

PALAUAN BAI (MEETING HOUSE): PARTS AND DEPICTIONS AS A PICTORIAL REPRESENTATION OF PALAU

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Ng ko er a bermel a chelehelui!
(Like the chelehelui fish!)¹

—A Palauan saying

INTRODUCTION

Of all the things that represent Palauan culture, the chief's hall, or community meeting hall, known as the *bai*, is the most iconic symbol and the most often photographed. The most visible parts are the *mad el bai*, which is the east-facing front, and the *but el bai*, the west-facing rear (Figures ① and ②).

The Palauan *bai* is iconic not just because of its impressive structure, but because of what it has come to represent over hundreds of years in the eyes of sojourners and explorers who have come to Palau from centuries ago up until now. It is also very significant due to the way it is constructed, how it symbolizes the community, and the way the knowledge of how to build this impressive structure is passed from one generation to the next.

1. The *chelehelui* is known for its resistance against rotting. Once caught, it will remain fresh for a full day. Therefore, a *bai* is compared to a *chelehelui* as constructing a *bai* is an arduous task that requires persistence and resistance to overcome obstacles to complete the building.



The building of the bai requires a holistic knowledge of nature. It requires understanding of seasons, of plants and trees, of shrubs and weeds, of soil and its properties, and also of destructive insects and things that infest buildings, as well as of construction methods. One part is a skill and one is a technique. The tradition requires people that know how to build and others who know the ornamental designs (different specialists).

There are different kinds of bai. These are *bai er a klobak*, *bai er a cheldebechel*, *bai er a taoch*, and *bai er a chelid*. The most important, most significant, most elaborate, and most complete in terms of parts and ornamentation is the *bai er a klobak*, the seat of the council of chiefs of each village, such as Bai Melekeong in Melekeok, Bai er a Meketii in Koror, Bai er a Keai in Aimeliik, and Bai er a Ngara Irrai in Airai. The second most important bai in the community is for the secondary tier of chiefs, such as Ngaruchob of Melekeok and Ngaracheritem of Koror. These bai are called *chosobuulngau el bai*. The third tier of the bai is at the village level, such as Bai er a Oldesibel in

1 Mad el Bai of Bai er a Klobak in Koror. © Patrick Tellei

2 But el Bai of Bai er a Klobak in Koror. © Patrick Tellei

Ngerubesang, Melekeok; Bai er a Ilulk in Ngeraus, Ngchesar; Bai er a Tuich in Elab, Ngaraard; and Bai er a Mellabedch in Ngerusar, Airai.

The remaining bai such as the *tetib bai* and *bai el beluu* are used by women and all community members for many kinds of functions such as feasts, planning, meetings for fishing expeditions, meetings to plan dances, meetings to welcome guests from other villages, and, in contemporary times, meetings to receive leaders of the government to speak to the community. In contemporary communities of Palau, at the state and community level, there are centers built with national government funds that exist to serve the purposes of the last tier of bai, like the *tetib bai*, such as Ked Center in Airai, Oikull Center in Ngerikiil, Ngarachamayong Cultural Center in Koror, and the community center in Ngerchemai.

THE KNOWLEDGE OF BAI BUILDING

The holding of the knowledge of the traditional bai building was exclusive and proprietary in traditional Palau. After World War II, the only bai er a klobak that was still standing was Bai er a Ngara Irrai in Airai, which was built at the turn of the previous century, about 1890. The next bai to be built was Bai er a Ngesechel a Cherechar in 1968, at the Palau Museum in Koror under the direction of the Palau Museum (now Belau National Museum) authorities. It was built by Ngaratabelik, a men's group from Ngeremlengui. This bai was tragically destroyed by fire in 1978. The new Bai er a Ngesechel a Cherechar was rebuilt on the same site and completed in 1991 with funds appropriated by the Palau National Congress, Obiil er a Kelulau. In 2013, it was completely renovated by the young men's group Ngara Osichii of Ngerubesang, Melekeok.

