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Aipwa in Practice: Retracing the Pathways and Footsteps of the Inhabitants of Chuuk Lagoon

by Matthew Brousil

(Honors Anthropology 1130)

Introduction

As one of the most populous and geographically distinct island groups of the Federated States of Micronesia, Chuuk is a source of cultural and social wealth in the Pacific. This paper explores the influences of geographical, environmental, and colonial forces that have helped to guide the formation and development of Chuuk's culture history. Volcanic geology and geographic orientation helped to shape the subsistence foundation of early Chuukese peoples, ultimately solidifying their relations to land and nearby social groups. From this base, the trajectory of European colonial influences and World War II impacts will be illuminated, offering a clearer understanding of how external forces redirected traditional subsistence, notions of well-being, and interpretations of the Chuukese' place within their own culture and that of their expanding global relationships.

Location and Geography

Chuuk (formerly Truk Lagoon, and Ruk) is located near the center of the Federated States of Micronesia; included within the Caroline Islands group. Politically, Chuuk State incorporates many other island groups (see Figure 1), but as one of the most significant high island groups amongst the members of the Carolines, the lagoon has existed as a central cultural location. Of the 48,853 members last counted throughout the entire state, Goodenough (2002) estimates that more than 85% reside within Chuuk Lagoon today.

Geologically, Chuuk Lagoon is "living proof" of volcanic high island formation – atolls top an underwater barrier reef that grows around the edges of the original mountain as it sank into the water (Gladwin 1953:27). A simultaneous process – albeit a destructive and ongoing one – of erosion reducing the peaks of the original mountain to their current weathered state contributing to many valleys that are now hidden below the inter-atoll waters of the lagoon. While water shortages have not historically been a major issue in Chuuk, its basalt rock landscape and lack of streams requires efficiency in the use of limited land and water resources, which its inhabitants have met by focusing resources on high-yielding breadfruit crops rather than intensive agricultural processes (Goodenough 2002; Gladwin 1953).

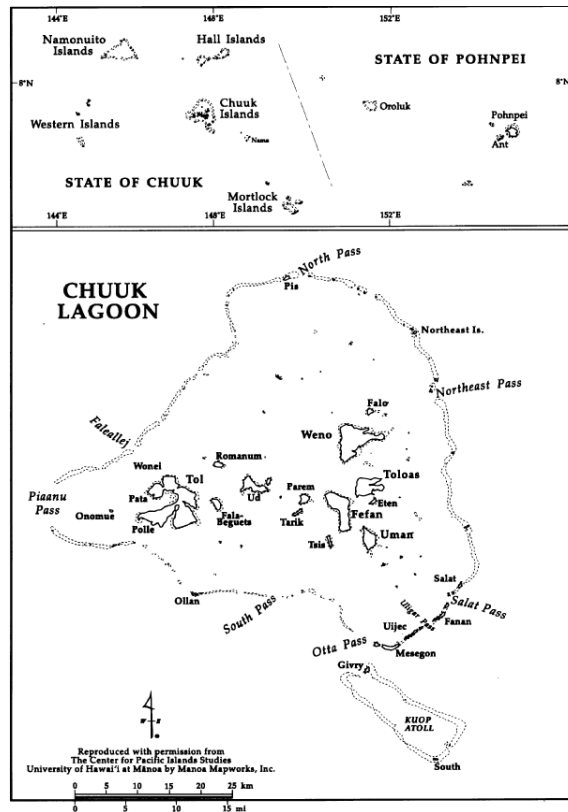


Figure 1 - The political boundaries of Chuuk State (top) and a geological perspective of the lagoon. (Peter 2000:259)

Early Settlement

The earliest known archaeological sites on Chuuk are located on the islands of Fefen and Wééné, and consist in part of 2000-year-old ceramics that have been described as vaguely comparable to Late Lapita Plainware (Goodenough 2002; Rainbird 1999, 2004). The lagoon's basalt composition is reflected in the pottery, which incorporates temper debris from basalt rock as well as beach sand and material from nearby reefs (Dickinson 2006). Goodenough (2002: 20) notes that "widespread human settlement" arose near the 14th century on Wééné, Fefen and Toon along with "what we now consider to be Chuuk's traditional social and political institutions." True to the Chuukese concept of *aipwa*, "walking in footprints to follow or retrace a person's movement," Chuuk's inhabitants recall their cultural ancestry beginning with the arrival of a single great leader, who introduced breadfruit and the clan system to the lagoon (Peter 2000:256; see also Flood et al. 1999). Although the exact pathway of this initial colonizer remains unclear, Rainbird argues for an origin near the western end of Remote Oceania, with support from Chuukese legends referring to an eastern or southeastern homeland (see Rainbird 1999:216, 2004).

