

David Hanlon, *Upon a Stone Altar: A History of the Island of Pohnpei to 1890*. Pacific Islands Monograph Series, no. 5. Honolulu: Center for Pacific Islands Studies and University of Hawaii Press, 1988. Pp. xxviii, 320, maps, figures, appendixes, glossary, bibliography, index. US\$32.00 cloth.

Reviewed by Marty Zelenietz, Dartmouth, Nova Scotia

"Writing the history of another culture," says author David Hanlon, "entails the recognition of limits" (p. xx). Within the limitations imposed by a multidisciplinary approach to a different culture, Hanlon has succeeded admirably in weaving a seamless history of Pohnpei. Combining his extensive experience on the island with a blend of social and traditional history, archaeology, ethnohistory, and ethnography, he produces a coherent exposition of nearly two millennia of the Pohnpeian past. Along the way, he teaches us valuable lessons about the drawbacks of Eurocentric historiography and the resilience of the Pohnpeian people and culture.

Pohnpei is, above all, an island of immigrants and a land of borrowing. Successive waves of Micronesian settlers to the "stone altar" of the Eastern Carolines made peace with the land, but not amongst themselves. Their feelings for the land, and their incessant intergroup struggles, gave rise to *tiahk en sapw* (the custom of the land), an ideology of cultural unity that simultaneously legitimizes political diversity and division. Thus, although the foreign Saudeleurs of Nan Madol struggled to impose political unity on the island from the twelfth to the seventeenth centuries, eventually they failed. Isohkelekel, the offspring of clan incest between the refugee Pohnpeian Thunder God and an old Kosrae woman, defeated the Saudeleurs and liberated Pohnpeians from foreign rule. An outsider himself, Isohkelekel restored the independent (and often warring) chiefdoms of the island, and through his son provided the basis of the dual system of ranking.

Isohkelekel's story illustrates how Pohnpeians incorporate outsiders as "a part of the land." When outsiders refused such incorporation, when they ignored *tiahk en sapw*, Pohnpeians did not passively accept external, imposed culture. Instead, they actively manipulated outsiders and their goods to their own ends. Pohnpeian treatment of beachcombers and missionaries are cases in point.

The early nineteenth century brought new arrivals, mainly American whalers, to Pohnpeian shores. These new visitors' failure to appropriately respond to Pohnpeian greetings left them outside the islanders' moral and cultural community. The Pohnpeians regarded the new arrivals as "property," used and manipulated to the chiefs' ends. For visiting whalers and itinerant traders, this Pohnpeian attitude made for difficult negotiations and broken contracts. Beachcombers, however, faced greater problems: they were, in truth, the chiefs' chattels, used as middlemen to obtain desired goods and services from the visiting Euro-

Americans and as soldiers to fight in the chiefly wars. They lived, physically and socially, on the fringe of the island. Unable to impose their values or cultures, beachcombers served Pohnpeian ends.

Similarly, Pohnpeian political and social struggles engulfed the American Protestant missionaries of the late nineteenth century. The missionaries came to “civilize” as well as convert, to impart social as well as religious values. But Pohnpeian values dominated the agenda: the mission provided a forum for indigenous political rivalry. Chiefs dangled the promise of conversion, as and when it suited their needs for internal control and alliance formation. Those with ambition, but of low chiefly ranking or from common families, used the missionaries’ ideology of equality to serve their own ends. Equality offered them enhanced prestige; the commercial skills taught by the missions provided them with the means to that prestige.

The Pohnpeian past reveals endless political struggle between individuals and between chiefdoms. Rivalries ran so deep that the Pohnpeians could not unify when faced with Spanish, and later German, colonization. Hence, while *tiahk en sapw* provided (and continues to provide) the cultural unity to withstand foreign ideological domination, by sanctioning political diversity it also impeded unified resistance to foreign political domination.

Hanlon’s lucidly written study reflects his respect and affection for Pohnpei, its past, and its people. His focus on the Pohnpeian perspective of their past provides a welcome antidote to the all-too-common Western view of island history, in which the brittle cultures of passive islanders crumbled under the strain of contact. Pohnpeians did not passively receive Western culture or acquiesce to Western dominance. They selected from, and later manipulated, what outsiders had to offer.

Although Hanlon concludes his analysis with the Spanish era, he provides some insight into the persistence of *tiahk en sapw*. Contemporary Pohnpeians continue their selective borrowing, as part of the Federated States of Micronesia. In a place where “the custom of the land” both unites and divides, Hanlon’s excellent book provides a solid base for the next chapter of Pohnpei’s emerging history.