About thirty years ago, there were very few left who held this knowledge, and Palauan elders realized that when the current generation of the bearers of the knowledge of how to build the bai died out, the skills would be lost for good. The bearers of knowledge are the people who direct the loggers, builders, carvers, and artisans in the construction and decoration of the bai. This knowledge was traditionally passed on through the generations (to children or

siblings) as part of their inheritance. This process is called *oidel a chas*, meaning passing down knowledge from one generation to another.

The liberation of this thought process led to the building of the Bai Melekeong in about 1983 (the Melekeok council of chiefs' bai). It was the first one to be built in Melekeok since the last Bai Melekeong was dismantled and used for fortifications by a garrison of Japanese soldiers prior to the start of World War II. This was done at the time when people felt that the knowledge of building the grand bai had been lost. The completion of Bai Melekeong was a kind of renaissance and reassured the community that the knowledge, although scattered among so many different artisans and builders, was not lost. Thus, the building of Bai Melekeong served as an impetus to reawaken the tradition of bai building.

Traditionally, the people of capital villages such as Melekeok and Koror did not build bai (or canoes). Befitting their high status, they would order a bai, specify the size, and designate the *cheldebechel* who would build it. In fact, it was expected that they “spread the wealth” by paying other villages to carry out the building of these traditional structures. Melekeok could thus order and pay for a bai.

CONTEMPORARY BAI BUILDING

The building of this Bai Melekeong ushered in a new phase of bai building. First, the people of Melekeok would now build the bai instead of ordering it to be built. Also, instead of traditional bearers of knowledge working in isolation, the young people's groups were allowed to observe so they could absorb the knowledge, sometimes with no words to teach them, just watching and doing. Before long, Bai Melekeong was completed.

The Bai Melekeong structure was built next to the main road; it was milled, cut, marked, fit together, and carved with depictions there to allow maximum participation and observation by young and old, local residents and visitors alike, in anticipation of liberating and spreading this knowledge to the maximum number of people. Once it was fit together, a traditional approval feast was held that allowed the opportunity for the chiefs to review their soon-to-be-completed

bai, making comments or recommendations and giving their final approval. Afterward, it would be dismantled and manually carried a mile to the traditional location where Bai Melekeong had stood for centuries, the same site where the Ibedul of Koror, accompanied by Captain Wilson of the HMS *Antelope*, paid a visit in 1783 to the Reklai² of Melekeok and the Artingal community. On that spot, the new bai was reassembled (Figure 3).

While the bai was being assembled, news spread that the young men of Melekeok were building a traditional bai using traditional methods. Villages and states around Palau and their councils of chiefs began sending people, both to offer food tributes and, at the same time, to observe the construction and the renaissance being brought forth by the young men of Melekeok. A particular group of chiefs of Aimeliik, called Ngarkeai, paid a visit to Melekeok and were the first group to request the young men of Melekeok to build the chief's bai in Aimeliik, receiving approval, securing funds, and arranging for the construction. The chiefs of Melekeok graciously agreed to their request to be the next because the state of Aimeliik, or Ngerbuns (the traditional name of Aimeliik), is the sister of Melekeok, the only female child of the mythical Milad.³ The other two children of Milad were sons, Imeyungs (Ngeremlengui) and Koror.

After the Aimeliik bai was successfully built in 1988 on the traditional Ngarkeai chiefs' platform (Figure 4), word further spread that there was a group of young men (Ngaramelangchad of Melekeok) capable of building traditional bai. The next request came to build one at Ngarachamayong Cultural Center in Central Koror through the Bilung (chief matriarch), Gloria Gibbons Salii of Koror, the head of Kerngab (female counterparts of the chiefs of Koror). She is also the head of Ngarachamayong Women's Group (a group of female elders representing all sixteen states in Palau). After the Bilung had taken the initiative to build the US\$2.5 million contemporary cultural center, she realized this complex would not be complete without a bai er a klobak. She ordered the largest traditional council of chiefs' bai that exists in Palau today to be built. Since the bai would be built in Koror, she wanted it to be the largest, widest, longest, grandest, and most elaborately decorated bai to be built in modern times. Completed in 2007, it consists of ten sleepers called



2. There are two traditional paramount chiefs in Palau. The Reklai from Melekeok oversees the villages in the eastern district of Palau, and the Ibedul from Koror oversees the western district of Palau.

