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TRADITIONAL CULTURE, TOURISM, AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN MOGMOG ISLAND, ULITHI ATOLL

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Abstract

This article discusses the present situation of traditional culture and social change in Ulithi atoll and Mogmog Island in particular. Ulithi atoll, which is located in the northeast of Yap Island, has had a complicated cultural and social relationship with Yap island through a traditional tributal trade called sawei. In this article, I try to trace the socio-cultural changes by looking briefly at the historical background of Mogmog island before and after the war, and also to give a brief description about the traditional Mogmog culture from the viewpoint of tourism.

Keywords: Ulithi atoll, Mogmog island, traditional culture, tourism, social change

Present Situation of Ulithi Atoll

Ulithi atoll is a cluster of low islets near the equator in the western portion of the Pacific. It is the northernmost of all the islands of the Carolinian archipelago. Guam is about 400 miles to the northeast, and New Guinea double that distance to the south. Philippines is almost a thousand miles to the west.

Ulithi atoll consists of forty-one islands plus many sand bars which lacked vegetation but yet are named. The forty-one islands and sand bars are divided into eight districts. Each one of the districts is named after the leading island of that district. In the chain of political authority, Mogmog District ranks highest among the districts of Ulithi. The Districts of Asor, Lossou, Fassarai, and Falalop equally shared the third and last level in the chain of governing authority (FIGIRLIYONG 1976: 6), although Falalop is the most developed in Ulithi today.

Ulithi is often said to look like a broken mushroom whose stem has been slightly detached from its cap. Its shape is closely connected with the reef characteristics of the rim of the island group. Space resources are tiny. The land surface of the atoll is a mere 1.80 square miles. The largest islet is only a mile long and less than that wide. Yet Ulithi is the biggest of all the atolls in the western region of the Carolines. The greatest length of the lagoon is about 24 miles and the greatest breadth about 15 miles, with a surface area of 183 square miles. The maximum depth of the lagoon is 210 feet, which places it among the deeper lagoons of the Pacific (LESSA 1966: 2).

Ulithi is not in the trade wind realm. Rather it is in the typhoon circulatory region bordering the monsoon realm. Tropical typhoons may occur during any month of the year, but almost two thirds of them are said to occur in the four months from July to October. However, the two greatest typhoons to strike within living memory came in March, 1907, and November, 1960. Especially, the 1960's typhoon called Ophelia wrought great damages on the islands (LESSA

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1964). Ulithi is in the incubating area of tropical cyclones, most of which start a few degrees above or below ten degrees latitude (LESSA 1966: 4).

Topographically, the flatness and lowness of the islets is their most striking feature. The highest point in the atoll is on the island of Falalop and is only about 22 feet. There is often a depression in the middle of an island, which may be converted by the natives into a swamp taro garden. The shores of the lagoon side of each island are sandy, and the opposite sides are rough. At low tide it is possible to walk from one island to a neighboring island, but the actual trip is rather difficult. Most water for drinking and cooking is collected from roofs when it rains.

Anthropological studies on Ulithi atoll are limited in number, and mostly done by an American anthropologist (LESSA 1950, 1964, 1966), but also done by native and Japanese anthropologists (FIGIRLIYONG 1976; USHIJIMA 1982). Lessa wrote about both the nature and culture of Mogmog island, especially he left a detailed description of the religion and magic of Mogmog people. Figirliyong's study was focused on the traditional political system of Mogmog society where he grew up. Ushijima wrote about the ownership of land and reef in Mogmog island, and the distribution and exchange of various foods among the Ulithians. However, there are few studies done from the viewpoint of tourism. Thus, this study hopes to make a small contribution to the anthropological study of tourism in Ulithi atoll.

