9

Is a village a village if no one lives there? Negotiated histories on Mabuyag in the Western Torres Strait

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Introduction

Partnership (or community) archaeology has become increasingly prominent in the Australia/Pacific region (see Marshall 2002 and McNiven and Russell 2005). A community-led approach acknowledges the importance of indigenous control of the cultural-heritage process. This is designed to enable indigenous communities to 'maintain or establish community pride, cohesion and identity', as well as creating a 'more nuanced and textured view of the past' (Smith 1999; Nicholas 2000; McNiven and Russell 2005:244; Smith and Wobst 2005).

Divergent 'symbolic and metaphoric strategies' in oral history and archaeology are likely to result in the creation of different histories (McNiven and Russell 2005:248). This may be further influenced by methodological constraints (e.g. the validity, accuracy and representativeness of oral/archaeological histories) or the reluctance of communities to divulge secrets about their sites and practices (Sand 2000:68; McNiven and Russell 2005:48). When archaeological and ethnographic results do not correspond it is important to avoid both selective criticism of oral histories and censoring of instances where archaeology conflicts with oral accounts (Allen 1983:8; Echo-Hawk 1997; McNiven and Russell 2005:256). Partnership archaeology recognises that the cultural-heritage process requires ongoing negotiation between indigenous and archaeological communities, and in some cases the alteration of existing indigenous and/or non-indigenous cosmologies and methodologies (Nicholas 2000; McNiven and Russell 2005:248; Smith and Wobst 2005).

In 2001, a community project was initiated in the western Torres Strait to track 'archaeological signatures of ethnographically documented cultural practices back from a recent to a more distant past' (David and McNiven 2004:203). As well as providing significant information on key points of cultural change, it has also provided a case study about community-based archaeology and the methods used to explore prehistoric sites and cultural material (e.g. McNiven and Feldman 2003; David et al. 2004; McNiven et al. 2009). This paper stems from doctoral

Figure 1. Map of Torres Strait Islands showing regional groupings.

research conducted during the Western Torres Strait cultural history project. It negotiates the competing histories for two ethnographically prominent ‘villages’, Wagadagam and Maidh, on Mabuyag in the central western Torres Strait (Figure 1).

Archaeology of villages in the Torres Strait

Two methods have been proposed to interrogate the notion of ‘village’ in the Torres Strait. The first conceives these sites to be ‘semi-permanent to permanent places of residence containing groups of houses’ (David and Ash 2008:428; see also McNiven et al. 2004:88). Using extracts from diaries, books and letters written by early European voyagers, 71 such ‘villages’ have been identified across 20 Torres Strait islands in the Torres Strait (McNiven et al. 2004:77, 88). In the western islands these locations were frequently abandoned during the dry season or due to sickness/death (Haddon 1890:353; Moore 1984:26), and similar practices are noted on a number of islands in the southwestern and central Torres Strait (Jukes 1847:155, 294; Thompson cited in Moore 1984:33). The term ‘village’ is flexible and can include occupied garden or feasting areas (McNiven et al. 2004:88; David and Ash 2008:429).

A second method of classification considers villages to be ‘meaningful places connected to how people structure and understand their social spaces’ (David and Ash 2008:428). This follows community histories which identify socio-political-ceremonial centres of activity relating to individual clans (cf. Haddon 1904; McNiven et al. 2004; Shnukal 2004). Such links to place continue to be firmly held by contemporary communities despite frequent relocation from traditional villages (Edmund Bani pers. com. Mabuyag 11/09/2006).

Despite the apparent disparity between these conceptions, they are not considered mutually exclusive but represent two sides (physical and metaphysical) of the village (Ghaleb 1990; McNiven et al. 2009).

The archaeological implications of both conceptions have been broken down into a set of archaeological expectations and related methodologies. Based on the first conception, it is expected that a certain amount of spatial and temporal homogeneity will exist in the archaeological record, with villages revealing ‘archaeological traces of occupation in the form of structural features (houses, fences) and occupational debris such as food remains (shell middens) and artefacts of stone, shell and bone’ (McNiven et al. 2004:88; see also Harris et al. 1985; Ghaleb 1990:219–222; Barham 2000; David and Weisler 2006; McNiven 2006:9; David and Ash 2008:428; McNiven et al. 2009). The semi-permanent conception of ‘village’ implies that archaeologists look for evidence of residential structures or activities (e.g. post holes, house platforms, paths, hearths and earth ovens) (Fitzpatrick et al. 1998; David and Ash 2008:446–447). For example, midden materials and clear activity areas (cooking, refuse) at Kurtuniawak on Badu were used as evidence for village occupation despite the lack of confirming oral histories (David and Weisler 2006:21).

