

The Intangible Underwater: Integrating Intangible Cultural Heritage into the Study of Underwater Cultural Heritage Sites

Suzanne S. Finney
Maritime Archaeology and History of the Hawaiian Islands (MAHHI) Foundation
Honolulu, Hawaii 96830, USA
suzanne.finney@gmail.com

Abstract

Intangible cultural heritage (henceforth ICH) is an integral component to the understanding of many cultural heritage sites worldwide. While the collection of stories, oral histories and other intangible information to interpret terrestrial sites is increasingly practiced, less so is the collection of this information to identify underwater cultural heritage sites, in particular those sites without material remains. The focus for intangible cultural heritage often seems to end at the shore, and not extend into the waters, for many nations. This presentation discusses the application of ICH for underwater cultural heritage, using examples from the Pacific to illustrate the importance of recording all information for underwater areas in order to ensure adequate protection and interpretation of the significant cultural heritage of many coastal, islands, and other submerged sites.

Key words: Intangible, Oral history, Chants, Pacific, ICH

Introduction

UNESCO describes intangible cultural heritage as, “traditions or living expressions inherited from our ancestors and passed on to our descendants, such as oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals, festive events, knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe or the knowledge and skills to produce traditional crafts” (UNESCO n/d). Rather than documenting materials or sites, the ICH list records ‘elements’ of cultures and social practices. Of the 30 elements listed for 2013, only one appears to have any type of marine or maritime focus (Shrimp fishing on horseback in Oostduinkerke, Belgium), and on the total list of 282 elements listed since 2008, only a handful are marine, maritime or underwater oriented¹. The documentation and protection of underwater cultural heritage (UCH) sites can, and often does, include the recording of oral histories related to the sites, but this information is usually peripheral to the recording of the material, or tangible, remains, focusing on the collection of

information related to the material remains under study rather than toward an all-encompassing cultural understanding of the area. Research in UCH may be expanding beyond the investigation of individual shipwrecks, bridges and ports to larger concepts of regional navigation, seafaring and the like, but a truly holistic examination of the *tangible* remains associated with most UCH sites, should always include a systematic collection of information about the *intangible* significance of the sites and the areas where sites are located. This is particularly timely in the face of budget and staff reductions with which many offices charged with the collection and protection of both UCH and ICH must currently contend.

This paper offers a brief consideration of how a synthesis between UCH and ICH data collection might be approached, beginning with two examples of research that incorporates both tangible and intangible data. It also explores the idea of collecting information on other research projects, focusing on topics of relevance to the Pacific Islands and those which could possibly lead to additional World Heritage and/or Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity nominations for the region in the future.

Example: Sea Turtle Consumption in the Marshall Islands

A good example of how a project incorporates the tangible and intangible aspects of underwater cultural heritage is the development of a proposed project involving sea turtle use and consumption in the Pacific. Regina WoodromRudrud, an environmental anthropologist and sea turtle biologist, has drafted a project that would incorporate ethnographic field techniques, sea turtle biology and maritime archaeology to determine the risk to human populations of sea turtle consumption in the Marshall Islands (WoodromRudrud et al., 2007). She and her colleagues contend that the understanding of the potential negative impacts of turtle consumption in the Marshall Islands cannot be complete without understanding the physical environment in which turtles live, feed and breed, including hazards brought on by shipwrecks from World War II and the post World War II nuclear testing in the region.

In this case, knowing where and when turtles are hunted and how they are consumed by the Marshallese is combined with learning where turtles hunt for their food, and how the impact of shipwrecks in the water might affect the food chain between turtles and humans. If turtles are being exposed to harmful contaminants, which are stored in their

bodies, then the people eating those turtles are exposed to the contaminants. Maritime archaeology assists with this research by locating shipwrecks in the areas where the turtles forage to determine what types of contaminants may be present. In the conclusion the authors state:

We argue that research into this situation is essential as we have found a high probability that there are toxicants remaining in the RMI environment and that due to the long life (50+ years receiving low dose radiation and other contaminants) and normal habits of sea turtles, such as site fidelity to certain resting areas and resting in submerged resources such as irradiated shipwrecks (among others), site fidelity to certain foraging areas and several species eating organisms that may be growing directly on toxic surfaces (such as algae and sponges), and embryo development and metamorphosis taking place a few feet down in contaminated sand, their contamination from those products is highly probable (WoodromRudrud et al., 2007: 17).

