

Becoming a Traditional Fisherman? – Reasons for Selecting a Fishing Method: Ethnographic Approach to Underwater Speargun Fishing, Republic of Palau, Micronesia¹

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Abstract

By focusing on the practice of underwater speargun fishing among local fishermen in the Republic of Palau, Micronesia, this article depicts the detailed process of the fishermen's choice of fishing methods as well as their perception of recently introduced fishing techniques. It is argued that the complexity involved in designing tools, selecting specific techniques and choosing fishing locations is connected to both functional and cultural reasons, which fishermen themselves constantly reinterpret through the practice of everyday fishing. To support this argument the paper presents a detailed ethnographic study on the practice of underwater speargun fishing, including fishermen's cognitive construction of seascapes, their choice of different speargun mechanisms and the use of specific fishing techniques. Through this study, I argue that the primary motivations behind the fishermen's complex arrangement of fishing practice are often linked to their perception of what it means to be a 'traditional fisherman', a notion embodied in the physical exercise and hardship inherent to the practice of underwater speargun fishing.

Key words: Palau, Technological choice, Traditional fisherman, Underwater speargun fishing,

Introduction

The Republic of Palau (ROP) is a newly independent archipelagotic country located in the western Micronesia. The region displays a variety of oceanographic settings, including a world famous coral reef, which attracts keen divers from ex-colonial countries³. Although Palau now relies on a market economy supported largely

¹ The original version of this paper was presented at the session 3 'Pacific Modernity' of the ESFO (European Society For Oceanists) International Conference in Vienna, July 2002. My fieldwork was supported by the University of London Central Research Fund and the University College London Graduate School. My research in Palau was sponsored by Palau Community College.

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³ Palau has a unique colonial history, starting from the late 19th century with the arrival of the Spanish colonial administration. After the brief occupation by the Spanish, the country was occupied by the German colonial government of Micronesia from 1904 until 1914. Then from 1914 until the end of the war, 1945, it was taken over by the ex-Japanese imperial government of South Pacific, *Nanyoucho*. During this period Palau had the most significant social influence from the occupational administration due to rigorous Japanese colonial rule. After the war and until its independence in 1994, Palau was under U.S. political control which created another significant change for the political structure (a dual structure incorporating both democratic and traditional chieftain system) as well as its socio-economic state (For more detailed information, see HEZEL, F 1985 and HANLON, D 1998).

