

PHILIPPINE PREHISTORIC RESEARCH: AN APPRAISAL

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Introduction

This brief paper is an attempt to critically assess Philippine prehistoric research from the American Occupation to the present. It tackles two main issues: first, the internal issue which is generated within the scientific field of archaeology itself and answers the question: how well is the science of archaeology conducted; and second, the external issue generated outside archaeology and answers the question: why pursue this particular science?

The scope of this paper is not exhaustive, for it is impossible to cover in so short a paper all the prehistoric research done in the country. It is assumed that the audience has basic anthropological knowledge specifically pertaining to the definition of culture and to the relationship between anthropology and archaeology. The paper dwells briefly on the descriptive presentation of specific researchers since its main intention is to criticize rather than to describe. It is hoped, therefore, that the audience will refer to the researches and to descriptive articles summarizing them.

Internal Issue: How Well Is Archaeology Done?

Traditional versus "New" Archaeology

Traditional archaeology is interested in the collection of cultural traits or artifacts and describing them carefully and meticulously, believing that after this is done the culture that produced them will be known (Taylor 1948: 43-92). The practitioners of this traditional approach to archaeology assume that culture is made up of distinctive bundles of traits and that these traits are tangible and manifest. They further assume that there are certain areas of social life of extinct societies that can never be known because the archaeological data are few and fragmentary.

In contrast, the so-called "new archaeology" aims to make archaeology more than just a technique of relic recovery and recording. It aims to become an empirical science (and has allied

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its theoretical position with that of anthropology) by making high probability statements about extinct cultures in such a way that these statements can be tested and verified (Binford and Binford 1968). For Gordon Willey (1974:XI), the "new archaeology" is defined by the following "attitudes":

The emphasis on the elucidation of cultural process. This is to be done in a general framework of cultural evolutionary theory. There is also a strong ecological bias and a deductive or "hypothesis-testing" approach to the data of prehistory. The "new archaeology" also makes heavy use of findings of the physical and natural sciences; it uses statistical procedures.

Archaeology, therefore, to be considered a science, must not confine itself to the discovery and description of artifacts. It must also make verifiable/testable hypotheses about past human societies and cultures. The recovery and recording of artifacts and their affinities is a necessary procedural step. But it is important to go beyond this step into synthesis and integration as to the carriers of such fossilized behavior. Failure to go through this final step is characteristic of antiquarianism and traditional archaeology where objects or artifacts are valued simply for their age. "New archaeology" therefore defines itself as a scientific discipline concerned with the full recovery of artifacts and their affinities as the starting empirical data that will lead to the formulation of verifiable hypotheses about extinct societies.

Philippine Prehistoric Research

Philippine prehistoric research gained momentum some fifty years ago when Dr. H. Otley Beyer began his "systematic" recovery of stone tool implements in Novaliches, Quezon City in 1926. Since then, numerous researches have been conducted. Some of the outputs of these researches are listed below:

1. Beyer, H. Otley
1947 Outline Review of Philippine Archaeology by Islands and Provinces.
1948 Philippine and East-Asian Archaeology and its Relation to the Origin of the Pacific Islands Population.
2. Lynch, Francis X.
1949 A Typological Study of the Neolithic Implements of the Rizal-Bulakan Region of Luzon.
3. Fox, Robert B.
1959 The Calatagan Excavations: Two Fifteenth

- Century Burial Sites in Batangas, Philippines.
 1970 The Tabon Caves: Explorations and Excavations on Palawan Island, Philippines.
4. Solheim, Wilhelm II G.
 1964 The Archaeology of Central Philippines.
 5. Premchit, Sommai
 1971 Thai Pottery in Philippine Prehistory.
 6. Patanne, E.P.
 1972. The Philippines in the World of Southeast Asia.
 7. Spoehr, Alexander
 1973 Zamboanga and Sulu: An Archaeological Approach to Ethnic Diversity.
 8. Peralta, Jesus
 1973 The Petroglyphs of the Angono Rockshelter, Rizal, Philippines
 9. Peterson, Warren E.
 1974 Anomalous Sites of Northern Luzon and Models for Southeast Asia.

Three are M.A. theses submitted to the University of the Philippines (Lynch, Premchit and Peralta). Two are Ph.D. dissertations (Solheim and Peterson). Except for Peralta and Patanne, all the rest are foreign scholars.

The list does not include smaller articles and essays, but I believe that it includes the major works in Philippine prehistoric research.

The first scholars who became interested in Philippine prehistory were the Americans. And even today, Americans dominate the field. The type of archaeology that was diffused here was the traditional one, the "Americanist archaeology" (Taylor 1948: 43-92). Most of the polemics leveled by Taylor against Americanist archaeology can be leveled against Philippine prehistoric research.

To my mind, there are three distinctive activities that make archaeology a scientific method. First is the technique of survey and excavation. Second is the technique of analysis and description. Third is integration or synthesis. In all three procedures, the archaeologist must be guided by his conceptual framework, by theory. In order to assess whether or not a piece of prehistoric research is scientific, it is necessary to look into the researcher's techniques and methods and the assumptions behind the employment of such methods. Unfortunately, most of the researches have not been explicit about these items.

In my evaluation or appraisal of a piece of prehistoric research, I always ask the following questions: Does the researcher have a clear and firm grasp of archaeological theory? Did he dig the site himself? How and why? Did he analyze the materials himself? Can his conclusions be verified?

However, this paper cannot answer all these questions regarding the nine mentioned researchers. A few brief comments on the works of each will serve to illustrate the state of Philippine prehistoric research.

