ORAL HISTORY, ARCHAEOLOGY, AND EPHEMERAL CULTURE: BOCCE BALL IN THE VASCO

Karana Hattersley-Drayton
Anthropological Studies Center
Sonoma State University
Rohnert Park, CA 94928

ABSTRACT

Cultural and ethnic traditions are often expressed ephemerally and leave little or no trace in the archaeological record. Oral history, for late 19th-century and early 20th-century sites, thus becomes a necessity in addressing questions about gender, ethnic boundaries, and behavior. Following Geertz' seminal work on play, this paper examines the importance of *bocce* ball among Italian emigrant tenant farmers in "the Vasco" (ca. 1920s). The premise is that the *bocce* ball court represents an ethnic gendered space and cultural text which can be read to better understand the world view and values of this community. The ongoing dialogue about ethnicity and the "invention" of ethnicity is also briefly explored.

The egalitarian nature of historical archaeology is also a major tenet of oral history research. Thus one goal of both disciplines is to produce a more "democratic" history, one in which everyday people are more than mere pawns in a struggle for political and economic power. Oral history, to quote the late social historian Paul Thompson, gives "back to the people who made and experienced history through their own words, a central place" (1978:2). As with postprocessual and feminist archaeology, oral history sweeps aside normative models of culture in a quest for the individual. History is also understood to be multivocalic—there is no one story, no one correct answer, but rather a diversity of readings for culture and its texts. (As Ian Hodder has written, "cultural reality is a shifting assortment of varied perspectives. When looked at as a whole, there is no one 'true' version of events" (1991: 159; see also 1991:181).

The modern tool of oral history (and by oral history I mean the tape-recorded, first-hand experiences of individuals) was initially developed to fill in the gaps left in the historical record. Gradually oral interviews have come to be valued as a way to write a more humanized history, to add flesh to the bones of dry statistics. Tagged onto archaeological fieldwork, oral history may also serve an important pragmatic function, to help locate and map 19th- and 20th- century sites. (Among groups with a rich oral tradition this window of time can be extended back several generations; cf.., Pendergast and Meighan 1959; Vansina 1985.) Where was the privy? How did you dispose of your trash? Do you remember the plan of the mill? These are a few of the questions we ask "old-timers" as we guide them through a site. To borrow a phrase from archaeologist John Parkington, oral history offers yet another point from which we can triangulate in our search for resolution and meaning.

To a great extent archaeologists rely upon the interpretation of artifacts. With care these "cultural texts" can be read to offer yet another tool for comprehending the history, social fabric and world view of a particular period or community. And yet the interpretation of these texts is not fail-safe, even for materials form the early 20th century.

Folklorist Henry Glassie has cautioned that artifacts must be read first as a "mental process of design...rather than as an element in performance" (1977:27). To crudely paraphrase him, artifactual analysis may indicate how an item was *thought* but it cannot tell us *what* was thought of the item or even how it was used. Neither potsherds nor probates will necessarily reveal attitudes towards a problem or event, whether the death of a child or the expression of community at Christmas. The gift of oral history is that it can provide this context.

For example, in a particularly poignant memory from the coal mining settlement at Nortonville, California one man recalled that someone outside of the family had to pay the twenty dollar burial fee for his brother: "Twenty dollars, where we gonna ge the money? (...) And they took and buried my little brother and...I went up on the little flat. I went up there and I kicked the undertaker cause he was taking my little brother away" (Hattersley-Drayton 1995:27). And no artifact, not even a gravestone, has quite the kind of power as does this simple statement.

The interpretation of material culture is also often hotly contested. A steel comb excavated from an early 20th-century African-American domestic complex in Annapolis was finally identified as a hot comb used for hair straightening. While archaeologists saw the artifact as a mechanism to achieve job integration and acculturation, the local African-American community had a rather different perspective. For blacks the hot comb represents a symbol of "prudent social negotiation" and cultural resistance which is still misinterpreted by outsiders to this day (Mullins 1992:1). Perhaps both readings have validity. The point is that oral history (conversation) can resolve problems of context and meaning, allowing for a dialogue and a multiplicity of views.