3. See the story of Milad in "Preserving Traditional Place Names of Palau," in this publication.

3 Bai Melekeong in Melekeok. © Carolyn Crockett and Bob Brooks

4 Bai er a Keai in Aimeliik. © Carolyn Crockett and Bob Brooks

bad, a kind of foundation beam (Figure ⑤). In comparison, the existing Bai er a Ngesechel a Cherechar at the National Museum in Koror, Bai Melekeong in Melekeok, Bai er a Keai in Aimeliik, and Bai er a Ngarra Irrai in Airai all have eight sleepers. Not only that, the material used was a very tough and hard-to-work-with wood called *btaches ked*, which was made possible owing to sophisticated sawmilling equipment available now in Palau.



To describe all the ornamentation, depictions, and symbolism in the bai, we will use as an example those that can be found at the bai er a klobak that was constructed at the Ngarachamayong Cultural Center and also that of Bai Melekeong.

Bai Construction Methods

The method of construction is as follows. Each village has a village center where the bai is built. The stone piers upon which the sleepers rest rise from a stone platform in this village center (Figure ⑥). Resting on top of the ten sleepers are two longitudinal *uchutem* (Figure ⑦).



The ends of the uchutem are connected across by beams called *kuoku* at both ends of the bai, *mad el bai* (front) and *but el bai* (rear). On top of the uchutem rest the *kboub* (walls) and *chad* (posts). “Chad” also means “person” or “man” in Palauan. The four corner posts of the bai are called *saus* (Figures ⑧ and ⑨).



At the Ngarachamayong bai er a klobak building site, there are twenty piers on the stone platform. The ten sleepers rest on top of these twenty piers, and the uchutem beam, in turn, rests on top of the sleepers. The ends of both beams are connected by *kuoku*. On top of the uchutem beams rest walls (*kboub*) connected to posts (*chad*). These *chad* are located at each side of a door. There are six entrances, so there are twelve *chad*. There are also four *sais* (Figure ⑨).

⑥ Stone platform at the village center with stone piers. © Patrick Tellei
⑦ Two longitudinal *uchutem* beams rest on top of the ten sleepers. © Patrick Tellei

⑧ The foundation sleepers rest on top of the stone piers. © Patrick Tellei
⑨ Corner post *sais* (on left corner) and *chad* posts resting on top of the longitudinal *uchutem* beams and the *kuoku* end beams. © Patrick Tellei

On top of the kboub, chad, and saus there are *tenons* (tongues that fit into mortise holes), and all are held together by *orsechokl* that are mortised and fit onto these tenons on top of the post. Fitted on top of the post is another beam called *ongrangre* (Figures 10 and 11).



At the front of the bai, the *iis* (threshold) is mortised and connects the two chad posts, and both rest on the kuoku (Figure 12). The two saus are mortised and fitted onto tenons and rest on the corner where the uchutem and kuoku beams meet. They are held in place lengthwise by the *orsechokl* (top plate) and crosswise by a part named *olik* with a lap joint (Figure 13).



The *ellabel* is mortised and fitted via tenons to the top of the sleeper beam, where it is held in place by a *rekoi*, a piece of wood with a curved-up end to hold a mat in place (Figures 10 and 11). It is also traditionally a place of sanctuary. If the bai is under attack and a man is afraid for his life, he can jump up to the *rekoi* for shelter there and his life will be spared. However, by so doing, he irrevocably abdicates his manhood and must wear a skirt and work in the taro patch with the other women for the rest of his life.

