnohistorical sources seem to verify this final stage. When Europeans first arrived in the mid-nineteenth century, Nan Madol was occupied by just a few people and used only occasionally for rituals (Fischer, 1964).

NAN MADOL: THE SCHOLARS DEBATE

Among those who contest the meaning of Nan Madol are anthropologists and archaeologists. Paul Hambruch, a German ethnographer who worked on Pohnpei in 1910 and was the first to map the area accurately, said that of all the impressions one might gain of Pohnpei, Nan Madol is the most enduring, but he also found it "a puzzle whose solution has become ever more difficult and will perhaps never be completely revealed" (1936, p. 3). More recently, American archaeologists have been working at the site. They make use of Pohnpei's mythohistory to interpret it, but they tend to misuse

this material, unsystematically pulling it apart and applying individual accounts out of context.

Pohnpei's mythohistory clearly associates Nan Madol with the Sau Deleurs, the tyrants who ruled over the island from their seat on Nan Madol's Pahn Kedira islet. One of the few things about which accounts are fairly consistent is that the Sau Deleur dynasty was established as a consequence of the work done at Nan Madol, that is, the first Sau Deleur is reckoned to have begun his reign *after* the bulk of the work there was completed. Although oral accounts are vague about the island's earliest times, there seems to be some agreement that the people responsible for building the complex were, by today's standards, politically unorganized: They were without chiefs (Petersen, 1990a, pp. 17–25).

Archaeologists, however, take the association of the site with the Sau Deleurs as unequivocal evidence that these powerful rulers were able to mobilize the labor that raised Nan Madol by means of coerced labor. Athens, for example, writes that "Oral accounts identify Nan Madol as the center of a polity ruled by a paramount chief who bore the title of Sau Deleur. . . . The authority of the Sau Deleurs was absolute" (1983, p. 52). Then, commenting on the "staggering" amount of labor that went into the project, he adds, "Oral accounts leave no doubt as to the social differentiation that existed between the ruler and the ruled. The power to command the labor obviously existed" (1983, pp. 59–60). Saxe, Allenson, and Loughbridge (1980, p. 93) discuss the "centralization of power embodied in the unification and subordination of previously independent polities." Bath (1984, p. 1) refers to the "political hegemony" of a "theocratic, centralized" kingdom.[6]

In every case, archaeologists use mythohistorical accounts about the powers of the Sau Deleurs to explain how the Pohnpei were able to mobilize the labor that went into constructing Nan Madol, despite the fact that these oral traditions consistently describe such powers arising only after the complex was built. In short, archaeologists find these tales about the formidable powers of the Sau Deleurs much too enticing to resist and do not let chronology interfere with an otherwise good story.

If the issue were simply a matter of chronology, it might be argued, I suppose, that in the process of oral transmission through generations of telling and retelling, the sequence somehow became inverted. But the entire corpus of mythohistorical traditions requires qualification. The dramatic struggle between the hero Isokelekel (a classic sky-god type) and the last Sau Deleur (a classic earth-demon) can be mapped onto any number of epic tales found in cultural repertoires from all parts of the globe. I am not

suggesting that no historical figures existed around whom these tales grew up, but that the themes embodied in them tell us far more about basic sociocultural issues than they do about Pohnpei's past (Petersen, 1990a, pp. 77–78).

Ample ethnohistorical evidence demonstrates that in the nineteenth century, long after carbon dates and oral traditions indicate that Nan Madol was completed, the Pohnpei were still undertaking monumental stone masonry (Christian, 1899/1967, p. 217; Gulick, 1857; Hambruch, 1936, pp. 3, 65; Petersen, 1990a, pp. 60–64). Competitive public works lie at the core of Pohnpei's political life; community feasting and the construction of community feast houses mobilize large amounts of labor, even though chiefs today generally lack physically coercive powers. I am inclined to interpret the complex at Nan Madol as the product of a series of essentially competitive construction projects carried on over the course of centuries. The Pohnpei, as they organized themselves in the nineteenth century (and much as they remain today), were capable of doing the stonework that went into Nan Madol's construction. Clearly, vast amounts of labor *were* necessary to complete it. Excepting only the magical powers that the Pohnpei believe were essential to Nan Madol's construction, the evidence from oral traditions, ethnohistorical sources, and ethnographic research suggests that it certainly *could* have been built with competitive—rather than coerced—labor.