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But implicit to all of these examples is the notion that oral history is a secondary source of evidence, a dutiful stepchild in the shadow of more privileged information. I trust that I am preaching to the choir but I want to stress that oral history serves as a more profound resource to the student of 19th-and early 20th-century social history. It can stand as a primary rather than merely a supplementary source of data (Hattersley-Drayton 1995). Oral history may be, in fact, the *only* resource available to reconstruct and decode a particular community. The marginal Croatian fishing village of Sobrante at Point Pinole came to light only through interviews with the last living descendent. Likewise, to date, no photographs, no documents, no primary or secondary source materials of any kind beyond oral interviews have surfaced to illuminate Giant Park, one of many Bay Area picnic grounds which once served a variety of fraternal lodges and ethnic groups. If indeed the "present creates the past" (Tonkin et al. 1989:7; see also Schellenbaum 1993:156) then it is essential that we do not selectively "forget" the history of ethnically diverse places such as Sobrante and Giant Park.

The "necessity" for oral history work is also underscored by the fact that culture is often expressed ephemerally and thus it leaves little or no material trace, whether above ground or below. As we ask the archaeological record, for example, what Irish railroad families ate at countless meals and what kind of ceramics they used, we need to also ask whether they continued to step dance, play fiddle tunes and attend *ceilidhes*. Did local Azorean-Portuguese express identity and continuity through the public performance of the Holy Ghost festa? And were games such as *morra* and *bocce* played by southern Italian males after they immigrated to America?

Beyond the premise of oral history as primary source material I would like to take one step further and suggest that oral history also serves as a first order of ethnography. As illustration I will use three examples from recent fieldwork, one from Los Vaqueros and two from the Cypress Freeway Replacement Project.

> **Vignette 1:** A German-American descendant of one Vasco farm family recalled, dryly, that the only help her mother received in childbirth was that her father brought the cow up to the back door so that the mother would not have to walk to the barn. In a similar vein, two Italian-American sisters remember that their mother never had time to quilt because "she worked like a man, cutting hay and all that." The day following the birth of her third child, this small stolid woman got up, went to round up the cows for milking and then proceeded to cook dinner for the harvesting crew.

> **Vignette 2:** In late January I interviewed two generations of one Italian-American family who lived in West Oakland prior to World War II. I was attempting to understand the generational shift in meaning in the word *paesan* when one member of the 2nd generation quipped: "Now everybody wants to be Italian." And her husband quickly responded: "There's only two kinds of people: those that are Italian and those that wannabe." And with this remark the group exploded in laughter.

> **Vignette 3:** In another recent interview with a Mexican-American resident of West Oakland I noticed that the modest home was filled with paintings, pot holders, and paraphernalia emblazoned with roosters. The small backyard was lined with pens which now house pigeons. It was only during a break from the formal taped interview that the homeowner off-tape candidly discussed her husband's prior avocation as a trainer of fighting cocks.

These simple ethnographic snapshots provide a depth of information regarding questions of interest to archaeologists, social historians and folk cultural specialists alike. Gender, ethnic identity and boundaries, and behavior are all easily articulated through conversation.

If engendering the past is one promise of feminist archaeology then the potential for engendering the present and near-present through oral history is staggering. By "gender" I mean socially constructed categories of behavior for males and females (Hastorf 1991:132). Coincidentally, perhaps, both Vasco families in these anecdotes were dominated by stern, erratic fathers who held to old-world notions of social roles. Women worked like women—cooking, gardening and giving birth—but they also worked "like men" not only because of economic necessity but because it was expected of them.

The Italian "wannabe" joke, framed within the context of the interview, comments on ethnicity and self-identity within the Italian-American community. One goal of urban archaeology is to better understand ethnic groups and boundaries. And yet ethnicity as a concept is usually accepted at face value rather than problematized. "Ethnicity" as a word only first appeared in print in 1941 and in the OED in 1953 although the ethnos, meaning an undifferentiated group of warriors and animals, is at least as old as Homer (Tonkin et al. 1989:12). Praetzellis, Praetzellis and Brown (1987) in their discussion of early Sacramento's Chinatown, have pointed out the folly and naivete of painting "ethnic" groups as monolithic or homogenous. To their categories of economic and social variability we need to also add the very real issue of regionalism.

As an example, Italian emigrants to West Oakland, following a pattern of chain migration, first settled in households of *paesan*, or "countrymen" from their home village or town. Italy was only unified in 1861 and these early immigrants did not think of themselves as Italians but as *Calibrase* or *Barese*. Their social networks, indeed their accessibility to jobs, were tied to regional affiliation. Over time, and as a response to expectations imposed from without, these *paesan* gradually became Italians and then Italian-Americans (cf., Mathias 1974:81, 137; Schellenbaum 1993:164). To some extent then and following Werner Sollors' (1991) argument, ethnicity was invented here.

