

A POSSIBLE MEDICINE-MAKING STONE IN THE UPPER TOFOL DRAINAGE, KOSRAE, MICRONESIA

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The jungles of Kosrae continue to shield vestiges of the island's ancient heritage. Hidden within its verdure are the remnants of stone villages, roadways, fortresses, and even more mundane activity sites where one can sharpen tools, make medicine, and take a brief respite en-route from somewhere to someplace else. During the summer of 2004, several archaeological sites were identified within a single square kilometer of the upper Tofol drainage, on the eastern shores of Kosrae. Many of these sites displayed a range and association of features that have not been recorded in the archaeological record for the island, at least not before this. One feature in particular captured our interest and curiosity (and there were so many!) – a basalt boulder with several conical to concave cupules pecked and ground into the top surface of the rock. Other similar worked boulders were observed throughout this same drainage system, always in comparable positions within the peripheral areas of residential or village sites.

What made this type of worked boulder unique were the cupules, small shallow bowls arranged relatively close together and confined to the top face of the boulder. These were, it seemed to us, intended to hold something, but what kind of something was the question. Other kinds of worked boulders have been encountered previously in Kosrae archaeological sites, including sites within the Tofol drainage, but these boulders exhibited well-recognized forms and shapes and were always associated with public spaces or defined kitchens. In fact, many of these worked boulders continue to be used today in the production of two traditional foods – *faa'faa* (a *poi*-like delicacy) and *seka* (a slightly narcotic drink made from the root of the *piper* plant). Both

faa'faa and *seka* are made on boulder sized slabs of basalt; however, the former requires a broad, very flat and ever-so-slightly concave surface, while the latter is produced on a relatively flat boulder with a shallow, sinuous channel ground into its surface. And, as heirloom objects, both types of artifacts are highly sought after, as they are believed to contain the "memory" of their product, and as such produce a richer *faa'faa* or more potent *seka*.

The cupule-laden worked boulders, however, were a mystery. Sited within contexts of isolation outside public spaces or defined activity areas, these objects suggested ritualistic or specialized activities, particularly activities meant to be inaccessible to the many. But what might that activity be? Magic? Medicine-making? Religion? Ceremony? Politics? This is where our problem in explanation starts, recognizing or at least trying to infer a possible function for these features, why there is usually only one within a site, and why they are inevitably located within the marginal region of a site.

Without benefit of archaeological excavation or detailed investigations (our 2004 work was considered exploratory only), little information other than location and site association can be recouped. And, while this is sufficient to raise questions, even suppositions, it does little to help in understanding these features, particular as they relate to site activity, which in turn can aid in planning more specific and efficacious recovery efforts.

In turning to the historical ethnographic information available for Kosrae (e.g., Sarfert 1919, 1920, Ritter and Ritter 1982, Christian 1899, Cordy 1993), we are again confronted with little assistance in resolving this conundrum.



Both magic-making and medicine are discussed by Sarfert, an eyewitness to the demise of traditional practices and missionization of the culture, but not in any specific terms and only in association with chants, religious activity, ceremonies associated with important undertakings, the transference of political power, celebration of a deity, or within the context of curing physical or spiritual maladies. In short, one is faced with the inescapable fact that Kosraeans and their ancestors, like so many of their kin across this part of the Pacific, relied on a combination of liturgies, incantations, admixtures, infusions, restoratives, and curatives to affect change in various sectors of their lives. But specific reference to the physical tools or consumables used in these rituals is neither described nor recorded.

Nor is the oral history for Kosrae useful in understanding these enigmatic objects. Few narratives remain intact, which Sarfert found significant enough to comment upon: the youngest generation, he lamented, do not know their own past and culture (Sarfert 1919). What remained were incongruous fragments of a formerly rich history that encompassed deities who once reigned supreme over some realm of nature, deified ancestors, impish spirits, significant acts of heroism in that mythic realm of ancestors, places that harbor the souls of the dead, as well as more humanly motivated needs revolving around love magic, the dangers of off-shore fishing and long distance trading expeditions, construction of a canoe, or even what constitutes proper and improper behavior. By the end of the nineteenth century, the ancient traditions of Kosrae had been altered beyond recognition (Sarfert 1919). They had been displaced by a new social order, a new concept of morality, a new religion; in effect, this tractable population teetering precipitously close to extinction was forced into a hybridization of western culture introduced by Reverend Snow and his Congregationalist missionaries. The past was relegated to the memories of a few old men who happened to survive the onslaught of for-

eign explorers, traders, buccaneers, proselytizers, colonizers, and the diseases they brought with them.

But, that isn't the end of our possible line of inquiry. While Sarfert was recording the reminiscences of island historians and selected informants, some traditional practices continued to endure as part of a netherworld that formed a shadowy undercurrent to the modernization and Christianization of Kosrae. These were inherited family vocations consisting of proprietary knowledge and skills (e.g., traditional medicine, magic-making) that played a vital role in the community.

At one time, these arts were in high demand and provided a necessary service, and as a commodity they represented a source of income, pride, and even status. Yet, to openly practice their craft now, under the penetrating gaze of missionaries, practitioners were acting in direct opposition to sanctions imposed by the Church. Their work had to be conducted in private, behind closed doors and shuttered windows, and in a whispered undertone, so as not to offend the new deity of this new religion.

Today, the knowledge associated with these disenfranchised professions has somehow managed to survive, notwithstanding the strict conditions of deprivation under which their practitioners operated more than a century ago. However, that knowledge did not escape unscathed, as one might expect with any forbidden art practiced in secret for decades. Somewhat disarticulated, and with small details lost over the years, even the current state of knowledge of these once-prohibited professions has not prevented their continued practice. Traditional medicine still plays a role as an alternative to other medical treatments, although few admit to the use of magic. The latter, at least, seems to have been consigned to a kind of slumber in obscurity, a slender footnote in history.

So, when we encountered the worked boulders during our survey, a couple of the crew members (who just happen to belong to a family that "owns" local medicine) made an



almost immediate link between the boulders and medicine-making. Each had recalled their grandmother preparing medicine, always chopping and grinding separate ingredients before blending smaller portions of each into the prescribed concoction. Medicine, after all, requires the proportional mixing of several different components – plant, animal, mineral – each of which must be prepared from its raw form before being combined. The multiple cupules on the boulder surfaces



could easily accommodate preparation of several different items, with at least one cupule reserved for the final mixing. Is this the last or best, definitive interpretation for these rather enigmatic, cupule-laden features? Not really, but it does provide a starting point, although we cannot completely rule out the possibility of other functions (e.g., magic-making or some other yet-to-be-identified activity) in the now vanished, irretrievable past.

Whether medicine or magic (or some other), these activities require a knowledgeable practitioner who must work in relative isolation, beyond the limits of prying eyes, in part because of the proprietary knowledge attached to each but also because of the presumed dangers associated with these rituals and the supernatural powers called upon to aid in their administration (Sarfert 1919, 1920, Cordy 1993).

How much of this intangible knowledge would be preserved in tangible form within the archaeological record is yet another question we face, but narrowing the potential activities associated with these features at least helps to bolster our expectations and focus our observations. Our next step is to more thoroughly investigate the Tofol sites, including these particular features and their contexts, through archaeological excavation.

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