The second conception is harder to examine archaeologically, with villages assumed to contain both tangible (e.g. structured space, middens, paths) and intangible (e.g. story sites, trees, stones, rivers) markers (Haddon 1904:197; Shnukal 2004:323). Such sites are identified through experience and social interaction, and do not necessarily involve human modification of the landscape. In large measure, archaeologists identifying the social components of the ‘village’ are guided by oral and written histories (Ghaleb 1990; 1998; Ash and David 2008; McNiven and Wright 2008; McNiven et al. 2009).

The ethnography of Goemulgaw villages

Four traditional ‘villages’ are prominent in Goemulgaw cosmology: Wagadagam and Dabangai on the north coast of Mabuyag, and Maidh and Goemu on the east coast (Haddon 1904:266, 1935:56; Figure 2). Further smaller villages on the island include Mui and Udai (east coast), Dogai (southeast coast), Sao, Awbayth and Kodakal (north coast), Ii and Sopolai (west coast) and Dadakul and Maitan (interior) (Haddon 1904; Vanderwal 1973:178). These villages have independent totemic affiliations: the major moiety (*Koey awgadhwaw kazi* or *Koey Buway*) with Wagadagam, while the minor moiety (*Moegi awgadhwaw kazi* or *Moegi Buway*) is associated with most villages on the east and south side of the island (Haddon 1904:55; Eseli et al. 1998:87; Shnukal 2004:323; Adhi Cygnet Repu pers. com. Mabuyag, 12/08/2006). Villages are further divided by primary and subsidiary clan affiliation (Haddon 1904:266, 1935:56; Table 1). A further village (as well as the ‘national kwod’ (ceremonial men’s meeting house) of the Goemulgal) is recorded for the adjacent island of Pulu (Haddon 1904:207; Lawrie 1970:85–87).

Table 1. Totemic affiliation (from sketch map drawn by Ned Waria in 1898, cited in Haddon (1904:163).

Village	Primary totem 1	Subsidiary totem 1	Primary totem 2	Subsidiary totem 2	Primary totem 3	Subsidiary totem 3
Wagadagam	Crocodile	Sucker fish	Snake	Dugong	Turtle	Frigate bird, fruit bat
Goemu	Turtle	Crocodile, dog				
Maidh	Snake	Turtle, sucker fish				
Dabangai	Dugong	Crocodile				
Pulu	Dugong	Sucker-fish	Cassowary	Dugong, snake	Dog	Turtle

Figure 2. Map of ancestral Goemulgaw villages on Mabuyag (topographic map courtesy of Schlenker mapping; GIS by Matthew Collier). Aligned grid north.

Totemic affiliation influences the behavior and spiritual and ceremonial roles practised by the people of each village. For example, Dabangai is reputed to be the place of great dugong hunters and the location of ceremonies relating to the dugong (Haddon 1904:162, 182, 1932:76, 1935:182–183; Eseli et al. 1998:74). The people of Goemu were largely concerned with turtle fishing, and were responsible for success in turtle hunting by conducting a number of key ceremonies (Haddon 1904:164, 183, 214, 330–331, 334–345, 1935:59). The families and clans associated with each location identify the individuality of villages through tangible and intangible features (Haddon 1904:4; McNiven et al. 2009).

Archaeological research at two Goemulgaw villages

To date, archaeological research on Mabuyag has concentrated on Goemu (Barham and Harris 1987; Ghaleb 1990, 1998; McNiven and Wright 2008) and Dabangai (McNiven and Bedingfield 2008; Wright 2009). Both ethnographically prominent sites contained rich surface and sub-surface deposits, leaving little doubt of a correlation between oral history and archaeology. This research comes at the expense of two equally important Goemulgaw villages, Wagadagam and Maidh, neither of which contain substantive archaeological evidence for cultural activity (Ghaleb 1990:158). Following the partnership approach, both villages were

chosen for archaeological research in 2006 and are examined in detail below. It is recognised that significant problems surround the reconstruction of Aboriginal boundaries and land ownership, with the publication by Sutton (1995) singled out for criticism. While this paper does not support the validity of bound social groups, it accepts that much of the material collected by Davis and Prescott (1992) parallels ethnographic material collected by Alfred Haddon (1890, 1904, 1935), Margaret Lawrie (1972) and myself.

