

# Facing Outsiders: Foreign Influences and Local Values in Palau

Yuping Chen

Ph.D. Candidate, Department of Anthropology, National Taiwan University  
Doctoral Student Grants, Center for Asia-Pacific Area Studies (CAPAS)

This research contributes to how capitalism affects local economies by focusing on the juncture of the local and global, and examining the ways that local communities participate in and are affected by these interconnections in a Pacific country, Palau.

The Republic of Palau, located in Micronesia, is a small nation-state. The total area is 458 square kilometers, and the population was estimated at 20,879 in 2010. Palauans are Austronesian speakers, but the origin of the Palauan people varies, with some coming from the Philippines and Sunda island, and most coming from Micronesia. In addition to these diverse origins, Palau was controlled by different colonial governments, Spain (1855-1899), Germany (1899-1914), Japan (1914-1945), and the US (1945-1994), and Palauan culture shows a blend of these successive colonial influences.

Since its independence in 1994, Palau has had the highest economic achievement in the region. Some Micronesians have commented that "*Palauans would break any tradition to pursue modernity.*" Contemporary Palauan culture is highly mixed, with different cultural elements, and there is a debate about whether receptivity to change is one of the most marked features of Palauan culture. Barnett asserted that Palauans' attitude toward change has deep cultural roots and enables successful adaptation (Barnett 1953). Force asserted that the changes in Palau after WWII were directed by many forces, such as introduction of a cash economy, education and modern

bureaucracy, and adaptation was an essential means of survival (Force 1960). Some researchers tried to prove that Palauan culture is never static, and that it changed with significant historical events, such as the visit of an English Captain Wilson in 1789, when a local chief cooperated with him to fight other villages, and changed the political alliances on the island (Pamentier 1987; Smith 1983). However, these explanations do not really tell us the details of how these changes happened, what role “culture” played in this process, and whether Palauans have agency toward these changes.

In this research, I focus on two themes. One is value systems. I use Graeber’s action-centered theory of value to analyze Palauan valuables—land and Palauan money—to explore how this local value system changes and engages with the foreign values. The second theme is to correct the static cultural concept by adding historical and power dimensions. By these two approaches, I demonstrate how Palauans cope with these rapid changes in their economic situation under the influences of globalization.

## **I. Successive Outsiders: Immigrants and Stranger King**

I intend to amend the previous cultural assumption, in which the previous researchers asserted that Palauans are known for their receptivity to changes. I assert that Palauan culture is actually formed by those successive immigrants by reconsidering the composition of Palauans and their attitudes toward those successive outsiders.

Palauans are part of the Austronesian speaking group, and expanded their settlements by continual sailing. These settlers determined their family’s ranking and authority by the chronological order of their settling (Bellwood 1996:26). Another prominent phenomenon in Austronesian societies is what Sahlins called the “stranger king.” Due to the *mana* (we can term it “power”) which the stranger/drifters have, they might be incorporated into local society in different ways to domesticate their power (Sahlins 1986).

The Palau islands are on the Pacific equatorial current, which flows

from the island Southeast Asian region of Sulawesi, Halmahera, and Mindanao. Palau continues to receive drift voyages from these islands (Bellwood 1979:286). Before contact with Europeans, Palauans were used to seeing these drifters and had a tradition that the highest-ranking family should accommodate the drifters and was responsible for adopting them into the family. According to oral histories, the highest-ranking clan in the north actually descended from two Portuguese sailors. It's obvious that Palauans were used to adopting foreign people and culture as their resources to gain higher status in the society. This attitude toward foreigners changed during the colonization period due to the imposition of authority at the state level. However, the openness to foreign things did not change much.

## **II. Multi-racial People and Local Entrepreneurs**

Japanese colonization not only brought some culture influences, but a significant amount of biracial people were born after the war. They formed a special group with a different social position in Palau. Most of them had good performance in different fields, and I focus on those successful entrepreneurs. I found some reasons for their success. The first is that their ambiguous social status made it easy for them to run businesses in Palau. They were a little excluded and lacked financial support from their natal fathers, so they strived to earn money in the modern economic system. On the other hand, they didn't need to work for their father's family, and could neglect some customary obligations. Also they had more freedom to work and make decisions independently, and refused to give credit to their relatives. When they acquired wealth in the modern economy, they turned this wealth into the traditional values, such as acquiring Palauan money, land, and titles.

## **III. Land, Law and Government**

The value of land in Palau not only is a means to produce food, but also

serves to preserve each family's migratory stories, so that people could recognize their relations to each other, which define their rights to land. The meaning of land changes in the process of colonization and nationalization. During the Japanese period, they registered the land with five legal categories, and made a land registry book, *Tochi Daicho*, which resulted in land disputes after the 1970s. With the introduction of Western law and the legal process, local people started to struggle with this complicated procedure of registering their land and filing lawsuits. At the same time, the local government also wanted to acquire land to develop the tourism industry for revenue. "Land" became a battlefield between people and the government, entangled with the concepts of traditional land tenure, Western laws, and the needs arising from commercialization.

Under the pressure of being self-sufficient, the traditional meaning of land has been gradually lost, and has gradually been commoditized.

#### **IV. New Money and Old Money**

While the value of land has gradually shifted to that of a commodity, the value of Palauan money has increased in importance in Palauan society. When the fund of the Free Association Compact came to Palau in the early 1990s, the amount of US dollars and turtle shell money, *Toluk*, circulating in traditional customs increased dramatically. In addition, the Palauan money, *Udoud*, is still the most important valuable in customary exchange. These *Udoud* are ancient ceramic beads, and the numbers are limited. Some *Udoud* are so valuable that they bear a specific name, and have some stories attached. Some low-ranking people didn't have *Udoud*, so they went to Bali Island to buy some antique beads, and circulated them in customs as *Udoud* since 1980. They refer to these fake *Udoud* as "*Bali*."

The value of Palauan money, which represents a person's prestige and is known as the "light of a family", has not faded with the prevalence of the modern economy, but has instead become more precious. Even the "fake" Palauan money acquired names, and started to accumulate transaction

stories. Rich men, poor men, high-ranking people, and low-ranking people are all still eager to get Palauan money even though they are all deeply engaged in the modern economy.

Many researchers have pointed out that Palau's society and social organization are never static due to the high frequency of contact with outsiders. I focus on the economic phenomenon to examine the value of valuables and those traditionally considered "low ranking" and "poor", or multi-racial people to see how they reconceived these old values when they attained new economic status in the modern economy, and how they promote their social status in contemporary life and traditional life. The result of this research might solve the ethnographic puzzle of whether Palauan culture has changed or not by correcting the concept of culture as something which is not static, but an action-centered idea.

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