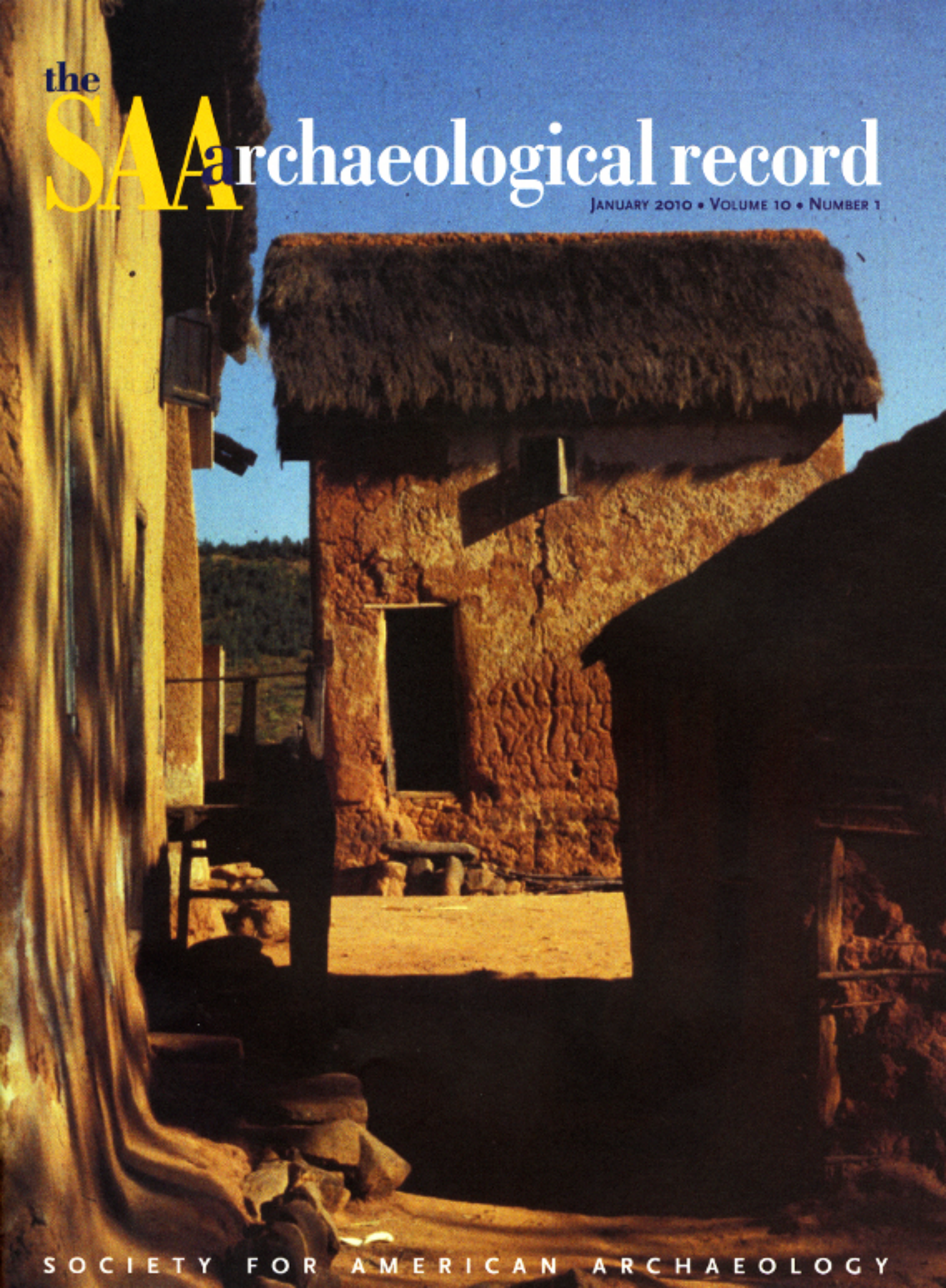


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OBSERVING THE PAST, PARTICIPATING IN THE PRESENT

ARCHAEOLOGICALLY INFORMED ETHNOGRAPHY¹

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I am of the generation to have been nourished on the tenets of the four-field approach, and I have never been weaned. I have found in my Ph.D. in *Anthropology*, and I have found in the mantra of four- (now five, and even sometimes six) field approach, an incredible source of sustenance in pursuing cross-sub-disciplinary endeavors. Call me a remnant of the twentieth century, if you will, as Wikipedia suggests.² Yet, I continue to find edification in anthropology's allegiance to the conundrum of participant-observation in alternative realities, realities that include those of the long-gone past.