Beyer

Although Beyer has been dubbed the "Dean of Philippine Archaeology," he has never dug an archaeological site. Although he claims to have started "systematic" recovery of artifacts, he was never explicit about his archaeological systematics.

The artifacts upon which he based his culture history of the Philippines were fathered from the surface by himself and his innumerable friends and associates during and after the American occupation. These artifacts, now dubbed the "Beyer collection" are no longer in the Philippines.

Beyer's hypothesis about the peopling of the Philippines remains a hypothesis to be verified and supported by archaeological research. Although almost all historians have been citing him, none so far has seriously questioned whether or not his historical reconstruction of culture is verifiable.

Lynch

Lynch confined himself to the stone tools which Beyer recovered in Novaliches. After a typological analysis, he refused to make any kind of interpretation. He felt inadequate in making any meaning out of the materials he described. He failed to make an archaeological leap from his material because such material was too little and inadequate for him. What kind and what quantity he needed he did not specify.

Fox

Fox who claimed to have employed a scientific method in excavation, explained this method in a mere footnote. He stated that excavations were made by *natural* and *cultural* deposits. There is, of course, a contradiction of terms here. He stated further that he did *not* excavate by mechanical levels. This statement,

I believe, is false. As a student in Tabon in 1965, I had the occasion to observe the Tabon digs. Excavation was by mechanical levels: We were always made to level our squares. The field records will bear me out that finds were listed by arbitrary layers: 0-19 cm, 20-39 cm, 40-59 cm and so on. When I returned to Tabon with the U.P. Summer Field School in 1970, excavation was still by mechanical levels.

Solheim

Solheim did excavate in the Philippines but the site he dug was badly disturbed. With these artifacts and those gathered by Carl Guthe, he made an analysis of the Iron Age in the Central Philippines. His work is chiefly a minute description of artifacts with very little interpretation at the end of the monograph.

Premchit

Premchit, a Thai student, made a typological study of Thai pottery found in the Philippines. He described the Thai pottery recovered in Calatagan by Fox in the late fifties and compared these with other Thai pottery in the collection of antiquarian pothunters in the Philippines. After describing the kinds of pottery, he concluded that there was trade between the Philippines and Thailand and the rest of Southeast Asia.

Peralta

Peralta's M.A. thesis consisted of a description of a single petroglyph in Angono, Rizal. The petroglyph was read like a projective test. His conclusions are unverifiable.

Patanne

Patanne wrote on Philippine prehistory from a journalist's perspective. His work is underrated since he is considered a non-professional. His work is mostly a rehash of Beyer, Solheim, Fox, and others. I find his work a good introduction to Philippine archaeology since one is immediately introduced to traditional archaeology. Patanne is not critical of this type of archaeology since he is unaware of the turmoil that has taken place in archaeological theory since the early sixties.

Spoehr

Spoehr belongs to the same mould from which Solheim and Fox came: Americanist archaeology. All are concerned with minute description of artifacts.

Judging from my own experience, I know that Spoehr almost completely destroyed a neolithic habitation site in Sanga Sanga Island, Sulu in 1969. He reported this site to the National Museum, saying that a fish hook may be found which would link Mindanao with the rest of the Pacific. He hoped the National Museum would succeed where he failed – in the search for this single, solitary artifact – a fish hook.

Peterson

Of all the prehistory done for the last fifty years, the work of Peterson stands out simply because he is explicit about his theoretical position. As a prehistoric researcher, he is lucid about what he is doing, and why he is doing it. He states his objectives and elucidates on the steps by which he will reach his goals. He makes predictions and calls upon others to verify them by the scientific method of the new archaeology.

External Issue: Why Pursue Archaeology?

Particular kinds of society need particular kinds of anthropology. The contention that science springs from the economic base of society has been characteristic of Marxist analysis of the history and philosophy of science.

But this relationship between anthropology and society has a negative corollary which is also true: that in particular societies, particular kinds of anthropology are *not* undertaken. They become impossible in terms of conduct or conception. Still, anthropology does not stop, for there are infinite questions that can be asked and infinite papers that can be published even if these are trivial and repetitive and the research relevant to certain problems is not done.

We must recognize such constraints when we ask the questions: what kind of anthropology do we want? how much of it do we want? who should do it? how should they and their activities be controlled? But the most basic question behind all these is: *what kind of society do we want?*

Man is root-seeking. He wants to know where he came from, just as much as he wants to know where he is going. Man may be finite – limited by space and time – but his mind may and can wander from the infinite past to the infinite future. It is only the human consciousness that connects these two infinities. But consciousness is rooted in its historical context. It is not something that exists in a vacuum. It is a historical product, and a historical process.

Archaeology is a method of knowing a part of the past. How big or small a part of the past will largely depend upon our theory and our techniques.

The Philippines is an old country, but she has a shallow and narrow understanding of her past primarily because she has a long history of colonialism. She does not have a written history or if she has had one, it was destroyed by her colonial masters. Histories are written not by the victims but by the victors. Another complicating factor about the Philippines is the fact that many if not all the people are nonliterate and therefore their histories are oral rather than written. If such is the case of the Philippines, the task of archaeology is, therefore, very important. First, it should help in checking and correcting histories written both by foreigners and foreign-influenced Filipinos. Second, it should help in reconstructing cultural history. Third, it should popularize its findings for all people through museum displays, and mass media like the movies, radio, and TV.

Filipino archaeologists have a story to tell their people. A story of struggle for societal survival. It is a story not only against the forces of colonialism but also against the forces of the cosmos.

Our people are waiting for their history. A history that may not be as dramatic and romantic as some depicted it but nevertheless, a history that is their own.

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