The ancestors of the modern Pohnpei constructed Nan Madol over a long period of time. Athens (1984, p. 23) summarizes radiocarbon dates indicating that the site was occupied as early as the first or second century A.D. and that megalithic construction on the Pahn Kedira islet began before A.D. 1200. Ayres, Haun, and Mauricio (1983, p. 128) have obtained radiocarbon dates suggesting to them that construction on Pahn Kedira began circa A.D. 900–1000 and as early as the eighth century A.D. on Usendau islet. Given the amount of time available to them—that is, a millennium or so—there is no reason to suppose that a great amount of labor had to have been mobilized in a short burst of creative energy. The complex may have been built in stages, slowly and sporadically, perhaps sometimes cooperatively and at other times under forms of more domineering leadership.[7]

Nan Madol's location, greeting the rising sun, is considered profoundly sacred. Evidence overwhelmingly indicates that it was primarily a ritual center. Though oral traditions significantly—sometimes radically—differ in their details, there is a marked degree of accord about the special character of the location where Nan Madol was finally sited. Some of the mythohistorical cycles describe a long search for an appropriate spot, others merely

emphasize that this section of reef, identified as Sounahleng (roughly, "sun-in-heaven"), faced the mythologically important, spiritually charged area known as Upwind Katau. In one version we learn that the people who built Nan Madol settled at the site because they were "constantly afraid of the people of the center of Pohnpei," both the various demihuman, cannibalistic creatures and "real people" who resided there (Silten, n.d., pp. 13–15).

We confront an elementary contradiction in Pohnpei's landscape themes here. The site lies out in the open, on the fringing reef, well away from the sometimes enervating closeness of the island's steep valleys, tall peaks, and dense vegetation. Nan Madol represents a degree of openness and freedom. At the same time, it seems best known as the abode of both the Sau Deleurs and Isokelekel. The Sau Deleurs symbolize all that is evil in the eyes of the Pohnpei—they were greedy, ruthless, imperious, and without love—and yet they started out as a decent, honorable line established by the builders of Nan Madol. Indeed, one of them, before the dynasty became corrupted by its own power, was responsible for ridding the island of its cannibal-like creatures. The message here is clear: Absolute power corrupts absolutely. Among the many things Nan Madol is about, one that stands out is the Pohnpei's fear of the island's center and of centralization. Isokelekel symbolizes the end of tyranny and the decentralization of island political life. The island's physical landscape, both in natural and in horticultural terms, matches its symbolic and cultural landscape in its complexities and contradictions. On one hand, the Pohnpei tend to prize the privacy and concealment their dense vegetation provides. On the other, they feel at times oppressed by it. They constructed Nan Madol out on the reef, where it faces the rising sun and the refreshing trade winds. It was in a sense a tribute to openness. The oral traditions, however, report that it was in time compromised, having lent itself to an unacceptable accumulation of power. The Pohnpei, aided by the gods and with help from the spirits of Upwind Katau, were able to overthrow their oppressors. Nan Madol thus stands as a marker of the dangers too much unity can pose.

The Pohnpei have learned they can effectively defend themselves not by banding together as a centrally organized, islandwide unit, but through the acts of individual communities. When we focus closely on what the Pohnpei say when speaking to one another, we hear them emphasizing the importance of local autonomy. Though Nan Madol appears to outsiders—that is, to those who might threaten the island—as evidence of an effectively centralized, tremendously powerful political system that should be capable of defending Pohnpei's shores against intruders, it is charged with a mark-

edly different message for the Pohnpei themselves. If my hunch about the essentially competitive character of the work that went into constructing Nan Madol is correct, then it exemplifies the Pohnpei's ability—seen for instance in their dance performances (Petersen, 1992a)—to make intensely local competition simultaneously serve the island as a whole.

