

UC Merced

Journal of California and Great Basin Anthropology

Title

Comments on "Puvunga and Point Conception: A Comparative Study of Southern California Indian Traditionalism," by Matthew A. Bost and L. Mark Raab

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3474j1r9>

Journal

Journal of California and Great Basin Anthropology, 22(1)

ISSN

0191-3557

Author

Lightfoot, Kent G

Publication Date

2000-07-01

Peer reviewed

Friar Geronimo Boscana. Santa Barbara and Salt Lake City: Peregrine Publishers, Inc. (First edition published in 1846.)

Zahniser, Jack

1974 Archaeological Salvage Excavations at 4-LAn-306 (Known as Puvunga), Summer, 1973. Report on file at the Rancho Los Alamitos Historic Ranch and Gardens, Long Beach.



Comments on "Puvunga and Point Conception: A Comparative Study of Southern California Indian Traditionalism," by Matthew A. Boxt and L. Mark Raab

KENT G. LIGHTFOOT

Dept. of Anthropology, Archaeological Research Facility,
Univ. of California, Berkeley, CA 94720-3710.

THE provocative article by Matthew A. Boxt and L. Mark Raab is guaranteed to engender controversy because it raises questions about sacred sites, native identity politics, and the competence of archaeological research in an increasingly complex and emotionally charged world. Their discussion of the sacred village of Puvunga and its identification with specific archaeological sites, in combination with the recent paper by Haley and Wilcoxon (1997) on the emergence of the Western Gate as a sacred place among Chumash Traditionalists, provides much food for thought. Recognizing the complicated and impassioned nature of events that underlie both the Puvunga and Western Gate episodes, I applaud them for raising issues about the participation of anthropologists and archaeologists in the genesis of California Indian Traditionalism. I believe it is very timely to begin an open and frank discussion about the practice of California archaeology today, its

broader social and political implications, and its relationship to native peoples.

In commenting on the Boxt and Raab article, the primary point I raise here concerns the competence of contemporary archaeological research. I think it is naive to think that we can practice a totally objective archaeology that is divorced from the social concerns, political pressures, and funding constraints of today. Archaeological research is conducted for a variety of reasons and for divergent clients and funding agencies. Collaboration with involved stakeholders, especially native peoples who have a vested interest in the archaeological record, will continue to increase. I have no problem with archaeologists working closely with native groups to identify sacred sites or places, to assist them in becoming federally recognized, to develop strong and legitimate claims for the repatriation of culturally affiliated skeletal remains, associated funerary objects, and sacred objects, or to help them negotiate or promote their native identities to the broader public. My problem is with poor, sloppy, and/or inexcusable archaeological research.

A very significant point raised by Boxt and Raab is that archaeological research cannot be conducted in a hasty, arbitrary, or uncritical manner given the ultimate implications it may have for contributing to the politics of development/open space, for "authenticating" ethnic identities and histories, and for generating public perceptions of the past. Their article highlights a problem that is becoming increasingly common in studies of the past undertaken by archaeologists. In this day of postprocessual archaeology, little emphasis is placed on the development or refinement of formal methodologies that can be employed to construct interpretations of the past. While multiple "stories" are celebrated, very little attention is actually devoted to generating alternative interpretations and to evaluating competing scenarios in a critical manner. Not all interpretations of the past are equally valid and, as exemplified by the Puvunga case, archaeological research should involve the rigorous assessment of viable alternatives.

The search for Puvunga underscores current problems that characterize studies of the past employing multiple lines of evidence. Although archaeological remains, written sources, and ethnographic data were considered in the Puvunga case, it is clear that the ethnographic findings of John P. Harrington were privileged over all other sources of information, including Fray Gerónimo Boscana's original written account on the Chinigchinich rituals and beliefs. Boxt and Raab discuss the implications that result from uncritically accepting ethnographic information over other types of data. In the remainder of my comments, I follow on their discussion and focus on the problematic relationship between archaeology and ethnography as a case for why we need to revisit our methodological approaches for constructing interpretations of the past.

