

UC Merced

The Journal of California Anthropology

Title

A Diegueno Shaman's Wand: An Object Lesson Illustrating the "Heirloom Hypothesis"

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7z945539>

Journal

The Journal of California Anthropology, 3(1)

Author

Thomas, David Hurst

Publication Date

1976-07-01

Peer reviewed

A Diegueño Shaman's Wand: An Object Lesson Illustrating the "Heirloom Hypothesis"

DAVID HURST THOMAS

Archaeologists are increasingly concerned with how artifacts become introduced into the archaeological record. Implicit in their approach is the realization that individual artifacts, like people, have a history, a unique past. An artifact may be manufactured in one place, used somewhere else, and discarded at yet a third site. Lewis Binford (1973:242-243) has recently termed such behavior "curated." According to Binford, the Nunamuit Eskimo hunters carry their artifacts about to such a degree that the tool inventory of their sites has precious little to do with the original activities which actually took place there. Unfortunately for the archaeologist, the Nunamuit have curated most of the functional information right out of their own sites.

Binford was concerned with how such curating obscured functional variability in archaeological sites. But curative behavior goes far beyond mere functional patterning. People also curate artifacts in time. People keep antiques.

A variety of cultural processes conspires against the "ideal" chronology within an archaeological site. Old things are sometimes retained anachronistically, maintaining and reifying ties with the past. Ralph Linton once pointed out that cultural conservatism is responsible for the hansom taxis which still parade about New York City's Central Park.

These horse-drawn carriages have been temporally curated. Why this is so tells us something about New York City culture. Objects of the past can sometimes take on a supernatural significance, a meaning unintended by the original manufacturer. The Holy Grail is one example of a mundane object which was infused with a magico-religious significance at a much later date. Artifacts such as this have a dual reference in the archaeological record. They represent some original function: why were they made in the first place? But they also have a meaning within their later cultural milieu: why were they resurrected? The phrase "heirloom hypothesis" has been used elsewhere (Thomas and Thomas 1972) to refer to this dual significance in time. The catch-phrases "temporal curation" and "heirloom hypothesis" hence refer to the same phenomenon. To curate an artifact temporally is an ethnographically observable act. The heirloom hypothesis is an archaeological inference about the past.

Unlike Binford's functional curation, temporal curation produces an asymmetrical impact on the archaeological record. In the long run, curating functional items introduces only general "noise" into archaeological sites. Grinding stones may occasionally appear at kill sites, projectile points at seed-grinding stations. But temporal curation skews the archaeological record in a single specific direction: older. Clovis points might appear in kivas, but Kana-a black-on-white vessels do not appear at mammoth kills. Similarly, by installing a Ben Franklin stove in my study, I am committing an act of temporal curation upon the archaeological record of my house. That is my prerogative. But we can be wholly

positive that Ben Franklin *never* burned a Presto Log in his Ben Franklin stove—or anywhere else. That is why the heirloom hypothesis implies an asymmetrical influence on the archaeological record.

Now we have terms to label some inputs into the archaeological record. But it is not enough to just give a name to something. All you have then is a name. If curating behavior is relevant to archaeology, we must do more than merely name the phenomenon. We must scrutinize the process behind the behavior.

Recently, as part of my own curating responsibilities at the American Museum of Natural History, I ran across an artifact which graphically illustrates the processes behind the heirloom hypothesis. I thought other archaeologists might be interested. The artifact is the Mesa Grande Diegueño ceremonial wand (Fig. 1, left).

Before considering the tool in detail, a brief word about the artifact's known history seems in order. Early in 1903, Constance Goddard DuBois of Waterbury, Connecticut, was preparing for ethnographic fieldwork among the Diegueño when she contacted Franz Boas, then Curator of Ethnology at the American Museum. "As my training is all literary," she wrote on 24 May, "and I am only a babe in science, I want all the help I can get in the proper direction of inquiry." DuBois requested that the young Dr. Kroeber, then preparing a manuscript on Arapaho ceremonials, accompany her among the Diegueño to serve as interpreter and advisor. She also inquired whether the American Museum would be interested in having her purchase ethnographic specimens in conjunction with the Diegueño fieldwork. Boas offered to procure her transportation over the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe and also raised \$150 for the purchase of specimens. No further mention was made of Kroeber's participation in the venture.

