

PRESERVING TRADITIONAL PLACE NAMES IN PALAU

MEKED BESEBES AND LYNDA D. TELLAMES

*Obil meai iiang,
a kededul di milrael el mei,
ma beluu a diak el ngii aikang,
ma chutem a diak el ngii aikang,
leng di ralm ma bad el ngeasek a merreder ra
chutem iiang.*

(We both came to this place with nothing.
The land and the rocks are not ours.
We are not the rightful owners of them.
It's only the water and
the rock that own the land.)

—*Chesols*, a Palauan chant

INTRODUCTION

The focus of this paper is to discuss the importance of preserving traditional place names in Palau. Place names embody rich knowledge of migration and settlement patterns. Knowledge of these place names is significant in passing down oral histories, events, and valuable cultural lessons to people and children. The essential structural aspects of Palauan social and political organization were charted in the mythological prehistoric era of Palau; thus, the discussion of these elements must begin there.

Creation of Palau Island: The Legend of Uab

Uchelianged created a land called Lukes, between the islands of Peleliu and Angaur. A clam (*kim*) living on Lukes gave birth to Latmikaik, who, in turn, gave birth to a fish. After some time the land became too crowded, so Uchelianged told the people of Lukes to collect matter from the surface of the water to create an island now known as Angaur. Angaur is considered to be an ancient place with pelagic water surrounding it. Place naming began at Lukes when the clam gave birth to Latmikaik. Angaur, then, was the second place to give names. It became so populous and overcrowded that the people living in Angaur divided the island into hamlets and named them.

Latmikaik gave birth to a child, Uab. Day by day, this magical child grew rapidly, as did his appetite. Uab's mother sought assistance from the villagers to fulfill her child's hunger, but, in fear for their own lives, the people set Uab afire. Leaping high up in agony, his body crashed northward and fell apart, with the various parts forming the Palauan archipelago. The large island of Babeldaob¹ is the trunk of Uab's body. It is said the people of Ngarchelong Village (on the northern tip of Babeldaob Island) have a lot of intelligence because Ngarchelong is one part of Uab's head. Aimeliik is formed of Uab's lower abdomen and legs, pulled up in kicking anger.

Division of Polity: Milad and Her Children²

The legend of Milad (a female demigod) began when the seven Tekiimelab (demigods) were searching the land for the eye of Temedokl (a one-eyed god). They came upon a woman, Dirrabkau, who was boiling taro, and asked her to cook their fish for their evening meal. With her ingenuity, Dirrabkau cooked the fish and inserted them in the cooked taro, thus making taro fish sandwiches. The Tekiimelab took their food and left. Upon finding out the ingenuity of Dirrabkau's taro fish, they went back and told her of a great flood that would be coming and instructed her to tell her son, Ngiselacheos, to lash a big bamboo raft in preparation. When the floods came, she was prepared, but, as the water rose, her hair caught on a tree and she drowned. The Tekiimelab found her body and breathed life into her nostrils, at which point she became Milad, meaning "was dead."

1. Babeldaob is the largest island in the Palau archipelago; ten out of sixteen states of Palau are on Babeldaob.

2. DeVerne R. Smith, *Palau Ethnography Volume 2: Recommendations for the Preservation of Historic and Cultural Resources in Palau* (San Francisco: Micronesia Endowment for Historic Preservation, U.S. National Park Service, 1997), 8.

According to Palauan legend, the goddess Milad gave birth to four children: Imeungs, the oldest son; Olekeok, the second son; Ngerbuns, the third child and only daughter; and Sureor, the youngest son. After giving birth, she went to the top of a hill called Ometochel and threw four small islands in front of her children as their markers. She threw Ngemolei in front of Imeungs, Ngerutoi in front of Olekeok, Okerduul in front of Ngerbuns, and Ngetmeduch in front of Sureor. These four children of Milad form the four corner posts of Palauan society.

TRADITIONAL PALAUAN VILLAGE AND SOCIAL ORGANIZATION

A Palauan Chant:

*At the gathering of Keremong they speculate its origin
Like two ridges that have one origin; it splits at the end
Look to the cloudy west coast, look to the white reefy east coast
When we go and come back there is only original path.³*

The main point of the above chant is to assure one another that there is no way that these two can be permanently separated or disconnected from each other. They are from the same mother after all. Their journeys in life will not separate them—they will always be brothers. This chant may be performed at funerals or other occasions as a reminder of clan or family relationships. It demonstrates the hereditary strength one has following his maternal clan and the village from which he comes.

