

# Maritime Culture in the Western Pacific: A Touch of Tradition

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## Abstract

This paper considers the role of Maritime Culture in the Micronesian region and how this has influenced a wide array of cultural elements and social life in the region. Some of the objectives that will be addressed include; the relationship between cultural identity and traditional voyaging, the geographic constraints placed on island community's economies, the effects of changing climatic patterns, the role of marine resources in village reciprocal exchange relationships, and some of the unique fishing methods that have been developed in the outer islands of Yap State. This paper is based on the author's ethnographic observations, open-ended interviews and conversations conducted on multiple field trips over a six-year period to Yap and Chuuk States in the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM). The critical results that came out of this work were the importance of preserving the knowledge of traditional navigation and voyaging as a part of Micronesian cultural identity, both for younger and older Micronesians. What also became evident is how the ocean is also one of the current threats to Micronesian maritime culture. Finally, this paper will address the continued importance of Micronesia's marine resources for trade, subsistence, and economic livelihood. Due to remote island settlements reciprocity among the island people as well as bartering continues to play an important role on the outer islands.

## Introduction

Throughout the Micronesian region, engagement with the maritime environment to provide economic resources, transportation and cultural identity is an important activity. As noted below in accounts by Magellan's crew, this importance is documented at least back to the time of Magellan's arrival, and presumably thousands of years prior to that time. Sailing traditional proas and voyaging between Micronesian islands has been a central part of Micronesian life throughout the centuries and remains so today as an important aspect of Micronesian cultural identity (Brower 153-155). While Micronesians have traditionally been very effective at catching fish and harvesting other marine resources, as noted in the work *Words of the Lagoon* (Johannes 1981), trips throughout Micronesia by the author in the last eight years, utilizing observations and interviews have revealed that Micronesians are increasingly relying on what is referred to as "store-bought food". The high costs of such purchases have resulted in something of a crisis and concern over expanding local agricultural production and local markets. The need for local market development was highlighted in the 2008 Association of Pacific Island Legislatures (APIL). The APIL has adopted a resolution, which encourages local food production and intra-regional trade of food products as a means to ensure food availability, affordability, and security for each island state (Cagurangan, 2008:10).

This interesting juxtaposition of a people with a rich maritime culture and history, whose self-sufficiency in food procurement has been replaced by reliance on western-style food stuffs had intrigued me from before my arrival in Micronesia in 2005. My

previous work in community development seemed well suited initially to exploring these and other issues in Micronesia. After one summer of community development studies in Chuuk, and two in Yap, I joined a research team for two further years of United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) funded studies in Yap. While the USDA work allowed me to conduct quantitative data collection, in the form of interviews, stakeholder meetings and case studies, I also conducted ethnographic observations, recorded conversations, conducted informal interviews and generally collected as many data sources as I could on what I came to see as the “Maritime Culture of Micronesia”. In 2012 I was invited to give a presentation at Jeju University in South Korea, on Micronesian Maritime Culture. This paper is the outgrowth of that earlier presentation.

### **Research Methods**

In 2008, the Governors of the Federated States of Micronesia declared that local food production was a strategic issue and widely encouraged local food production and consumption through a variety of programs. Our research team from the University of Guam had already become involved in conducting research in Micronesia because of interest in food production and consumption patterns. During a six year period from 2006 to 2012, three of us have been working as a team in Yap and Chuuk states to identify which crops are grown, what marine resources are harvested, what is consumed directly and what is sold in local markets. Our team also considered the role of micro-finance in local agricultural and marine resource development. Our team consisted of Dr. Harley Manner, a cultural geographer with decades of experience studying food crops and traditional agricultural activities across the Pacific, Dr. Ann Ames, a sociologist who specializes in family economics and micro-finance, and myself Dr. Todd Ames, also a sociologist. My area has been macro-socio economics and marketing issues. This provided the impetus for our team to develop a research program funded by the University of Guam and the United States Department of Agriculture to address the above noted issues. While we were conducting extensive quantitative research in the form of surveys, interviews and stakeholder meetings, I separately also conducted extensive ethnographic observations, participant observations, open-ended interviews, and recorded multiple conversations in field journals on fishing techniques, proa building and voyaging and traditional navigation. Much of the USDA research and the ethnographic observations presented in this work overlap. Other than the 237 informants in the USDA research work, there were an additional 35 informants utilized for informal conversations, observations and participant observations. The previous and following works are based on observations and research conducted during the four trips we made to Yap proper, two trips each to Fais and Ulithi, and the three trips we made to Chuuk and the islands of Weno and Fefen between 2006 and 2012. It should be noted that this work, rather being a wide-ranging, historical, comparative account, is a contemporary, firsthand account of current practices in Micronesia.