For Angela Albanese Cosy, a 90-year-old first-generation immigrant, *paesan* still means fellow villager. For her son,

72-year-old Ben Albanese, the word appropriately signifies the new group, "Italian." Up through the 1960s and 1970s Italians in the United States felt the burn of discrimination. Now Italians and Italian-Americans enjoy a higher status owing not only to the economic stature of the local Italian community but also to the enhanced socioeconomic status of Italy itself. "Made in Italy" is now *portato in alto da tutti*, "highly regarded by all" (Schellenbaum 1993:174). Indeed as the joke states, there are now two kinds of people, Italians and Italian "wannabes."

The cockfight is perhaps the most elusive and ephemeral of all, difficult to elicit even through interviews, as this ritual drama is illegal in most countries. How would we interpret the iconography of the rooster images without the context of the narrative? (How, indeed, would we decode eagle motifs found in contemporary households decorated in an "Early American" style?) Could we know that 100 Clarkes, Kelsos and Blue Grey fighting cocks were raised in this urban yard? Would we see Mexican and Filipino women selling homebaked foods on the sidelines as their men enacted the "deep play" of the cockfight? Would we know that this activity took place on a ranch owned by a local sheriff? And could we understand that the husband's passion for cockfighting created a deep fissure in this particular family?

Conversation, oral history, is both flexible and expressive and it offers a rich source of data for the social historian and ethnographer. But oral history is also incomplete and at times "undemocratic." Chinese bachelors who worked in the California coal mines and dynamite factories at Giant left no descendents to tell their stories. And to quote Henry Glassie, "when your wish is to understand people who are dead, artifacts are all you have. They last" (1977:28).

Bocce Ball in the Vasco

I'd like to turn now to the Los Vaqueros Project and look at the game of *bocce*, one aspect of expressive culture, or folklife, which has been elicited through oral history interviews. I safely use the modifier "Italian" as *bocce* is played throughout Italy and apparently pre-dates the Roman Empire (Mathias 1974). A form of *bocce* is also played in France, along the Adriatic coast of Yugoslavia and throughout the world wherever Italians have relocated. Some form of the game was brought to California in the 19th century by Italian emigrants and it was played on both outdoor and indoor courts which were often attached to a saloon. The game is also clearly related to English lawn bowling (cf., Greig 1904).

Bocce is deceptively simple yet psycologically complex. Although now standardized through international play and regulations, generations of elderly Italian-American men continue to play according to a more fluid, folk standard of rules and aesthetics. (The following general outline of contemporary play comes from members of the San Francisco Aquatic Park Bocce Club and I am indebted to them.) Two opposing teams of usually four players each attempt to place balls as close as possible to a target ball, a *pallino* or "jack," which has been rolled down a rectangular court of approximately 75 by 12 feet. Points are accrued by the proximity to the target ball. A ball which touches the target is said to "kiss" the *pallino*. Team members attempt to *bocce* ("botch") or knock their opponent's balls away from the *pallino* by either rolling their ball *(striscio)* or by using the more flamboyant and difficult *volo* shot or "fly ball." Six points per hand are possible although rarely made; a standard game is several hands with a total of thirteen points, fifteen points for a tournament. Since points can all be deducted when one *bocces* an opponent's ball, the game is constantly in flux (cf., Horowitz 1994; Piernini 1984).

Folklorist Elizabeth Mathias (1981) has suggested that initially both in Italy and America bocce was played crosscountry in a kind of free-for-all test of stamina, and she suggests that the move to the bounded space of the court was an environmental response to urban life (Malpezzi and Clements 1992:155; Mathias 1974:174-175, 1981:82-83). Although *Calabresi* immigrants played a variant of *bocce* using rocks or hard rounds of cheese in the streets of West Oakland, Italian immigrants in the rural expanses of the Vasco played their version of *bocce* on carefully groomed adobe courts.

Census records and oral history attest to a remarkable mix of mostly immigrant families in the Vasco: Portuguese, Italian, German and Irish. In contrast to other California agrarian communities is the large number of French settlers, most of them of Basque descent. Saturday night dances, held in a farmhouse kitchen or an outbuilding, contributed to community identity and social cohesion. Although there was inter-ethnic mix at some levels, first and second-generation families generally socialized along lines of ethnic affiliation. "They'd stay more or less in their own" (Fragulia 1993a:26).