As mentioned, the *rekoi* is mortised to the *ellabel* post, and the end of the *rekoi* rests on the *ongrangre* (primary top plate) and is lashed to it. The *imuul* cross beam is mortised and sits on top of the *ellabel* (Figure 11). The bottom of the rafter sits at the back of the *rekoi* and extends all the way to the ridge on both sides. Both sides of the rafters meet at the middle right on top of the ridge (*buadel*) and form

10 *Ellabel* resting on bad and protruding through *rekoi*. © Patrick Tellei

11 Showing *olik* on top of *ongrangre*. © Patrick Tellei

12 Inside view of Bai Melekeong showing *rekoi*, *ellabel*, *imul*, and *delal a duus*. © Patrick Tellei

13 The *iis* (threshold) is framed on either side by doorposts called *chad*, and both rest on the *kuoku* beam. © Patrick Tellei

an X. The buadel is held in place by the *otekrikr* kingpost, which is mortised and fixed via tenons to the *olik* at the bottom and the buadel on top. The bottom of the X is the ridge. At the top of the X made by those two crisscrossing rafters is a piece of wood called *rael* that is defined as the path or way of the spirits.

In order to hold the rafters in place, a rope is wrapped from the bottom of the ridge all the way around a minimum of five times (from the buadel ridge over to the rael and down around the ridge again). In order to tighten the two parallel pieces of wood further together, another rope is wrapped around them, pulling the top and the bottom closer together; the term for this technique is *cheleas*. This is the same word that is used in the context of the Palauan family adoption tradition. When a couple adopts a child from another family, in order to create a closer relationship, tributes of fish or food are brought to them to further strengthen the ties, the way the rope tightens the rafters together in the bai.

There are three beams corresponding to each rafter, equaling the number of sleepers (for ten sleepers there are ten corresponding rafters). The lowest one, the *imuul*, is a beam mortised and fixed via tenon to the top of the rekoi. The rafter is lashed to the end of the imuul at both sides of the bai, as seen in Figure ⑪.

Both sides of this imuul beam are where the most significant legends and mythologies are told about each particular village that owns the bai, focusing on the exploits of the men, women, and leaders of the past. Thus, the stories carved at that level are of that significance: who said what, who won what, etc. Note that although the bottom beam holds all the significant stories of that capital village, they are ranked from east to west in order of importance. The most important ones start on the east beam (and are carved on both sides).

This beam reaches across the bai from one side to another. “Imuul” is defined as “going to the other side”—from an engineering standpoint it is balancing the load from one side of the sleeper to the other. From a traditional Palauan standpoint, it is the way by which the whispered counsels and traditional policies, rules, and regulations (*kelulau*) travel from one side of the bai to the other side.

The ten chiefs of the ten village clans within a *klobak* are divided into two opposing sides called *kaucherareu*. These chiefs always sit on opposite sides of the bai. This mutual opposition provides checks and balances in decision-making that are good for the community. The odd-numbered clans sit on one side headed by one chief while the even-numbered clans sit on the other side headed by the second chief. This is the heart of Palauan tradition: maintaining a balance. Everything has two sides.

The second beam, which is lashed at the midpoint of the rafters on both sides, is called *omkuuk*, which literally means “to spread.” This beam holds all the weight of the roof and keeps all of the roof members from crashing into the center of gravity. On both sides of this beam are carved the stories of villages in alliance with the capital village that owns the bai, other lesser legends of the community and villages, and spillover from the first *imuul* beam (i.e., whatever major stories could not be accommodated there). “Omkuuk” also has another meaning: “to spread and make widely known.” Some lesser-known stories of exploits that find themselves on the *omkuuk*, when told over and over again, will attain more importance and eventually move down to the lower beam.

Next, the highest beam, just below the *buadel* (ridge), is lashed likewise from one rafter to another and is called *reberball*. This means “to be seated at” (by the spirits). The carvings and depictions on this beam are anecdotes, clichés, old sayings, proverbs, and, at times, admonishments.

