

# I . Background

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Palau's intangible cultural heritage like other Pacific Island countries has witnessed social changes that influence much of the cultural transformations and sometimes even loss. From Spain colonization and the introduction of Christianity, to Germany and its trade policies, to Japan and World War II, and unto U.S. Trusteeship Agreement and its education, health, and social welfare programs, Palau intangible cultural heritage has seen its share of acculturation. Beginning with Spain rule where Christianity was to be the new norm and behavior of Palau's society, traditional spiritual and natural practices and observations were to be controlled and even eliminated so as not to compete with the missionaries' goal.

According to Kramer's Palau Volume 3, Material Culture and Cultural Life, 1926, in the divisions for labor men were responsible for "war, hunting, fishing, care of the trees, collecting for palm wine, woodwork, construction of houses and canoes, navigation, rope-making and preparation of fibers, and the drilling of money. The women were in charge of: taro patch, weaving mats, pottery, making clothes, tattooing, cooking." In addition, Barnett, Palauan Society 1949, Study of the Contemporary Native Life in the Palauan Islands, a study that takes place after the second World War and into the beginning of Palau's society under the Administration of the United States, under United Nation Trust, he reflects on Palau's societal change from the traditional into the contemporary. From his writing the change of lifestyles of the Palauans as they adopt to the new way of life, it is clear that the local people gravitating towards materials and a culture of the westerner changing labor industries from which the intangible cultural knowledge derive from. Construction of traditional homes and canoes are slowly replaced with engine motored boats, and homes begin to take more of a foreign context of architecture. Cloths are also replaced by clothing made from local seamstress who picked up the skills from Japanese people and others who attended Japanese trade schools.

From the gender specific labor and in comparison to the current cultural practices of Palau, it is clear that so much change has taken over the societies of Palau thereby eliminating some of the mentioned practices for men and women. For instance, for the division of men, war, constructing of canoes, navigation, and drilling of bead money is completely eliminated from today's practices of men. As for women, pottery and tattooing have been eliminated from today's practices. Hunting, fishing, care of trees, construction, rope making, and preparation of fibers is left to the few and not as regularly practiced as men are increasingly participating in wage earning jobs and rarely participate in the aforementioned labor unless for recreational or for cultural showcasing. Of all the mentioned labor for male fishing is perhaps the only practice that remains strong amongst men for recreational and subsistence living. Collecting of palm wine is taken place only in the Southwestern Island of Hatohobei and Tobi, while pottery is currently being revived by a project from Belau National Museum for the last two years, and making of cloths is of a store bought item, unless for cultural demonstration event, or a cultural ritual. It is from these labor industries that the intangible knowledge was used to produce and sustain livelihoods. As changes take over with a more dominant western influence, Palauans are striving more and more to document and revive some of its intangible cultural heritage thru national cultural events and unconventional training programs for the younger generations. Its membership into the convention for safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage is a crucial and necessary step for such a goal for the nation to achieve.

The Republic of Palau became a member of the Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage in November 2011. As a new member, Palau has began its assessment of the current status of nation's intangible cultural heritage in comparison to the conventions criteria for nominations towards any of the UNESCO ICH qualifications. In year 2011, a cultural mapping of Palau was complete and reported that provided an overview of Palau's current cultural heritage protection and promotion as a means to feeding the development of a cultural policy. A copy of the report can be accessed at [www.spc.int/hdp/index.php?option=com\\_docman&task](http://www.spc.int/hdp/index.php?option=com_docman&task). Most of the ground work in the identification and documentation of the intangible cultural heritage are managed under the Ministry of Community and Cultural Affairs as the responsible government agency. Others within the government and of non government agencies are actively promoting the use and passage of the knowledge, but little is done towards documentation. It is within the government

where documentation is generally practiced, with promotion as a coordinated effort between the government and non government agencies. Such non government agencies or civil societies include;