There is little time here to rehearse the experience that many of us have had as students of archaeology, despite differences in generational ranks. When my age-grade was reminded that "archaeology is anthropology or it is nothing," we took to classes on all possible themes from kinship to high theory. To the astonishment of our "cultured" professors, we did well, often very well. I suspect that the situation has not changed dramatically, neither changed in the seriousness on our parts to move beyond our subdisciplinary specialty, nor changed in the astonishment of our professors. What we take as sustenance from the larger discipline to use in our own endeavors as archaeologists is fascinating, but what we bring in return from our studies to nourish the larger discipline is equally significant. Yet, what we archaeologists have to offer to the larger discipline is sometimes seriously underappreciated.

The Challenge of Materiality

It goes without saying that one either loves or hates Binford's prolegomenon of middle-range theory, a credo that includes ethnoarchaeology. Perhaps we are now of a generation that has moved beyond this personalized moment in the history of prehistory, but indulge me for a moment. I still have vivid imaginings of Binford traveling from France to the States

with trunks of statistics on paper generated at the dawn of the computer age. I am in awe of his consequent decision to take to the field as an "ethnographer" working with the Nunamiut (e.g., Binford 1983). I find poetic pause in (at least) two profoundly material moments of his research: (1) the discovery of the expanse of space the Nunamiut knew/know and roam/ed, an experiential palimpsest of many intimate dense layers of knowledge acquired as individuals and passed down to other individuals, and (2) the elegant technological haiku of the Nunamiut tool repertoire.

The early version of middle-range theory was of a particular materialist brand; consequently, the poetry of ethnoarchaeological encounters was submerged in the prose of a materialism that was a remarkable offensive advance, and at the same time, a defensive entrenchment within the larger discipline of anthropology. Giving priority to "materiality" in theory, archaeology (re-)claimed its place at the disciplinary table. Yet, as a consequence, the prehistoric and historic others in archaeological recounting were determined by technological and environmental imperatives, and/or were expedient ecological rationalists, and/or were either powerless casualties or ruthless power players in struggles for material resources. It was a time when archaeologists used ethnography to selectively inform archaeology, and ethnography's many lacunae were filled in by ethnoarchaeologists; filled in *scientifically* by mapping, counting, weighing, x-raying, bombarding, and (more to my taste) *sensuously* by crafting, holding, using, breaking, chopping, etc. Yet it was *and* still is a time when many archaeologists, by force of circumstance of working with and among indigenous populations, *lived and continue to live many ethnographic moments*.

What We Have Learned and What I Have Learned as a Cross-disciplinarian

Working as an underdog with underdogs of present state

societies in an attempt to understand underdogs of past state societies, I have come to appreciate the quality of the astute observations and analyses that contemporary underdogs have of their situations (Kus 1997). In sustained brushes with the quotidian of the Betsileo of the highlands of Madagascar, I have come to appreciate how the private is the political (e.g., Kus and Raharijaona 2000).

My first intentional encounter with "ethnoarchaeology" came when the late Susan Kent asked if I would like to contribute to a volume on domestic architecture (Kent 1990). It was at a time when interest in the "symbolic" was difficult in the discourse of the "New Archaeology," but I thought that I had cleverly located a terrain wherein the symbolic could become a legitimate problem focus. This was in the symbolic organization of public space and monumental architecture, and in the observation that so much material, physical and intellectual labor in early states was directed toward the crafting of weighty material symbols and state propaganda. I supposed that the arena of domestic organization of space would serve as an interesting complement to the monumental, so I decided to devote a bit of time from a summer of archaeological survey to try my hand at ethnoarchaeology. I went into the field looking for vestiges of traditional practice and expecting not to learn much beyond the "facts" that every ethnographer knew about the symbolic layout of domestic space in the highlands of Madagascar. Everyone knows that the house of the highlands is oriented north-south; that the cardinal directions come with associations that compare and contrast the noble with the humble and the sacred with the dark and ambiguous; that the central pillar of the house plays an important role in local ritual, etc. I suspected I would find a Malagasy version of *feng-shui*, formulaic and light. But along with my co-researcher (V. Raharijaona), we came to find a tenacious tradition, viable not because of blind, conservative orthodoxy, but rather because of active recreation of the "tradition" by ritual specialists who remained faithful to the spirit of, rather than to the letter of the law.