Historical Background

The Portuguese were the first recorded explorers to land in Ulithi atoll. A Portuguese captain discovered Ulithi atoll in 1525 after being blown off course by a storm. After the Portuguese came two Spanish Jesuit missionaries, who began the first missionary effort in Ulithi atoll. However, all the efforts to Christianize Ulithians were halted for a period of time after the killing of one of them by the Ulithians. Although Spain had established administrative institutions in the Marianas islands by 1565, the political system of Ulithi atoll was barely influenced by the Spanish government. Rather, it was the Spanish introduction of Christianity that influenced the political system of Ulithi atoll. In 1899, the Germans purchased the Caroline islands from Spain for four million five-hundred thousand dollars. The Germans used the Ulithians as laborers to mine minerals in Palau and as soldiers. Again little change in the Ulithian political system resulted. In 1920, the League of Nations gave Japan a mandate to govern the Micronesian islands. While the Japanese began colonizing most of the Micronesian islands, only a few businessmen and soldiers were stationed within Ulithi atoll. Although few in number these businessmen and soldiers greatly weakened the traditional political system of Ulithi atoll. The authority of the traditional chiefs was often ignored by the Japanese. They also administered physical punishment for disobedience and for listless labor. Various tabus were also broken under Japanese direction such as the killing of turtles on Asor instead of on Mogmog.¹⁾ Green turtles were offered to high chiefs, and only a man from a certain special clan was allowed to kill them, but these tabus were also ignored by the Japanese (LESSA 1966: 8). After the Japanese occupation the traditional political system was never quite the same as before (FIGIRLIYONG 1976: 2).

The principal effects of Japanese control were in travel, trade and education. The greatest single impact of Japanese control was on the economy, for the Japanese set up a local branch office for a while to look after the copra and trading interests of the South Seas Trading Company (LESSA 1966: 8). However, as the tide of war began to turn against Japan after the Pearl Harbor attack, the Japanese attitude stiffened, and the natives were treated with greater severity than had been the case before. The traditional kingship was also abolished during the

Japanese colonial time (LESSA 1966: 8).

During World War II, the Micronesian islands became a Japanese military stronghold for the defense of Japan. With the Japanese surrender in August, 1945, Micronesia became subject to United States authority. The first Americans to arrive on Ulithi during the war were troops of the 81st Army Division, landing on September 20, 1944. Naval military government soon took over and Ulithi was converted into a huge advance base for the invasion of Okinawa and the Philippines. The natives were confined to the island of Fassarai and Lossou. Naval administration continued until July, 1947, at which time Micronesia was declared a United Nation's Trust Territory. On July 1, 1951, the responsibility for administrating Micronesia shifted from the secretary of Navy to the civilian control of the secretary of the Interior, under the direction of which the Trust Territory government was created and it continued until the independence of the Federated States of Micronesia in 1986 (LESSA 1966: 8; FIGIRLIYONG 1976: 2-3).

In this way, Ulithi had been under the political control of Spain, Germany, Japan, the United Nations, and the United States, and during that time the traditional sawei trade declined greatly.²⁾ After the war, Ulithi atoll has specially been under the strong socioeconomic and cultural influence of the United States, and social and economic autonomy has also been greatly lost.

Mogmog Society

Mogmog island is an island of the Ulithi atoll with a population of about two hundred and thirty-five households and forty families (as of October, 2001). Most of the people except public workers such as school teachers live on fishing and the cultivation of taro. There are also some people who get money by selling pigs that they breed, to public officers, teachers and Filipinos in Falalop island.

There are an elementary-junior high school, a Catholic church, a men's house and a women's house, three canoe houses, a power plant and two grocery shops. Electricity has been supplied since 2000. There are five public water catchments and three public radio communication apparatuses. Most of the Mogmog people have a privately owned portable radio communicator, which has become necessary equipment to communicate with each other between boats, between islands or between boat and island. The portable radio communicator is capable of communicating with even Falalop islanders. There also is a dispensary, which was first built before 1960, but has just been rebuilt in 2001 as a new ferroconcrete building.

The conduct of Mogmog society used to be decided at the Elders Council by men who gathered at the men's house every morning. The Elders Council used to make all decisions concerning community activities for the general public such as fishing, repairing canoe houses, the men's house and the women's house. This Elders Council met at the men's house (matalfal) every morning whenever events occurred that necessitated a general meeting (FIGIRLIYONG 1976: 14). However, only remnants of the Elders Councils continue to function today. They now include all the young men and they no longer meet every morning as in times past. Instead, the infrequent sessions are announced among the men the day before the meeting. Community activities are still the topics of discussion.