SOME MODERN MEANINGS OF NAN MADOL

To appreciate properly Nan Madol's importance to modern Pohnpei, we must place it in the context of modern Pohnpei's society and culture, which are complex and contradictory. It would be folly for an outsider to say categorically that Nan Madol is this or means that, and yet it *is* some things and not others and *has* some meanings and not others. When Europeans first arrived on the island, the Pohnpei were rather reticent about the complex, and it was sometimes reported that they did not know who built it. For many reasons, some no doubt having to do with the Pohnpei having accustomed themselves to Europeans and others, perhaps, with a certain lessening of fears of supernatural sanctions, some people have grown more willing to talk about Nan Madol. It is possible, however, that the change is mainly owing to the simple matter of finding the right people. Most of what we know about Nan Madol's history comes from a few Pohnpei historians who are charged (through their clan and lineage status) with preserving its history (Bernart, 1977; Hadley, 1981); others are not inclined to speak about what is not theirs to tell (Hanlon, 1992; Petersen, 1993a).

Depending upon what part of the island they are from, their clans and matrilineages, their age and gender, their education and upbringing, and their own personalities, individual Pohnpei have widely different knowledge of and attitudes toward Nan Madol. Many people refer to it as Nan Dowas, which is the large fortress-crypt that dominates the principal entrance into the complex, and when they speak of excursions to the area, which they sometimes make, they literally mean a visit to the fortress—that is, to the complex's most secular precinct and the site charged with guarding it. Few Pohnpei are eager to travel much farther into Nan Madol; few ever visit even Nan Dowas. In my experience most Pohnpei relate not so much to Nan Madol's physical presence as they do to the original processes of constructing it. Throughout the island one encounters large, often fractured, columnar blocks of basalt lying on the ground. These are likely to be described by locals familiar with them as having fallen to earth while the magicians who

built Nan Madol were flying them into place there. In areas along the island's western and northern shorelines, various spots are pointed out as sites where unsuccessful attempts were made to construct the complex before it was ultimately sited in Madolenihmw.

The images and feelings Nan Madol evokes are multiple. For some it is a place of pure awe or respect. For others it retains the largely evil aura associated with the tyrannical Sau Deleurs. For many, Nan Madol is a matter that concerns primarily the Madolenihmw chiefs and people, and so it has only peripheral relevance for the rest of the island. For others, it is a symbol of all that their ancestors were capable of, a somber reminder that people today no longer possess the knowledge and skills of the ancestors. Though Nan Madol is certainly promoted in Micronesia's scant tourism materials and has drawn a good deal of scientific attention, the Pohnpei do not employ it as a public symbol for the island or the state. Pohnpei, as a whole, is symbolized officially either by Dohlap, better known as Sokehs Rock, a massive volcanic headland (resembling Honolulu's Diamond Head) that rises beside the island's harbor and only town, or by a coconut-shell kava drinking cup, representing the Pohnpei's cultural and spiritual values. Nan Madol is both a specific place and a cultural artifact, and as such it belongs to a specific community: the people of Madolenihmw. Any attempt to appropriate or expropriate it would run strongly against the grain of the Pohnpei's respect behavior.

This brings us, then, to the intersection of respect (wahu) and territoriality. Together, these two concepts or themes combine to embody what I think is the most salient modern meaning of Nan Madol. Archaeological and linguistic evidence tell us that Pohnpei's society developed in situ, beginning perhaps 2,000 years ago. There is no evidence that the population has ever been replaced or displaced (which is not to imply that it was never threatened with these possibilities). As in many Pacific Island societies (Rodman, 1992), emotional bonds to the landscape are not simply individual or familial; they run through the totality of social life and culture. Every feature has a name (or several names) and evokes scores of stories. Every vicinity and community has multiple names, layered one atop the other, each representing an epoch and its history. To speak of a place is to make reference to a vast historical archive and to call up century upon century of memories. Pohnpei historiography is much more territorial in its organization than it is chronological. And control over land is not just a question of mere assets but of a people's soul. In recent years an emphasis on what we now speak of as "the invention of tradition" (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983; Linnekin,

1983) has taught us to view much of what people represent as timeless as actually of relatively recent vintage. But we must recognize that the Pohnpei, who are certainly capable of inventing traditions, have run emotional taproots deep into their land.[8]

Lying at the core of the many meanings of Nan Madol, I think, is a complex message about the importance of decentralization, that is, the notion that the chiefdoms must remain autonomous. The Pohnpei's attachments to their own soil are matched by a larger theme insisting that the attachments of others be equally respected. By Pohnpei lights, Nan Madol was built as a cooperative act of worship, but this process of cooperation led to political centralization. That centralized government is now thought of as symbolizing all that is evil. It was the Sau Deleurs' abuses that ultimately led the gods to conspire against them and thus the Sau Deleurs' downfall was provoked.

