Conceptualizing Landscapes in the San Pedro Valley of Arizona: American Indian Interpretations of Reeve Ruin and Davis Ruin

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Abstract

At various times in the past, the San Pedro Valley of southeastern Arizona was home to the ancestors of four contemporary American Indian tribes: Tohono O’odham, Hopi, Zuni, and Western Apache. Collaborative ethnohistoric research with these four tribes was conducted to explore multiple tribal histories drawing on concepts of cultural landscapes as memory. Members of each tribe use archaeological sites in the San Pedro Valley as monuments to substantiate their unique community history and worldview. A model of cultural landscapes encompassing variables of absolute, relative, and representational time and space was developed to enable us to better understand the interpretations of the past revealed by tribal research participants. American Indian concepts of landscape and history are brought into further focus through considerations of the ways in which archaeologists have appropriated ancestral sites for scientific inquiry. Differing conceptualizations of cultural landscapes in the San Pedro Valley are illustrated using the Reeve Ruin and Davis Ruin, occupied in the fourteenth century, as examples.

One Valley, Many Voices: An Introduction to the San Pedro

Ambling along the San Pedro River in southern Arizona, listening to the trickle of tumbling water and sheltered from the desert sun by arching cottonwood trees, it is easy to understand why generations of humans made this place their home. Since the time of the ancient hunters who culled mammoths and giant bison with stone-tipped spears some 12,000 years ago, people have been drawn to this lush river valley (Gregonis 1996; Haury 1956; Haury et al. 1959). Although the names these people called themselves have been lost to time, archaeologists have labeled each epoch and assigned names to the archaeological cultures representing the people who lived there—the Hohokam, Salado, Sobaipuri, and Anasazi. But these past peoples are also important as the ancestors of contemporary American Indians. Evoked in oral traditions and rituals, and revisited in intermittent journeys, modern Indians have not altogether forgotten these people and places. Thus, even as the San Pedro Valley comprises a single terrain, it contains multiple histories investigated by archaeological science and maintained by the descendents of the people who formerly resided there.
The present-day members of the Hopi, Zuni, Tohono O'odham, White Mountain Apache, and San Carlos Apache Indian tribes all have cultural and historical connections to the San Pedro Valley (Figure 1). In a three-year collaborative ethnohistory project, the authors have endeavored to explore these links and learn how tribal cultural knowledge relates to the archaeological and documentary record (Colwell-Chanthaphonh and Ferguson 2004). The core of the project involved interviews and fieldwork with a research assistant and cultural advisors from each tribe (Figure 2). These research participants established the research framework that best suited their own cultural practices.

In this paper, we examine the way tribal researchers interpret the ancient villages of Reeve Ruin and Davis Ruin (Figure 3). These two sites have special meanings as historical monuments and cultural markers for contemporary Hopis and Zunis, and they are highly valued by O’odham and Western Apache people. Archaeologists also bring their own cultural and intellectual perspectives to bear. Based on excavations in the 1950s, archaeologists Charles Di Peso (1958a) and Rex Gerald (1958, 1975) argued that 800 years ago a group Western Pueblo people traveled hundreds of miles southward from a homeland on the Colorado Plateau to take up residence at Reeve and Davis in the San Pedro Valley (see Lyons 2003). A suite of excavated artifacts—stacked masonry architecture, Salado polychrome ceramics, mealing bins, finger-grip manos, stone-lined rectangular hearths, entry boxes, certain bird species, and kivas—indicate not just an admixture with resident local populations, but rather a village with one cohesive population surrounded by culturally distinct peoples (Di Peso 1958b:12).

The Role of Time and Space: A Matrix for Cultural Landscapes

Conceptualizing cultural landscapes entails understanding how different people interact with and perceive a given terrain. As numerous scholars have now amply demonstrated, many native peoples differ from the European tradition, born from the Enlightenment, that envisions land as an entity essentially separate from human beings, easily divisible through boundary-making practices (Smith 1999:55). In the Cartesian model of the landscape, territories are imposed on an empty space and divided through binary representations: private/public, cultural/natural, closed/open, inside/outside, ours/their (Harley 1988, 1990; Piper 2002). For Euro-Americans, the past is inscribed on the land and the historical landscape becomes a product of cultural memories. But for many American Indians, ancestral sites that persist in the present are historical monuments that remind and recall what passed before. Cultural landscapes thus do not represent memory, they are memory, and their apprehension provides a means to unite the past and the present in a personal experience (Basso 1996; Küchler 1993). The meanings of these places have not expired but continue to transform and enlighten those living in the present. In this way, traditional histories are embedded in the land, stories made inseparable from place. Visiting places is vital. Bernard Siquieros (2002), an O’odham colleague, explained in an interview: “All the things we hear growing up, they’re just legends but when you go to a place first hand, then you realize it’s actually a part of history, where a historical event took place there.” Cultural landscapes tangibly link the past and present. Because the landscape has many stories that can be continuously re-experienced in new ways, the land is a palimpsest of people and places.