The men's house is located near the shore in the middle of the village facing the lagoon. In the old days, only a person able to control himself could enter the men's house, but today basically anyone can enter it. Canoe houses line the shore and provide not only shelter for their canoes but a clubhouse for men that own them. Friends often visit them and join in the gossiping

and lounging. Some men may be found performing light chores. Children like to dart in and out but may sit still long enough to listen to the conversation and yarns of the men. A canoe shed is a cool place to be, as it catches any breeze off the lagoon and is fairly free of flies and day mosquitoes. Men often sleep here at night

Young men don't like to talk in front of elders at the men's house. If they want to talk freely, they move to an adjacent canoe house. At the canoe house one can speak freely and openly irrespective of one's age. However, at the men's house young men can do nothing but listen to the elders. There exists an oppressive atmosphere for young men to speak freely at the men's house. A kind of tactical diplomacy sometimes occurs between the two parties, as when young men move to the canoe house, and elders shift to the men's house in trying to take an initiative depending on the agenda.

Traditional Culture and School Education

There is only one school for both elementary school and junior high school children in Mogmog island. The number of children presently at school is forty-seven. The highest number ever before was a little over fifty. The school year starts after the schoolmaster comes back from an annual workshop. Therefore it usually starts in August or September depending on the time of the workshop.

The present schoolmaster is from Mogmog island. There are nine teachers including two culture teachers who are in charge of culture class. The culture teachers are a man and a woman who are chosen in the village. A private company commissioned by the Ministry of Education in Yap state hired them. They teach Ulithian traditional culture at a thatched small hut within the school compound after class Monday through Thursday. First-grade and second-grade kids start learning Ulithian language. They also teach Ulithian traditional culture such as navigation, how to make a canoe and a thatched roof, how to build a house, the names of flora and marine fauna, fishing methods, traditional chants and dances, the Ulithian names of seasons and months, constellations, and so on³. Every Friday is a culture day and traditional culture is taught all day long.

The fifteenth of January is the Culture Day, and villagers have a contest for the best taro, the best coconuts, and the biggest banana. This Culture Day has the aim to promote the development of agriculture for the adults, and to display the outcome of their learning for school children.

In Mogmog society, there are two special occasions called Men's Day and Women's Day. Men's Day is the day that women give the first fruits and taro to men, and Women's Day is the day that men give the first fish to women. On Women's Day, men go fishing and then put the fish in a special place. Then, women come and distribute the fish, and bring it back home. They don't eat together on that place.

On Men's Day, women go to taro patch and bring taro. Other than taro, each woman also prepares cooked food and brings it to a special place. Then, men come to the place, and distribute the taro and cooked food among them, and bring it back home.

However, Women's Day has not been held last three times. Some men suspect that women are intentionally choosing a day of bad weather for Women's Day so that men cannot go fishing, and so cannot have Women's Day. Thus, cooperation within and competition without find especial expression in two semiannual feasts, one given by men for women and the other by women for men. One division tries to outdo the other in accumulating fish and plant foods for the island.

Social Changes from a Native Viewpoint

Mogmog people see four factors as the main causes for great social changes in Ulithi and Mogmog after the war. The first one is religion, that is, the Catholic. Most of the Ulithi people are Catholic. About 1937, a Spanish Jesuit missionary began to make the first sizable conversions to Catholicism among the Ulithians (LESSA 1966: 8). There are Catholic churches in Falalop and Mogmog islands. The deacon in Mogmog island is a villager who was chosen and sent for training as a deacon. Mass is held every morning and evening, twice a day, by the deacon in October. Elder women ring the church bell by turns on a one-week shift. The first bell is rung at five in the evening and the second one at five-thirty PM, and the third at eight PM.

When a baby is born, a god-father and a god-mother are chosen. The ritual of christening is given two or three months after a baby was born. A nuptial ceremony is also held at the church. When a person dies, a funeral Mass is held, and then a tombstone is put in the graveyard. The family of the deceased visit the graveyard to pray for nine days. Thus, the Catholic church outlines the lives of the Ulithians through administering the rites of passage.