### **Maritime Culture in Micronesia**

One of the first accounts of Micronesians by outsiders was by Francisco Albo, a member of Magellan’s crew, who wrote that as they approached Guam, “we saw many

sails coming out to us, moving so swiftly that they appear to be flying, with triangular sails; they had masts which they could shift making the prow the stern, as they wished” (Barratt 24). The ability of these small craft to readily tack and sail close to the wind at high speeds, at the time was considered quite impressive. Spanish and later German authorities discouraged the ocean voyaging that had taken place for thousands of years among Micronesians. During the pacification of the Chamorro people in the Marianas, the Spanish regularly destroyed their proas (traditional canoes) as a way to control them. The last *sakman* (a large sailing proa), recorded sailing in the Mariana’s waters was in 1742 (Farrell 201).

While the material technology of proa building survived to modern times, the non-material knowledge and skills necessary for navigation were almost lost. By the 1970s, Mau Pialug, a Micronesian from Satawal, was considered to be one of the last master navigators of Satawal (Lewis 3).

With growing interest in traditional navigation and voyaging, a renaissance of building traditional sailing vessels and training people in traditional navigation occurred across the Pacific. Mau Pialug travelled to Hawai’i to conduct training in traditional navigation and accompany the Hōkūle’a on its voyage across the western Pacific from Hawaii to Tahiti (Lewis 1). Mau Pialug would go on to train Hawai’ian Nainoa Thompson in traditional navigation. Thompson in turn trained others and thus extended navigational skills to others. Subsequently Mau Pialug’s training led to a renaissance in traditional navigation in the Pacific. Until 2008 Professor Larry Cunningham and Master Navigator Manny Sikau taught a course in traditional navigation at the University of Guam. It was always well attended by local students.

Today in Guam there are two groups that promote and conduct training in traditional navigation, sailing and proa building; the Traditional Seafaring Society (TSS) and Traditions Affirming Our Seafaring Ancestry (TASA). In Yap every year, both paddled and sailing canoe races are held. Annually local high-school students also sail a proa from Yap proper to Palau as part of an “Outward Bound” type challenge for its senior students (See Figure 1).



Figure 1. Photo by: Todd Ames, 2010

In 2010 these students sailed to Guam, accompanied by a master navigator who used traditional navigation techniques. In 2010 a proa was constructed in Ulithi by Ulithian high-school students (with the advice and direction of master proa builders), as part of a school project. Working on the proa was the reward that students received for taking part in an internationally funded health awareness program. Later in the year the proa was sailed to Yap proper for the annual canoe races (See Figure 2.). Traditionally on Yap, voyaging has had special cultural significance. The Yapese are well known for their historical voyages to Palau to quarry and bring back the stone money known as *rai*.



Figure 2. Photo by: Todd Ames, 2010

A HPO Officer on Yap related that it was customary for outer islanders to voyage to Yap proper to bring tribute to the high chiefs in the form of sennet rope, lava lavas and fish. This was part of the traditional *sawei* system. In the *sawei* system Yapese outer islanders were bound to certain chiefs on Yap proper who they would pay a yearly tribute to. The chiefs were also obligated to take care of these same outer islanders in times of need, such as a typhoon devastating outer island crops. To provide a better understanding of this relationship, one Yapese chief had related to me that, “the outer islanders are like our children, we must take care of them.” With proa building regularly taking place in Yap and Guam, and young people learning traditional navigation and engaging in voyaging, the reemergence of maritime culture is enjoying a cultural renaissance. While tribute is no longer paid by the outer islanders, and tribute voyages are no longer made, the flying proas and traditional navigation and voyaging have reemerged as an important part of contemporary Micronesian cultural identity.