From the outset, it must be stressed that Harrington's field work in the Puvunga case involved the transcription of oral histories and oral traditions as told by native elders, and not participant observer ethnographic accounts of a functioning native community. This kind of ethnography, known as "memory culture" or "remembered ethnography," presents its own unique strengths and challenges to the study of the past. Oral histories usually refer to stories told by individuals that concern events that happened in their lifetime, while oral tradition is defined by narratives that have been transmitted by word of mouth beyond the present generation (see Vansina 1985:12-13, 27-30). There is an extensive scholarship on the use of oral histories and oral traditions in anthropology, folklore, and history, and it is commonly recognized that these sources can provide a unique perspective on history by providing an "insider's view" to the past, a window for contemplating the world views, myths, ideological constructs, social relationships, and daily practices of past peoples (e.g., Dundes 1980; Erdoes and Ortiz 1984; Vansina 1985; Lummis 1992; Williamson and Farrer 1992; Finnegan 1996).

Oral traditions have long been employed in archaeological research (e.g., the fieldwork of Fewkes, Cushing, and Bandelier in the Southwest

during the late 1800s), although with the rise of "processual" archaeology in the 1960s and 1970s, there was a tendency to downplay their usefulness in the study of prehistory. However, this is rapidly changing as archaeologists increasingly collaborate with native groups, participate in the NAGPRA process, and recognize the important insights that can arise from oral narratives passed by word of mouth from one generation to another. I think oral narratives have taken on new meaning and relevancy as native groups play increasingly more powerful roles in the politics of archaeology. I do not think the Puvunga or the Western Gate examples are isolated cases, but rather represent a growing trend in which native oral traditions are taking precedence over archaeology and other sources for interpreting the past. What is clearly needed now is a more balanced perspective that does not privilege one data source over another. Recognition of the importance of native oral traditions should not diminish the potentially significant contributions that ethnographic reports, ethnohistorical accounts, historical linguistics, biological interpretations, and archaeological data can play in studies of the past. Each data set is characterized by its own distinctive strengths and weaknesses in constructing interpretations of the past.

The many challenges of using oral traditions to reconstruct the past are outlined in detail elsewhere (see especially Vansina 1985). However, the current consensus among scholars who study oral traditions is that they cannot be taken at face value, even though this can create considerable tension between specialists and stakeholders who endow their ancestors' words with politically and personally entrenched values (Finnegan 1996: 888-889). In reality, oral traditions are often representations of the past as told in the present, and as contemporary remembrances they are subject to a variety of processes (memory loss, social and political reorientations, reevaluations of the past) that can modify, update, and restructure oral accounts over time (Vansina 1985:xii, 186-196). Furthermore, most societies are characterized by diverse types of oral

narratives (myths, legends, folk tales, proverbs, songs, prayers, genealogies, etc.) that may or may not be linked with "real" events of the past. Vansina (1985:159-160, 196) cautioned that oral traditions should be treated only as hypotheses for reconstructing the past until they have been fully checked by independent sources of data.

The field work on "remembered ethnography" as undertaken by Harrington and many other California anthropologists represents a complex relationship to the past. Interviews with native elders involved at least two "authors"—the elder recounting the story and the researcher transcribing it (in addition to the many other "authors" who passed the stories down from one generation to the next). Multiple problems can result in the process of transcribing the story to English. For example, was the story really understood by the researcher? Did the story lose some of its meaning in the translation from the oral native language to written English? In recent years, researchers have emphasized the importance of performance and storytelling in understanding the meanings of oral narratives, and that understanding the social context in which a story is told is very critical (Bauman 1986:1-12; Cruikshank 1990:14-16; Finnegan 1996:890-891). Ethnographic fieldwork in California in the early part of this century tended not to record this kind of contextual data that is so critical for generating interpretations today.

My candid discussion of oral traditions is not meant to dissuade archaeologists from employing these data in their work. Rather, I am stressing the critical use of oral tradition in a holistic anthropological approach that employs multiple lines of evidence in the construction of interpretations. Hypotheses generated from oral traditions can be evaluated using archaeological information, historical accounts, and other sources of data, with the convergence of different evidential lines supporting, refuting, or modifying proposed interpretations. Farris (1989) demonstrated the utility of this approach in his analysis of two Kashaya Pomo stories told by Herman James and Essie Parrish in 1958 that were originally translated and transcribed by Robert Os-

walt. Farris was able to demonstrate that the stories pertained to the passing of a large company of Hudson's Bay trappers near Fort Ross in 1833 by carefully triangulating the oral narratives with written accounts of the Hudson's Bay expedition in northern California.