The second factor for social change is the founding of a high school on Falalop island in 1964. Today, most of the children of the atoll go to high school in Falalop after they finish junior high school. They live in a boarding house. Formerly, they had to go to Yap to attend high school, which is very far, and furthermore, the islanders often were said to suffer from discrimination by Yap people.

Thirdly, the activity of the American Peace Corps is given. The first Peace Corpsmen came to some of the islands in 1967. Their main activity was to teach English at elementary schools. But islanders consider marijuana brought in by them as one of the big changes, since it also affected to some young Ulithians.

The fourth point is the spread of television, which was said to be first introduced into Yap in 1978 or 1979. The people in Ulithi are not able to watch TV programs yet, because they still can't receive the TV signal from Yap proper. However, video players are gradually spreading. Some people in Mogmog island have video players and enjoy watching video movies and other various videos.

Finally, internet and e-mail are expected by Mogmog people to bring great change to the Ulithians in the near future. A huge satellite dish was under construction in Falalop island in 2001, and it was scheduled to operate in 2002.⁴⁾

Tourism

There can be seen little progress in tourism in the Ulithi atoll as a whole. Falalop island is the only place in Ulithi where some development can be observed. There are a small airport and a resort hotel in Falalop, and divers have started to come especially from the United States and Japan by way of Yap by airplane. A group of divers from the United States were staying at the hotel in Falalop during the time of my fieldwork. There once was a regular ship line between Falalop island and Yap proper twice a week on Monday and Friday from 1948 to 1956. Today, the regular line makes a call at Falalop island once in two or three months.

Tourism in Mogmog island gradually started around 1990. But the number of tourists who came to Mogmog during past years is very small. The reason would be not because the villagers were opposed to tourism, but because Mogmog island was hardly known to outside tourists. Mogmog people recall the two impressive foreign visitors in 1990s, a Swedish family who

stayed at a villager's house, and a foreign luxury boat which anchored off shore of a nearby island and whose passengers enjoyed sea bathing within big shelter nets against sharks. In the latter case, the tourists didn't land on Mogmog island.

There is an agreement about tourists among Mogmog people that tourists must pay twenty dollars as a landing fee, and if they want to stay at a private house providing meals, they will be charged fifteen dollars for lodging and another fifteen dollars for meals per day.⁵⁾ Mogmog people try to avoid having tourists stay at one same house. Rather, they try to distribute tourists equally among villagers so that everybody can get a benefit from tourism. Women sell the lava lava that they have woven at the Women's house to some shops in Yap island at thirty dollars each.

Villagers are not negative toward tourism; however, they are opposed to the onrush of a crowd of tourists at one time. Since there are no hotels and other lodging accommodation in Mogmog island except private houses providing lodging and meals to transient guests, there is a great limitation in on their capacity for hosting tourists. Eventually, a limited number of tourists would be acceptable. According to Mogmog people, so called eco-tourism is the kind of tourism that would be acceptable to them.

The villagers would not allow the building of a hotel in Mogmog island if all the benefits were to go to a limited number of specified people alone. However, if every villager could get equal benefit from the construction of a hotel, it would be possible to have a hotel. Then, how do the Mogmog people see the tourism of Falalop island? They see that the building of a hotel in Falalop has caused a lot of problems. They think that the benefits of tourism have not been divided equally among the islanders, but only specified people have had the merits and the gains of the tourism. Thus, they think that social reciprocity, mutual aid, and morals of equality have been greatly damaged. In Mogmog, when a villager came back from fishing with a lot of fish, it was a matter of course that he should distribute them to other villagers. Everyone easily knows that he brought a lot of fish, since he has to seek other villagers' help to unload his boat and the fish. However, in Falalop, some people now unload their boats and fish by themselves without seeking the help of others because they own unloaders and cars. Thus, they can monopolize all the catch if they want. The example above is seen by Mogmog people as one of the bad effects of tourism in Falalop island.