Example: Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument

The Papahānaumokuākea² Marine National Monument is located in the northwest section of the Hawaiian Islands. For years there has been systematic research and investigation into the maritime cultural heritage of the area, and a number of significant historic ship and aircraft wrecks have been identified and recorded. There have also been tremendous advances in the collection and understanding of Hawaiian sites and traditional uses of the area. Much of this information comes from the study of the intangible heritage of the Hawaiians, the chants and histories passed down for generations.

There have also been a number of projects involving archaeological fieldwork on Hawaiian sites on the islands, including the collection of intangible information on place names within the Monument. There is not been much evidence to date that this has led to documenting underwater Hawaiian sites, but the importance of collecting intangible information about the area, and incorporating this information into the ongoing research, interpretation and protection of the Monument is also a good example of the holistic approach to understanding underwater cultural heritage by compiling tangible and

intangible information. As described in the maritime heritage management plan for the Monument:

Aspects of Native Hawaiian heritage, including fishing, religion, and politics, are links to the kind of broad, interdisciplinary understanding of the heritage of the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands that can help management pursue a sustainable direction for this World Heritage Site (Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument, 2011: 28).

Shipwrecks

Raupp, Finney and Gleason (2011) discuss the use of 19th century whaling wrecks for multidisciplinary research in the Pacific, incorporating fields such as history, archaeology and biology. The collection of ICH should also be considered a component of this research. The location of shipwrecks is often learned through oral histories and stories from local inhabitants. Once a location is determined and these wrecks are mapped, the collection of intangible data often ends. Yet the impact of these wrecks can continue on, in genealogies from descendants of the survivors or changes in habits around the location of wrecks. For example, in Pohnpei, Federated States of Micronesia, four whaling ships were captured and burned in April 1865 as part of the activities of the CSS *Shenandoah* during the U.S. Civil War. The whaling crews were all left on Pohnpei while the *Shenandoah* continued into the Arctic Ocean to look for more whaleships to capture³. By the time a vessel arrived in Pohnpei to rescue the whaling crews, one of the whaleship masters, Captain John Eldridge, had decided to stay on Pohnpei. He raised a family whose descendants still live on Pohnpei. Collecting information from the family during an archaeological investigation of the wreck sites led to more information about the whaling wrecks and the history of the harbor where the wrecks are located. The shipwrecks are not the end of the story; it continues to develop through the history of the family on Pohnpei. This is also true for more recent wrecks. Ship and aircraft wrecks from World War II are often found through written records from the period, but as many maritime archaeologists know, local knowledge is likely to be more accurate in locating wrecks. Stories from eye witnesses and information from fishermen about where nets are snagged, lead to the discovery of new wrecks. A recent survey of one the atolls in the Republic of the Marshall Islands documented several 19th and 20th

century shipwrecks based on information gathered from local informants, including stories passed down about how the ships were sunk (Finney, 2007). The ability to collect this type of information is as important for UCH managers to learn as how to photograph, measure and map these wrecks.

Marine Exploitation

Marine exploitation, such as fishing, collecting shellfish, or harvesting seaweed, is an ongoing activity throughout the Pacific. Traditional fishing methods are often not easy to detect in the archaeological record, but that is not a reason for UCH managers to discount this essential component of life on the islands. Knowing the importance of primary, seasonal, sacred or taboo fishing grounds, and current fishing practices offer the potential for discovering significant tangible cultural sites in these areas.

In a recent article for the Hawaiian Airlines magazine, Michael Shapiro describes efforts to preserve traditional fishing knowledge in a small village on the Big Island of Hawaii (2013). This information could be the starting point for an investigation of the coastline and underwater environment for evidence of underwater historic or archaeological sites related to fishing. In 1996 the University of Hawaii sponsored a maritime archaeology field school that looked at ancient fishing sites off Waikiki on Oahu, where they documented some artifacts that supported the Hawaiian stories of fishing in the area (NOAA n/d). It would be useful for those involved with UCH to develop working relationships with those involved in the promotion of traditional skills such as fishing in order to acquire information on where likely underwater sites might be located. The transmission of knowledge across generations on a variety of marine and maritime contexts can provide excellent information that leads to developments in underwater cultural heritage.