Pre-Colonial Culture



Figure 1 - An 1899 photo of a warrior from Weno sporting shell jewelry. (Micronesia Seminar 2004)

Before contact with Western cultures, the inhabitants of Chuuk did not have formal markets for trade within the lagoon. Rather, “trade was conducted within the framework of kin, clan connections, and long-standing visiting arrangements” (Goodenough 2002: 26). *Pulling of Olap’s Canoe*, a traditional chant, presents the interisland Chuukese navigators as “[flying] high above the islands” while also searching near home for “both desirable things and the necessities of life” (Peter 2000:260-261). This tradition demonstrates that pre-planned trade played a central part to maintaining individual clan groups but also in maintaining social ties between otherwise isolated communities, thus reinforcing Chuukese identity on a much larger scale. Trade with Pohnpei, Yap and Guam also occurred, namely to obtain items such as coconut cord, jewelry made from turtle and sea shells (see Figure 2), and to export cosmetics and red earth pigment (*apar*) used on canoes and bowls (Goodenough 2002). Interestingly, the image of the navigator as staying “close to home” corresponds to accounts of somewhat one-sided trade with non-Chuukese navigators “who [when compared to the Chuukese] had highly developed skills in navigation and the construction of sailing canoes,” as those with the most interest in maintaining trade (Goodenough 2002: 26). However, the fact that the Chuukese still rely heavily on kinship in their present-day amalgamation of traditional and democracy-based laws suggests that the one-sided nature of such trade was less an issue of ability than of a lack of physical need (Lowe 2002).

Goodenough (2002) emphasizes that kinship was inherent in day-to-day functioning in Chuuk; having a home, food, and rights to work land required one to seek sponsorship from a community member if they were not part of a kinship group. Matrilineal lineages define these kinship practices, with women and their female children forming the backbone of sibling groups (Goodenough 2002). Additionally, the conception of the physical (Figure 3) and familial home in Chuuk has existed very separately from that of Western cultures for several reasons: (1) visitors, youths, and unmarried men slept in meeting houses (Figure 4) rather than in dwelling houses; (2) contact between brothers and sisters was heavily restricted by social norms; (3) despite a matrilineal structure, the men of the female residents’ lineage had final authority over a household; and (4) men were unquestionably responsible for children of previous marriages regardless of when or with whom their wives had them (Goodenough 2002).



Figure 3 – A traditional dwelling (Goodenough 2002: 24)

Overwhelmingly, the power of political priests (*itang*) was central to spiritual and political culture in Chuuk up until, and to a lesser extent after, the arrival of the Japanese in the early 20th century (Gladwin 1953). Much of traditional spirituality focuses on a dichotomy between spiritual and human realms, with religious practice bent toward “obtaining from [gods and spirits] as much as possible of the dangerous powers for effectiveness that inhered in them” (Goodenough 2002: 336). Humans, residing on the surface of the land and sea, existed between the two spirit realms – resources of spiritual energy and potential. As such, those who had mastered the priests’ language could contact the powerful spirits. It comes as no surprise then that access to the *itangs*’ power was highly selective (see Flood et al. 1999; Goodenough 2002). However, a devastating – though not unexpected – loss of cultural knowledge occurred when the *itang*, “repositories of important esoteric lore,” are said to have “voted themselves out of existence...discharged their students...and bottled up in their heads their knowledge” with the arrival of Japanese (Gladwin 1953:44).