A Visit of Japanese TV Production to Mogmog

One of the big happenings recently on Mogmog island is the visit of a Japanese TV crew which is producing a popular TV program called *Ururun Taizaiki*, a program based on a Japanese TV personality's experience of living in an exotic culture. They chose Mogmog island for their shooting location. The process of choosing Mogmog is as follows. A Japanese coordinator made soundings to Tamol council, the supreme chief council of the outer islands, to see whether it would be possible or not for a Japanese TV production to visit Mogmog island to make a TV program. Then, the coordinator was introduced to Mr. Hosey Sogrui by the chief of Tamol council who is Mr. Sogrui's elder brother. The coordinator made contact with Mr. Sogrui and asked him to host a Japanese TV talent, Toba Jun, and he agreed with the request. The Japanese TV crew was altogether about ten, and they stayed at the men's house for two weeks. Toba Jun stayed at Mr. Sogrui's house. The Japanese TV team paid to the village three thousand dollars in reward for villager's cooperation. Other than that, each of them paid twenty dollars for landing fee, fifteen dollars for meals, and fifteen dollars for lodging at the men's house per day.

They also paid thirty dollars for hiring a boat per hour. They never failed to get permission before shooting on the island, and their reputation while in the village as a whole was a good one. They often had shootings at night. Villagers were also asked to perform traditional dances in front of the TV cameras. One day, villagers got a turtle and cooked it for Toba Jun, but he was very shocked to watch them killing the turtle. This happening became a sort of highlight scene of his cultural experience on Mogmog island in the TV program which was aired later in Japan. After the TV crew went back to Japan, Mr. Sogrui received two video tapes sent by the director of the TV program. One was a broadcast version, and the other was a longer-edited version. When a Japanese Canadian woman of Mr. Sogrui's acquaintance happened to come to Mogmog island, she helped to translate Japanese and explain the contents while watching the video tapes.

After the TV program was aired in Japan, various people came over to Mogmog island to see the host, Mr. Sogrui. Especially, some members of Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers who then had been stationed in Falalop, Yap and Palau came to see Mr. Sogrui. An eighteen-year-old Japanese girl, an ardent fan of Toba Jun, also came all the way from Japan to Mogmog island after watching the TV program. She came to see the places where Toba Jun was and stayed, and to meet Mr. Sogrui who hosted the young Japanese TV talent. Mr. Sogrui arranged her to stay at another villager's house so that the opportunity to host a tourist would be equally shared among the villagers.

Traditional Culture and Tourism

The Ulithians as a whole and Mogmog islanders in particular seems to have gone through tremendous social changes after the war. The first one is the fact that all the Ulithians were forced to move to Fassarai and Lossau for about three years from 1944 to 1947 by the US Navy. While Mogmog island was under US Navy occupation, the ground except the taro patch was leveled by bulldozers for the construction of the army camp. So, it would be supposed that familiar sights would have greatly changed when the Mogmog islanders returned to their island.

Secondly, the typhoon Ophelia brought serious damages on Mogmog island; especially, most of the coconut trees were blown down, and the taro patch was covered with sea water. Present coconut trees in the island are ones which were brought from Woleai and Yap. Immediately after the typhoon Ophelia, the Mogmog islanders sought the seeds of coconut trees from Woleai and Yap, and thus the coconut trees were transplanted on the island.

Thirdly, the fact that Ulithi atoll was put under the trusteeship of the United Nation, and the US government has greatly influenced the culture of islanders. Under the economic support of the US government, a lot of the youth have been educated and sought jobs in the US, and some of them have returned with a higher education. But one of the interesting things is that those who came back to Mogmog island from the US have again been assimilated into the local culture instead of bringing in the US culture. Thus, once they are on Mogmog island, they seem to be following the traditional Mogmog way of life.

Fourthly, to see Mogmog island from the viewpoint of tourism, we have to say that tourism is still very new and stays on a very small scale. As we have seen above, tourists started to come to Mogmog island only around 1990. They were mostly the hotel guests in Falalop, who got permission first from the chief of Mogmog and came over to the island by boat. Those tourists within the living memory of Mogmog islanders are a Swedish family, a large tourist boat from overseas which anchored off shore, a Japanese TV crew, Japanese Overseas Cooperation Volunteers, and a young Japanese girl who came alone.