The ocean remains the main transport system of the Western Pacific. Transport to many islands in Micronesia, especially the outer islands, continued to be by ocean transport. In Yap state, only Fais and Falalop in Ulithi, receive any regular air transport. The Pacific Missionary Air Service (PMA) flies one of two 1960s twin-engine Beechcraft Queen Airls twice a week to Falalop and Fais. Ostensibly provided to transport medical emergencies back to the hospital on Yap proper, the PMA is quite willing to take paying passengers and cargo as well. Holding up to eight passengers, the rest of plane and its cargo and passenger spaces are crammed full of variety of store bought goods and even gasoline from Yap proper.

For the vast majority of outer islanders the state sponsored “fieldtrip” ships provide the only regular commercial transport. Micronesians make extensive use of the

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fieldtrip ships for transportation to the state centers for work and visits, as well as to access air transport (See Figure 3). Micronesians use the fieldtrip ships to send food supplies and other imported goods to the outer islands as well as ship back small amounts of cash crops, such as taro, tobacco, and fish as well as sennet rope, lava lavas and woodcarvings.



Figure 3. Photo by: Todd Ames 2011

Fieldtrip ships have been a part of the FSM island transport system for decades. This mode of transportation is highly depended on, supplying the outer islands' material needs. Even with access to processed foods and imported staples such as rice, people on the central islands as well as the outer islands also rely extensively on subsistence gardening and fishing. In Chuuk state, outer islanders use small boats as transport to Weno, the state's island center for access to work, store bought goods and to sell locally grown crops and fish (See Figure 4).



Figure 4. Photo by: Todd Ames, 2011

### **Micronesia's Marine Environment and its Impact of Agriculture**

Taro has been a staple in Micronesia for probably as long as they have been inhabited. Small-scale cultivation in the form of taro gardens (Falanruw 1994) is vital to the existence for many Yapese living on neighboring islands and islets, such as Falalop. However, many inhabitants of the low-lying atolls informed us early on that they could tell the sea was getting higher. We were shown several wet taro pits on Falalop in Ulithi that had become inundated due to rising sea levels in 2009 and 2010. Even though the salt water had not contaminated that part of the water lens yet, it had pushed the freshwater lens higher and the taro was drowned in fresh water. I had asked the farmer who was showing us this if they could simply build up the organic matter in the pits. He explained that it had taken many years of slowly putting organic material in the pits and waiting for it to break down in order to establish the current pits. One solution the United Nations has funded has been to build large concrete tubs about 30 feet long and 10 feet wide to use as above ground pits. While they have been successful, they are expensive to build and so far only a few have been completed on Falalop. We were also taken to several garden plots closer to the shore that had been used for many years and had been just recently inundated by high surf. This killed all the crops and made the land unsuitable for further farming due to the salt now in the soil. High waves continue to swamp these areas. A number of people are also aware of and have spoken to us about the situation that occurred in Chuuk in 2008 when a storm surge swept over an atoll, killing all the crops and inundating the taro pits with salt water. One of the Land

Resources Officers on Yap relayed to me that they have been recording mean high tides over the last 30 years and that they are currently about ten inches higher than they were 30 years ago. Based on this rate of sea-level rise by the end of the century it could easily mean a rise of three to four feet. Considering that the low lying atolls like Falalop are only six feet above the high tide mark, many of these outlying islands will shortly become uninhabitable with increased sea levels. Some atolls, such as the one in Chuuk may cease to exist altogether. The very environment that has nurtured Micronesian people for eons may very well be the force that ultimately destroys it.