Wagadagam

The Wagadagam region encompasses the northwest side of the island, from the forested hills inland (an area known as 'Bari') to the coastal grasslands of Wagadagam proper (Davis and Prescott 1992:118, 124). A number of adjacent islets (e.g. Woeydhul and Aipus) also appear to have been affiliated with and used by the people of Wagadagam (Haddon 1904:58, 368; Davis and Prescott 1992:124). As the divisions between regions remain contested and obscure, they are roughly illustrated in Figures 2 and 3.

Figure 3. Sketch by Tim Gizu (of Mabuyag) of the Wagadagam village(s).

Ethnography

Lawrie (1970:105, 108) suggests there were two large villages, Wagadagam and Urabal Gagait. These two locations lie adjacent to one another, with the former at the end of the current road and near the new landing place, and the latter slightly further to the west (towards Ii). Both of these villages were large enough to contain sub-districts such as Kulapis (in east Wagadagam) and Buru in Urabal Gagait (Lawrie 1970:105). An alternative arrangement recorded by Ghaleb (1990:134) was that everything from Kula pis to bur was part of the single gigantic village of Wagadagam.

Wagadagam is recorded to have been an extremely important and influential place on Mabuyag, and the focus of activities relating to the *Koey awgadhaw kasi* moiety, which had the *koedal* (crocodile) as the main totem (Haddon 1904:164, 172; Adhi Gabriel Bani pers. com. Mabuyag, 21/9/2006). At Wagadagam, decisions relating to warfare and headhunting were made by people who were 'fierce and politically minded' (Haddon 1904:185; 1935:56; Adhi Gabriel Bani pers. com. Mabuyag, 21/9/2006). According to legend, Wagadagam was also the ancestral village of the Goemulgal, with all other villages founded by the chief of Wagadagam at the time, Bari (Haddon 1904:164, 236, 267; Tabeta cited in Mooke and Simpson 1972:1; Edmund Bani pers. com. Mabuyag, 12/11/2006).

Archaeological research

Until this study, no excavations had been conducted at Wagadagam. The only conclusive evidence of former occupation was several relict mound-and-ditch fields in the northeast quarter of the

valley, and in the same area: ‘a large grove of tall bamboo growing around a water hole’ (Ghaleb 1990:158; Wright 2009).

Two excavations were conducted on the Wagadagam foreshore, adjacent to the new landing place (Figure 3). As Square A had been substantially disturbed by bulldozing, this excavation was discontinued and a second 70 cm² unit (Square B) was positioned 4 m away from the mangrove line on an elevated platform. With the exception of a few fragments of glass, no surface materials were observed in the locality of the excavation. Square B was excavated to a maximum depth of 63 cm (18 excavation units/XUs), with bedrock reached in some sections at 33 cm depth. There was little stratigraphic change, with sediment consistently dry and silty and mildly acidic throughout. A slight change in colouration occurs at the base of SU 1 (between 3 cm and 6 cm) from very dark grey to black (Figure 4). This transition is reflected by a shift from consolidated, organic rich sediment to increasingly friable and unconsolidated sediment. The transition between SU 2 and SU 3 (between 27 cm and 30 cm) was marked by substantial increases in rock, pumice and cultural materials (see Figure 4). Although the sediment is similar in texture to SU 2, it gradually reverts in colour to a very dark gray.

The main period of cultural activity at Wagadagam was dated to 800–1057 cal. BP by three AMS dates in correct stratigraphic sequence and overlapping at two standard deviations (Table 2). Ephemeral cultural deposits continue until 5–8 cm below the ground surface, before disappearing in the top four XU. This transition was dated to 464–535 cal. BP.

Marine vertebrate bone makes up the bulk of the Wagadagam cultural assemblage (total weight = 1.4 kg), with the majority of remains attributed to unidentified large vertebrates

Figure 4. Section of Square B, Wag 1 showing stratigraphic units (SU 1–3).

Table 2. AMS radiocarbon dates, Square B, Wag 1. Dates in calendar years using Calib 5.0.2

Laboratory code	Square B: XU	Depth below surface (cm)	Sample type	Sample weight (g)	¹³ C	¹⁴ C age	Calibrated age (cal. BP)
WK-24932	B: 4	7–11	Charcoal	0.43	25.7 ± 0.2	486 ± 30	464–535
WK-24933	B: 10	30–32.5	Charcoal	0.38	24.4 ± 0.2	1050 ± 40	896–968* 800–890
WK-24934	B: 16	53–56	Charcoal	0.14	25.3 ± 0.2	1134 ± 30	932–1018* 1022–1056
WK-24935	B: 18	60–63	Charcoal	0.5	25.3 ± 0.2	1140 ± 30	951–1057* 934–948

Dates expressed as cal. BP = before AD 1950. * = highest probability calibrated age range.