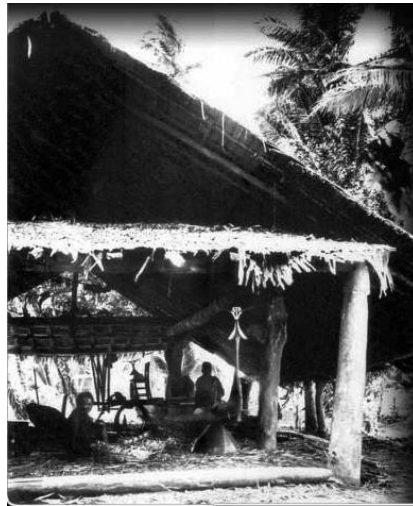


Figure 4 - A 1915 image of a meeting house, or *uut*, on Fefan. (Micronesian Seminar 2004)

Language and Place

Chuukese culture is very intimately connected with both its physical and social presence within the Pacific environment. Even its name translates to “hills” or “mountains,” denoting its significant high island presence among the nearby atolls (Goodenough 2002). Notably, Goodenough (2002:17) points out that these atolls contain of almost “mutually intelligible dialects” and, as members of the Malayo-Polynesian branch of the Austronesian phylum, much linguistic pooling has occurred between them. Chuuk’s name then offers up a more symbolic image of its culture as a geographic

landmark, or centerpiece for the extensively connected cultures of the atoll neighborhood. Within the local environment, a linguistic division defines the Chuukese' conception movement between three main locations: inland, "the place of the animals"; seaward, "the place of the seawater"; and shore, "the place of the sand" (Gladwin 1953:30). Protein from nearby reefs and starchy foods from the land are frequently paired in meals, symbolically uniting Chuukese culture with its surrounding bioregional landscape (Gladwin 1953).

Colonial History

Alonso de Arellano's 1565 contact with the Chuukese marked the beginning of a disruption from traditional lifeways, though, ironically, Gladwin (1953:39) has remarked, "it is doubtful that the contact had any appreciable effect." While the claim that a paradigmatically upending event like first contact would go almost unnoticed is dubious at best, there is truth in Gladwin's (1953) assertion that colonial influence became significantly more consequential during the 1800s. France's arrival in particular marked the tone for future colonial problems: during Dumont d'Urville's visit a misunderstanding occurred and some of the indigenous population was attacked. Six years later, the Chuukese (understandably) reacted with hostility toward Englishman Andrew Cheyne, earning the island a reputation of treachery (Gladwin 1953). Whalers and the Spanish reportedly ignored Chuuk Lagoon as a result (at least in comparison to their detrimental exploits nearby), though some traders visited the Chuukese, intermarried and introduced steel and iron tools before the arrival of the Germans (Gladwin 1953).

Germany acquired Chuuk in 1899 from the Spanish, touching down for exploration in 1903, and immediately demanding that the Chuukese turn in the firearms that they had been provided by traders and cease interisland warfare – which they did (Gladwin 1953; Micronesian Seminar 2002.). Historically, compliance with foreign authority in Chuuk may originate in Germany's at least partial acceptance of existing chiefly authority, as well as "local customs and prerogatives as the law" except in homicide (Gladwin 1953:42). However, Joakim Peter proposes a more authoritarian German rule where indigenous interisland travel was strictly controlled or outright banned, requiring Chuukese to travel between administrative centers rather than allowing them to maintain traditional inter-clan visiting practices (Peter 2000).



Figure 5 - The Jaluit Company, a government-owned trading company heavily involved with the German administration on Chuuk. Chuukese chiefs answered to this entity. (Micronesian Seminar 2002)

Japan and World War II

With the annexation of Chuuk by the Japanese, any form of local political clout that the indigenous held in Chuuk was largely revoked. An irreversible transition to a money-driven economy with foreign imports occurred, paired with increasing movement away from traditional modes of subsistence (Gladwin 1953). Compared with Germany's gradual movements, the Japanese plan for Chuuk was mostly commercial enterprise, focused on "pouring in capital for major developments" like fishing fleets, processing plants, and intensive agriculture to feed 38,000 extra inhabitants (Poyer 2004; Gladwin 1953:43). The workweek, which was first introduced by the Germans, took on new meaning as the Chuukese were progressively pulled into both manufacturing and service industries and, during the height of World War II, forced into "relentless manual labor in military work and agriculture" (Poyer 2004:141).



