

# THE ART OF COMMUNICATION IN YAP, FSM: TRADITIONAL FORMS OF RESPECTFUL INTERACTIONS

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*I believe the most beautiful thing about our  
culture is respect.*

—Elizabeth Ribilyan<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

All cultures have unique and interesting ways of communicating and transmitting knowledge and information important to members of their societies. This is especially true in Yap State of the Federated States of Micronesia, where traditional communication forms have endured for ages and support a society in which respectful interactions and peaceful relations are paramount. On islands such as those of Yap, crucial resources such as land, food, and water are scarce, and the ways residents cope with these limitations all connect to culturally transmitted understandings of how to cooperate and respect one another at all times.

According to Yap State Senator Ted Rutun, one of the reasons Yap has such a distinct and fascinating communication system is its reliance on non-written forms of transmitting information. Rutun notes, “That is why we do activities like *mitmit*.<sup>2</sup> That is why we have performing arts—just to convey the same things that you could do

1. Elizabeth Ribilyan, personal interview with author, 24 February 2014. Elizabeth Ribilyan is a long-time education specialist in Yap with a keen interest in Yapese language and communication.

2. As will be explained in more detail below, a *mitmit* is a very important social gathering of related villages where numerous vital interactions occur.

verbally.”<sup>3</sup> In this way, ceremonies, rituals, and performances are thus the traditional mediums of mass communication on Yap. They give audiences information meaningful to the society, often conveying messages of respect, cooperation, and social order. On an individual and family level, these values are communicated in a more personal way. Stories, sayings, proverbs, and even the manner and style of non-verbal expressions and behavior are vital tools used by families and individuals to communicate important lessons on how to properly become and be Yapese.

These ways of communicating wisdom on getting along and cooperating with each other in order to survive may have indeed been more relevant in the past. But their endurance is evidence that respect can still be a highly valued social norm—one for which the world can perhaps look to Yap as an example. This chapter will therefore briefly highlight many of the important and interesting methods of Yapese communication that help to transmit traditional knowledge and wisdom on how life should be lived on a small, remote island in the Pacific.

## ISLAND-WIDE COMMUNICATIONS

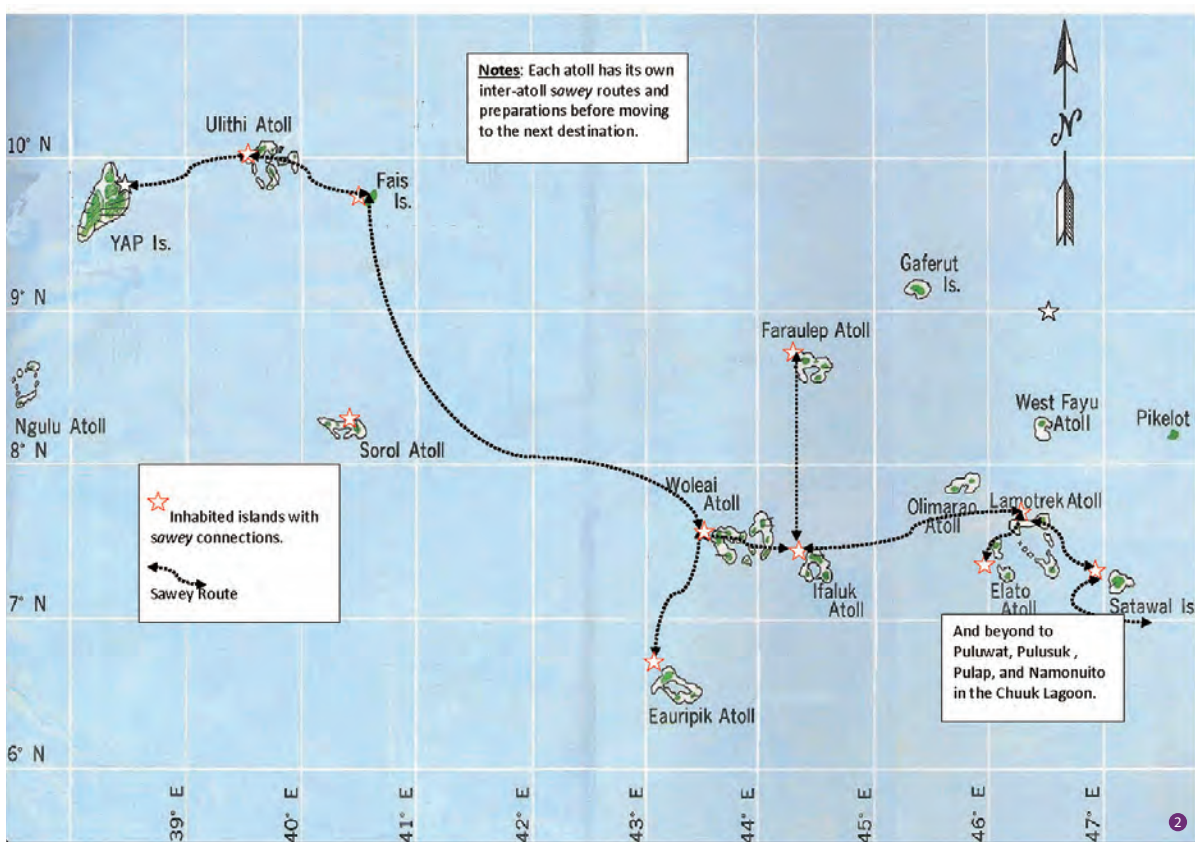
3. Ted Rutun, personal interview with author, 19 February 2014.