A native-born Palauan is affiliated with his mother's clan; this affiliation is stronger than his association with his father's clan.⁴ A person's connection to a village is important to Palauan cultural identity as it helps manifest community ties, social status, and kinship and provides a sense of belonging. Place names, chiefly titles, names mentioned in migration legends, and alliances between individuals or villages from the prehistoric era remain central modes of linking people today.

The traditional landscape of Palau encompasses the traditional village as well as other features that serve specific purposes in Palau's worldview (Figure ①). A traditional village is organized according to

3. Palauan version: *Me teko l kidebeiara keremong, el di melechedeche ngii, aika eru lke del ngurd, el dita uchul e mo ketouch ra rsel, msechetau l keiukl ema, cheleua nga ra desbedall, ma debo me deluu te, ngdi ta uchul a rael iiang.* This chant is about two brothers from Keremong, a clan in Ngkeklau-Ngaraard State, who went their separate ways. They left their village together: one went to the east (*Desbedall*), and one went to the west (*Kiukl*) of Babeldaob, along ridges that separate but connect back into one.

4. *Kotel* refers to one's home village following maternal lineage. One's home village is a strong identifier, and one is a strong member of his or her mother's clan and village. Thus, it can be an insult to say something about one's mother, her clan, or her home village. When a Palauan passes away, he or she must be buried in his or her mother's home place.

the dual social organization of people and chiefs.⁵ Typical villages have ten clans and are equally divided in half, organized under the two high clans; each clan has a house lot in each village. Title and clan names are derived from their specific land names.⁶ A place name is a marker to identify and locate in detail a specific history and its associated people and places. Most have stories associated with each place name. Villages that have had previous relationships share places with the same or similar names, but there are stories that can explain the connection between these places.



Preserving Traditional Village Place Names

5. The dual organization in Palau is called *bita el blai me a bita el blai* (two half clans), through which all clans are divided under one of the two high clans in the village.
6. For example, the second ranking clan in Mengellang–Ngarchelong is Imei, which is also the house/land name; thus, the male chiefly title is *Adelbai ra Imei*, and the female title is *Eblil ra Imei*.
7. Palauan version: *Diluches a nguu ra Ongeroell ma Ngedebuul ma; Dimes a nguu er a Morotai e me nguu a Meriil; Se Edeaur ma Odesangel ma Erenguul ma; Ngerbuns ma Imeungs; Kerradel ma Rteluul; A mo modak e di Belau di imo el beluu; Me bol ta rengud a dodengesii tia el Belau rekid.*

A Palauan Song:

*North takes from Ongeroell and Ngedebuul;
South takes from Morotai toward Meriil;
There is Edeaur and Odesangel and Erenguul
Ngerbuns and Imeungs
Kerradel and Rteluul
Combined together make up one Belau
Let us join in one spirit and praise our Belau.*⁷

1 Traditional Palauan village by Charlie Gibbons. © 1973. Belau National Museum

The above song is about associated villages in the western half of Palau. While the music remains the same, a singer may replace names in the lyrics with different village names that have linkage. A similar song is sung in Ngaraard Village that states its boundaries with nearby villages. There are sixteen states (formerly village districts) in Palau, each with hamlets and places that were specially named. Following are traditional names and short descriptions of the sixteen states that were formerly village districts of Palau.⁸

Ngedebuul (Kayangel)⁹

Ngedebuul is taken from the word *ulebdebuul*, referring to the washed-up driftwood and other drifting materials in the oral history of Dirrabakerus. Dirrabakerus was an elderly woman who lived in Aimeliik with her husband Tkedelukl and two sons, Kautechang and Techatiei. One day, Dirrabakerus was exiled and dumped at sea by her husband. With her, she carried some wood ashes and a branch of a hibiscus tree. While drifting at sea, Dirrabakerus threw the ashes in the water so she could stand and rest when she got tired of swimming. When she ran out of ashes, she planted the branch of the hibiscus tree she had carried with her. That piece of hibiscus is now a sacred tree covering almost all of the southern part of the island. During Milad's time, the name became Ngcheangel, sometimes referred to today as Kayangel. It is believed that the name Ngcheangel was changed to Kayangel to make it easier for Westerners, but the name Ngcheangel is still used by some Palauans.



8. Palau Society of Historians, *Rechuodel Volume I* (Koror, Palau: Division of Cultural Affairs, Historical Preservation Office, Ministry of Community and Cultural Affairs, 1995), 13-14.