THE PAST IS A FOREIGN COUNTRY

In *The Past Is a Foreign Country* David Lowenthal tells us the notion that "they do things differently there" (1985, p. xvi) is of recent vintage. "Only in the late eighteenth century did Europeans begin to conceive the past as a different realm, not just another country but a congeries of foreign lands endowed with unique histories and personalities" (Lowenthal, p. xvi). He acknowledges, however, that his conclusions refer only to European and European-derived cultures: "Oriental and African views on the past and ideas of heritage are to me virtual *terrae incognitae,* for which equivalent studies might reach radically different conclusions" (p. xxvi). My own study of a large corpus of Pohnpei-language mythohistorical accounts (Petersen, 1990a), and fieldwork conducted over the course of 20 years, convinces me that the Pohnpei have long been inclined to view their past as something that is much like a foreign country, in the sense that many modern Pohnpei view the people and society of ancient Pohnpei as having been distinctly different from the people of today. They recognize these people as their ancestors, to be sure, and trace numerous continuities, but they also believe that their society has changed repeatedly since the island was first settled.

The bulk of these changes took place before Europeans ever arrived on their shores: Most of today's older Pohnpei see themselves as having remained much like their nineteenth century predecessors, despite the many transformations they do see taking place. Moreover, in comparing mythohistorical materials collected in 1910 with accounts set down by the Pohnpei

in the 1920s, 1930s, and the 1970s, there is scant evidence of systematic change in the ways in which the past is represented. Pohnpei's mythohistory remains an essentially oral tradition.[9]

In the early 1970s I had a long conversation about Nan Madol with a high-ranking man in U chiefdom who had done linguistic work with John Fischer, an anthropologist who served in the Trust Territory administration in the early 1950s. This man, Gregorio Donre, told me he had heard explanations of how Nan Madol might have been constructed through the use of rafts, inclined planes made of rubble, and wooden rollers. It all seemed very reasonable, he said, and no doubt could have happened that way. But then he continued, insisting that that was not how the place was built. People in those days were different from the modern Pohnpei, he said. They had much more knowledge and they were endowed with magical powers now lost to their descendants. They were able to fly the materials into place. I believe most Pohnpei of my acquaintance would agree with his assessment.

Another historian (*soupoad*), Ioakim David, has often spoken to me of Pali, a legendary hero (or group of heroes) whom he describes as a man with a "master plan." Pali appears in many Central and Eastern Carolinian tales. His skills and talents vary according to their provenance, but on Pohnpei he is associated with the construction of Nan Madol. Similarly, Silten (n.d.), a Pohnpei who wrote down his own mythohistorical accounts in the 1920s, referred to those who built Nan Madol as "master builders" or "professors" (Petersen, 1990a, pp. 17–19). Nan Madol was constructed, then, with the use of both highly technical skills and magical powers, neither of which now exist to the same degree, say contemporary Pohnpei.

In the "congeries of foreign lands endowed with unique histories and personalities" (Lowenthal, 1985, p. xvi) that Pohnpei's past contains, Nan Madol does serve as something of a constant. The dramatis personae change, their motivations and outlooks change, the functions of the site change, the political systems change, but in the middle of it all Nan Madol stands steadfastly. It serves as a reminder of all these historical changes. To see it—or merely to be reminded of it—is for Pohnpei an event that ratifies the importance of these changes. Perched there on the reef facing each new day, Nan Madol betokens the island's remarkable mythohistory of political experimentation: first anarchy, deliberately replaced by a centralized polity that quickly deteriorated into tyranny, which was in turn forcefully overthrown and replaced by modern Pohnpei's system of decentralized local autonomy.

Colin Williams and Anthony Smith (1983, p. 509) observe that "architecturally impressive ruins . . . are filled with holy memories and charged with collective emotions that far surpass their actual role in history." In this same vein, Lowenthal (1985, p. 245) suggests that relics, ruins, and physical remains can provide unmediated impressions of the past: "Seeing history on the ground is a less self-conscious process than reading about it: texts require deliberate engagement, whereas relics can come to us without conscious aim or effort." On Pohnpei, where nearly every historical account is opposed by a variant tradition, the issue is not so much the mediation of texts as it is the weighing of competing oral accounts. Nan Madol reminds people not only of what their ancestors had to contend with, but also of historical contingency itself.