There are then four of the *delal a duus* (purlins), which literally means “the mother of all purlins” (longitudinal structural parts of the roof) (Figure 11). The *delal a duus* is the principal purlin that is tied to the main rafters. These rafters, called *seches*, are tied to the *delal a duus* from the *ongrangre* all the way to the *rael*, the entire length of the bai. The *delal a duus* protrudes at both ends of the bai and holds the rafters and the *ongiau*, the fascia board that is decorated from the bottom to the top. The *ongiau* is decorated either with *belek* (spirit faces) in Koror or *dellerok* (money birds) in Melekeok (Figure 14). Where the *ongiau* meet at the top, they are decorated with the god of construction, *Chedechuul* (Figure 15). It is normally a face with

eyes, a nose, and a long beard wearing two *chelbuche* money beads on each ear. The second set of duus is tied to the rafters and extends from beyond the ongrangre all the way to the rael.



The *osekidel*, which is made of bamboo, is tied to the purlin from the lowest duus all the way to the rael and criss-crossed at the top to form another X. The *osekidel* is where the thatched roof (hand-woven from coconut fronds) is tied in place; each piece of thatched roof is tied to three *osekidel*. On average, from the bottom to the top of one roof section, measuring five- to six-feet wide, there are 190 pieces of thatch. With fifteen of these sections on each side, on average a bai is composed of about seven to eight thousand thatched roof pieces.

Once all the thatched roof pieces are tied in place (each bai uses an average of 5,200 thatched roof pieces), it is time to install the *uchub*, the ridge cap. The word “uchub” comes from the Palauan word for compassion, *klechubechub*. The *uchub* is the top part that covers everything in the bai both physically and symbolically, protecting against wrongdoing and preventing water from coming inside. It takes over five hundred leaves to complete this crowning touch.

¹⁴ The *ongiau* (fascia board) is decorated with spirit faces (*bellek*) in Koror. ¹⁵ The god of construction, Chedechuul. © Patrick Tellei
© Patrick Tellei

To install the *uchub*, a sharp piece of wood called *eliil*, usually made of mangrove root, is pushed through from one side of the roof to the other side, crossing in between the *rael* and *buadel*. The *eliil* sticks out on both sides of the roof and is sharpened on both edges to prevent the spirits that hover over the chiefs' bai from landing on it because they could get pierced (Figure 15). The *eliil* are installed at about five feet apart the entire length of the bai from *mad el bai* (front) to *but el bai* (rear). Two pieces of bamboo called *osarch* are tied at the bottom of the *eliil* on both sides, extending along the entire length of the bai. A crown of nipa leaves is then painstakingly mounted on top of the bai, inserted under the *osarch* by a man sitting on the ridge cap.

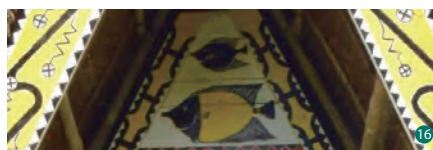
The final part of the bai to be completed is the *melech*, which in construction terminology means “cable end.” In Palauan mythology, *melech* represents the evil spirit that needs to be driven out of the bai once it is completed in a ceremony that is called *osebekel a melech*.

As discussed, there are two facades of a bai, east and west. The face called “*mad el bai*” traditionally and constructively must face east. “*Mad el bai*” means the “face of the bai” (*mad*=face). It is bordered on both sides by *ongiau*, which are planks starting from the top of the *olik*, the heaviest beam, extending from one side of the bai to the other.

BAI MOTIFS AND SYMBOLS

The cable end of the *mad el bai* is generally divided into six equal horizontal spaces, with the following symbols painted or depicted on them, normally in the following order. People seated in the bai need to know all this symbolism by heart.

- *Chelebesoi* (Figure 16) is one of the most beautifully colored fish in the ocean and is depicted on the bai to symbolize beauty, good taste, and good life. It represents everything that is good that must come from the bai and be extended to the community.