Why has the tourism of Mogmog island been staying at a low level in scale? The possible reasons for this could be given as follows.

1) The capacity of the island itself is very small. It is a small island with a small population, and with no hotels and guest houses for tourists. Islanders arrange home-stay for sudden tourists. Thus, only a small number of tourists would be acceptable.

2) The islanders don't seem to be very enthusiastic about tourism. On Mogmog island, the most important condition for the promotion of tourism seems to be egalitarianism. Islanders are not necessarily against the development of tourism, if an equal share of the profits from tourism would be assured. They feel it is important that traditional moral life should not be affected by the development of tourism, as we can see from their critical view of the Falalop case. The islanders seem to be seeking a kind of tourism where everyone can get an equal share from the tourism. That would be the best way for them to keep a peaceful order.

Conclusion

Mogmog islanders think that eco-tourism is the kind of tourism that would be best fitted for the ecological and social conditions of Mogmog island. It suits the small scale tourism that the islanders think about. If a lot of tourists were to come to the island at one time, not only would it affect the natural ecosystem, but also it would disturb the rhythm of the lives of the islanders.

What would tourists seek by going to Mogmog island? It seems that the top priority for tourism is always in exoticism, that is, exoticism of nature and of culture. As to the exoticism of nature, those natural traits of the atoll such as flatness, lowness, smallness, sand bars, and the lagoon are extremely exotic to tourists.

As to the cultural exoticism of Mogmog island, traditional dress such as men's loincloths and women's lava lava, and traditional houses such as the men's house would also be exotic enough to attract tourists. Especially, the fact that traditional dress is stubbornly maintained in the village is worth pointing out. One of the striking facts is that even those young people who had long been in Guam, Saipan, Hawaii, and other places in the US follow the traditional dress code once they were back in the village instead of bringing in T-shirts and jeans. Even the high school students in T-shirts and half pants on Falalop island go back home in loincloth and lava lava. They are often seen slipping off T-shirts on the boat on their way home. Thus, on Mogmog island, traditional culture seems to be kept rather through the maintenance of traditional dress code.

On Mogmog island, education about traditional culture is very consciously part of the school curriculum, and the reproduction and the maintaining of traditional culture through education is well organized. As Yap islanders emphasized the value of traditional culture by looking at the tourism of Guam and Saipan (KUWAHARA 2001), Mogmog people seem to be choosing the traditional value of egalitarianism by looking carefully at the Falalop case as a precedent of a resort tourism.

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Notes

- 1) In old days, only specified clans had canoes. If a fish were big enough to put an elbow into the fish's mouth, the fish had to be offered to the King. If the canoe is coming through in-between Falalop and an adjacent island, it shows that they will bring a turtle with them.
- 2) In the Caroline islands, the islanders in the east of Ulithi atoll have a politically, socially and religiously close relationship with two villages of Yap proper, Gachapar and Wanyan in Gagil municipality. This is a kind of periodic tributary trading relationship. Politically, Ulithi atoll is subordinate to Yap. On sawei, see, for example, LESSA 1950 and LINGENFELTER 1975.
- 3) At the time of my fieldwork on Mogmog island in late October, school children were learning the Ulithian names of plants and fish, fishing methods, the ways to weave the traditional textile called lava lava, a string and a basket, to make a lei, the Ulithian names of months, constellations, myths and folk tales, the old songs and dances for Culture Day and commencement.
- 4) There are two other changes that can be pointed out on Mogmog island. One is a change in the way of wearing a man's loincloth. Men are now using a much wider and longer loincloth than before. The other change is the abstinence from drinking. Drinking in the island has been prohibited to avoid quarrels and the disturbance of peace. When Ulithian people were invited to the research ship, which anchored off Mogmog Island, for the reception given by the Kagoshima University research project team on 23 October 2001, most of the Mogmog people were abstaining from drinking, but those who were drinking told us that they were not able to return to the island until they got sober.
- 5) When our research team first landed on the island to pay a courtesy call on the chiefs of the island, we were invited into the men's house, where we were asked a few times whether there was any tourist among us. This seems to show that they have a different approach and regulation toward a tourist and a mere visitor.

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