When pressed for specifics about the needs of the American Museum, Boas replied in a letter dated 5 June 1903:

I desire to obtain as complete a collection as possible, with the limited funds at your disposal, from the Diegeno [*sic*]. I beg to ask you not to confine your collection to basketry, but rather try to represent all the various branches of their industries and customs . . . I wish to call your attention to the necessity of collecting all kinds of objects illustrating the daily life of the people, and not to consider anything as too trifling.

Boas' comments ring surprisingly contemporary, especially from one so often accused of eclecticism and insensitivity to mundane material culture.

DuBois returned to the East Coast after about two months of fieldwork. She shipped to the American Museum a collection of thirty Diegueño artifacts including grinding stones, some San Felipe pottery, a few baskets, bows and arrows, mescal fiber sandals, rabbit skin cloaks, a "tolache" stone, granary and cooking ollas. She expressed some apprehension that Boas would be disappointed in the collection, "not realizing that the Mission Indians are so different from some others, and what remains are only fragments, odds and ends." Unfortunately, we have no record of Boas' reaction.

Artifact 50/4106 in the DuBois collection is catalogued as a *hechicerro* stick (also spelled *hechicero*), and the accession entry in her fieldnotes reads as follows:

Used by witch-doctors in various ways. They put medicine into it to injure or destroy their enemies. Not material medicine—but the evil power of the heart. The hechiceros are still powerful though few in number. They are sent for from a distance of 60 miles to heal the sick. They still perform wonderful cures—.

DuBois also added a small tag to the artifact itself, stating:

50/4106 Hechicerro stick—Matawhya—point supposed to be poisoned. Could be thrown any distance to pierce heart of enemy. Used for curing the sick etc. Ch. DuBois 1903.

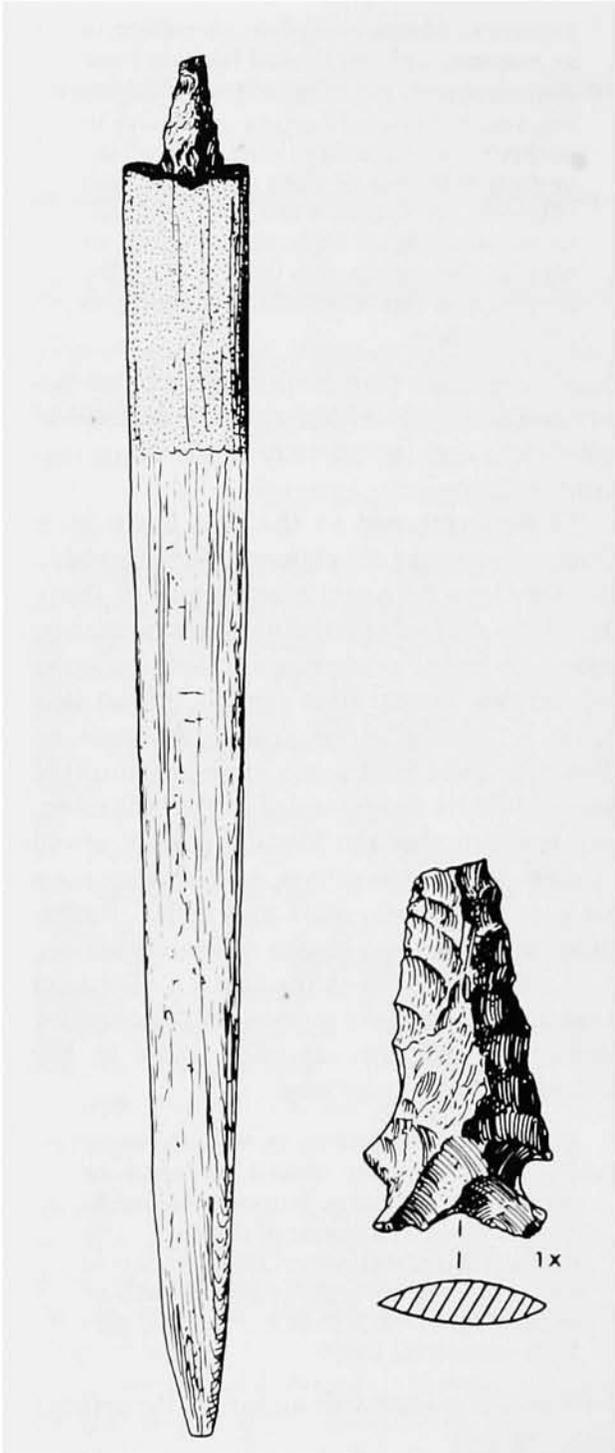


Fig. 1. Left: *Hechicero* stick, or shaman's wand, collected from the Mesa Grande Diegueño by Constance Goddard DuBois in 1903 (AMNH 50/4106). Total length is 44 cm. Distal 9 cm. are painted red. Right: Detail of projectile point implanted in the *hechicero* stick shown at left. Length is 48.2 mm. and weight is 8.8 g.