American Indian histories of their ancestors’ lives frequently place asymmetrical emphasis on time, space, and events. The passing of time is contracted or expanded, as in O’odham origin
stories where each break in time is said to be four years, a ritually significant number that is recognized to signify a much longer time. Similarly, references to places may describe real and specific locales, or be used as a narrative trope to symbolically mark movement, directionality, context, or even time itself. Like Morphy writes about the Yolngu in Australia, many chronicles shared with us in this project emphasize place over time, where “sequences in time are represented only if they were spatially segregated and occurred at separate places in association with separate features” (Morphy 1995:188). Furthermore, for our American Indian colleagues, the people who lived in these places were not separated into distinct archaeological cultures but are conceived as the ancestors who constitute the fathers and mothers of their modern world. Thus, when American Indians talk about ancestral sites, there is a complex of memories that links them to the landscapes of the past and present.

Archaeologists and ethnohistorians who work with the archaeological record and American Indian oral traditions are faced with the challenge of fusing these two very different ways of knowing the past. Indeed, much debate has surrounded the issue of how, and whether, such radically divergent epistemological perspectives can be fruitfully married (Anyon et al. 1997; Echo-Hawk 2000; Ferguson et al. 2000; Mason 2000; Tonkin 1992; Whiteley 2002). Although some archaeologists have recently engaged oral tradition in important and interesting ways (e.g., Bernardini 2002; Lyons 2003), we suggest that other archaeologists have not fully considered how narratives of the past frame time and space in different ways. Oral traditions do not always provide the kind of historical statements archaeologists seek.

The interpretations and values people convey about cultural landscapes turn on their conceptions of time and space. To better understand how people’s statements in the present convey information about the past, we have developed a model of cultural landscapes that can help us, as scholars, better decipher what people are really telling us in interviews and fieldwork (Figure 4). The matrix expands on the work of Barbara Morehouse (1996) by incorporating the dimension of time into her theoretical arrangement of absolute, relative, and representational space. Our cultural landscape model begins with the premise that there is the natural environment and the material culture of the past that persist in the present. People then use varying concepts of time and space to interpret objects and imbue them with meanings. These interpretative moments are mediated through personal and cultural values, which in turn structure how people experience and use the materials of the past. This fluid process creates a cultural landscape.

Absolute space and time are marked and bounded by the physical properties of the space-time continuum (e.g., chronology, topography, latitude, and longitude). The San Pedro Valley, as it exists in tangible space exemplifies absolute space. An example of absolute time is the NIST-F1 Cesium Fountain Atomic Clock, which is used as the primary time and frequency standard for the United States. While absolute space and time seem to exist in the “real” world, independent of humans, it is extremely difficult for people to apprehend these absolutes. That is, often the very attempt to define the “absolute” is a cultural act, and therefore it begins to slip into notions of the relative and representational.

Relative space and time are socially defined with fluid boundaries relative to other objects in space or time and depending on who defines it. Relative space, for example, is illustrated in Father Eusubio Kino’s 1701 map showing the Greater Southwest as he knew it, informed by his
role as a Spanish missionary and his personal experiences with native peoples there (Figure 5). Relative time is entailed in an O’odham “calendar stick” that records only special events, each one relative to the last and relative to what was important for the O’odham people. The concepts of relative space and time lie on a continuum between culturally independent and dependent concepts. Relative space and time therefore mediate between attempts at complete “objectivity” and “subjectivity.” Relative is the in-between of absolute and representational.

Lastly, representational space and time are encoded with rich cultural symbols and values. An example of representational space is the map of the United States and Arizona, where the very shape of the place allows it to become an emblem, like a flag that emits powerful connotations if one knows the meanings assigned to these symbols. Representational time is embodied in the notion of Camelot, which does not reference a “real” time, but a symbolic Golden Age where knights were honorable and maidens fair.