Nan Madol's landscape tells first of contests—of struggles for an acceptable form of government. The modern system of autonomous chiefdoms was not easily achieved and it is, as a consequence, that much more highly valued. Nan Madol reminds the Pohnpei of what they have to lose, of what threatens them, and of how to hold these threats at bay. They must be ever vigilant about the dangers of centralization and regularly remind themselves that, as an elderly chief once said to me, "One man cannot rule a thousand" (Petersen, 1982).

But even this generalization can be contested. In the same way that some Pohnpei might like to expand their holdings or influence at someone else's expense, others might well be inclined to argue that centralization is a good thing. Indeed, Pohnpei's people confront a classic political problem: how to organize themselves well enough to deter external threats to their freedom without simultaneously creating domestic conditions that threaten those very freedoms (Petersen, 1993a, p. 347). Pohnpei's political life is marked both by well-developed hierarchies and by an ethos of decentralization. Neither pole is supreme; there is endless tension between them.

Framing their own past as a "foreign country," and using the site as a reminder of that past, contemporary Pohnpei now use the lessons of Nan Madol as guidelines in their dealings with foreign countries. In a sense, they reverse the paradigm, regarding foreign countries in the same suspect—or at least problematical—manner they view their own past. In doing so, they illustrate a phenomenon Lowenthal (1985, p. 46) recognizes, that is, that "the past is most characteristically invoked for the lessons it teaches." But while Lowenthal believes "ruins and tombstones" evoke "associations between the observer's own impending demise and the transience of all life . . . and the irretrievability of the past" (p. 375), it is precisely the possibility

of retrieving lessons from Pohnpei's past that gives Nan Madol its immediacy.

This becomes evident as the Pohnpei grow increasingly uncomfortable with the Federated States of Micronesia's (FSM) national government. At first glance, their attitude toward the national government seems entirely unwarranted. Given their strong feelings about local autonomy, nothing would seem more appropriate than an end to American rule and the beginnings of Micronesian self-government. The problem, however, is that Micronesia remains an artificial, essentially colonial category. To the extent that these islands are governed by "Micronesians," they are not being governed by Pohnpei or Kosrae or Yap; that which binds them together is their shared *colonial* history. Moreover, the demography of the FSM is such that more than half of its citizens are from Chuuk State, and the FSM Congress is widely perceived as being controlled by the delegation from Chuuk. The FSM's relationship with the United States, known as "free association," also remains problematic. It is clearly not the independence that a majority of Pohnpei have long pursued.[10] Many Micronesians believe that the free association agreement continues to accord the United States ultimate authority over their islands.[11] Indeed, Pohnpei frustration over the independence issue led their delegates to the 1990 FSM Constitutional Convention to propose an amendment to the constitution that would have added an article permitting secession. When asked if there were Pohnpei who wanted to leave the federation, one of the Pohnpei delegates responded, "All of them."

In the course of this Constitutional Convention, the Pohnpei delegation also proposed other changes that were either of little or no importance to most of the FSM states or that were truly perceived by the others as threats. In particular, the Pohnpei delegation wanted the FSM states to be assigned direct control over land law and immigration, which in effect would have granted them the right to exclude other Micronesians from either moving to Pohnpei or purchasing land there. These proposals are relevant in the present context because they illustrate an attachment to the land that may not be matched by most of their neighbors.[12]

NEW CONTESTS

Following a century of colonial rule and two decades of political status negotiations with the United States, the Pohnpei still do not see themselves as having regained control over their own island. It is in this context that

