

## THE LIFE OF THE PALAUANS AND SIÚKANG (CUSTOM)

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### Introduction

I surveyed Koror City and visited several families for two weeks from 17th Oct. to 7th Nov. in 1995. While researching aspects of Palauan life, I noticed that their life style is very different from what Krämer and Hijikata have described. When I interviewed them, Palauan people told me about "old type" and "new type" weddings and funerals. They said now they hold "new type" ceremonies only, except for some "rich men" who can afford the "old type" style. In conclusion, if there are any remnants of traditional, native life-style left in Palau Islands today, one is a kind of custom called siúkang, an extension of an older practise called ocheraol.

### Materials and Methods

The present survey consists of three aspects i.e., 1) field investigation of markets, 2) studies of interviews with several Palauan families including two families of Modekngai believers, and 3) studies of documents and video tapes which I saw and got at the Belau National Museum and other culture centers. Field work centered on: (1) various markets, i.e., from the supermarkets in the center of Koror City, the fish market at T-Dock, to a small general store in Kayangel Island; (2) visiting a Bai and other meeting places. The Bai is a traditional meeting house for chiefs in Palau, which is rarely used. The ordinary meeting houses, however, are used for wedding parties, housewarmings, funeral ceremonies, birthdays and ceremonies celebrating the birth of a first child, these first birth occasions being attended only by women.

### Results

The life of the Palauans was under the influence of American culture for the fifty years of the American Trusteeship (1944-94). America continues to give economic assistance to Palau. The expansion of spending by individuals changed the life of the inhabitants. Now they don't like to eat taro tubers. Now they usually wear T-shirts and jeans and now they think that it's very embarrassing to dance half naked, covered with oil and wearing a grass skirt. We can't find houses with a bamboo floor and a thatched roof any more. The most important change in Palau is the elimination or modification of nearly all social customs involving the use of native money. The Palau economy has no need of Palau money which consists of polychrome and clear glass beads, and crescent-shaped bar gorgeto, and beads, of pottery. This caused further diminution of autocratic power of former chiefs who still possess Palau money. The ordinary Palauans increasingly used and depended upon foreign goods, resulting in greater need, and so they desired to earn foreign money. During American times, they completely shifted from native to foreign money. RITZENTHALER points out that the beginning of this situation was already seen during the Japanese Regime (1914-44).

The Americanization of Palau had a great impact on the religious life of the inhabitants by bringing about the decline of a New Religion, Modekngai, which was founded by Tamadad in 1917. It is said that Modekngai has now 600 believers which is only 4% of the present popula-

tion of Palau. In 1940 membership was up to 3,000 or 50% of the population. A feature of this religion is that it mixed native supernatural beliefs with Christianity. It flourished according to the predictions of the founders, Tamadad and Ongesi, providing for medical treatment with medical herbs, money-making by collecting money for mutual aid, releasing from taboo, especially about food, and acceptance of local gods. A modekngai believer interviewed assured me that he was cured by the third leader Runguul and had no return of his cancer. According to his accounts, he had been treated for two years (1958-59) in the American Hospital Palau after learning of his cancer. He didn't improve at all and became all skin and bones. At last he drank the liquid made by the late Runguul in accordance with his friend's advice. He recovered from his illness in only two months and was quite restored in 1960.

About siúkang there are no documents, it is so usual and common among the Palauans, and springs from a kind of old custom, ocheraol, now brought into general use and so now called siúang. Siúkang can be summarized as follows:

- (1) Ocheraol is to give a party for the purpose of collecting money only for building a new house. On the contrary siúang is not only for building a house, but for the ceremonies of birthday, marriage, funeral and buying a car or boat and so on.
- (2) In both ocheraol and siúkang the relations on the wife's side take the initiative in holding a party. Not only relatives, but also friends who would give some money and get some back later are called to attend a siúkang party. Radio broadcasting is used for calling out the names of participants at a party. Before that, the purpose of the collection is explained with the words of request. Therefore the parties are often held on a Saturday or Sunday after a payday that occurs every other Friday.

I should add a few more words in conclusion. There is still something like Palauan native money in use. It is called tolúk which is a kind of Palauan money in the form of a plate or tray of turtle shell. Tolúks are given to women who worked well at preparing a party by the organizing woman. In Palau, a relative in the female line, especially the eldest sister, plays an important role in holding a party. What kind of and how much food should be prepared, who cooks meals for a party when participants are not given box lunches, and what and how much for compensation or gifts are considered. So the woman who often has chances to hold parties has got to stock of tolúk as rewards. She gets them from helping at other parties or buys them from turtle shell workers. Or she gets turtles from a fisherman and has tolúks made. Only six pieces of tolúks can be made of a turtle. Sometimes in the tolúk she puts some dollars (\$20 in middle class) for a woman who worked very well.

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