One of the most interesting expressions of communication in Yap involves the highly complex and sophisticated protocols involved



① The Munguy men's house in Dugor, Yap. Traditionally, men's and women's houses have been the main places where oral traditions were passed on to newer generations. Stories, legends, and words of wisdom were often heard in them, and they were important (and still are to a smaller degree) places where Yapese culture was communicated. © Stefan M. Krause

in formal interactions between villages. This remarkable system ties distinct villages and their people together in ways that reflect both the social organization uniting discrete communities on the islands and the respectful inter-village processes helping to ensure stability. These ties also extend out to Yap's many surrounding smaller islands. As an example, many with knowledge about the state have likely heard stories of the *sawey*—a system of reciprocity, respect and obligations between the Outer Islands of Yap and a few coastal villages in the municipality of Gagil. To put it simply, the *sawey* is basically a formal relationship between the resource-poor Outer Islands of Yap and their Main Island benefactors from the municipality of Gagil. While less observed nowadays, it involves protocols of obligation and respect between both groups that are described metaphorically by the Yapese as a “parent-child” relationship. As in a family, the “parents” from Gagil are obligated to give needed resources to their “children” from the Outer Islands, who in turn must observe certain respect and tribute protocols.



2 Map showing Yap State, including the Outer Islands and the sawey system network. © Yap State Historic Preservation Office



These protocols include the formal channels of communication through which a procession of canoes with prestigious gifts would begin from the furthest Outer Islands and stop at each island on the way, where a new group of chiefs and navigators would take the lead. Eventually, the leaders from the closest Outer Island (Ulithi) would then be responsible to guide the procession into the lagoons of Yap and to Gagil with all the accumulated tribute to be given to specific chiefs from Gagil. While the “parent-child” metaphor may seem oppressive or patronizing to non-Yapese, it is not understood that way in Yap. Custom holds that the villagers from Gagil *must* give shelter or whatever essential items are requested to their Outer Island “relatives” even to the detriment of their immediate families. As such, the sawey can thus be seen as a formal relationship that in practice benefits both groups—not just the “parents” from Gagil. In times of famine or other natural disasters, for instance, the sawey ensures that Outer Islanders can look to their “relatives” for assistance.

As with the sawey, the inter-village communications on the Main Islands of Yap are complex and meaningful.<sup>4</sup> According to the 2010 Census, the Main Island group of Yap is home to over seven thousand residents living in over a hundred different villages. While developed in ancient times when the population was far greater and the resources and territory much more strained, Yap's traditional

4. For a comprehensive look at the network of relationships between villages and the overall social organization of Yap, please see Sherwood G. Lingenfelter's *Yap, Political Leadership and Culture Change in an Island Society*, University of Hawaii Press: Honolulu, 1975.



