

The input of francophone archaeological research in the Pacific

A short summary

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Résumé

Cet article présente une courte synthèse des principaux thèmes de recherche archéologique menés au cours des dernières décennies par des chercheurs de langue française dans la région Pacifique. L'importance de l'influence intellectuelle du Pr. J. Garanger, qui a mis en place les problématiques de la recherche francophone sur la validation des traditions orales par les fouilles archéologiques, la construction de chronologies céramiques, la mise en valeur de monuments préhistoriques et la création de Départements locaux d'archéologie, est soulignée. Ces problématiques sont devenues les caractéristiques de la recherche francophone en Océanie. Différentes réalisations sur ces thèmes sont présentées, en focalisant l'attention principalement sur le Pacifique ouest.

Abstract

This paper presents a short synthesis of the major themes of archaeological research conducted over past decades in the Pacific region by French-speaking scholars. The importance of the intellectual influence of Professor J. Garanger is emphasised, as he established the major lines of francophone research: confirmation of oral traditions through archaeological excavations, the building of ceramic chronologies, the restoration of prehistoric monuments, and the development of local archaeological departments in French Territories of the region. Inquiry in these four problem areas has become characteristic of francophone research in Oceania. Various examples of recent achievements on these subjects, mainly for the western Pacific, are presented.

SINCE WESTERNERS' FIRST ENCOUNTER with the island Pacific, their imaginative fancies about the existence of a paradise on earth have centred on the South Sea Islands, whose inhabitants were supposed to have achieved the perfect equilibrium between nature and culture (see e.g. Bryan, 1915). The identification of Polynesian islands as a 'new Cythera' (see Kirch, 1997 for a summary) led, as a perverse result, to the general belief that pre-contact Pacific societies were static systems, trapped in their traditions with no way of escaping the rigid customary laws transmitted from generation to generation. The region had to await the emergence in the 1950s of the first deep archaeological excavations—showing successions of cultural traditions—and the use of the newly invented carbon-14 dating techniques—indicating long time-depth sequences—to be given the right to a proper pre-historic history (see Kirch 2000: 12–36 for a review). Over the past 50 years, scholars have put to rest the idea of 'frozen', static pre-European Pacific societies, showing instead the extent to which processes like adaptation, transformation and intensification had been at play over the millennia (Kirch, 1984; Spriggs, 1997).

Trying to put aside the over-representation of Anglo-American prehistoric research in Oceania (Kirch & Weisler, 1994), francophone contributions have, during this period, developed specific trends, influenced by the more European theoretical background to past societies, as well as by the unique political situation of the three overseas Territories of New Caledonia, Wallis and Futuna, and French Polynesia (Collective, 1994), whose ties to French

research institutions remain strong. In this paper, I will try to illustrate briefly the specific contributions of francophone archaeology in the Pacific, and what it has brought to the indigenous communities as well as the scientific community.

The beginning

In the Pacific, archaeological research by trained specialists was initiated in the early decades of the twentieth century, by Americans and New Zealanders (e.g. Best, 1927; McKern, 1929; Emory, 1933). In the French-speaking community, though, up until the early 1960s the only contributions that really stood the comparison were the Franco-Belgian studies of Easter Island, carried out in the 1930s by Lavachery (1939) and Métraux (1940). The development of renewed anthropological research in the Pacific after the Second World War led to the appearance of a wholly new generation of scientists, who maintained in the field, most often consciously, the old conflict between the French flag and the Union Jack.

Anthropologist Jean Guiart was instrumental in the early 1960s in promoting a French archaeology in our region, one whose main objective was to demonstrate the historical truth of Melanesian oral traditions, which most people at that time thought to be just 'myths'. Through the French National Research Centre (CNRS), he was able to bring José Garanger to the New Hebrides (hereafter referred to by its present name, Vanuatu) as an archaeologist trained in the revolutionary new concept of prehistoric ethnology developed by A. Leroi-Gourhan. Garanger can be considered the father of francophone archaeology in the Pacific, being the initiator of French-led prehistoric programmes in the region and the mentor of the two succeeding generations of French-speaking archaeologists (Julien, Orliac & Orliac, 1996). During his career he developed four research subjects: ethno-archaeology, ceramic chronologies, the restoration of pre-European sites, and the setting up of local archaeological departments in the French Territories. Rather than summarise the different achievements since the 1960s, I will present these four major research topics in turn, focusing mainly on the south-western Pacific.