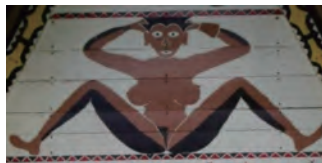
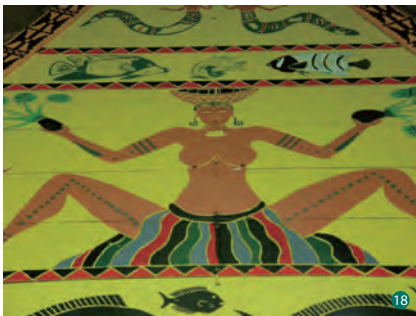


- *Bechei* (Figure 17) is a worm-shaped figure with a human head, human hands, and a straight body, but it is depicted with visible internal organs that contain all symbols of Palauan money. *Bechei* is a symbol of prosperity and frugality, representing the wealth that needs to be collected for the community. There is only one body, one head, and two hands, so all the wealth needs to be distributed equally in unison.



- *Dilukai* (Figure 18) is a female figure seated with legs extended and open to display the genital area. There are many legends and stories about *Dilukai*. Some even say that *Bechei* was the brother of *Dilukai*, but she has come to represent fertility, continuity, growth, birth, sustenance, and life.

The display of the female genitals also refers to the customary death settlement of *cheldechduch*, representing the money that is paid to the male members of the wife's side of the family when she is either deceased or widowed. This payment, called *techel otungel*, is owed by the husband's relatives as compensation for the conjugal services performed during the marriage.

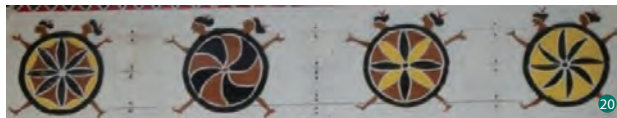


- *Mesekuuk* (surgeon fish) (Figure 19) are a type of reef fish that, in the face of danger from a predator, congregate together under a leader to form the shape of one big fish that cannot be eaten, chasing the predator away. *Mesekuuk* symbolizes doing things

together in unison, having one voice, supporting a decision when it has been made, and getting along.



- *Terroi el beluu* (Figure 20) is a circular figurine with two human heads, two legs, and two arms. One of these figurines is encircled by *belsebasech*, a continuous triangular pattern. This has come to symbolize continuity, each triangle representing a different season for planting, harvesting, etc., and showing how the members of the community need to cooperate and work in unison.



- On the lowest plank is *chedeng* (Figure 21), the shark. The sharks are normally depicted on the bai facing each other with mouths open and bodies curved, ready to strike. In the Palauan community these facing sharks show that we may be in unison and try to get along and work together with our women, but one should not mistake that to mean that they can try to run over us: like sharks, we are ready at all times to attack if necessary.



4. This expression literally means Koror is deeply rooted in people. Koror's willingness to open its arms to migrants from within and outside Palau is a source of its wealth. It has allowed people, ideas, and economic ventures to prosper, adding to Koror's power and wealth.

The rest of the *ongiau* plank of the Bai ra Klobak in Koror is decorated with *klikmch*, consisting of multiple faces, eyes, noses, and ears all the way to the end (in Melekeok this part is decorated with a clam). “Klikmch” is defined as the smiling face. It symbolizes the face of humanity, Koror's willingness to host others, which is why the motto of Koror is “*Oreor a ourois er a rechad*.”⁴ The Koror war canoe is also named after the face, *oklikmch*. The last traditional war canoe carved for the Festival

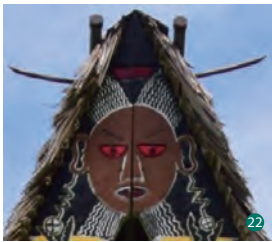
of Pacific Arts in 2004 was also named *Oklikmch* in a quest to maintain this state motto.