Faithfulness to the spirit of the law on the part of gifted ritual specialists pushed me to explore how this re-creation of tradition was accomplished. This ethnoarchaeological encounter forced a reassessment of my understanding of "the symbolic" by looking at it through the lens of "the science of the concrete," informed by an appreciation of sensuous human practice. There are many attractive and enticing pieces of theoretical vocabulary, from "embodiment" to "bricolage," that offer archaeologists the possibility of grappling with our individual problem foci. Yet, it is by force of working in the countryside among the Betsileo that I have

come to underpin my choice of vocabulary with a conviction based on the details of those encounters, details of observed daily and ritual practice, and details of the discourse of masters and mistresses of trope.

One initial result from the sustained encounter with ritual specialists and observations on Betsileo domestic space was the rephrasing of my research question. No longer was my exclusive focus on the blinding aw(e)ful(!)ness of palaces and pyramids. I have come to understand the powerful grounding, both material and experiential, of local symbols and worldview. As a consequence I have come to understand that the wresting of symbol and metaphoric logic from the local to put it to use in service of state propaganda is neither gratuitous nor fortuitous. I have also come to seriously entertain Gramsci's understanding of hegemonic struggle as a "war of position" (of belief and discourse) taking place alongside the more familiar "war of maneuver" (for control of resources and institutions) that we have traditionally investigated in the domain of the explicitly political and economic.

Archaeologists once awakened to theory have proven to be hearty, unashamed theoretical bricoleurs—how marvelous! Whereas, a classic materialism was the first (and sometimes too enduring core) of theory in archaeology, we have now come to appreciate and take up the challenge of how materiality is a nontrivial dimension of the symbolic. Yet, that challenge needs ethnographic underpinning to assess and appreciate it. Let me use a concrete example from my explorations as an ethnographer to clarify this last point by returning to the Betsileo region of central Madagascar to look at the issue of the "re-creative" labor on the part of ritual specialists, *Mpanandro* (Makers of Days). Their labor guarantees the tenacity of tradition concerning the construction of houses and tombs. In order to understand the symbolic labor of *Mpanandro*, we need to appreciate several things. First, their labor is *powerfully redundant* across multiple domains (e.g., directional orientation, placement of objects in space, timing of inaugural elements of construction). This redundancy is not so much a litanic drone, but rather an edifying refractive reminder of a Betsileo core cultural principle: life is to be fostered and death kept to its proper domain. Second, the labor of the *Mpanandro* is symbolic labor that involves the play of tropes (across person, gender, language, objects, gesture, landscape, etc.) not only reinforcing tradition, but allowing innovations and re-interpretations to sustain tradition. Third, we need to understand that the symbolic is not just the sonorous arbitrariness of the association of signifier to signified, it is also the *resonant materiality of the iconic and indexical*; the symbolic of sustained sensuous engagement.

To properly orient a house within the changing forces of space and time the Betsileo *Mpanandro* not only decide on the who (e.g., an individual whose parents are both living), the when (e.g., the appropriate hour of the appropriate day of the appropriate month of the appropriate year), and the where (e.g., orientation and locale) of laying out of a house, but also about symbolic accoutrements to plant to foster life and to bury to protect a family from malfeasance. A central piece of this symbolic tableau is the orientation of the central beam of the house, a piece that I want to examine to allow us to understand an imbroglio of trope across the materiality of index and icon.