The Many Meanings of Reeve Ruin and Davis Ruin

The frames of reference for time and place in this project started out with the chronologies and typologies archaeologists have created (Figure 6). This provided an opportunity to begin discussions about the past. We recognize that archaeologists have altered what are living parts of the world to native peoples, transforming archaeological sites into static objects for scientific scrutiny. This process has a long history (Thomas 2000), which has allowed professional “archaeologists (perhaps unintentionally)...to co-opt the American Indian’s unwritten history and material culture” (Watkins 2003:273). Archaeologists explicate the past in terms of precise dates and places. Tree-ring dating and GIS imagery make it easy for archaeologists to focus on the precision of time and space, disregarding the relative and representational meanings archaeological sites hold for other people. Despite archaeologists’ tendency to focusing on absolutes, they frequently enter into a more representational mode when they depict who resided at a site and characterize how American Indians lived (Figure 7). When Reeve Ruin was nominated to the National Register of Historic Places—a listing of archaeological sites, buildings and monuments that have national significance—the village was selected not because of its distinct spatial boundaries, but for its broader symbolic values, representing ancient Western Pueblo migrations into southern Arizona.

To many Hopis today, archaeological sites are ang kuktota, the “footprints” of their ancestors, the Hisat.sinom (Dongoske et al. 1997; Ferguson et al. 2000). Donald Dawahongnewa (2002) explained in an interview that archaeological sites “are our landmarks, our footprints for us. [Our ancestors] were wise to do that. The shrines there are alive, and I feel emotional about that… Their lives are relevant today for the knowledge they gained” (also see Kuwanwisiwma 2002a:161). Archaeological sites are lasting monuments—enduring places that serve as a testament to ancient lives, and a means to learn from those who have passed before (Kuwanwisiwma and Ferguson 2002). Hopi history is encapsulated in the clan stories and migration accounts that relate how the Hisat.sinom traversed the world until at last they reached the Hopi Mesas. Many clan traditions recount emerging at Yayniini (the Place of Beginning), passing through Palatkwapi, and arriving at Pasiwvi (the Place of Instruction). This list simultaneously refers to a progression of events and the associated places that represent those happenings.
In May of 2002, five Hopi cultural advisors ascended up a narrow ridge leading to the top of a mesa, the site of Reeve Ruin. After an hour of inspecting the site, we reconvened to talk. As we sat on the walls of the ruin, no one doubted the absolute nature of the place or even the absolute dates archaeologists provided for the occupation of the site (Figure 8). However, as the Hopi elders spoke of their clan migrations, discourse about Reeve Ruin shifted from a discussion of a specific place isolated from the Hopi Mesas to an ancestral village linked relative to the other places in the trajectory of ancient clan migrations. This ancient village was recognized as one stop of many, along the trail to the Hopi Mesas. In this way, the stories of clan migrations also transformed our sense of absolute time, where Reeve Ruin was no longer discussed in terms of being occupied between A.D. 1200 – 1350, but just as a time from long ago, between Palatkwapi and later ancestral villages. The story of Palatkwapi is of interest because it tells about an ancestral village in the south where moral decadence eventually led to its destruction (Ferguson and Lomaomvaya 1999:108-114; Voth 1905:25). A flood forced the people to leave and resume their journey towards the Hopi Mesas. When Hopi advisors discussed Palatkwapi, it was a general reference without direct mention of absolute time or place. An interview Leigh J. Kuwanwiswima made clear how Palatkwapi might not refer to absolute time and space, but rather represent something larger. For Kuwanwiswima (2002b), Palatkwapi “is not just a place, a village, but an era, a time period in which things occurred; it climaxed with the end of a village and lifeways, but it was a village that was a center of others and a way of life.”

A week before the Hopi visit, a group of Zuni cultural advisors visited the ruins of Reeve and Davis. Although the Zuni do not typically employ a metaphor of footprints, they similarly see artifacts as objects that connect people in the present to the past. At one site, Perry Tsadiasi (2002) came across two fragments of a metate, and said, “Maybe the people who lived here left these behind so the archaeologists know they were here… People leave these things so people later can remember they were here. Maybe these artifacts are ‘memory pieces’…these things are left so we can remember.” The Zuni ancestors left behind such memory pieces on their migration from the place of origin to the middle place of Zuni Pueblo, Halona:Itiwana (Ferguson and Hart 1985:22). Along their journey, the ancestors were obliged to choose between two eggs, one plain and one colored with blue spots. One group chose the plain egg, from which a multi-colored parrot was hatched. Those who chose this egg traveled southward, “into the Land of the Everlasting Sunshine, never to return,” becoming the “Lost Others” (Bunzel 1932; Cushing 1896:388; Ferguson and Hart 1985:22). From the beautiful egg came a black raven; and those who chose it resumed their journey to the middle place.

