

Preserving and Revitalizing Traditional Cultures and Historical Heritage in the Pacific Islands

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Rapid modernization in the post-war period have caused changes in lifestyle and the decline of traditional cultures that had been inherited as wisdoms of peoples for thousands of years in the Pacific Island nations. In addition, traditional knowledge has been often lost without proper documentation, and accessible information on their cultures and histories by the local people are largely limited. We believe that learning one's own culture and history generates and enhances respect to one's origin and identity and further creates the present and future culture based on these traditions.

For the realization of such societies, NGO Pasifika Renaissance was established by former Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers (JOCV) members and researchers in Japan in September 2014 (registered as a nonprofit organization) to endeavor to preserve and promote cultural and historical heritage in the Pacific Islands to contribute to Pacific Islanders' revitalization ("renaissance") of traditional cultures and empower local communities. Three main fields of our activities are (1) documentation, research, and educational projects regarding traditional cultures, histories, and cultural heritage; (2) technical assistance to relevant agencies and organizations; and (3) promotion of tourism.

Currently our activities have been mainly focused on the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM). First, on the islands of Pohnpei State, where traditional knowledge on their culture and history have been passed down orally through generations, we began to document oral traditions from knowledgeable elders by using a video camera. Those traditions, which include legends, tales, historical accounts,

chants, and songs, have faced extinction due to prevalence of modern media (e.g., videos) and young people's indifference. Our project was welcomed and supported by chiefs, elders, and other community members who share a concern of losing their traditions. Some of our video recordings of elders' narrations have been uploaded on our NGO's YouTube page (www.youtube.com/channel/UCnmyAfrAD0u4MpUF9jLgJag) and have gained a lot of access from Micronesia (7 percent of the total views) and United States (73 percent), where one-third of the whole FSM population, most abundantly younger and middle-aged age groups, emigrated, indicating their keen interest in a different cultural environment. We have previously worked on three islands in Pohnpei State and plan to begin documenting the remaining three islands later this year. This method of documenting and publishing by the modern technology and media has been seldom used in the Pacific Islands setting, although it has great potential for future applications due to its easiness and transmitting ability—that is, video's visuality and social media's diffusing capacity.

Second, we assisted FSM National and Pohnpei State governments in their efforts to inscribe the famous megalithic ruins, Nan Madol, on the UNESCO World Heritage List, in which we participated as a member of an international collaboration team and succeeded to formally submit a nomination dossier to UNESCO World Heritage Centre this January. In addition, we provided the Yap State Historic Preservation Office staff with hands-on training in documenting and inventorying stone money sites in March to support their efforts to develop a trans-



Training program at a stone money site on Yap Island
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boundary nomination for a World Heritage listing with Palau, which was previously deferred in 2012. The documentation included oral traditions on individual sites to meet the recommendation made by the World Heritage Committee.

Third, we use our Facebook page (www.facebook.com/PashifikaRenaissance) to provide Pacific Islanders with cultural and historical information for educational purposes. Our posts intend to introduce old and new research results and archival materials (historical photographs, for example) that are held at foreign institutions and are unfamiliar to most Pacific Islanders. We have gained more than 3,600 fans of our page and have received many encouraging comments on our endeavor from them.

Henceforth, we will strive to make a versatile endeavor such as (1) assisting local education department in producing social studies materials due to lack of such teaching resources in school education; (2) repatriating and sharing various information, materials, and research results stored in overseas institutions with local communities; (3) supporting to preserve tangible and intangible cultural heritage that can become invaluable tourism resources to promote cultural tourism, one of the potential sectors to lead the economies in Pacific Island countries; (4) commercializing traditional crafts to give new life to them; and (5) promoting art-related activities to stimulate islanders' creativity. We attempt to collaborate with researchers, government agencies, NOGs, and communities, which share mutual missions, to attain large objectives.



Recording oral traditions from a Pingelapese women © Takuya Nagaoka