### **Marine Resources: A Matter of Observation**

Both on the main islands and the outer islands especially, Micronesians depend heavily on marine resources (Liebar 13). Marine resource collection today is still fairly similar to traditional methods employed throughout Micronesia (Johannes10-13) (LeBar 66-91). Collections are widely conducted by hand and with a spear along the foreshore and reef flats for fish, mollusks, octopus and crustaceans. Fishing on the foreshore, reef flats and reef edges with hooks and lines, both with rods and hand lines are also frequently used methods. For a man without a canoe, fishing with line and hook along the reef might be the only option (Liebar 11). Traditional throw nets, and surround nets are also used on reef flats and in lagoons. Liebar has noted that in Kapingamarangi atoll that netting fish is so important that it can account for over half of the fish that people ate (Liebar 57) (See Figure 5).



Figure 5. Photo by: Todd Ames, 2009

Fishing offshore for pelagic fish involves using hooks and lines. Fish traps made of wooden branches were also used traditionally in Yap proper, and still are. The extensive fish traps built of stone in the inner lagoons of Yap proper are quite impressive. While not used for a number of years, their remains are still quite evident from a boat and have been the subject of archeological study. It is worth noting that in general fishing, especially offshore fishing, is reserved for men, even though women will engage in near shore and reef flats fishing and gathering. Garden work, such as in the taro fields is reserved for women (Alkire 282). Although, as noted above men will help construct and repair taro pits. One interesting aspect of fishing in Yap is that from traditional times to the current era, foreshore, lagoon areas and areas outside the reefs are controlled by local villages and chiefs. Even today one must have permission to fish in an area where one does not have rights to do so. If one is caught doing so without permission, the catch at least will be taken away, and one may have to pay a fine to the village or chief who controls that area. I was also told that chiefs also issue bans on fishing at different times if an area has become over-fished, or if it is a spawning ground area for a prized or sought after fish. This was explained to me during an interview with a local fisherman. This form of control over fishing resources acts as a successful and sustainable conservation method, and it has been successfully employed throughout Oceania (Johannes 1978). Yap proper is known for its manta rays, which come into the lagoon each spring to lay their eggs. Divers come from all over the world to dive among the mantas. I asked one fisherman if he and others caught and ate mantas. "No" he firmly replied. I asked if there was a ban on catching them, or were they taboo, as are species like sharks in many parts of Micronesia. The fisherman said simply that "manta rays do not taste very good which is why no one caught them."

Chuuk also has an extensive dive industry, but with a different focus. Whereas Yap's industry is focused around the mantas, Chuuk has developed a highly successful industry based on shipwreck diving. Divers are able to dive to dozens of WWII wrecks in the preserve of Chuuk Lagoon, one of the best WWII wreck diving areas available today. This type of marine economic development has significantly contributed to the local economy, providing jobs for boat captains, dive masters, dive shop technicians, plus various service sectors jobs with the local dive resorts and hotels on the island.

While our team was on Fais islet in Yap state, in 2010, men and boys would fish daily along the foreshore, out at the reef drop-off and further off shore by boat and canoe. We were fed reef fish such as parrotfish, tangs, surgeonfish, grouper and snappers, among a number of other fish I could not identify. Catches were shared among all those who lived along the pathway. Several times a day neighbors and relatives would drop off several fish from a larger catch that they had made. These were usually prepared for the evening meal. Night fishing was also common. One morning our host Terry was preparing breakfast and placed a bowl of what looked like stewed beef in front of me, urging me try it. I chewed on a strip of what tasted and looked clearly like beef. That surprised me, as there was no refrigeration on the island. After I had mentioned my surprise and asked Terry where she had gotten fresh beef, she grinningly told me it was a sea turtle the neighbor had caught the night before. As was the custom, the neighbor had distributed the meat among all of his neighbors. Terry had also been given one turtle egg which she offered me raw. I felt it was my duty to reserve that treat for my colleague, Dr. Ann Ames who had yet to arise. Later in the afternoon another neighbor brought over

what she called donuts, which consisted of a chunk of turtle meat inside a ball of dough which had been deep-fried, and was delicious. In Micronesia as in many places in the Western Pacific, sea turtles are protected, but locals are allowed to take them for personal use. In the Ulithi atolls, the taking of sea turtles, while allowed by state authorities, are still strictly regulated by the chiefs. During the nesting season, the turtles are strictly protected by chiefs' edicts against being caught or having their eggs taken.