One exception, at first glance, were the Italian and French-born residents who met to play *bocce* at the courts of "French Frank". After a closer inspection of several interviews it appears, however, that these courts figured most prominently as a social network for Italians. Frank Rafette, an immigrant bachelor, dubbed the "Iron Man," lived on a tenant ranch at the northern end of the Vasco grant along with several French laborers. The courts were a commercial venture and he charged either two bits or four bits a game. Although in 1908 Raffette purchased his own 160-acre farm outside the grant he apparently continued to run his *bocce* "club" up through the early 1920s.

Bocce was played then much as it is today with a few variations. According to Paul Fragulia, men played partners rather than in teams of 3-4, and they referred to the target ball as the "pinky." Unlike the flat oyster shell courts of San Francisco those at "French Frank's" were hard-packed adobe with a slight bias to the edge similar to those in South Philadelphia. In order to maintain control one had to "put the 'English' on the ball, to get that ball rolling a certain way, spinning a certain way so that when it got down to the 'pinky' it would touch the pinky and stop, right there." This strategy required great skill: " It took me a long time. I used to practice and practice all the time you know. But there were a lot of

them Italian people. Boy, they could really play ball...men, I never seen any women playing" (Fragulia 1993b).

To understand the role and function of *bocce* ball among these Italian-Americans we hardly need to go further than this quote. Fragulia recalls that he practiced "all the time." The seriousness of this play is underscored by his committment of time and resources. Unlike baseball, one couldn't practice *bocce* in the front yard but only on the groomed surface of the court: "As long as we paid two bits a game we could practice all day." (You can imagine how much hard earned pocket money could be expended at this rate.) Money also exchanged hands during the games and heavy betting served to raise the stakes.

Through memory ethnography the *bocce* ball courts at Rafette's also emerge as a gendered landscape. In every discussion with Mr. Fragulia he commented on the fact that he never saw a woman play *bocce*. Even as recently as twenty years ago Elizabeth Mathias could remark that she "never saw a woman at the courts" in South Philadelphia and some local Bay Area clubs remain "a bastion of maleness" to this day. There is a theatrical quality to the game; spectators are integral and are welcome. Women may have come to watch Vasco competitions but if so they are not named.

Common to other Italian-American communities the Vasco courts also had a small building on the grounds which served as a kind of clubhouse. Men gathered here to drink wine, play pedro, casino and poker. During winter months or rainy seasons *bocce* players traveled into Livermore to play on the courts behind Ratti's Saloon. Typically this, too, was a gendered landscape although women were not prohibited: "Once in a while they come in with their husband." (And Fragulia's use of the "historic present' is interesting.) This constellation of activities—*bocce* ball, drinking, betting and cards—is typical for traditional Italian-American communities in which space is ritually segregated. The woman's domain is, or was, the home and church. The street corner, bar and fraternal club served as a meeting ground for men (Malpezzi 1992:149; Scherini 1980:140). Photographs from the Vasco suggest that this pattern of exclusion, however, was at least softened on this frontier.

Finally, through this quote, Fragulia comments directly upon the question of ethnicity. Although he notes that other "nationalities" came to play at French Frank's, clearly the courts were used predominantly by local Italian-Americans. English was apparently the dominant language which suggests that second generation descendents, such as Mr. Fragulia, were consistently present. *Bocce* ball play helped to meld this community and provide a sense of identity in an ever- shifting ethnic landscape. French Frank's exerted both a centripetal as well as a centrifugal pull as *bocce* players from outside the area came to play at tournaments in the Vasco and local teams journeyed to competitions in other Bay Area cities, a feat of some consequence when one considers the quality of roads at the time (c. 1920). Although Vasco farmers might own a car, roads were impassable much of the year and farmers continued to plow and harrow with horses up through the 1940s.

Games are anything but frivolous. Eugene Fink (and others) see the play arena as an oasis, an Eden before the fall, as a separate reality (in Mathias 1974:51). Erving Goffman, in contrast, suggests that games are public rituals which mediate in the transition from one cultural view of the world to another (in Mathias 1974:9). Is the *bocce* court merely a stage set, and if so for what kind of play? Looking back from this distance it is difficult to move much beyond a functional analysis. Certainly *bocce* in the Vasco was multivocalic—with a diversity of meanings. For Italian immigrants, the gendered landscape represented a continuity from social roles learned in both southern and northern Italy. For the second generation, the *bocce* ball court was a place to go and something to do. It was a place to be Italian, a place to be American, and to some extent it was a place to learn what it is to be a man.

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