Figure 6 – An aerial image from February 1944 of the results of an attack on a naval base on Dublon Island. (Chen 2004)

This disastrous wartime period still permeates Chuukese cultural memory today. In 1944 a massive loss of Japanese supplies in an American air raid occurred, to which the Japanese response was "a rapid program of confiscation, military control, and rationing of the Lagoon's limited resources," mostly *out* of the hands of the Chuukese, and into those of the Japanese army (Poyer 2004:142). Plantations of cassava and sweet potatoes quickly replaced empty land and agricultural land like taro swamps; under Japanese rule nearly every island peak was cleared and existing plant life now consists of second growth alone (Poyer 2004; Gladwin 1953). Lin Poyer's interview with Akeisuk Mokok provides a representative picture of Chuukese trauma during the war: "During the war, we ran out of our house to a cave, and we were very hungry, because we had no food. They took our land, our breadfruit trees, and other kinds of foods. That's why my father and mother died, because what were we to eat?" (Poyer 2004:137). The Chuukese were forced to steal from their own land (for which execution was sometimes the penalty) or live off of famine foods like wild yam, taro leaves, and coconut palm toddy (Poyer 2004). To a people for whom foods like breadfruit are symbolic of health and prosperity, such shortages and deaths are culturally devastating and have undoubtedly made already-present anxiety over food shortages even more pervasive in the years since the war (Goodenough 2002).

Post-War Chuuk

Unfortunately for Chuuk Lagoon, the defeat of the Japanese did not signal the end of colonialism's influence. Until 1986 Chuuk remained under American control, and well into the present period Chuuk has been the subject of imposed colonial and neocolonial boundaries – most notably the American labeling of Micronesian migrations to Guam under the Compact of Free Association (Peter 2000). Joakim Peter (2000:254) maintains that the CoFA has negatively framed the Chuukese as “Compact Immigrants.” Instead of being citizens of ‘Freely Associated States’ as promised, economic and political constructions have created the perception of these migrations as external threats to the U.S., Guam, and Hawaii that began with economic and military liberalization through the CoFA. Again, the concept of *aipwa* is relevant: here, neocolonial boundaries conform the historically restricted travelling habits and pathways of the Chuukese people to the very synchronic lens of the signing of a political document (Peter 2000). As Peter attests, “space is not just physical...it is fluid and mobile,” and restrictions on navigation and cultural movement must be viewed as restrictions on the culture's ability to adapt and react to change (Peter 2000:256).



Figure 7 – A machine gun being overtaken by coral in the Eastern waters of Chuuk Lagoon. This is one of many images that recent geocachers have compiled from dives in Chuuk. (Groundspeak 2002)

The United States' “nonchalant attitude toward political, economic and social responsibilities” after World War II likely set the stage for the current economic situation of Chuuk, which relies heavily on tourism for economic support in absence of other sources of revenue (Peter 2000:258). Numerous merchant ships, warships, military installations, hundreds of aircraft, and over 1000 tons of bombs dropped on Chuuk now contribute to hundreds of thousands of tons of World War II wreckage that attracts tourists (Peter 2000). Together with surviving fish populations, these preserved relics (see Figure 7) have made a world-renowned diving center out of Chuuk; though, this arguably attracts American tourists interested in World War II culture, serving the celebration of American wartime conquests instead of commemorating the suffering of the Chuukese. In the last ten years geocaching (which originated in the United States) has become another tourist outlet for these dive sites, and a ‘Virtual Cache’ now exists for divers to document their trips to a historical site (see Figure 8) in the Nomoneas Islands (Groundspeak 2002).

Conclusion

Among lingering memories of wartime hunger, hardship and several hundred years of colonial conflict, many of the cultural structures of Chuuk Lagoon are still alive. Though, while kinship and matrilineal ties remain important in the lifeways of Chuuk, contemporary neocolonial influences are strengthening as threats to the remnants of this society's heritage. Moving into the future, *aipwa* will gain importance as a means of understanding and preserving the Chuukese' wealth of cultural

knowledge amid the political and social forces described by Joakim Peter. By recovering and renavigating the pathways of their indigenous traditions, the people of Chuuk Lagoon have hope of maintaining the vitality of their history and adapting to the ever-changing and ever-widening cultural sea that they must now begin to navigate.



Figure 8 – A geocacher’s photograph of a plaque in a Chuuk diving site, hinting at the World War II legacy that Chuuk carries with it into an independent and uncertain future. (Anderson 2008).

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