- Belau National Museum, line agency to the Ministry of Community and Culture, safeguarding Palau's cultural materials, oral history, natural history, etc.
- Mechesil Belau (Palau Women), an overall Palau women association conducting an annual event to discuss the pressing issues of Palau some of which are intangible cultural heritage.
- Belau Potters Association, a newly introduced organization for the revival of Palau's pottery.
- Ebiil Society Inc., a community based organization conducting education of youth on indigenous knowledge towards conservation of natural environment.
- All current and active traditional Palauan men and women's group who are practicing and promoting various intangible cultural heritage such as:
  - Melekeok Ngaramecherocher- Traditional architecture of Palauan Bai (traditional leaders building) and stone platform engineering
  - Ngerubesang Men's Club- traditional architecture and stone platform engineering
  - Ngarachamayong traditional performance art training for girls
  - Ngardmau Ngaraokelout men's war dance group

The rest come together to perform during the National cultural events on an annual basis. Below table and description is an excerpt from Palau Cultural Mapping (Kloulechad-Singeo 2011).

## National Cultural Events

Table1. Current National and State Events

Event	Description	Coordinating Agency
Annual Olchotel Belau Fair (ongoing)	Performance art staged, crafts, food, plants, ets	Ministry of Community & Cultural Affairs/ State and Communities
Mechesil Belau Annual Conference (ongoing)	Current issues of Palau Society	Mechesil Belau/ Ministry of Community and Cultural Affairs
Festival of Pacific Arts	Every 4 years cultural event for all Pacific Island countries	Ministry of Cultural Affairs/ State and others
Koror Friday Night Market	Cultural Market once a month	Palau Visitors Authority
Constitutional Day	July 9 <sup>th</sup> of every year	Ministry of Domestic Affairs/Ministry of Community and Cultural Affairs/State and Local Communities

These are just some of the cultural events consistently conducted at the Community, State, National, or Regional level on a monthly level, to annual and on to every 4 years. Documentation of the events can be obtained by the main organizing entities or by the Bureau of Arts and Culture as part of their cultural information collection. Other than cultural events, there are community based programs conducted in partnership with the local communities for the purpose of conserving and protecting Palau's nature and culture. Such programs are included in the below table 5 (Kloulechad-Singeo 2011).

Table2. Joint Programs; Government/Communities

<b>Program</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Coordinating Agency (s)</b>
Palau Register of Historic Places (Ongoing Program)	Identifying and registering of all important historical	Bureau of Arts and Culture/State/Communities
Belau Watershed Alliance (Ongoing Program)	Protection of Traditional Watershed	State/Local Communities/TNC/Palau Conservation Society
Palau Protected Areas (Ongoing Program)	Identifying of critical natural properties of Palau for conservation purposes	Palau Conservation Society/State/Local Communities
Archeology, Survey, & Inventory	Archeological surveys and documenting	Bureau of Arts and Culture/State/Communities
Society of Historians; Oral History and Ethnography (Ongoing Program)	Oral history/ culture preservation thru documentation	Bureau of Arts & Culture, State and Communities
Belau National Museum (Ongoing Program)	National cultural showcasing and preservation	Belau National Museum-NGO/Ministry Community & Cultural Affairs
Ebiil Summer Camp (Ongoing Program)	Nature & Culture based summer camp for youth	Ebiil Society Inc.-NGO/ Local communities/ Bureau of Arts and Culture/ Palau Conservation Society/ Belau National Museum

With the assistance of local communities, the ethnic knowledge important to the preservation of Palauan culture and its environment is identified, documented and protected through laws or policies by the various actors mentioned in the table above. Using the bottom up planning strategy these community based programs employ community members' knowledge and contribution into planning and implementation for effective cultural or natural properties protection and promotion. One of the recommendations from the conducted consultancies was to develop strong support for community based organizations as a strategy for appropriate and effective development of community programs (Kloulechad-Singeo 2011).