Conclusion

There is a very clear distinction between UCH and ICH within UNESCO, and this paper does not recommend that this division be altered. However, practical considerations such as budget, staff and time constraints argue for the development of projects that can serve more than one purpose, to collect information on underwater sites, and preserve the knowledge and skills of local populations, or to collect oral histories to

prepare for the survey of underwater sites, integrating tangible and intangible aspects of underwater heritage.

UCH has traditionally focused on tangible or material remains, but there is nothing inherent in the concept that should cause us to limit our inquiry to only the tangible aspects of UCH. Within the broader context of UCH, documentation and research should include all evidence, including the intangible. The management of underwater cultural heritage calls for a holistic approach to collecting information, and those who are engaged in UCH should be willing to “think outside the box” or the shipwreck, or the fish trap, and explore ways in which ICH can increase our knowledge of the underwater environment.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the organizers of this conference for the opportunity to present the paper. I would also thank Professor Noelani Arista of the University of Hawaii at Manoa, who provided suggestions and I am grateful for her input.

Endnote

¹For example the *Watertight-bulkhead technology of Chinese junks* (China), or *Sanké mon, collective fishing rite of the Sanké* (Mali). See www.unesco.org/culture/ich for the full list.

²See <http://www.papahanaumokuakea.gov/about/name.html> for information about this name and how it was chosen for the monument.

³See Chaffin 2006, Finney and Graves 2002 for more information about this incident.

References

Chaffin, T., 2006. *Sea of Gray: The Around-the-World Odyssey of the Confederate Raider Shenandoah*. Hill and Wang, New York.

Finney, S. S., 2007. *Phase Two Survey and Inventory of Submerged Cultural Resources in Portions of Maloelap Lagoon, Republic of the Marshall Islands*. Report submitted to the Historic Preservation Office, Republic of the Marshall Islands.

Finney, S. S., and Graves, M. W., 2002. Site investigation and documentation of a Civil War shipwreck thought to be sunk by the C.S.S. *Shenandoah*, April 1865. *Report for the American Battlefield Protection Program, U.S. National Park Service*, Washington, D.C.

NOAA, http://hawaiihumpbackwhale.noaa.gov/maritime/maritime_history.html, accessed on 29 December 2013.

Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument, 2011. *Maritime Heritage Research, Education, and Management Plan: Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument*, Honolulu.

Raupp, J., Finney, S. S., and Gleason, K., 2011. Multidisciplinary Research Potential of Whaling Heritage in the Pacific Region. In Mark Staniforth, Jennifer Craig, Sheldon Clyde Jago-on, Bobby Orillaneda, Ligaya Lacsina (Eds.), *Proceedings on the Asia-Pacific Regional Conference on Underwater Cultural Heritage*, Manila: 1029-1040.

Shapiro, M., 2013. *Go Fish!HanaHou. The Magazine of Hawaiian Airlines*, Vol. 16 (6), December 2013 - January 2014, accessed at the website <http://www.hanahou.com/pages/magazine.asp?Action=DrawArticle&ArticleID=1270&MagazineID=78&Page=1> (29 December 2013).

UNESCO, 2003. Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage Media Kit, www.unesco.org/culture/ich/doc/src/18440-EN.pdf, accessed on 27 December 2013, p. 3.

Woodrom-Rudrud, R., Kroeker, J. W., Leslie, H. Y., and Finney, S. S., 2007. The Sea Turtle Wars: Culture, War, and Sea Turtles in the Republic of the Marshall Islands. *SPC Traditional Marine Resource Management and Knowledge Information Bulletin*, Vol. 21: 3-29.

Biography

Suzanne Finney is an archaeologist specializing in maritime archaeology. She received her Ph.D. in Anthropology from the University of Hawaii at Manoa and has been involved in fieldwork and projects throughout the Pacific, including Hawaii, the Federated States of Micronesia, the Republic of the Marshall Islands and the Republic of Palau. Suzanne is President of the Maritime Archaeology and History of the Hawaiian Islands Foundation (MAHHI), a non-profit organization chiefly concerned with research, training, and education in maritime elements of submerged cultural resources in Hawaii and the Pacific.