Ethno-archaeology

Organising his first field season in Vanuatu in the early 1960s, Garanger was assigned the task of showing the historical truth of two oral traditions of the central region of the archipelago, around the large island of Efate. The first myth concerned a disastrous event related to a volcanic eruption; the second related to the cultural hero Roy Mata (Garanger, 1972). The identification of the explosion of the large caldera of Kuwae, listed today as one of the ten major volcanic events on earth during the last 10,000 years, was his first achievement (Eissen, Monzier & Robin, 1994). But it was the excavation of different burial grounds, and especially of the mass burial at the Roy Mata grave, that popularised the demonstration of a historical truth in Melanesian oral traditions (Garanger, 1980, 1997).

This ethno-archaeological approach to the late prehistory of the Pacific, implying the recording of oral traditions and genealogies in relation to archaeological surveys, was developed over the succeeding decades by various French-speaking prehistorians in Melanesia as well as Polynesia (e.g. Conte, 1996). I will highlight two examples here for the western Pacific. The first has concentrated on Wallis and Futuna in western Polynesia, under the direction of archaeologist D. Frimigacci. The survey of over 200 archaeological sites, linked to a whole set of oral traditions and genealogies, has led to the writing of a prehistory of these two islands making major use of indigenous knowledge and historical wisdom (Frimigacci, 1990, 2000). For the late prehistoric period, the writing has been done with overall help, as well as control, of the local traditional authorities (Frimigacci, Keletaona et al., 1995). A comparable joint programme was carried out in the remote island of Cikobia-i-ra in northeastern Fiji by an international team, with collaboration between New Caledonian, French and Fijian archaeologists. Here also, a large set of archaeological sites was recorded, with the discovery of a dense amount of remains, on an island that was supposed to have been very isolated and sparsely settled (Sand & Valentin, 1997; Sand, Valentin & Sorovi-Vunidilo 2000). In this project, the Fijian colleagues worked on the oral traditions and genealogies in Cikobia, taking the responsibility for managing this important part of the late prehistoric reconstruction in a way that serves the local people of the island.

In these two research programmes, the focus was on excavating and dating sites related to oral traditions, like fortifications or named burials, allowing people to gain a direct link with their forefathers' knowledge and history (Frimigacci, 1997; Valentin et al. 2001).

Ceramic chronologies

During his research in Vanuatu, Garanger undertook excavations on sites containing ceramics. Although at the start it was not a topic of his programme, the discovery of numerous sherds led him to work on pottery. His studies allowed the identification of a set of unique ceramic characteristics, with special forms, mostly incised and applied decorations, all these points markedly different from the dentate-stamped Lapita tradition (Garanger, 1970). This prompted him to propose for the area a specific ceramic chronology, identifying the existence of a particular tradition in central Vanuatu, labelled by him 'Mangaasi' (Garanger, 1972).

Over the succeeding decades, his work on ceramics has been followed by various other French-speaking archaeologists in southern Melanesia and west Polynesia. In New Caledonia, a tentative ceramic chronology proposed by D. Frimigacci in the 1970s (Frimigacci, 1975) has been progressively restructured (e.g. Galipaud, 1992; Sand, 1995a). Work on the Lapita tradition of the archipelago (e.g. Frimigacci, 1999; Sand 2000a) has led to important advances in the study of first settlement sites, and to the spectacular discovery of a whole set of nearly complete Lapita pots on the eponymous site at Foué (Sand, Coote et al., 1998). Following the research initiated by Garanger on the Mangaasi ceramic motifs, typological studies of ceramic decorations, with a specific interest in Lapita motifs, have been conducted (e.g. Siorat, 1990, 1992; Sand, 1996b).

Focused research on Lapita sites of northern Vanuatu has also been conducted (Galipaud 2000) and excavations have allowed the demonstration of the first settlement of the islands of Wallis (Uvea) and Futuna in west Polynesia by Lapita navigators (Frimigacci 2000; Sand 2000b). The study of ceramic changes has led to the proposal of a specific ceramic sequence for these two islands (Frimigacci & Vienne 2001; Sand, 1996a) lasting around one millennium and different from what developed in the north-eastern Fijian

island of Cikobia, only 300 km away, where the ceramic chronology expands up to European contact in the nineteenth century (Sand & Valentin, 1997).