(88.5%) and dugong (11%). The remaining turtle and fish bone makes up less than 0.5% of the total. Marine vertebrate bone was present in small quantities within SU 1 (total of 55.5 g per 10 l of deposit), increasing in SU 2 (total of 286.7 g per 10 l of deposit). The majority of bone comes from the top of SU 3 (XU 10–15), at which stage there is total of 472.7 g per 10 l of deposit. After this point, the quantity of marine vertebrate bone drops considerably (total of 26.3 g per 10 l of deposit). During excavation it was noted that the transition was matched by a significant drop in bone size, suggesting some bioturbation (Figure 5).

Considerable charcoal (40.3 g) was excavated from all XUs until XU 12, with 73% (17.0 g per 10 l of deposit) recorded between XU 7 and XU 11. There is a further minor charcoal peak in the basal two XUs, although this is considered to be the result of natural bioturbation of small fragments.

Square B contains a total of 3143 flaked stone artefacts and a further three ground stone/ochre pieces. Quartz was the prominent material used to make flaked artefacts ($n=3043$), followed by igneous ($n=93$) and glass ($n=7$). The remaining non-flaked artefacts consisted of two fragments of ground ochre and a single stone implement with use impact. The bulk of artefacts (by number) comes from the upper 12 excavation units (SUs 1, 2 and the top of 3). This accounts for 96% of the quartz and 92% of the igneous flaked assemblage (Figure 6). Of the igneous flaked artefacts, the bulk come from between XU 6 and XU 12 (75%), while the ground stone and ochre is restricted to XU 3 and XU 4. Flaked glass is restricted to the upper three XUs, roughly corresponding with the SU 1 deposit.

Figure 5. Vertical change in marine vertebrate bone density, Square B, Wag 1.

Figure 6. Vertical change in flaked stone artefact density, Square B, Wag 1.

Maidh

Davis and Prescott (1992:127) suggest that: 'the boundary between Wagedagam and Maidh follows a ridge line, a criterion which also accords with the northern boundary between Maidh and Panai' (see Figure 2). The southeast boundary of Maidh generally follows a line excluding the beach and foreshore area, which has become the focal residential area for the Mabuiag population. Other sources suggest that Maidh includes the villages of Bau, Maidh and Mui, with all of these areas falling within the jurisdiction of *thabu* (snake) and *koedal* (crocodile) clans (Haddon 1935:56; Rivers cited in Haddon 1935:55; Aaron Whap pers. com. Mabuyag, 1/12/2006).

The paucity of cultural material was explained by traditional owners as evidence for the different role of Maidh within the community. This was not considered a residential place but rather an important totemic and ceremonial site (Young Bani pers. com. Mabuyag, 1/12/2006; see Haddon 1904:97, 327). The 'village' (for that is what the Goemulgal call this site) was used by the *Maidhelaig* (or spiritual people) to conduct ceremonies at a large house (*merkai mud* or 'dead man's house'), with a high, steep roof and low walls (Haddon 1890:399). The area was restricted to certain members of the community: 'if an unauthorised man or any woman entered a *merkai mud* they would die' (Haddon 1890:399; Adhi Dimple Bani pers. com. Mabuyag, 1/9/2006). During the early 19th century, these restrictions appear to have been lifted, with the village increasingly used for gardening (Mooke and Simpson 1972:17; Done cited in Stevenson 1987; Eseli et al. 1998:27; Figure 7).

Archaeological research

Site surveys were made between July and October 1984 by archaeologists from University College London (Harris et al. 1985; Barham and Harris 1987). Investigations revealed few cultural surface materials or sites associated with cultural activity (Harris et al. 1985:48). The exceptions were relict fields and two stone arrangements in the shape of turtles observed on a hillside overlooking Maidh (Barham and Harris 1987:32). A survey in 2006 by the author revealed stone cairns in the Maitan valley region of Maidh. These were attributed by the Goemulgal to a recent period of land clearance for gardens (T. Gizu pers. com. Mabuyag, 8/11/2006).

