
Critique of Pauketat's Volume

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A recurring theme running through Timothy Pauketat's *The Chieftdom and Other Archaeological Delusions* is the notion that the introduction of evolutionary ideas into Southeastern archaeology, in the 1960s and 1970s, had a pernicious effect on that endeavor. Pauketat steadfastly denies that these ideas made any positive contribution to the interpretation of the prehistory of that region. Let us see if this conclusion is justified.

Before evolutionary thinking began to affect it, Southeastern archeology had a rather narrow vision of its objectives. One of its concerns was that of establishing a historical chronology, with an emphasis on proper ceramic typologies. Did 'Punxatawney Red-on-White' precede 'Chattahoochee Black-on-Buff', or was it the other way around?

To be sure, such studies were necessary and useful, but they were by no means the be-all and end-all of archaeology. Carried out too assiduously, they tended to draw attention away from the loftier goal of reconstructing, as fully as possible, the economic, social, political, and religious institutions of the societies whose material remains were being unearthed. In pursuing such a grand objective, Southeastern archaeologists were handicapped by the lack of robust theoretical concepts. Eventually, though, such intellectual tools became available to them. And since Pauketat fails to engage this phase of archaeology's history, let me attempt to do so here in brief compass. What was it that lay behind the infusion of new ideas into the domain of Southeastern prehistory? The influx of such ideas centered around the concept of the *chieftdom* – the very concept Pauketat regards as 'delusional'.

Surprisingly, the chieftdom, the concept as well as the term, was not introduced into anthropology until 1955. In that year

the ethnologist Kalervo Oberg, in a groundbreaking article in the *American Anthropologist*, unveiled it as one of several structural forms he identified in the native cultures of Central and South America. However, what Oberg presented merely as a structural type, Elman Service (also an ethnologist) saw as an evolutionary stage. In his influential little book, *Primitive Social Organization* (1962), Service made the chiefdom a key element – indeed, the lynchpin – of his now-famous developmental series of *Band, Tribe, Chiefdom, and State*. Thus the chiefdom, and the evolutionary sequence of which it formed a part, may be regarded, quite properly, as ethnology's 'gift' to archaeology.

Among the first to recognize the utility of Service's scheme for archaeology were William Sanders and Barbara Price. In their book, *Mesoamerica, the Evolution of a Civilization* (1968), they put this scheme to work in portraying the rise of civilization in that region. The attention soon garnered by this volume led a number of archaeologists working in the Southeastern United States to see the possibilities of applying Service's evolutionary sequence to the interpretation of their own area's prehistory. And as they did so, it quickly became apparent to them that the culminating stage of cultural development in the Southeast, previously referred to as 'Temple Mound', also had a socio-political face which, in terms of the newly adopted sequence of stages, was clearly that of the *chiefdom*. This identification proved to be right on target. Thus Pauketat's contention that in adopting the concept of chiefdom Southeastern archaeologists were badly misled, is very wide of the mark. Accordingly, those archaeologists, instead of being fuzzy minded and easily duped, were actually perceptive and far-sighted. Their work in fact led to a complete reorientation of archaeological thinking, so that the narrow particularism of old was largely abandoned, giving way to a more panoramic view and a broader synthesis.

The cultures of the Mississippian period were now seen as the product of an evolution that had led from the autonomous villages of an earlier time to the impressive chiefdoms that were so conspicuous a feature of the landscape when De Soto and his men first arrived on the scene. More and more, Southeastern archaeologists saw their proper goal as that of laying bare the evolutionary process that had produced such a profound cultural transformation. No longer was there such an emphasis on the way people decorated

their pots; now the major concern became the reconstruction of whole cultures, of functioning societies. The kinship between archaeology and ethnology, once neglected or ignored, became ever more apparent. Thus, rather than the meddlesome interlopers Pauketat seems to regard them, ethnologists were being seen more and more by Southeastern archaeologists as useful allies ... even comrades in arms.