9. Names in parentheses are contemporary state names under their constitutions.

② Meduu el Bai (*bai* and stone platform in Kayangel State). © Bureau of Arts and Culture

Rteluul (Ngarchelong)

Before the polity of the giant Uab, Ngarchelong was called Rteluul. The name Rteluul is referred to as the old name for Mengellang and Ngruil. Mengellang was Rteluul re Bab and Ngruil was Rteluul re Eou. When Uab died and fell down, his upper torso became the big island of Babeldaob, and his head became Rteluul. Thus, the old name for Ngarchelong was Euid el Llomes. Being the head, it had the seven facial features: two eyes, two nostrils, two ears, and a mouth. These seven facial features are referred to as *euid el llomes*. *Euid* means seven and *llomes* means intelligence; therefore, “euid el llomes” literally means “seven intelligences.”



Kerradel (Ngaraard)

The old name for Ngaraard was Kerradel, and it was traditionally divided into two halves: three hamlets (Chol, Ngkeklau, and Chelab) on the east coast were called Ngaraard, and two hamlets on the west coast (Ngebuked and Ulimang) were called Ngebubs, meaning these two villages came to the surface from underwater. Later, the chiefs from all five villages from east and west met and agreed to merge the villages together and become one state with five hamlets called Kerradel, which means that they would all unite with respect for one another as they merged everyone from the east and west coasts with strengthened ties among all the villages.



Kiueluul (Ngiwal)

Kiueluul is derived from the word *kelulau* (whispered policies). A snake god whispered the secret strategies for governing into the ears of local chiefs. In each village he chose a place for whispering. When he came to Ngiwal they thus made their stone platform there and named it Ongeluluul. This name came to being after the goddesses held their meeting, whispering secretly how they would select and distribute the policies for the chiefs.

⁴ Chetoikeyang (dock/causeway in Ngaraard State). © Bureau of Arts and Culture



Olekeok (Melekeok)

Olekeok was one of Milad's four children. Olekeok is derived from the word *tekeok*, which means "one who is proud of oneself." Because of his mischievous behavior, Milad sent Olekeok to the eastern coast of Babeldaob, crowning him to have paramount order of the eastern village in Palau. Melekeok is the home of Reklai.¹¹



10. See "Mesei: Taro Field Landscapes in Palau" in this publication for significance of Iluochel in Palau taro culture.

11. There are two traditional paramount chiefs of Palau, Reklai in Melekeok and Ibedul in Koror.

12. See "Palauan Bai (Meeting House): Parts and Depictions as a Pictorial Representation of Palau" in this publication.

Oldiais (Ngchesar)

Oldiais refers to joy among the villagers in this state. People respect and rely on one another (*kaudiais*), and they exchange information on everything concerning their village.

5. Sualel a Iluochel¹⁰ (stone basket of Iluochel in Ngival State). © Bureau of Arts and Culture

6. Bai Melekeong¹² (traditional chiefs' meeting house in Melekeok State). © Bureau of Arts and Culture



Ongedechuul (Ngardmau)

Ongedechuul means “one who is clever or ingenious.” This village became Ongedechuul because the people who settled there came from different places, yet they were clever enough to transcend their differences and work to form one polity. During the German administration, the name Ongedechuul was replaced with Ngardmau.



Imeungs (Ngeremlengui)

The old name for Ngeremlengui was Imeungs (Chim er a Iusech), the oldest and unwearied son of Milad. His mother kept him beside her and tasked him to look after his siblings. Imeungs is the region symbolizing the eldest of Milad’s children, and the site contains

13. See “Palau Knowledge of the Sea” in this publication for description and significance of klekat.

7 Iliud er a Mesial (platform for making smoke signals [klekat]¹³ in Ngchesar). © Bureau of Arts and Culture

8 Olketokel er a Udoud el Bad (stone table for money presentation in Ngardmau). © Bureau of Arts and Culture

ancient knowledge of Palau. This is because it holds within it the site Ii er a Ngebesek (also known as Milad's Cave), where Milad was revived after the flood and where she gave birth to her four children, as well as several other sites associated with Milad and the early settlements of Palau.



Ngerdubech (Ngatpang)

In the oral tradition of Palau, Ngerdubech was an ancient village descended down from heaven at the center of Babeldaob/Ochallechutem. The village of Ngerdubech and its associated village of Ngimis hold important places in Palau and are closely connected with traditional religious beliefs.



9 Elsechei-Bliil a Blebaol (pedestal for displaying enemy's decapitated head in Ngeremlengui). © Bureau of Arts and Culture

10 Ngersois (bathing pool in Ngatpang). © Bureau of Arts and Culture

Ngerbuns (Aimeliik)

Aimeliik is one of the four children of Milad and the only daughter, and, as such, the traditional villages here play an important role in the Palauan society. The old name for Aimeliik was Ngerbuns. This was derived from the word *bunt* (to pull hair up, twist, and tie in a knot) as she was the only daughter and would have her hair long and tied in a knot. In addition, specific village histories are often tied to movements of people from other areas in Palau to and from this state.



