

Introduction: July 4, 1954, A Great Day for the Archaeology of Hawai‘i

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This Special Publication by the Society for Hawaiian Archaeology honors Dr. Yosihiko H. Sinoto, Bishop Museum Senior Anthropologist. Best known for his innovative research on fishhook typologies, his ground breaking research on the “early” sites of Polynesia, especially in Hawai‘i, the Marquesas and Society Islands, concentrates on the material culture of the first settlers. His work on that initial period forms a background of knowledge that has provided stable points of reference for scholars working in the islands since his first publications about fishhooks in 1959 (1959a–d).

He was born in Japan but, having worked with the Bishop Museum *‘ohana* since he arrived in Hawai‘i sixty years ago, he has touched the hearts of the islanders and is honored in Hawai‘i as a “living treasure,” and in Tahiti as *matahiapo*, a “first-born” community leader. His numerous awards and distinctions include a Japanese Imperial Award, The Order of Rising Sun, Gold and Silver Rays; the Knight Insignia of the Order of Tahiti Nui, Chevalier; the Bishop Museum Robert J. Pfeiffer Medal; and the Mary Kawena Pukui Award for his contributions to Hawaiian culture and history.

Much of this brief introduction, is adapted from Yosi’s biography, *Curve of the Hook*, which is scheduled for publication in the summer of 2015. It is a stirring account of his remarkable life and career, and provides great insight into a unique period of scientific exploration in the Pacific that was the beginning of current archaeological research in the region.

The English spelling of his name is a source of puzzlement to both Japanese and English speakers so I’d like to add a brief note of explanation. The romanization of Japanese to English has been done in various ways and in the system that was used for the spelling of his name, “s” is used in place of “sh.” The pronunciation of “Yosihiko Sinoto,” following the more familiar spelling format, is “Yo shi hiko

Shi noto.” He added “H” as a middle initial to help distinguish his romanized name from his father’s, which is nearly identical.

Yosi’s career at the Bishop Museum began sixty years ago while traveling from Japan to enroll at the University of California, Berkeley. The catastrophic upheavals of World War II had interrupted his studies but he was a seasoned archaeologist who possessed tremendous focus and commitment to his work. He published his first article on the Neolithic Jomon period of Japan during the height of the war (1943). This was followed by more articles and a dictionary of Japanese archaeology (1951). Soon after came a book about one of the major Jomon sites of Japan, the Ubayama shell mound near Tokyo. The first radiocarbon age estimates for a Japanese archaeological site, “about 4,500 years old,” were published in that volume (1952). It seems like 4,500 years was not old enough because the young scientist was also interested in the possibility that a much older Paleolithic culture existed. He wanted to investigate the origins of the Jomon people. This was a topic of fierce debate at the time but with limited fieldwork being conducted in post-war Japan, researchers were mainly reading about Paleolithic sites in Europe and America. Thinking about the educational options available to him in that milieu, Yosi decided that he would go to the University of California, Berkeley where a number of scholars were studying Paleolithic archaeology.

On July 4, 1954, his ship made a scheduled stop in Honolulu and during the layover he received an invitation from Bishop Museum’s Dr. Kenneth Emory to spend a month working on the excavations at Ka Lae (South Point) on the island of Hawai‘i. Emory was so impressed by the young student that at the end of the month he insisted that instead of continuing on to Berkeley, Sinoto should change his plans and study Hawaiian archaeology with him! In

spite of much uncertainty about how this might affect his visa approvals, Yosi eventually decided to accept the invitation and so began his new life and career in Hawaiian archaeology.

When he arrived at Ka Lae in that summer of 1954, one of the first questions he asked was what kind of pottery had been found? Emory told him that there is no pottery in Hawai‘i, so Yosi asked which artifacts could be used to evaluate the chronology for the sites.

He was astonished when he was told that none of the artifacts were suitable for chronological analysis.

At that time the excavations of the sand dunes were conducted using arbitrary six inch levels and a three foot square grid system to control the dig. Having worked extensively on ceramic series in Japan that spanned many thousands of years, Yosi knew how important natural layers are for guiding archaeological excavations, so when Emory asked him to lead the next field session at Ka Lae a few months later in the winter of 1954, he said that he would do it only if he could excavate using natural layers, and the metric

system. Emory approved his plan and Yosi spent the semester break, directing the work.