In the Puvunga village case, it is important to employ a similar kind of rigorous methodology to evaluate the hypothesis presented by Harrington. Harrington's hypothesis appears to be based primarily on two informants' (Kewen and Acú) accounts of where Puvunga was located. Since the interviews with Harrington took place in the early part of this century, and the rise of the Chinigichinich rituals and beliefs date back to at least the late 1700s, the information provided by the informants appears to be oral tradition passed down from previous generations. Vansina (1985:147-160) cautioned that two different versions of the same story should not be viewed as independent sources when the storytellers hail from the same community and "memory pool." Since Kewen and Acú were both associated with the Mission San Juan Capistrano community, the stories certainly reflect where this native community believed Puvunga was located in the early decades of this century. But the convergence of their stories does not constitute adequate proof alone, since Kewen's and Acú's oral accounts provided Harrington with his hypothesis in the first place. This situation presents a perfect opportunity to triangulate their perspectives of the past with available written accounts (such as Boscana's) and the archaeological record. For example, does CA-LAN-306 in the Rancho Los Alamitos Historic Ranch and Gardens represent the remains of a large village community dating to the late 1700s?

In conclusion, I think the Boxt and Raab article points out methodological weaknesses that characterize archaeology today, especially in the use of multiple lines of evidence. The critical issue for me is not why the archaeological research is undertaken in the first place. I think working with native groups on sacred sites or demonstrating their long-

term occupation of a place is a very valid enterprise. My concern is whether a rigorous methodology is employed in the research process—one that considers multiple lines of evidence and evaluates alternative interpretations in a critical manner. In the long run, no one is served by poor research methods and weakly argued interpretations. The true test of any interpretation is whether other scholars, native peoples, and interested lay people support the conclusions based on the arguments and evidence presented. This is one reason why I think peer-reviewed research is so important today. Of course, interpretations are always subject to change with the addition of new information. Ultimately, I think the jury on Puvunga is still out.

REFERENCES

- Bauman, Richard
1986 *Story, Performance and Event: Contextual Studies of Oral Narrative*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Cruikshank, Julie
1990 *Life Lived Like a Story: Life Stories of Three Yukon Native Elders*. In: Collaboration with Angela Sidney, Kitty Smith, and Annie Ned. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Dundes, Alan
1980 *Interpreting Folklore*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Erdoes, Richard, and Alfonso Ortiz (eds.)
1984 *American Indian Myths and Legends*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Farris, Glenn J.
1989 *Recognizing Indian Folk History as Real History: A Fort Ross Example*. *American Indian Quarterly* 13(4):471-480.
- Finnegan, Ruth
1996 *Oral Tradition*. In: *Encyclopedia of Cultural Anthropology*, Vol. 3, David Levinson and Melvin Ember, eds., pp. 887-891. New York: Henry Holt and Company.
- Haley, Brian D., and Larry R. Wilcoxon
1997 *Anthropology and the Making of Chumash Tradition*. *Current Anthropology* 38(5): 761-794.
- Lummis, Tevor
1992 *Oral History*. In: *Folklore, Cultural Performances, and Popular Entertainments*, Richard Bauman, ed., pp. 92-97. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Vansina, Jan
1985 *Oral Tradition as History*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Williamson, Ray A., and Claire R. Farrer (eds.)
1992 *Earth and Sky: Visions of the Cosmos in Native American Folklore*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.



A Comment on "Puvunga and Point Conception: A Comparative Study of Southern California Indian Traditionalism," by Matthew A. Boxt and L. Mark Raab

EUGENE E. RUYLE

Dept. of Anthropology, California State Univ., Long Beach, 1250 Bellflower Blvd., Long Beach, CA 90840-1003.

THE central point of Boxt and Raab's article lies in their assertion that "widely held understandings of Puvunga are almost entirely a product of anthropological scholarship. This fact is rarely acknowledged" (p. 63). They claim that the "exact location of this community and its archaeological remains were unknown until J. P. Harrington announced his discovery to the academic world 60 years ago: Puvunga had been located" (p. 51). This is nonsense.

BOXT AND RAAB IGNORE INDIAN ORAL TRADITIONS

First of all, to the extent that Harrington "discovered" Puvunga, he did so by talking to Indians. Boxt and Raab give no indication that they did the same. Boxt and Raab do thank their Indian moni-