One common marine activity for the young men was to go out lobster hunting with a mask and fins and underwater light late at night. Our host's nephew Clement told me that they would get orders from the hotels and restaurants on Yap proper for lobsters and the young men would collect them and send them back on the Pacific Missionary plane. Lobster was plentiful while we were there on Fais and we had it during several meals. In fact, Clement shyly gave me a bag of about twenty lobsters before I boarded the PMA flight back to Yap proper where I shared them among my associates and friends.

Another interesting fishing method employed on Fais was that young men would swim out with mask and fins and a hand-line and hook to fish for deepwater fish outside the reef edge. After the reef edge, the ocean floor slopes quickly down to several hundred feet in depth. It continues descending as Fais is not part of an atoll. The men catch small tuna, jack, trevally, deepwater grouper and other open ocean fish. When I asked several young men if they were bothered by sharks they replied that that if a shark came too close they would take a large fist sized rock that they carried in their shorts and they would drop it into the depths. Normally the shark would usually chase it just as a dog chases a stick. They all burst out in giggles at the sharks' apparent gullibility.

Although many people on Fais and throughout the Micronesia region have fiberglass boats and outboard motors, they were rarely used while we were on Fais, since gas on Fais cost six dollars a gallon. Most people used an outrigger canoe, a proa, when fishing offshore. (See Figure 6).



Figure 6. Photo by: Todd Ames, 2009

Men and boys would paddle up to a mile offshore to pursue larger pelagic fish such as tuna, mahi-mahi and marlin. People in Chuuk lagoon also use their proas to fish. Fishing and food sharing are important activities throughout the Pacific. The practice of sharing food with others has very practical purposes. Other than serving to tie the community together in reciprocal relationships of exchange, it can also serve as a practical “investment” in that one can then expect to regularly receive food back from one’s recipients in the future (Pollack 123).

### **Shark Wranglers of the Western Pacific**

A few days before we were to leave Fais, our host’s other nephew Jonas mentioned that they were going out fishing the next morning, but this was a special fishing trip, as they were going after sharks. Jonas proudly explained to me, that people on Fais are the only Micronesians who eat sharks, since it is taboo elsewhere. Throughout Micronesia most people do not eat shark. One elderly Yapese man told me that sharks were their ancestors and that is why they did not eat them. While marooned on Puluwat in Chuuk, Dr. Manner was told that sharks were special totems and that it was taboo to eat them. One young man in his early forties from Woleai (an outer island in Yap state), had a pragmatic explanation. He said that until recently the traditional burial method was to take the corpse off shore in a boat and sink it with stones. The notion of eating a shark, which may have eaten one’s dead relative, or any other human remains, was absolutely nauseating.

Early the next morning five of us travelled about two miles off the eastern shore in one of the outboard boats, since Fais is barely over a mile across it looked quite small from two miles out it. No other land is visible from Fais and sitting in this small 18 foot

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boat with five other people, I was struck by how alone one could feel in the open ocean, making the achievements of the traditional navigators and voyagers seem all the more impressive.

Once we had reached an appropriate spot, the captain, killed the engine and everyone but myself took out rolls of heavy monofilament line, which they attached to a single large hook. The men placed small baitfish about eight inches long on the hook that they had caught the night before. They placed the fish and hook against a small flat rock about the size of half an apple and wrapped a number of loops around the rock. They explained to me that this would take the bait down into the depths and then just fall away. Each of the fishermen let out about a hundred meters of line and began to jig their bait up and down. Every 15-20 minutes they would pull their lines up, some after receiving a tug, and check the bait. Sometimes the bait was gone, and the men would re-bait their hooks. In all cases they would wrap another rock sinker with line and the baitfish and again drop it down again between 75 and 100 meters (See Figure 7).