That field session was one of the key moments for the archaeology of Hawai‘i. Dozens of fishhooks were being recovered every day from the excavations and Yosi noticed that they varied considerably in form and material. He soon realized that here was the Hawaiian artifact he could use to study the chronology of sites, as he had done using Jomon pottery. Fortunately, the newly adopted excavation method separated materials from different layers, and it became clear that the fishhooks from different strata at the site varied systematically.

The program of excavations in the Ka Lae area eventually recovered about 3,500 fishhooks.

While working at the museum as a student intern until he completed his undergraduate degree in 1958, he continued work on the fishhooks and with Emory and William Bonk published their landmark study “Hawaiian Archaeology: Fishhooks” (1959). Yosi’s title for one of his lectures is “A 50-Year



Ka Lae (South Point), July 1954. William Bonk, Elaine Frisbie, Kenneth Emory, Yosi Sinoto, William Solheim.

Archaeological Search: Origins of the Hawaiian Ancestors” and the work he did at Ka Lae was just the beginning of the search.

I’d like to again refer the reader to his upcoming biography for an in depth chronicle of his career following his undergraduate years. Because what followed was an incredible series of discoveries at sites he excavated, that form much of the core of the “early” assemblage of artifacts for East Polynesia.

In 1960, Yosi was a Bishop Museum Fellow in Anthropology when he worked with Emory on a reconnaissance survey of the Society Islands. He returned to Tahiti in 1962, after completing his doctoral dissertation on Polynesian fishhooks, to begin excavations at several places that they had found promising. While making preparations in Papeete, however, a friend who he had met on the island of Maupiti showed him artifacts that made him change his plans completely.

The artifacts he found at the Maupiti site were unlike any others known for the Society Islands; especially the shaped whale tooth pendants, a type of ornament that was only known from “early” sites in New Zealand (1964a). Later, Yosi found similar whale tooth pendants in early contexts at the Hane site in the Marquesas and the Fa’ahia/Vaito’otia sites in the Society Islands (1966, 1975). His analysis of the distribution of these artifacts, as well as a wide range of other material such as adzes, harpoon heads, fishhooks, potsherds, clubs, and radiocarbon dates provided the substance for the first of his many articles about Hawaiian and Polynesian origins (1966).

His excavations at the 800 year old Fa’ahia site, a waterlogged canoe manufacturing area, were especially spectacular. Yosi had actually found canoe parts there a decade before he undertook the large scale excavations, but he delayed the project because there was no museum in Tahiti that could care for the extremely fragile wet wooden artifacts. He waited until new facilities were built and the patience and forethought that he exhibited exemplifies his approach to his work.

When Emory retired in 1970, Yosi became Chairman of the Department of Anthropology. The department flourished under his leadership and became a center for research that spanned the Pacific.

He also provided Hawai‘i with crucial leadership in historic preservation when the development boom took hold here. One of the very first things he did, immediately after becoming Chairman, was to issue a public statement calling for stronger historic preservation laws and educational programs. A short while later, Bishop Museum took a leading role in Hawai‘i’s first statewide inventory of historic places.

Not content that his staff would have to publish in the journals of other institutions he also strengthened the department through regular publication of the Pacific Anthropological Records and the data rich Departmental Report Series where research from the rapidly growing public archaeology program could be disseminated.

Yosi is committed to the Bishop Museum and understands its multi-faceted role in preserving the heritage of the islands. In 1976, he oversaw the building of the Bishop Museum Hawai‘i Immigrant Heritage Preservation Center, where artifacts and documents from the early years of the plantation communities, ca 1900, could be protected and studied.

Yosi’s conservation activities extend to other island groups as well, and beginning in 1968 he developed an archaeological site stabilization and preservation program for the Society Islands. Fluent in Tahitian, he has earned the respect and trust of the people by working with them for so many years. His support and advice for programs in the Cook Islands and Easter Island has greatly encouraged their communities in their efforts to implement historic preservation measures in spite of significant obstacles.

This year, 2014, marks the 60th anniversary of his arrival in Hawai‘i and he also celebrates his 90th birthday. Yosi maintains regular, albeit shortened, office hours at the Bishop Museum and complains about a ceaseless stream of questions and requests. But I know that his inquisitive mind and sharp instincts relish the thought of examining yet another piece of the puzzle when he opens his email every morning. With this volume, the Society for Hawaiian Archaeology honors the many accomplishments and contributions made by one of the most brilliant and dedicated scholars of our time. Indeed, July 4, 1954 was a great day for the archaeology of Hawai‘i, when Yosihiko Sinoto set foot on our shores.