Belias (Airai)

Belias is derived from the word *belsechakl* or *m̧la obasech*, which means there is unity in their villages and they are now recognized as one polity. Irrai (more commonly known as Ordomei) is recognized as the chief village. Originally, Irrai was the name of this village district only, but somehow it came to be more and more identified with the whole state in general. Ordomei is defined as “handle” (as in the handle of an axe) and “principle village in district.” Many informants explained the reason behind the dual meaning by using a metaphor with an axe handle, in that it is the foundation that provides the strength for the whole, or the guiding component of the whole.



Sureor (Koror)

Sureor was the youngest of the four children of the goddess Milad and thus occupies an important position in traditional belief. He was very energetic and feral, and so his mother, Milad, shoved him off to the south and named him Sureor. Koror also is the home of Ibedul, the paramount chief overseeing the western states of Palau.



Odesangel (Peleliu)

Odesangel is derived from the word *omsangel* (money bank). It is said that this state was the main depository for all Palauan money coming in and out of Palau.

¹² Chades er a Mechorei (bai platform and stone causeway in Airai State). © Bureau of Arts and Culture

¹³ Tekeok-Imid (stone monolith in Ngermid, Koror). © Bureau of Arts and Culture

Edeaur (Angaur)

Edeaur derives from the word *edei*, meaning “three,” as in the three villages (Ngermasech, Ngebeanged, and Ngerbelau) that make up this island. The legend of Uab originates in Edeaur; thus, Edeaur has migration stories related to many areas in Palau.



Dongosar (Sonsorol)

Dongosar literally translates as “place where there are hard currents.” The name was given by the people who first settled on the island, who experienced strong currents that made it extremely hard to sail.



¹⁴ Olsechall er a Ruchel (stone platform in Angaur). © Bureau of Arts and Culture

¹⁵ Burial ground in Sonsorol State. © Bureau of Arts and Culture

Hatohobei (Hatohobei)

Hatohobei Island is one of the southwest islands of Palau. It has maintained its traditional name, which is now the official name written in its constitution.

TRANSMISSION, CONTINUITY, AND SUSTAINABILITY

Traditional place names are passed down by oral repetitions and experiences. Like other traditional knowledge, learned place names are passed down from parent to child.¹⁴ This transmission traditionally took place at home and was reinforced in the community. Children were encouraged to perform small tasks assigned to them. As they reached the age of maturity, they were required to join the small clubs in the community, in this way exposing themselves to different skills and types of knowledge appropriate for their respective age.

Women and men passed down important skills to young children. Taro cultivation, for example, is a major component of a Palauan woman's world; thus, young girls begin to learn different features of taro fields by accompanying their mothers and performing simple tasks assigned to them. In the same way, a man will begin bringing his son fishing, teaching him different landmarks and names in the reef.

Many traditional villages retain their significance as ancestral homes for relocated communities and are much alive in contemporary Palauan culture. They are part of their birth certificates in a Palauan sense of establishing lineage with members of their clans and villages. Clans retain their association with individual structures in villages by continuing to use traditional burial platforms to this day. People claim their ancestral lands and continue to go to their villages to gather foodstuffs planted by their ancestors and cultivate taro fields handed down over the generations.

Efforts are being made by various cultural institutions and civil societies to preserve and promote Palauan traditional names. The Palau Bureau of Arts and Culture and Historical Preservation Office are mandated under public law to record tangible and intangible

14. Palau Society of Historians, "The Traditional Education System of Palau" (Koror: Bureau of Arts and Culture, Ministry of Community and Cultural Affairs, 2006).

properties of the Republic of Palau. Reports and educational materials are published and disseminated to schools, libraries, state offices, and related offices. The Ministry of Education also has a Palauan Studies curriculum that teaches significant cultural values and principles from grades one to twelve. In most cases, reports and publications by the Bureau of Arts and Culture are used by educators to teach Palauan cultural practices and values. The Oral History and Ethnography section of the Bureau of Arts and Culture is currently finalizing a project on Palauan traditional place names that will be distributed to schools for education and preservation purposes.

REFERENCES

Palau Society of Historians. *Rechuodel Volume I*. Koror, Palau: Division of Cultural Affairs, Historical Preservation Office, Ministry of Community and Cultural Affairs, 1995.

Palau Society of Historians. *The Traditional Education System of Palau*. Koror: Bureau of Arts and Culture, Ministry of Community and Cultural Affairs, 2006.

Smith, DeVerne R. *Palau Ethnography Volume 2: Recommendations for the Preservation of Historic and Cultural Resources in Palau*. San Francisco: Micronesian Endowment for Historic Preservation, U.S. National Park Service, 1997.