the current controversy about Nan Madol arises. The Madolenihmw chiefdom is confronting several different challenges to its traditional authority over the site. The Nan Madol Foundation, headed by a former Peace Corps Volunteer (who prepared an excellent historical brochure on Nan Madol in the early 1970s), has been argüing that the site is far too important to Micronesia and humankind to be left solely in Madolenihmw's charge and that to ensure that it is properly maintained and administered, greater oversight must be established. (Compare "'We are preserving these buildings for *mankind*,'" cited in Lowenthal, 1985, p. 285). Pohnpei's former governor, Resio Moses, maintained that as the state's chief executive he had final authority over Nan Madol. Bureaucrats within the constitutional system recognize the site's value as a tourist destination and continue to assert the state's right to assume control over it (Whaley, 1993, p. 4). As Lowenthal observes (p. 46), "Many governments today nationalize their nations' past." And Nan Madol remains on the United States *National Register of Historic Places* (1989), the only one (of 10 listed sites on the island) that was constructed by the Pohnpei themselves rather than by colonial administrations. Although inclusion in the *Register* "does *not* give the federal government control over private property" (and more than three quarters of all sites in the *Register* are privately owned), regulations specify that "federal agencies must review any of their actions that may affect National Register properties, and allow the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, an independent federal agency, an opportunity to comment" (*National Register of Historic Places,* pp. x–xi). It appears that Nan Madol remains at least partly under US supervision.

When we examine the rationales for claims being asserted over Nan Madol, we find that they focus on two factors: upkeep and the charging of fees. Nan Madol, it is claimed, is in danger of falling into disrepair. In his interview with Mr. Whaley, a reporter from Guam, Madolenihmw's *Nahnken* (a sort of secular high chief who reigns in tandem with the more sacred Nahnmwarki, or paramount chief) defended his community's right to retain control over the area. As Whaley describes it (1993, p. 4),

> The ruins are crumbling in parts with thick mangrove swamps growing in the canals that connect different parts of the city. Jungle vines grow within the rocks and dead foliage is scattered throughout the megaliths. Last year, the Nan Madol Foundation was formed to assist in fund-raising efforts for the restoration and maintenance of the area. But that group, headed by an American, did not consult the Nahnmwarki on how the sacred site would be handled.

> "For outsiders, they would say Nan Madol is neglected," said Nahnken Hadley. "But not for us. For us, it is sacred. We do not touch it."

The Nahnken went on to defend the collection of a $3 fee from visitors. "This is not a fee, as such, it is an expression of the ownership by the Nahnmwarki. It informs visitors that our claim is genuine" (Whaley, p. 4). Many readers will probably find these arguments self-serving, but as I have been trying to demonstrate in this essay, Madolenihmw's claims are indeed genuine.

The Pohnpei *are* inclined to allow such overgrowth. It is in the nature of their relationship with the land and their understanding of what Pohnpei's landscape is. Nan Madol is sacred ground, even—perhaps especially—for the Madolenihmw chiefs, and attempts to turn it into a well-trimmed, thoroughly domesticated park or garden constitute a fundamental threat to its essence. Furthermore, much of Nan Madol's meaning derives from its extraordinary ability to weather the elements on its own: It is the only cultural artifact on Pohnpei that can withstand the island's rigorous environment and climate. To undertake regular maintenance procedures would be an affront to much that the site stands for because such procedures would ignore some of Nan Madol's many different meanings for the people of Pohnpei, would wrench the whole out of context, and would impose an essentially Western or American set of values in place of those of the Pohnpei.

Although most Pohnpei continue to practice subsistence farming, they have also been engaged in commercial dealings with the outside world since the 1830s when whalers first began to visit the island for reprovisioning. Over the last 30 years, the vast sums of money that the United States has poured into Micronesia have partly transformed the island's economy. A $3 charge is nominal in Pohnpei's current economy, not an economic imposition. Because the Japanese alienated nearly 70 percent of the island's land during their occupation of the island (1914–1945), and because the US administration long insisted on retaining control over these so-called "public lands," establishing title to the land is tremendously important to the Pohnpei. The paramount chief's fee does serve to demonstrate, in a simple, clear-cut fashion, that Nan Madol is the property of Madolenihmw's paramount chief; it is not public property. Given the emotional resonance of land on Pohnpei, this is an entirely understandable gesture. It also returns us to the central theme of this essay.

CONCLUSION

Among the many things Nan Madol symbolizes is an essentially political point. It is a concrete manifestation of a Pohnpei notion that good government must be small and decentralized. It serves to remind the Pohnpei of the evils attributable to powerful, centralized rule. Madolenihmw's right to control its own territory is absolutely essential to the entire Pohnpei world view. This of course runs thoroughly against the grain of most European political thought and particularly challenges the American ethos that only in unity is there strength. Those who would wrest control of Nan Madol away from Madolenihmw are verifying exactly the threat that the site warns of: the dangers of big government.