Two 'test pits' were dug at an unspecified location at Maidh (Harris et al. 1985:48). The pits did not reveal any buried soil or former land surface that might have provided charcoal or other datable organic material (Harris et al. 1985:48). Due to site disturbance relating to the expansion of the modern village of Bau, further excavation of this site was not considered feasible (Wright 2009). An examination of bulldozed spoil heaps and house foundations in the eastern margins of Maidh also revealed little evidence for human settlement. The eroding creek bed which runs through the centre of Maidh did not contain any evidence of significant human activity.

Discussion and conclusion

Two villages that from the outset were expected to reveal little archaeological information about human settlement on Mabuyag were examined archaeologically. The lack of surface (and in the case of Maidh, sub-surface material) was initially conceived as evidence for contradictory histories between archaeology and ethnography. Following the partnership model, both sites were investigated to give insight into the broader cultural heritage of the indigenous communities.

The antiquity of 'villages' was expected to date to between 850 cal. BP and 550 cal. BP (cf. McNiven 2006). However, as evidenced by Mabuyag, archaeological research frequently considers the culturally rich areas (e.g. Goemu and Dabangai) as priority sites for research

Figure 7. Sketch map of Mabuyag in 1914 (Queensland State Archives file A/58755: Islands, Torres Strait, sketcher unknown. From Eseli et al. 1998:27).

(Barham and Harris 1987:28; Ghaleb 1990, 1998; McNiven and Wright 2008). This is broadly representative of research elsewhere in the Torres Strait, which has a recognised bias towards highly visible, late-Holocene sites (e.g. Barham et al. 2004; David and McNiven 2004). As evidenced by excavations at Wagadagam, such an archaeological approach can ignore early phases of village occupation in the Torres Strait. Archaeological research at Wagadagam identified sub-surface deposits of bone from large vertebrates that date to 1100–550 cal. BP. A similar partnership project at the ethnographically known village of Totalai (on Mua) revealed an antiquity of 1300–1400 cal. BP for the initial phase of village settlement (Ash and David 2008). These excavations reveal the value of partnership archaeology and suggest that the methodology will improve our understanding of late-Holocene settlement in the Torres Strait.

While oral histories may or may not always converge with archaeological remains, this paper suggests that negotiation between indigenous and non-indigenous archaeologists is likely to enable the mutual development of both the prehistoric record and the oral history. Adhi Cygnet Repu (pers. com. Mabuyag, 20/04/2010) identifies the reciprocal role and importance

of archaeology and ethnography within the cultural heritage process, saying: ‘it [archaeology] is useful for us [Goemulgal]. It makes us ask questions about our important villages. There are some points we can ask why the archaeology is not the same as our stories.’ Community histories provide archaeologists with an equally distinct (and in some cases) confronting set of questions.

It is recognised that cross-cultural distinctions exist in the classification of ‘villages’. Such locations are regarded as both residential areas and the meaningful places connected with community identity (McNiven et al. 2004; David and Ash 2008). However, Maidh is ethnographically known to be a site deliberately restricted from the majority of the Goemulgaw. This was an important socio-political and ceremonial centre, but was not expected to be a residential centre. It is equally clear that Wagadagam (along with all other ethnographically known villages) continues to be conceived by the resident Mabuyag population as a village (in the present rather than past tense) despite the physical relocation of the Goemulgal away from this site at least 150 and possibly 550 years ago. These different ideas about what constitutes a village contribute to a broader understanding of what is ‘significant’ about these sites. An archaeological perspective is frequently (although not always) grounded in domesticity and utilitarian material culture, while the indigenous conception frequently identifies material culture as secondary to, and a result of, how people look at and organise a social space. Oral histories identify villages to be socio-politically and ceremonially distinct, with individuality often inscribed on to the landscape through totemic markers and monument architecture (Wright In prep). In effect, representing ‘conflicting’ views of what constitutes a ‘village’ requires a partnership approach whereby villages are recognised to be unique and the presence/absence of material culture can be viewed as the result of different types of social activity.

Following previous research, this paper highlights a partnership model for negotiating indigenous cultural heritage. While cultural materials and site visibility remain useful methods of site selection, it is important that cultural-heritage practitioners recognise the limitations of this approach. It is also essential that expectations of variation/disagreement between oral and archaeological histories should not result in the avoidance of such sites or situations (Echo-Hawk 1997; McNiven and Russell 2005:256). While such an approach is liable to highlight divisions between different belief systems, it is important that the value and limitations of each historical perspective are recognised in establishing a cross-cultural working relationship. When discrepancies do exist, these need not be viewed as problematic, but instead an exciting opportunity to develop a deeper mutual understanding of the past.

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