



## Using Cultural Heritage to Confront Tomorrow's Challenges

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Young boys learning sailing and navigation © 2013 Waa'gey

**W**aa'gey is a community-based organisation that uses traditional skills to confront the social, economic, and environmental challenges faced by the people of Micronesia's most remote outer islands in the Pacific.

We pursue the preservation of native knowledge, technologies, and arts both to protect our distinctive outer islands' identity and to solve specific problems relating to import dependency, urbanisation, climate change, and unemployment.

For thousands of years, our people of the central Caroline Islands, spanning from Yap to Chuuk in the Federated States of Micronesia, have sustained lives and a healthy lifestyle on remote low-lying island atolls. Central to the lifestyle were our sustainable cultural and traditional practices, which allowed us to live side by side with nature and its resources, the most significant being the vast Pacific Ocean that our people still treasure using traditional navigation knowledge and without the aid of GPS, navigational maps, or radios. While our culture has withstood the test of time, the pace and scope of outside influence is growing at an unprecedented rate. Moreover, there is now an even bigger threat at the global level: climate change and the effect it has had on sea level have put further stress on the low-lying atolls and the meagre resources available.

More and more of our people in the neighbouring islands are relocating to the main island of Yap. Broadly, neighbouring islanders migrate to this urbanising centre to seek better opportunities, such as medical services and education, and to participate in the cash economy.

While this is the case, we cannot ignore the looming problem of the not-too-distant future: climate change and the rising sea level. The rising sea level has already taken its toll on certain low-lying islands. This paints a dark picture for the 36 per cent of our national population that resides out in these remote islands. This phenomenon will inevitably force the people to seek higher ground for permanent residency where food and other basic human needs can be met. Hence, the emergent communities of outer islanders already established on the main island are expected to grow over the next decade.

This will pose some expected challenges that the communities themselves need to address early on. Such problems will mostly arise out of cultural differences, if not culture shock, as the community members readjust to their new lifestyle. These problems will include health-related issues with people adjusting from a diet of local produce to spam and other imported goods and being less physically active.

More importantly, however, our traditions will have the added risk of being lost forever. The newly born generation of Reimathau (people of the ocean) in Yap will have less exposure to cultural values and traditional practices. Our culture and traditions sustain us. They define who we are as a people and as individuals.

Our ancestors made these small islands their homes. Their skills and traditions have been passed down from generation to generation. The heritage of the past is not only simple but the most ideal for the environment in which we live. Today as the world and its diverse cultures become more

intertwined, our small communities are challenged with an awesome responsibility of protecting our cultural values and heritage. They are the bedrock upon which the foundations of our societies were built. The social fabric that ties us together as a people cannot survive the winds of change if our true heritage and valuable culture is left to pass. We must hold on to it tightly and have our children embrace it with devotion, especially the highly regarded attributes and virtues that have thus far weathered the test of time.

At Waa'gey, which literally means 'future,' we believe that for us to move forward, we must look to the past to help set our course. Quite often, we use the metaphor of a canoe to explain the value of teaching students cultural knowledge: When a canoe is sailing toward a distant destination, the navigator always looks back at the point of departure to estimate how fast the canoe is drifting due to ocean currents. If he didn't look back, he would have no reliable way of reaching his destination. Waa'gey teaches traditional skills as a way of giving young people the means to look back on where they came from, even as their lives take them to new places or new countries. Without a firm understanding of who they are, they would be as lost as a canoe whose navigator didn't take note of its point of departure.

Pairing expert mentors with eager young people, Waa'gey helps to protect and revive important cultural skills that would otherwise be lost.

Waa'gey organises the efforts of volunteers to pass specialised local knowledge from community elders to young people. Traditionally, this occurred as a matter of cultural and familial course in the outer islands. Today, with the introduction of the cash economy and a surge in emigration to the urban centres on high islands, continuation of such instruction must be deliberate. On-going Waa'gey projects include making dugout canoes, learning traditional way-finding navigation skills using stars and ocean swells, and developing handicraft carving skills as well as specialised skirt weaving.

Waa'gey also supports the efforts of others working in or for the outer island community. Waa'gey has on-going partnerships with foreign development agencies and international non-profits as well as local clubs, schools, and organisations. Waa'gey's presence on Yap and its reputation within the community helps it serve as a conduit, clearinghouse, and coordinator for effective civic action in Yap State.