③ Stone path in Amin, Yap. This is one of the hundreds of beautifully constructed stone paths that weave throughout the Main Islands of Yap. The stone paths facilitate networks of communication between villages and are the traditional “roads” used by everyone. As such, they also have protocols that need to be followed when traveling on them. If in another village, for instance, you must carry a small twig or branch in your hand to communicate you are on a peaceful journey. You should not make loud noises, eat, whistle, or do anything disrespectful, and when traveling in groups, you must walk in a single-file line. © Yap State Historic Preservation Office

political structure is still extremely complex and retains built-in customs that continue to keep order and peaceful relations among the villages. On a broad level, these customs include the proper way to send messages between villages and the formal interactions that occur in meetings between allied villages. A great example of both of these traditions in action was the recent 2014 mitmit ceremony in the village of Ngolog.

## THE MITMIT

The *mitmit* is a public event that carries and communicates important Yapese meanings. As Senator Rutun explained in the opening paragraphs, it can also convey information to all in a non-written way. In early 2014, the village of Ngolog hosted its first mitmit in almost a century. Its revival was important to Yapese for numerous reasons, including the opportunity it provided to display Yapese custom and tradition to newer generations who had never witnessed such a ceremony before. In the past, mitmits were ceremonies that brought together allied villages in formal settings where leaders met and discussed important matters concerning their alliances. The recent mitmit in Ngolog did this as well. Sensing tradition and custom in Yap were fading, including knowledge about village alliances and chiefly titles, the organization and performance of the ceremony communicated the correct ways for certain villages to relate and interact with each other as well as important information on the traditional leadership structure of the culture.<sup>5</sup> Being from a lower ranking village herself, Elizabeth Ribilyan explains as follows:<sup>6</sup>

The Yapese cultural system is complex and complicated. Like a spider's web, with the many important positions, titles, ranks, and commoners, everyone is connected to one another in some way, somehow. As in a company, there's the CEO and the many managers and supervisors. In Yap, there are high chiefs; there are the three pillars [paramount chiefs] and each community has its own chief; [this is similar] to the managers of the various divisions in a company.

During the planning and preparation of the mitmit, traditional inter-village communication activated and networks between



5. While it is true that a unique village ranking system does exist in Yap, many Yapese (including those who are among low-ranking villages) wish to make clear that their society is not a true "caste system" as it has been portrayed by many outsiders in the past. Applying this non-Yapese term to such a complex and uniquely Yapese system of relations is wrong in their eyes. As Ribilyan's perspective describes, in Yap, ranking is like a division of labor in a company. Unlike caste systems, ranks are not determined by birth and blood, but rather by the village or estate from which they are associated. The system is also dynamic and flexible because the land holds the true power and people can leave their villages and marry or become adopted into higher ranking ones.

6. Ribilyan, personal interview, 2014.

<sup>4</sup> Presentation of traditional Yapese money to village chiefs during a historic mitmit in Ngolog Village, Yap. The circulation of these valuable cultural items communicates and reaffirms the traditional ties between villages and chiefs. © Stefan M. Krause



villages came alive. As with the sawey, interactions between villages on the Main Islands must follow a certain path according to their relationships. The northernmost municipalities of Rumung and Maap, for instance, were contacted through village channels that must always pass through Gagil first. In the weeks leading up to the ceremony, all the attendees of the mitmit then collected tribute goods and traditional money that would eventually be presented to the Paramount Chief in Ngolog. On the day of the mitmit, chiefs and villagers from Rumung then began a procession with their tribute goods that stopped first in Maap, then in Gagil, and eventually in the municipality of Rull, where Ngolog is located.<sup>7</sup> At each stop, the chiefs met and discussed their roles and what was expected of attendees.

Once all the affiliated villages had gathered at Ngolog, traditional patterns of interactions between them took on an even more formal structure. Each village in attendance, for instance, had its particular place to sit, and inside the large community house, chiefs and other titled members had their positions as well. Once all were settled, the events included traditional dances, circulation of traditional money, feasting, and formal dialogue among the leaders meant to reaffirm the customary relationships between villages. And of course, there was the exchange of numerous pieces of stone money that would eventually find resting areas in Ngolog's "stone money bank."<sup>8</sup> Through ceremony and ritual, participants and observers alike experienced and acted out customs. The mitmit can thus be seen as an important medium of communication through which tradition survives in Yap. For most this was a new experience, and participation

7. A separate group of allied villages from other municipalities also attended and proceeded along their own customary routes.