Restoration and reconstruction of prehistoric structures

Concurrently with his work in Vanuatu, José Garanger conducted research-programmes in French Polynesia in the 1960s and 1970s. He was the first in Tahiti to have the courage to restore sites devoted to pre-Christian religion, especially the *marae* of the old Maohi (e.g., 1969). Reconstructing the walls as close to the originals as possible, reshaping the stepped *ahu*, he also managed to restore Polynesian pride in their old religions. In the western as well as the eastern Pacific, his successors have exerted tremendous efforts on some major cultural sites, to extricate pre-Christian remains from the strangling bush. On Uvea (Wallis Island), D. Frimigacci and M. Hardy carried out, over several years, the restoration of the large platform of Talietumu in the Kolanui fort. This platform is today over 5 m high and 80 m long, embanked in a set of trails and walls with symbolic meaning (Frimigacci & Hardy, 1997). A similar programme was conducted by our team in New Caledonia on a megalithic fortification on Maré Island, whose walls are over 10 m wide, 4 m high and several hundreds of metres long, using thousands of limestone blocks sometimes weighing several tonnes (Sand, 1996c). But it is probably on the island of Cikobia in Fiji that the response of the inhabitants was the most profound. The reconstruction there of a large fortification called Rukunikoro was entirely organised by family leaders in the *mataqali*, archaeologists becoming merely the technicians in the project (Sand, Valentin & Sorovi-Vinidilo, 2000). And probably most importantly, today, years after the completion of that programme, the people on the island continue to clean the site and are reluctant to show it to foreigners coming to visit. Quoting their own words, they prefer to 'keep it for themselves' (Sand 2001).

Developing local research institutions

In the sometimes-chaotic recent institutional stories of French possessions in the Pacific, the central government (the hub of State) in Paris has regularly tried to create or at least promote local departments of archaeology. Today, departments of archaeology are functioning as part of the Territorial Museum

in New Caledonia (Sand, 1995b) and Tahiti (Cauchois 2003), and a first step towards a local archaeological structure should soon appear in Wallis. In each case, a period of at least 10 to 20 years has been needed to foster the emergence of a first local generation of professional archaeologists. None of the French promoters of local archaeology had anticipated quite the degree of difficulty that has been encountered in pushing indigenous people to acquire full training in prehistoric research and achieve university degrees, allowing them to take over the archaeology of their archipelago. In this domain, francophone archaeology has succeeded but poorly—although it should be noted that the failure is a general trend for Pacific archaeology, not one confined only to francophone research efforts in the field.

Driven by his continuing interest in popularising local archaeology for the local people, Garanger started very early to publish short volumes with lots of illustrations (e.g., 1969, 1977, 1978). This tradition has been followed in various fields, with publications on New Caledonian archaeology aimed at a more general audience (e.g. Frimigacci, 1977; Galipaud, 1984; Sand, 1997, 1999; Sand, Baret & Ouetcho, 1998) as well as western Polynesia (Frimigacci, Siorat & Vienne, 1995; Frimigacci & Hardy, 1997; Frimigacci & Vienne 2001) and Fiji (Sand, Valentin et al., 1999).

Conclusion

What has francophone archaeology brought to the knowledge of Pacific people? The major achievement has certainly been the promotion of the use of oral tradition in archaeology, for which multiple examples can today be cited. This process of ethno-archaeology, while extremely useful in a general scheme, has nevertheless shown its limitations in various recent cases (e.g. Conte, 1996; Luders 2001), prompting more detailed analysis of the outcomes of oral history. In a contemporary Pacific where a new interest in the past is arising, francophone archaeologists have been pioneers in the field of restoring prehistoric buildings. This trend is slowly gaining new vigour, and probably before too much longer we will see a wholly new series of projects promoting restoration and reconstruction of sites, bridging the past and the future of the Pacific nations and reconciling today's indigenous inhabitants of Oceania with their distant history.

What is needed today are Pacific voices in archaeology, able to guide research in directions that Western prehistorians have not thought about, and able to make a more satisfying connection between scientific discoveries and Oceanic traditions. Whole avenues of inquiry, like the symbolism of site organisation or the hidden information of oral texts, can be fully understood only by people having more of an insider's view of the cultures that produced them generations ago (e.g. Leleivai, 2003). Only then will the writing of the old history of the Pacific really come of age. And Kanaks, Uveans and Futunans, Tahitians, expressing themselves in their shared second language that is French, will have to be part of the writing process with their Melanesian, Polynesian and Micronesian cousins speaking English.

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