

Trading People

The Republic of Palau is past its teens and has come of age; it is now celebrating its 20th birthday as a nation. Now may be a good time to look back at the new relationship with the world it established when it became independent and joined the world community of nations. This is what independence does—it is the invitation to a people to come and sit at the adults table and join the conversation there.

Independence also means entering the world market, but the “market” doesn’t simply mean trade of goods—resources and manufactured products. If it did, Palau wouldn’t have much of a chance in the world market. What does this country have to trade—fish, shark fins, copra, processed taro or tapioca, Red Rooster? For Palau it means a different kind of trade—the trade of people, and the ideas they bring, and the hopes they give rise to. Sometimes this exchange is planned; sometimes it just happens. But in any case it is always important.

To see what this means, let’s go back in time and review a few examples.

- 1783: Captain Henry Wilson and the *Amelope* are wrecked in Palau. We all know the story of how the British and Palauans befriended one another during the few months that the shipwrecked crew remained in Palau. In the end, the first people exchange recorded in the history of Palau resulted: Libu went with the British to become a legendary figure in London before he died. Meanwhile, Madan Blanchard, the gunner, was left in Palau to keep the musket and cannons firing, and to take inter-village competition here to a new level. With this exchange began a whole century of ties between Palau and the British navy, usually to the benefit of Koror.

- 1840: Whaleships now and then stopped off in Palau and traded tools and iron pots for fresh food. One of these ships brought the West Indian sailor William Gibbons to Palau. When the ship left, he stayed. Can you imagine a Palau without Gibbons and his descendants? Many of us would like to think that Palau got the better part of the deal on this visit.

- 1876 (?): The ship captain of a sailing bark (Clark, I think, was his name) stopped in Chuuk and soon afterwards headed off westward to Palau. He brought with him a Chuukese woman, who stayed in Palau, was adopted into Ibedul’s family and later became Bilung. The woman became a link with Chuuk right up to the present.

- 1905: Wilhelm Winkler, German police chief, was instrumental in helping the chiefs exile the independent spirit mediums, *korong*, and suppress the clubhouses for good. The Germans had their own reasons for doing this, and Palauan chiefs had their own. But could the chiefs have done this as easily without Winkler and his German troops? The result was a lasting change in cultural life of Palau. As for Winkler, a few years later he left with an Aitai woman who remained in Germany the rest of her life and has been a tie with Germans since then.

- 1920s: Japanese teachers, policemen and officials began to pour into Palau. Some of them married here, but all of them were affected by their experience in the islands. In return, they

taught their language and shared their love of udong and rice and song. The links between Japan and Palau would last and would continue to bear fruit up to the present. How else would Noboru Gotoh, on his visit to Palau in 1967, have come to dream up the idea of Palau Pacific Resort? Then, too, these ties with Japan may have something to do with the beginnings of the strong Japanese tourist market in Palau since 1985?

- 1950: Palauans and American Navy personnel meet after the war when the US takes over the administration of the islands. Almost immediately, some Palauans—perhaps 30 or 40 a year—head off to Guam to attend school while staying with military families or serving as domestic helpers in their homes. (Fr. Felix Yaach was one of these, someone reminded me just the other day.) Twenty years later, the outflow increases to 200 or 300 a year. Palauans soon are found in colleges just about everywhere in the US. The result: jobs, education, and a leg up on other islands in settling into places where there are plenty of good jobs for those who want them.
- 1982: Air Nauru begins its flight to Palau, and from Palau to Manila. For the first time there is an air link between this place and Asia. The immediate result is a flow of Filipinos to add to the work force (perhaps replacing some of the Palauans who have gone to the US for jobs there). Ten years later, there is the tourist flow from Taiwan, and then from Korea, and Palau is getting 120,000.
- The result of these visits—this trade in people—is an interesting mix. Today there are probably two or three times as many Palauans living in the US as here in Palau. But to make up for it, you have 6,000 Asians, mostly workers, and 120,000 visitors each year.

If you want national development, you're well on your way, without even a single product stamped "Made in Palau" sent to the outside world. Those Palauans in the US, bundled up against the autumn weather, are happy in their new home. The Asians here are employed at a level they could not have found back in their own country. The visitors are pleased with a chance to vacation in an interesting new place. And the money they bring in is pushing Palau towards economic as well as political independence.

It's called "people trade." Palau has been doing it for a long time, as I tried to show you.

What will the future bring? No one knows for sure, but we do know that it will bring more people trade. Palau may not have produced too much to export, but it has a cultural heritage and a competitive people who have always been willing to engage in people trade. My bet is that the future will bring more of the surprises and the great benefits that come from such trade.