Ironically, one of the few coincidences in language history is an instance when the Palauan and English words have the same meaning. The west end of the bai is called “but el bai,” which is the rear of the bai (in English, “butt”). This western façade has different legends of great significance to Koror, including those about the relationships between Koror and Peleliu and between Koror and the English.

These stories and symbols on the outside of the bai are for the public; the ones on the inside are only for the eyes of the chiefs.

There are many other symbols used as depictions in the bai, as follows.

- *Chedechuul* (Figure 22) is the god of construction, normally placed where the fascia boards meet at the top of the ridge line.



- *Orachel* were the the first bai builders; legend has it that they marked, assembled and built the original bai at the bottom of the ocean and then brought the knowledge to the people of Palau.
- *Klidm* is a smiling face that symbolizes strength in people, and it has come to represent the people of Koror, who have a motto that they welcome all the citizens of Palau.
- *Bellek* (Figure 23) is also a face, this time wearing money-bead earrings.



- *Iis* (Figure 24) is the removable threshold placed at the entrance to the bai; “iis” also means “nose,” as it is the center of the face. The iis is located under the *olik*, a low roof beam to make the entrance very short in order to force a physical show of deference and obedience from everyone who goes inside, as even proud people have to bend over to step inside and bow down when they enter the bai (see also Figure 12).



- *Cheldech duch* (Figure 25) is a zigzag shape that symbolizes communication, as Palau’s ancient people believed voices traveled in waves.



- *Udoud* (Figure 26) is a plus sign in a circle that represents chelbuchebe, conveying the concepts of a monetary community, wealth, and economy.



- *Olik*, the fruit bat, is also the name of the part of the bai that crosses the main entrance, upon which a large figure of an olik is carved on a very low entrance. The olik is the only animal that holds its head down when it rests, so it symbolizes humility, obedience, and deference; if you don't have any of these traits, you will be forced to emulate them when you enter since the entrance is low.
- *Mengidab* (Figure 27) is a spider usually carved on the *reko* plank, representing the legend of Mengidabrutkoel,⁵ the mythical figure that taught the people of Palau the first natural childbirth. Before that, all children were born by Cesarean section, resulting in a high female mortality rate.

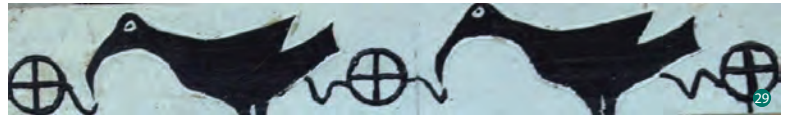


- *Malk* (Figure 28) is the rooster, a symbol of announcements of decisions from the bai to the community. It also symbolizes the value of starting on time and letting people know what you are going to do, like the rooster waking up and crowing in the morning. In the myth about bai building in Ngerchelong "Bai Rulchau", after the seventh crowing of the rooster, the sun came up, and the builders, who could only work at night, had to leave. Thus, the bai remains unfinished even today.



- *Dellerrok* is the money bird, the symbol of Melekeok that is mythically believed to excrete money from its body.

5. See "Traditional Childbirth Practices in Palau" in this publication for the story and significance of Mengidabrutkoel.



- *Kim* (clam) (Figure 30) is a symbol found in many different forms that illustrates the dualism in Palau, where there are two sides to everything and mutual opposition is central to traditional ways.



- *Besebes er a ngerot* (Figure 31) is a zigzag motif with leaves on top and a money symbol hanging on the apex of the zigzag. Ngerot is the mythical place where a father and son went fishing. The father told his son to collect rocks for fishing sinkers, but the son started playing and throwing the rocks. When they reached the beach and the sun rose, they found that the big stones left were money beads. This story illustrates how haste makes waste, and since wealth can depart in no time, one should pay attention.



- *Besebasech* (Figure 32) is a zigzag design normally drawn in two colors, either black and red or black and yellow. It symbolizes continuity and is also the border when one wants to end a legend with “and so it ends.”