8. Stone money banks (*malal*) are locations around community houses and other places where the large stone-disc currency is placed and remains. While ownership may change when the stone money (*rei*) is exchanged for various purposes, their location for the most part does not. In most cases, the "banks" are found in the long areas between stone platforms that also serve as dancing grounds during festivities and ceremonial events such as the mitmit.

5 Yapese youth participating in a reenactment of the transportation of stone money that was quarried 400 miles away in Palau and brought to Yap on traditional voyaging canoes. Taken during the 2013 Yap Day Festival, demonstrations such as this communicate Yap's history and traditions to all. © Brad Holland

6 Yapese youth participating in a coconut husking demonstration during the 2013 Yap Day Festival held at Yap's Living History Museum. © Brad Holland



in the events helped to reestablish traditions that many may have forgotten.

## TRADITIONAL YAPESE DANCE

While Yap is best known for its stone money, the culture is also famous for spectacular dances its villages perform on various occasions, including the recent mitmit and the annual celebrations of Yap Day, the Canoe Festival, and Yapese Homecoming. Women, men, and children from villages often practice for weeks or even months to perfect dances that include wonderfully sung songs and highly choreographed, stylistic movements. These dances communicate multiple messages to onlookers. The songs' stories can tell everyone about famous historic events, the relationships between villages, and important legends or stories, and oftentimes, they commemorate and honor the suffering and sacrifices of ancestors. Senator Rutun states:<sup>9</sup>

The information that you need to preserve, you put into the dance. That information may have to do with the relationship between your village and another village. Information that goes into the dancing chant may have to do with a time when disaster struck so that people would know, future generations would know that in such a time a war was waged on the village—the village was attacked. Or a storm hit the village and killed so many people. Or something that is more celebrated like the arrival of something good—is it the stone money from Palau, or when they got a necklace [highly valued traditional money] from somewhere? The way they went through obtaining those things would be detailed in the dance. There is a dance now called “Paliker, Paliker” which is the name of the capital of the FSM. There is this old man from Maap that choreographed this dance. And you know when you go through this dance you would think that this old man was sitting at the negotiating table. Because in it, when you go through the dance, you would understand how the first Compact came about.<sup>10</sup> So instead of reading a book, it's an oral history that was about the creation of this nation.

Along with being a traditional form to communicate history, some dances and chants are also ceremoniously performed to address

9. Rutun, personal interview, 2014.

10. Senator Rutun is speaking here of the very historic period of negotiations that occurred between the FSM and the United States of America that resulted in the Compact of Free Association between the two nations.



present concerns. One such dance is the *tayor*, a standing dance in which women of the village ask chiefs and others present for certain needed items. These items are then always presented. According to Yap State Historic Preservation Officer Francis Reg,<sup>11</sup> the *tayor* has recently been seen again more and more than it had in the recent past. This is because traditional leaders requested it become a regular part of ceremonies such as Yap Day since it is such an important symbol of the culture's values of sharing and reciprocity.

It is important to point out that traditional Yapese dances are also more than vehicles to convey messages. Senator Rutun mentions that many are unaware, for instance, of the sacred association that links humans and the spirit world.<sup>12</sup> One way this hallowed relationship is symbolized is when villages “hang-up” dances—a ritual in which dances are ceremoniously “retired” for periods of time. It is believed that the dances come from the spirits and should be returned to them at certain points since they belong in the sacred realm. As Senator Rutun notes:<sup>13</sup>

Some people think that they are hanging [the dance] up just to lay to rest for a while. But that is not the case. It is like to put it up in heaven, to give it back to the gods. Because dances are something that belongs to the gods. Dances are for the gods. That

11. Francis Reg, personal communication with author, 12 March 2014.

12. Rutun, personal interview, 2014.

13. Ibid.

⑦ Yapese women prepare for a dance during the 2013 Yap Day Festival. Beautiful dances such as these are accompanied by songs or chants that communicate important messages to onlookers. © Brad Holland



is why here, you don't smile. You have to be expressionless. And this goes a long way, being expressionless here. You don't smile, and people say, 'how come they are not smiling.' Because you are doing something for the gods [...] So [we] put the dance up [because] it's a sacred, almost a forbidden thing to leave it here on earth. So you just have to put it back up to keep it holy, to keep it sacred.