Nan Madol is contested landscape; it is also, in Jonathan Smith's phrase, "moral landscape" (Smith, 1994). On one hand, a small community of Pohnpei people assert their right to true local autonomy. But bureaucrats and preservationists want to ensure the viability of Nan Madol as a revenue-generating tourist destination and mount a guard over its architectural heritage in the name of all humankind. Nan Madol reminds the Pohnpei about the dangers inherent in taking on any political form that shifts power away from the local communities, and the current controversy demonstrates the acuity of this advice: The site is threatened by exactly the political processes it warns against. The entire contest is, in a sense, contained within Nan Madol's mythohistory. Foreigners and foreign institutions pose a threat; a proper Pohnpei response to that threat is summed up by the very monument they seek to protect.

Today, Nan Madol serves not only as a marker of an older contested landscape, reminding the modern Pohnpei of mistakes once made, and of mistakes they must continue to avoid, but also as a warning to others about the Pohnpei's willingness to do battle in defense of a cherished way of life. When Madolenihmw's paramount chief says that Nan Madol can only be overthrown by war, he should not be taken lightly.

Notes

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1. My touchstones are Carl Sauer's work, particularly his pioneering "The Morphology of Landscape" (1925) and his *Land and Life* (1963), and the work of the so-called "Berkeley school" he is credited with founding (Price & Lewis,

1993). This approach has recently been described as an "atheoretical abyss of empiricism" (Warf, 1991, p. 705). I trace my own lineage in geography to this tradition and this perhaps helps to explain why I have long considered myself an unrepentant empiricist.

2. In some parts of the island there are open, grassy areas known locally as *mals*. Whether these occur naturally or are the products of human activities has not yet been established.

3. During earlier colonial regimes, road building was an important administrative activity that was rather effectively resisted by the Pohnpei, who appreciated their opponents' lack of mobility.

4. The effects of European influences, especially of Congregational missionaries from Boston, along with German-instituted changes in land tenure, brought about shifts in the Pohnpei's patterns of postmarital residence and land inheritance. Today a tendency toward a male bias is seen in these areas.

5. To offer a more *recherché* comparison, the fox tells Saint-Exupery's Little Prince, "Whatever is essential is invisible to the eye" (Saint-Exupery, 1943/1971, p. 87).

6. Other scholars have written along similar lines; I discuss in detail my objections to this work in Petersen (1990b).

7. Peter Bellwood (personal communication, 1990) has argued that if separate groups of the Pohnpei had built different parts of Nan Madol at different times, they would have been inclined to appropriate stones from previously built structures. But there is great continuity within and among the Pohnpei's communities. Members of a community whose ancestors raised a structure would view it as the product of their own efforts. Were members of another community to make use of materials removed from a previously existing structure, they would run the risks of antagonizing those who built it and, more significantly, of gaining little or no credit for their labors. They would have failed to demonstrate their ability to do the single, most daunting portion of the work entailed in the construction process—that is, move materials to the site.

Michael Graves has suggested that the Lelu site on Kosrae (the nearest high island to the east of Pohnpei), which possesses similar but much less extensive stoneworks, might have been built as part of an "authoritarian, but noncoercive" process that minimized "divisive economic and territorial competition" (1986, p. 12; cf. Cordy, 1993, p. 287). While we share a viewpoint concerning the possibility that the work was accomplished without coercion, we differ in our evaluation of the role played by competition.

8. I have argued that the Pohnpei are much more inclined to draw variant traditions from their vast corpus of historical accounts than they are to "invent tradition" (Petersen, 1992b).

9. Though nearly all Pohnpei are literate in their own language, the only books published in the Pohnpei language are Protestant and Catholic versions of the Bible. Theirs remains an essentially oral tradition.

10. The Pohnpei have consistently called for independence, even though they have been willing to accede to the FSM's majority vote in favor of free association with the United States (Petersen, 1985).

11. The actual political status of the freely associated Micronesian states (the FSM, the Republic of the Marshall Islands, and the Republic of Palau) remains a matter of some debate. Some claim they are independent, others deny this. This issue has been addressed by Michal (1993) and Petersen (1993c).

12. It is important to acknowledge that as the site of the FSM capital, Pohnpei draws far more outsiders than any of the other FSM islands, and this exacerbates tensions there.

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