The Betsileo house is oriented north-south, but this orientation is not of strict compass direction. The central beam of the house needs to be oriented to a *tanjom-belona*—a “life orienting target/point” (Figure 1). Identifying a *tanjom-belona* within a landscape is anything but formulaic. Most individual adult Betsileo can easily generate a list of what NOT to orient the *tanjom-belona* to: not to boulders that drip water (reminiscent of tears), not to tombs or abandoned villages, not to valleys that draw one into a void, or to flyways of birds that suggest chaos, etc. But it takes a specialist to identify an effective *tanjom-belona*. One might naively assume that a *tanjom-belona* should be oriented to the highest point on the landscape. That would be a mistake of a poetaster. From the highest point there is only the suggestion of downward movement. Consider rather the following landscape moment (Figure 2). The point demarcated is the *tanjom-belona* of the house of one ritual specialist. It is an artist's appreciation of the landscape, a moment of secure pause on the landscape. Once your eyes are momentarily arrested at that point of constancy, then your vision is drawn upward. That is a [scientist] poet of the concrete's understanding of landscape; what I imagine was characteristic of the practice of the *Mpanandro* when houses were allowed freer situatedness in the territory. But with French colonial rule, isolated households on heights were outlawed and village of “ten [or more] roofs” were to be established along new arteries of controlled movement. So what of the houses now forced into the submissive space of colonization and modernization? They too need *tanjom-belona*. Look at the following landscape (Figure 3). Not as photogenic or poetic as the previous view. Yet, herein lays the spirit of the law and the poetry of icon and index. The tree, as one ritual specialists explained, is a tree that survived the creation and continuing resurfacing of a road between a regional capital and a secondary market town; a tree that survives the dust and fumes of a major traffic flow; a tree that survives the incessant need for firewood. This is a tree that is icon and index of an orientation of life. Today, walking on that same road it is difficult to distinguish



Figure 1. The orienting of the central beam of the new house of a ritual specialist (1) and his wife (2).

this *tanjom-belona* among “restored” vegetation; this is a further testament to the acuity of the original orientation.

What are the “take away” points here given space constraints?

- Ethnographic experiences continue to remind me to not two-dimensionalize the prehistoric other; hapless non-elite victims of other states are *not necessarily witless* victims.
- Their “wit” is one of trope, of metaphor steeped in material engagement with their world. We archaeologists should not forget that the domain of the symbolic is one



Figure 2. The point on the landscape that serves as the “life-orienting target” of the house of a ritual specialist.



Figure 3. The tree that serves as the "life-orienting target" of the house of another ritual specialist.

not only of the abstract sign, but also one of the materiality, sensuality, and affectivity of icon and index.

- Careful and powerful choice of abstract theoretical vocabulary should be grounded both in the materiality of archaeology and in the materiality of ethnographic experience.

Some have spoken of hybrid scholarship to qualify research that escapes the frame of traditional subdisciplinary and disciplinary boundaries. I see such scholarship as owing allegiance to a *problem focus* rather than a disciplinary specialty. Yet, with that said, training as an archaeologist brings important sensitivities. There is the sustained cultivation of an appreciation of the "deep alterity" of many ways of being in the world that precede contemporary times and these should find their way into the discourse of the larger discipline as a whole. Archaeologists continue to come to the table as materialists but now equipped to dismantle the old dichotomy of the material and the ideal. They come also as "deep materialists" who understand that material sensual engagement with the world both renders the world meaningful and transformational, and are thus powerfully equipped to engage in answering the *how* of the transformation of self, society, world, and meaning.

Now that our theories recognize a prehistoric and historic other imbued with agency, embodied, situated in alterities of

not only ecology and landscape, but ontology as well, and transformed by material and symbolic engagement in everyday life, I would argue that the practice of ethnography in the ranks of archaeologists is critical. It is critical, certainly, as incitement to theoretical imagination, but more importantly it is critical as touchstone so that our theoretical vocabulary does not become either appropriative or prurient concerning other subjectivities. This call for ethnography within our ranks would seem to fall under the common axiom of "anthropologically informed archaeology." But I would push us further. Archaeologists bring to the larger discipline a profound sensitivity for "deep materiality" and a sense of "deep alterity." We need to take up the challenge not only of anthropologically informed archaeology, but also archaeologically informed ethnography. I wonder if the courses taught by archaeologists to ethnographers become an interesting arena for taking up this challenge. Rather than being content to instill cultural anthropologists with a healthy respect for the methods and material findings of archaeology, we might look to our ethnographic moments to carry on further dialogues, perhaps even writing our own short classics to rival Shakespeare, "Shakespeare in the Bush" that is, to be remembered beyond the classroom.

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Notes

1. This paper was originally presented at the AAA 2008 Annual meetings in a session organized by Kathryn Lafarencz Samuels and Joshua Samuels.
2. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anthropology>