This particular artifact reflects the belief common throughout aboriginal California that pain could be "thrown" into one's enemies. A wide variety of shamanistic paraphernalia was known to induce diseases—or "pains"—including bits of wood, stone, bones, insects, even worms. The unifying theme seems to have been the intrinsic powers contained within certain fetishes. Properly manipulated, this power could serve either evil or benevolent ends. While methods for treating such diseases were various, it was generally the shaman's duty to remove the object causing the pain. These curing rituals commonly involved "sucking" the offending objects from the patient's body.

In looking over the DuBois artifact, I was immediately taken by the stone embedded in the wooden handle. This was obviously an important charm or fetish. The tip was loose, so I removed it and was pleasantly surprised to see a rather familiar form (Fig. 1, right). Any archaeologist who has worked in the Desert West should immediately recognize the artifact: it is an Elko Eared projectile point. Elko points were used as dart tips and are thought to date to about 1500 B.C. (O'Connell 1967). The bow and arrow was probably introduced into the area about A.D. 500. Elko points "evolved" into smaller types more suitable for hafting onto arrowshafts.

Artifact 50/4106 suggests an interesting scenario. An ancient stone tool, probably manufactured at least 15 centuries earlier, must have been found by a Diegueño shaman. Mystical powers were attributed to the implement, and it became a talisman. Once properly hafted and manipulated, the fetish could both cause and cure disease. DuBois was even told that the shaman poisoned the tip before using, just as prehistoric hunters may have done millenia before.

In effect, the stone tool has two functions and two referents in time: as a 1500 year-old dart tip and as a magico-religious fetish from the late nineteenth century, first for hunting

deer, then for hunting spirits. Weigand (1970) has noted a somewhat similar re-use of a fluted point by the Huichol.

This is clearly a case of temporal curation. We know this because we know the recent history of the artifact. But how would one deal with similar artifacts in archaeological contexts? How do we know when the heirloom hypothesis applies?

Recognizing that archaeologists are always limited to a strictly etic framework (Harris 1968; Thomas 1974), let us stipulate that the archaeologist can *never* tell what a fetish meant to a prehistoric shaman. Some information is irrevocably lost within archaeological contexts. Kroeber (1925:853), for example, recorded that the Yuki and Wintun referred to a shaman-induced pain as "arrowhead," a tantalizing observation which suggests a cognitive link between ancient projectile points and modern talismans. Perhaps this is why a projectile point, of all things, was chosen for the *hechicero* stick. But such linguistic and mentalistic details remain the province of the ethnographer, not the archaeologist. The cognitive map forever disappeared upon the death of the informant.

Yet etic analysis still can tell us a great deal about past behavior. Too many archaeologists mistakenly assume that the hypothesis-testing strategy so lovingly nurtured by "new" archaeologists is relevant only to matters of settlement pattern, technology, and cultural ecology. This is not so. A cultural materialistic framework can be used to explain a very wide range of behavior—including religion and ceremonials, as Marvin Harris (1974) has recently demonstrated.

I suggest that the heirloom hypothesis has a potential for explaining facts which seem to controvert physical and cultural stratigraphy. Rather than simply dredge forth mechanical labels such as "rodent disturbance" or "stratigraphic anomaly" or "ceremonial," why not test these notions outright? If an artifact has been used as a fetish, then there are

implications. Is it reasonable for a prehistoric shaman to have been on the site at all (is this a task-specific or year-round site; would both sexes have been here; is there associated rock art)? Are other shaman-like artifacts found on the site? Is the artifact an isolated find or in a cache? Has the artifact been reworked (as noted, for example, by Jolly [1970])? Do similar finds occur at nearby sites? The imaginative archaeologist should be able to generate dozens of such implications.