But I would go even further than this. I would venture to say that were an archaeologist in the Southeast suddenly transported back in time into the midst of the culture he had been excavating, he would quickly lay down his trowel, pick up his notebook and pen, sit down with an informant, and begin plying him with the hundred and one questions to which even his most meticulous excavations had failed to yield a satisfactory answer. In a word, he would become an *ethnologist*.

To repeat the gist of my argument, rather than the baleful influence Pauketat thinks evolutionary ethnologists have had on Southeastern archaeologists, they have actually infused them with a new vision, a new energy, and a new purpose. Thus instead of the opprobrium Pauketat so liberally heaps on them, they deserve, if not sainthood, at least knighthood!

Let me turn now more specifically to the chiefdom. Inexplicably, Pauketat seems reluctant to recognize that there was ever such a thing as a *first-generation chiefdom*. He quotes me as saying that, 'Like it or not, the fact remains – unavoidably and ineluctably – that at some point in time there were first generation chiefdoms, and they arose from non-chiefdoms by some specifiable process'. This assertion he calls 'a statement of religious faith', as if only by unquestioning 'faith' could one believe that there *was* such a thing as a first-generation chiefdom! Furthermore, Pauketat maintains that my simple statement of the obvious is, in fact, 'the source of most delusional thinking, ... not an accurate recounting of scientific facts ...' With that, however, it seems to me that Pauketat has placed himself precariously on a fast-melting ice floe.

How can he possibly deny that there was a time when there were *no* chiefdoms in existence anywhere in the Southeast, and that this time was followed, several millennia later, by a time at which the region was liberally sprinkled with them? Accordingly, when the very first chiefdoms came on the scene they were – by an irresistible and compelling logic – *first-generation chiefdoms*!

Paul Radin informs us that in Oglala Sioux mythology some gods are said to have fathered other gods, yet all gods are said to have existed from the beginning of time! How could this be? The Oglala themselves say it is a profound mystery ... one of the great conundrums of the cosmos. I would not hesitate to place Pauketat's rejection of first-generation chiefdoms right up there with the great mysteries of Oglala mythology.

At one point in his rebuttal, Pauketat states that had I defined evolution as 'historically contingent social change through time ...' he would 'have no issue with the word', since for him evolution 'is simply a synonym for history'. But is the matter so easily resolved? Look at it this way. If we define evolution as history, pure and simple, why have two words? 'History' alone would suffice. But then, in effect, we would have defined 'evolution' out of existence! No doubt this result would please Pauketat immensely, and, as he says, he would then no longer have any quarrel with me.

Well, I am not prepared to buy his acceptance of me at such a price. It is too steep. To call culture change *of every kind* 'history' and nothing more, would be to show a blatant disregard of even major differentiations. If we follow Pauketat's usage, no distinction would be made between, say, the rise of the Roman Empire and its disintegration and collapse. Two sharply contrasting phases of the past would then become terminologically indistinguishable, both being simply 'history'.

Who would regard this as a healthy state of affairs? There is a real conceptual need for the word 'evolution' to designate a kind of social change that differs categorically from what Pauketat calls, with supreme indifference to gradations, 'history'. And unless Pauketat is ready to affirm that there was *no difference* in the level of culture in the Southeast between, say, 3500 B.C. and A.D. 1500 – that throughout all these 5,000 years culture remained at the same dead level of complexity – then we must be ready to recognize that *a very significant change* had in fact taken place. And if we grant that this change involved a palpable and undeniable increase in complexity, then I see no reason not to label it *evolution*.

Now, Pauketat states that nowhere in my critique did I propose a definition of evolution. And in this he is correct. I merely *assumed* one. So in order to rectify this omission, I would like to leave him with one that is clear and explicit. It is essentially

the same definition proposed by Herbert Spencer in his book *First Principles*, back in 1862. There Spencer defined evolution as 'a change from an indefinite, incoherent, homogeneity, to a definite, coherent, heterogeneity, through continuous differentiations and integrations'. I would change just one word of this definition, replacing 'continuous' with 'successive'. And if Pauketat allows me this definition, can he possibly deny that, over the course of millennia of Southeastern prehistory its societies manifested not just *his* 'history', but *my* 'evolution'?