## THE WISDOM OF RESPECT

*“Generous is to generous and mean is to mean. Others will be generous to you if you are generous and will be mean to you if you are mean.”* —Yapese Proverb<sup>14</sup>

These words of wisdom communicate to Yapese a moral lesson found in most cultures around the world—one known to many as the “Golden Rule” of “do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” In Yap, this ethic is extremely important and underlies the fundamental values of respect and reciprocity that have been taught to so many through oral traditions. Indeed, the Yapese have a rich collection of traditional sayings that, through the use of metaphors and other forms of speech, communicate a common set of ideals essential to survive on their small island. Along with the village-to-village forms of communication already discussed, Yapese “words of wisdom” and common sayings are mediums of cultural transmission that are spoken daily in various more personal settings. Additional examples are provided below:

14. This English version is a translation from the Yapese: *Ulwon ea gool ea gool ea ma pulwon ea kaan ea kaan, faqan raquum gool ngewuug, ma raquug gool ngewuum. Faqan raquum kaan ngewuug, maa raquug kaan ngewuum.* Proverb and translation provided by Elizabeth Ribilyan, interview, 24 February 2014.

8 Yapese women's bamboo dance during 2013 Yap Day Festival. © Brad Holland

9 Yapese women's sitting dance during 2013 Yap Day Festival. Through participation and watching others, Yapese children are taught an important tradition. © Brad Holland

**“Te gich bo Yalus”** – “Not us, but the spirit”<sup>15</sup>

This saying, heard on some of the Outer Islands of Yap, is used to deflect praise from others so as not to appear boastful. If, for example, a fisherman returns with a large catch he is sharing with others, when praised for his generosity and hard work in providing for them, he would say this to take the spotlight off himself by giving all the credit to the “spirit” or god that provided the bounty. Boastfulness is looked down upon in Yap, and sayings such as these help to ensure others that no members become too prideful or think they are above anyone else. According to Leo Pugram, a retired Yapese educator, village chief, and elder as well as one of the foremost living experts on Yapese language, “When you are humble, the people will lift you up. When you are boastful, they will bring you down.”<sup>16</sup> Legends bear this reality out as stories abound with chiefs who became too powerful and were killed by villagers, some of whom conspired with enemies against the misguided leaders. In general, today, it is rare to see Yapese displaying high status or wealth or especially to hear Yapese boasting.

**“Bay ea lawan' u way”** – “Wisdom is [still] in the basket”

Almost every Yapese carries a handheld woven basket at all times. Since it holds many of their essential items, this basket is so important (especially for men) that it is often called a “second home.” One such item found inside is betel nut, which, as on many Pacific islands, is a highly valued and culturally significant local resource and is chewed often. This saying, “bay ea lawan' u way,” is meant to convey the advice that whenever a problem seems difficult to solve, one should take a minute to chew a betel nut and think about it

15. This saying and its description were given by Chief George Hofalui from the Lothow, Ulithi (an Outer Island of Yap) to Danny A. Matheblemal (staff member of the Yap State Historic Preservation Office).

16. Leo Pugram, personal interview with author, 14 February 2014.



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10 Yapese children preparing for a traditional women's sitting dance during the 2013 Yap Day Festival. © Brad Holland

11 Yapese women and men prepare for the bamboo dance during the 2013 Yap Day Festival. © Brad Holland



more. The calming effect of the betel nut will help in providing the focus needed to make a wise decision. When it comes to decision making in Yap, such careful consideration and consensus-making are the norm. According to preeminent Micronesian scholar Father Francis Hezel, “A betel-nut break [also provides] a check against impulsive speech. Nothing is so detrimental to the peace and climate of respect as an ill-considered remark.”<sup>17</sup> When groups come to an impasse and cannot agree, seeking wisdom in the basket by sharing a chew often leads to progress.