Figure 7. Photo by: Todd Ames, 2009

After three hours of this our captain finally announced that the sharks were apparently not biting today and that we would return to shore. But, as the men were pulling in their lines Jonas' line suddenly jerked in his hands. Pulling hand-over-hand, he eventually brought up a six-foot long open-ocean grey shark.

As the shark came thrashing to the surface, I realized that we were in a rather precarious position. We were all sitting in an open boat with no seats or bulkheads, like a big open tub. I had been fishing before and caught several sharks and I knew that once in the boat sharks could live for up to an hour, biting anything that got near. I had

unpleasant visions, of this shark flailing around our bare legs on the ride back to shore. As the shark continued to thrash, Jonas prepared a short length of rope that he fitted with a noose. Joshua slipped the hand line through the noose and Jonas quickly slung the noose down the line while Joshua pulled up the shark's head. This allowed Jonas to use his noose to lasso the shark just behind its head. The two men then wrangled the shark up tight against the side of the boat where they tied it off (See Figure 8).



Figure 8. Photo by: Todd Ames, 2009

I assumed at this point that like Santiago's marlin in *The Old Man in the Sea* (95-97), we would simply tow the shark back to shore strapped to the side of the boat. Joshua pulled out a two-inch long paring knife that he handed to Jonas, who with a grim look, bent over to stab the shark. I stopped him and asked if he would like to use my larger eight-inch long Wenoka diving knife. With a look of great relief on his face Jonas took the Wenoka and struck the shark a swift blow right behind its head, burying the knife in the shark's neck. Jonas sawed back and forth several times and the shark suddenly stopped snapping its jaws although the tail kept writhing somewhat. Jonas then severed the shark's spinal cord halfway between the head and tail. At this point the shark went completely limp. Jonas and Joshua hauled the shark into the boat and dumped its now lifeless body onto the floorboards.

The captain fired up the outboard motor and we headed back to shore. Once we got to the beach the shark was unloaded in the shallows and all of the blood was washed off and then carried up to a clean space under the trees next to the canoe house. Two older men arrived and began to cut up the shark's carcass. I asked what they did with the shark's fins, "Nothing," they replied at which point they hacked the fins off and threw them into the bushes (See Figure 9).



Figure 9. Photo by: Todd Ames, 2009

As with the fish and turtle, the shark meat was distributed throughout the village. Terry received about two pounds, which she then chopped up into small pieces and fried with soy sauce and peppers, which gave it a mild and succulent flavor. The catching of sharks and their distribution and consumption on Fais certainly illustrates, as with other fish, the importance of marine resources as an important component of subsistence. It also serves to illustrate the cultural and practical purposes served by reciprocal exchange, and in the case of the people of Fais, the value of a unique cultural identity among the larger Micronesian Maritime peoples.

### **Conclusions**

Observations made between 2006 and 2012 demonstrate that in this current era, preserving the knowledge of traditional navigation and voyaging is an important part of Micronesian cultural identity and is still a central theme of Micronesian society. The younger generations are embracing this knowledge, learning the ways in which their ancestors interacted with the sea, and preserving these traditions for generations to come. What is also evident is the continued importance of Micronesia's marine resources for trade, subsistence, and economic livelihood. The ocean is an important source of revenue, via fishing and tourism development in Yap and Chuuk. Ocean transportation allows isolated islanders a means to transport their cash crops and fish to more populated islands where there are markets. Reciprocity among the island people as well as bartering is as important as a monetary economy on the outer islands. Marine resources play a valuable role in this area, both for subsistence and a marker of cultural identity. The ocean is also one of the current threats to Micronesian maritime culture. With rising sea levels

threatening food resources and water sources, it may eventually spell the demise of these traditional lifestyles and livelihoods.

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