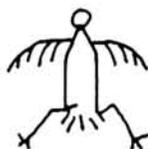
I make but two simple points. The first is to describe an intriguing Diegueño artifact and point up how this artifact might serve as an analogy for some cases of prehistoric behavior. Secondly, I would like to goad archaeologists into venturing beyond the narrow range of hypotheses now in use. There is no need to simply write off stratigraphic anomalies as rodent disturbance or frost heaving (or sloppy excavation). What about testing for temporal curation? We can overextend any argument, of course, and no single hypothesis will serve us unflinchingly. In fact, the heirloom hypothesis will undoubtedly be rejected in most cases. But when it cannot be rejected, then we have something. The Diegueño ceremonial piece suggests a shred of ethnographic behavior of use to archaeologists. I consider it to be a worthwhile object lesson.

American Museum of Natural History
New York

REFERENCES

- Binford, Lewis R.
1973 Interassemblage Variability—the Mousterian and the "Functional" Argument. *In* *The Explanation of Culture Change: Models in Prehistory*. Colin Renfrew, ed., pp. 227-253. London: G. Duckworth.
- Harris, Marvin
1968 *The Rise of Anthropological Theory*. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co.
1974 *Cows, Pigs, Wars and Witches: The Riddles of Culture*. New York: Random House.

- Jolly, Fletcher
 1970 Fluted Points Reworked by Later Peoples. *Tennessee Archaeologist* 26(2): 30-44.
- Kroeber, A. L.
 1925 *Handbook of the Indians of California*. Washington: Bureau of American Ethnology, Bulletin 78.
- O'Connell, James F.
 1967 Elko Eared/Elko Corner-notched Projectile Points as Time Markers in the Great Basin. *University of California Archaeological Survey Reports* 70: 129-140.
- Thomas, David Hurst
 1974 An Archaeological Perspective on Shoshonean Bands. *American Anthropologist* 76:11-23.
- Thomas, David Hurst and Trudy C. Thomas
 1972 New Data on Rock Art Chronology in the Central Great Basin. *Tebiwa* 15(1): 64-71.
- Weigand, Phil C.
 1970 Huichol Ceremonial Reuse of a Fluted Point. *American Antiquity* 35:365-367.



Kashaya Pomo Ethnobotanical Project

CLAUDIA LAWSON
 and VANA PARRISH LAWSON

EDITOR'S NOTE: Claudia Lawson and Vana Parrish Lawson are currently undergraduates at California State College, Sonoma. Claudia Lawson is Central Pomo, and Vana Parrish Lawson is Kashaya Pomo.

In 1974, we started to gather plants in various areas around Santa Rosa, Healdsburg, the Kashia Reservation, and in Lake County.¹

The plants we were collecting are used by the Kashaya Pomo people for medicinal, food, technological, and ceremonial purposes. Some of these plants can only be gathered during certain seasons of the year; for example, mid-winter, early summer, or mid-summer. In gathering we had to be careful because we lacked knowledge of some plants; for instance, if a medicine plant is picked at the wrong time it can be poisonous. The word "poisonous" can have one meaning for Pomo peoples and another meaning for non-Pomos. As an example of what the Kashaya Pomo mean by "poisonous" let us consider the strawberry. Kashaya Pomo people do not pick or eat any kind of strawberry before the first fruits ceremony in mid-spring, because if they do they will get sick, or some other kind of bad luck will happen to them. A Kashaya Pomo man once turned into a snake because he ate strawberries before the Strawberry Festival; in other words, he got poisoned. We not only had to know what poisonous plants were from the strictly Pomo point of view, but we also had to know that some plants, if picked at the wrong time, will poison anybody. For example, if the coffeeberry is picked in the spring it will cause intestinal cramps and vomiting because the new growth contains an acid property called "bitters." In order to determine which plants were poisonous at which time of the year, we consulted our knowledgeable older people, and we also studied the ethnographic and botanical literature (Gifford 1967; Jepson 1960; Munz and Keck 1968; Oswalt 1964).

In planning our plant-collection trips we had to consider the following: (1) plants bearing fruit can be gathered from early summer to mid-summer, depending on stages of maturity; (2) plants that are fruitless are gathered from early winter to mid-winter, again depending on stages of maturity. Our fieldwork plans also included consideration of what days and hours would be the best for us and our consultants and where the best place would be to meet. Our consultants went with us to identify plants