**Relationship Between Yap and Palau**

Yap Homecoming Talk, June 2013

***The Far Edge of Micronesia: Yap and Palau***

Yap and Palau, at the extreme western end of Micronesia, have always had an air of mystery around them–at least to us Westerners.

For one thing, their languages are so different from the rest of Micronesia–Palau the Polish of Oceania with all its consonants, and Yap with its closest relative being a Guatemalan language, a linguist friend tells me. [Tom Smith trying to pronounce “black shirt” in Palauan]

In some ways, the island groups seem to be opposites. Yap: conservative, slow to change, proud of its culture and its past. Palau: go for broke, keep up with the changes, get a good education and make a place for yourself in the modern world. One is taking the fast track, and the other is in the slow track.

But that’s not quite true, when we take a hard look at their history. Palau may be famous for keeping up with the rest of the world these days, but bear in mind that it was the last island group in Micronesia to modernize. Just look at the photos of Palauans in the early 1900s to get an impression of how traditional their dress and houses were before the coming of Winkler in 1905. On the other hand, Yap was trading for whiskey for 30 years before the end of the century. Yapese might have been wearing grass skirts and thus, but they knew what tools and cooking utensils were being offered at the trader’s stores and how much copra it would cost them.

Both Yap and Palau share strong features in their cultures:

* First of all, they have strong village organization–stronger than anywhere else in Micronesia, I can tell you. In both groups there are chiefs “the voice of the land” with village councils, seats assigned to heads of ranking clans. Their council houses nearly share the same name–*bai* in Palau, and *pebay* in Yap.
* Second, they both have competition built deeply into their system. Palau: everything split into halves “bital ma bital”–this side and that side. Clubhouses within villages, villages into confederations, one under Koror and the other under Melekeok. Yap: everything divided not into halves, but into thirds–like the three legs of a stool is the way someone put it.
* Third, the competition brings prestige. Both places had something that no one else in Micronesia had: traditional valuables, or what could be called “local money.” In Palau, it was beads and pieces of ceramic rims. In Yap it was limestone discs and the different kinds of shell money. The “money” was valuable, of course, because it was hard to get.

So it’s not surprising that Yap and Palau, the westernmost island groups in Micronesia, would have a special relationship with one another. They might not share the same language and culture, but the broader definition of their culture is something they share with one another much more closely than anywhere else in Micronesia.

***Traditional Relationship***

The most obvious feature in the relationship between Yap and Palau was the voyages of Yapese to Palau to quarry those famous discs of limestone money.

Legend of the first stone money cut in Palau: Crew from Tomil went to Palau to quarry stone money but couldn’t figure out how to get it back to Yap. So they enchanted a butterfly that guided the canoe and raft back to Yap. Limestone money discs were afterwards called “stones of the butterfly.”

Another tradition recounted by Karen Nero: Two Yapese, Fatha’an (from Rul) and Anguman (from Tomil), went to Palau and discovered a beautiful white stone. At Ramith, a place in the Rock Islands, they found the white stone and cut it into different shapes, but finally selected the circular shape since it was like the full moon. They returned to Yap separately, after a war of magic on the way to create high seas.

When did the contact between Yap and Palau for stone money begin? Sometime before the presence of the Westerners in 1800s certainly, perhaps a century or two before that. It seems that the two major confederations in Palau were forming at the time that Yapese were intensifying their efforts to get stone money. Perhaps the Yapese voyages and the payment they made might have helped Koror and Melekeok gain leadership positions in the two confederations. At some point, special ties were developed: Rul with Koror and Airai, and Gagil with Melekeok.

Yapese got their stone money from Palau, but they brought exchange items with them. Bead money (*bachel*) was one of the items–there’s a story that the chief of Rul gave a piece of the bead money to Ibedul. They also brought to Palau turmeric–the deep red turmeric produced in Gagil that is still a luxury product today. But there are stories Yapese tell of work that they performed when in Palau: The path up to the men’s house in Melekeok was paved by people from Gagil. The long causeway to Meyungs was paved by the people of Rul. The causeway to Malakal was paved by the people from Outer Islands, Rumung and Maap.

But there are hints that this long-term relationship between Yap and Palau went beyond the voyages for stone money.

* There is a story that a Yapese man ran into bad weather and drifted to Ngchesar, whose people brought him to Melekeok where he was later given the third highest title of Ngirkungil.
* A few Palauans visited Yap some years ago to inquire about the *tu’guw*, the distinctive shell object used to pound betelnut. The Yapese word was also the name of the estate associated with the Reklai title in Melekeok.
* Not all Yapese who sailed to Palau returned with their canoes, we know. Some remained and married, providing a kin base for later Yapese voyagers.
* Yapese have a belief that the souls of the dead, after visiting a place in Tomil, make a stop at Ngadolog in Angaur to bathe in a pool of water before they continue their journey onward.

This relationship between the two island groups, then, resulted in an exchange of valuables (*bachel* and *rai*), and services performed by Yap for Melekeok and Koror. This seems to have been advanced by the intermarriage of ranked persons between the two groups, even extending to some of the higher titles in Palau.

There is much about the past that we don’t know, of course. About the ties between the two places and how they changed with time. When the stone money trade really began? What role the Outer Islanders played in all this?

These are important questions relating to the past. But, as Pohnpeians like to say, the answers to these questions are “lost in the weeds.” Maybe the time has come to bring out the machete or weed-whacker and find the answers.

***Resuming the Relationship After the War***

The relationship between Yap and Palau has become even closer after the Second World War, long after the last stone money was quarried, when the US “adopted” the Japanese Mandate and converted it into the Trust Territory of the Pacific.

In 1947, the Chamorros who had lived in Yap for years and handled government clerical jobs for the Japanese were sent back to the Marianas. Soon afterwards, though, Palauans began moving to other places in search of jobs. One of their principal destinations was Yap. According to the figures we have, about 60 Palauans a year were leaving Palau for other destinations between 1956 and 1972. About 10 or 20 a year were moving to Yap, some of them opening businesses, especially the hotels and bars, and others working for the district government–Public Works and other departments, and at the Loran station.

As these Palauans began settling in the area once inhabited by people from the Marianas, Chamorro Bay soon became Palau Bay.

Increasingly, the link between Yap and Palau was strengthened. We might think of Luke Tman, the late congressman from Yap. I’m sure there were other prominent persons with blood ties.

Then, in the late 1970s, as the old Trust Territory divided up and Palauans in Yap had to choose between Palauan and Yapese citizenship, many of the Palauan residents returned to their islands.

What happens in the future? Undersea cable links? Formal political ties? Who knows?

But this year we gather to celebrate this relationship, which has enriched the past of both island groups. We reinforce it and look forward to the continuing link that it offers to both island groups at the mystery edge of Micronesia.

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