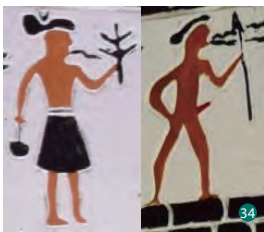


- *Mesekuuk* is a symbol of unity and unison (surgeon fish).
- *Chedeng*, the shark, represents strength, ferocity, perseverance, and toughness.

- *Kaeb*, *kabekel*, *brotong*, and *kaberruuch* (Figure 33) are the main Palauan canoes: *kaeb* is a fast sailing canoe; *kabekel* is a war canoe; *brotong* is a cargo canoe; and *kaberruuch*, also known as *omuadel*, is a fishing expedition canoe; Usually *kaberruuch* is a retired war canoe that had a poor showing in a war expedition or canoe race. In the old days, when a capital village lost a war canoe race, they would buy the winning canoe and send it to be a fishing canoe so it could never win again.



- *Chad* come in two kinds: *sechal*, which represent man, manhood, and things of a manly nature; and *redil*, which represent women, womanhood, and things of a feminine nature (Figure 34).
- *Blai* is a dwelling, the depiction of which reflects family, family life, and normalcy.



- *Beluu*, as used in depictions, is a contiguous land mass composed of ocean, mountain, flat land, and mangroves.
- *Iungs* literally means “islands,” including small islets, atoll islands, and rock islands. Atoll islands are symbolized by a flat sandbar with coconut trees while a rock island is symbolized by a shape protruding from the ocean and colored green to indicate trees (not coconut palms).

- *Dellomel* can be either *kukau* or *kerrekar*. *Kukau* is swamp taro that is the mainstay starch food in traditional and contemporary Palauan society. *Kerrekar*, on the other hand, are big trees such as breadfruit and the *ukall* tree used to build canoes, houses, and bai.
- *Sils*, or the sun, symbolizes heat, living, and the universe.
- *Ius*, the crocodile, represents catastrophes or danger from the past or lurking ahead.

TRANSMISSION AND CONTINUITY

In Palau, there is a saying: *Ng di tirke el bellemakl a imuchet a techerakl*. This saying refers to those who are quiet and have purposeful ability—those who can actually learn or complete a difficult task. Such characteristics are necessary for those involved in difficult undertakings like building of bai.

In traditional Palau, builders were a very specific group of people who hailed from various communities within specific villages. Some were experts in identifying trees, some were good in organizing groups to fell and cut down trees, and some were experts in mobilizing and transporting the wood from the forest to specified clearings. Some people were skilled in milling the wood, either with traditional tools or with introduced steel and metal tools. The master builders would prepare the building site, set layout lines, and provide all provisions for leveling all foundational parts of the bai.

This knowledge is passed from one generation to the next. In the case of Melekeok, the transfer of these psychomotor skills was made possible because of the actual building of Bai Melekeong, Bai er a Keai, and Bai er a Klobak at the Ngarachamayong Cultural Center. It would be very hard, if not impossible, to transfer these skills without the actual experience of bai building. Thanks to these construction projects, we are now at a stage at which the young people have all been exposed to aspects of bai building. The platform for learning has been opened to all.

In the past, it took lots of practice and actual construction of the bai to learn, sharpen, and apply skills, most often under a master-apprenticeship relationship. Today, in the case of the bai building tradition in Melekeok, all young people are invited and in fact encouraged to participate in all aspects of building a bai, from scouting a location to identifying trees, milling logs, carving, assembling, thatching, roofing, and cleaning the site. The traditional *omengermodel* (the traditional way for young people to acquire new knowledge and know-how from other sources other than those available to them) has become a norm in bai building.

While teaching the skills of bai building is a recommended course of action for maintaining this skill set, commissioning new bai is fundamental to this learning process. In addition to new bai, repairs of existing ones should be scheduled as regular activities of young people.

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