As with the Hopi advisors, the Zuni readily recognized the absolute spatial attribute of Reeve Ruin and Davis Ruin, and the absolute time in which archaeologists situated these places (Figure 9). But as the Zuni advisors talk shifted to migrations and the “Lost Others,” the absolute reference of time and space began to dissolve. As the Zuni advisors talked about the Lost Others it became clearer that they did not think of the migration of the Lost Others as a specific time and place. Rather, it was a process that encompassed what is said to have happened at some point and somewhere, but such details were largely aside the point. Zuni advisors also thought that these sites were probably connected to trade networks which probably entailed continuing interaction between the Zuni and the “Lost Others,” but they were reticent to suggest specific dates. Zuni advisors left an offering of corn meal at one site, illustrating how these places continue to hold an abundance of power and significance.
The Western Apache cultural advisors who visited Davis Ruin said that their ancestors did not live there, but it was still intensely meaningful (Figure 10). Apaches make a distinction between the nałkidé (“ancient ones”) and the nohvizá'yé (“departed Apache people”), who followed different paths although they both existed in the distant past. Even though departed Apache people did not build these sites, elders told us that Apaches frequently camped at archaeological sites. And significantly, elders spoke about the how objects from ancient sites were incorporated into Apache ritual accouterments and ceremonies. Abalone shell, beads, stone points, turquoise, and groundstone are all collected and re-used, imbued with a sense of power and sacredness because of their connection to the ancient and their persistence in the present. Thus, the power of place and the symbolic associations that are attached to the ancient artifacts transform these sites into something wholly representational. That is, at places like Davis and Reeve, it does not matter so much when they were occupied but only their very antiquity is relevant to the Apache cultural practice of collecting artifacts from sites. In this way, absolute space is important, but time is symbolic and representational.

Tohono O’odham cultural advisors took a strong interest in the San Pedro Valley (Figure 11). Few had actually visited the valley previously, although many had heard of their cousins to the east, the “Sobaipuri,” a Spanish appellation given to the O’odham people who lived in the San Pedro until the 1760s. However, even though the Sobaipuri had left their homes generations ago, O’odham families have continued to return to the San Pedro Valley to collect plant materials for making baskets. Like the Apache advisors, the O’odham recognize that their ancestors were not the ones that built the villages of Reeve and Davis. Nonetheless, O’odham expressed their feelings that these places are still important. One O’odham elder placed an offering of corn kernels at Reeve, telling us that it did not matter if it was Pueblo people or O’odham people who resided there, only, “It is important to respect them if they are dead. That’s what is important” (Ortega 2002). So, in this way, the place had significance as being a tangible locale, but once again, time became relative in which only antiquity mattered. O’odham today have a historical connection to the San Pedro Valley, in that they know with some precision from Spanish documents when their ancestors, the Sobaipuri, left the valley, even if they do not personally know everywhere they lived. While a few villages are known, many more must surely exist. Thus, sometimes when the O’odham speak of the San Pedro, the entire valley becomes symbolic, a representational space inhabited by their ancestors long ago.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the aim of this cultural landscape model is not to place each and every statement neatly in a specific quadrant of the matrix, but rather to illustrate how statements of the past have differing references to time and space. Thus, we are trying to understand how an archaeological question, like “Is Reeve Ruin Palatkwaip? would misconstrue how Palatkwaip is talked about in Hopi society. There is no uniform way of imagining or discussing the past. As Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999:50-56) reminds us, Euro-American projections of time and space onto the territory of native peoples is not innocuous; it is an endeavor to shape the world in an image of Western civilization. Hence, to recognize alternative perspectives of time and place not only allows for more effective dialogue between archaeologists and native peoples, but may also challenge historical arrangements of power that privilege the Western emphasis on the absolutes of time and space.
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Figure 1. Map of State of Arizona, with San Pedro River and modern reservation boundaries.

Figure 2. Photographs of cultural advisors conducting fieldwork at Davis Ruin and Reeve ruin, representing the (clockwise) Tohono O’odham (10/28/02), Hopi (5/1/02), San Carlos Apache (4/8/02), and Zuni (4/23/02). Photographs by Chip Colwell-Chanthaphonh and T. J. Ferguson.
Figure 3. Schematic map of Reeve Ruin and Davis Ruin.

Figure 4. Cultural Landscape Matrix.
Figure 5. Father Kino’s 1701 map of the Greater Southwest.

Figure 6. A cultural landscape for archaeologists.
Figure 7. Di Peso’s (1958:80) depiction of the residents at Reeve Ruin using different “arts and crafts.”

Figure 8. A cultural landscape for Hopi advisors.
Figure 9. A cultural landscape for Zuni advisors.

Figure 10. A cultural landscape for Apache advisors.
Figure 11. A cultural landscape for Tohono O'odham advisors.