**“Kammagar”** – “You are tired”

All the values of respect, cooperation, and politeness discussed in this chapter are embodied in one of the most often heard terms in Yap: *kammagar*. Meant to express thanks, the term literally translates to “you are tired.” Beyond a simple “thank you,” it is also a greeting that conveys an understanding and appreciation for the tiring effort someone may have taken to perform a task or walk a long way to be somewhere. In the past, for instance, Yapese would travel long distances by foot to meet each other using one of hundreds of the islands’ beautiful stone paths. Because they were probably tired after such journeys, “kammagar” was the polite way of thanking them

17. Francis Hezel, personal communication with author, 2014.

<sup>12</sup> “Wisdom is in the basket”: A traditional men’s basket in Yap that holds many essential items. © Stefan M. Krause



for their sacrifice. By saying “thank you,” the Yapese are thus also thanking guests for their presence. It is a symbolic gesture of respect that illustrates the lengths Yapese go to in being polite to others.



Thoughtful, considerate, and respectful communication is extremely important in Yap. In most social settings, words are always chosen very carefully and spoken with the utmost care not to offend. Politeness is indeed the norm. To illustrate this point, Yapese youth Kalahao Fillmed provides the following often-heard saying that conveys it is just as important to speak in a polite way as it is to speak polite words:<sup>18</sup> “If you whisper, people will strain their ears to listen, but if you shout people will shut their ears in annoyance.”<sup>19</sup>

As a long-time educator and someone who has worked decades studying Yapese oral histories, Peter Reuchugrad, a Yapese elder, knows a great deal about his culture. When speaking of the Yapese virtues of constant politeness and respect, Reuchugrad explains it well:<sup>20</sup>

You have to be polite. So you have to use polite terms. Whether you are a man or a woman or older, you have to show respect by speaking politely. Saying *sirow* (excuse me), and thank you and bowing, not using so many facial expressions, not getting mad, not saying sarcastic words, no joking to older people, stuff

18. Kalahao Fillmed, personal communication with author, 14 February 2014.

19. The Yapese version is, “*Gara um kathkath ma ra'i chela'n e girdii ko nen ni gabe yog, ma gar um tolul ma dariy bae' ni ba'adag ni nge motoyil ngom ya gabe amith nag lan tel rad. Ere kayog e gorrong mag moding nigem ma ra adag e giddi' ni fulweg lingum.*”

20. Peter Reuchugrad, personal interview with author, 20 February 2014.

13 Stone money bank (left), dancing grounds (center), and community house (background right) in Kaday Village, Weloy Municipality, Yap. © Brad Holland

14 Henry Fanaglubuw sitting next to stone money in front of Kaday Village's community meeting house in Weloy Municipality, Yap. © Brad Holland

like that. I guess politeness is the main thing here. Politeness and respect. If you remain polite, show respect, people will show respect to you, people will like you. I think that is important. You have to make people like you.



When asked why this respect and politeness is so important in Yap, Reuchugrad further states:<sup>21</sup>

Well, because we like to be liked. I guess that is the most important thing. And because we have so many relatives and respect is a big part of it. And because of the relationship between

21. Ibid.

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<sup>15</sup> Yapese educator Elizabeth Ribilyan shares her knowledge of the unique and interesting forms of Yapese communication. © Stefan M. Krause

families and between villages, between municipalities...you have to be liked. I guess the word 'love' can be used too.

Finally, Senator Rutun echoes the above by pointing out how living on an isolated island such as Yap is like being on a small boat in the middle of the ocean with people you have to get along with.<sup>22</sup> Getting along with, loving, and respecting one another makes life's journey easier and benefits everyone. On Yap, the traditional mediums of expression and communication developed with this wisdom in mind. One might say that this wisdom proves more and more important as the world becomes ever more interconnected, making clear that we are all passengers on the same boat. Metaphorically speaking, the boat may indeed be getting bigger, but this just means that so, too, is the importance of cooperation and respect.

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22. Rutun, personal interview, 2014.