

Beyond the Blue Horizon

Filming on Lamotrek Atoll

Essay & Photographs

by

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After six months into a 14-month stay on Lamotrek, an outer island in Yap State in the Federated States of Micronesia, I ceased to maintain clarity of purpose. It did not make much sense to me to continue filming. Anthropologists refer to this phenomenon as “culture shock.”



Lamotrek: Looking North

One day while staring at the coral cuts on my feet in my bright orange, all-purpose, plastic washtub, I realized that I did not know what I was doing. It had become a regular habit for me to boil water and soak the cuts I had received when spear fishing in the lagoon. I wondered when I was going to get over such childish clumsiness. After all, the islanders knew how to handle themselves on the coral reef. When was I going to learn?



My Hut

Looking out the doorway of my palm-thatched hut in the morning, I saw that it was going to be a beautiful day. The tops of the coconut palms shone in a gold line all along the crescent beach. The inner lagoon near the shore was lying undisturbed and the smoothness of the water seemed to glow in unison with the land. Only the clouds moved ... and my feet in my washtub.



Lamotrek: Looking South

Maybe it was this ironic juxtaposition of images, or the depressive prospect of running out of coffee with no cargo ship due for another three months, or the fact that I had not picked up a camera in two weeks. Whatever, there was not only something wrong with my feet but my state of mind in general. I thought I was an ethnographic filmmaker. I thought I had developed methods to interpret a culture on film, but after six months of not making progress all my strategies were gone, used up, burned out.



Filming a New Year's Celebration

After spending six months on Lamotrek, I had filmed many of the traditional arts and skills that were being practiced on the island but a theme to connect them still eluded me. I seriously wondered if I should continue filming. The question swirled around in my head but found no answer, so I poured more hot water into my bright orange, all-purpose, plastic washtub and continued to rub the coral cuts on my feet.



Making a Fish Trap

I had a conflict: to use my film equipment to continue documenting the culture or to forget the film and join in the island activities. An islander would tell me, "Come, this is the work we are doing." Or another would ask, "Did you hear what the men have decided that we are going to do today?" And the most provocative question of all, "When are you going to take your wife?" The invitations to assimilate were constant, as if I could easily forget the reason why I had come to Lamotrek.



Dancers

I had fallen into the island rhythm and it was getting harder and harder for me to find the time and energy to continue filming. I would get up at six in the morning, climb the coconut trees given to me for making palm wine, collect the fermented coconut juice, and cut the palm blossom so the sap would continue to flow.



Collecting Palm Juice

Then I would go to the elementary school on Lamotrek where I was teaching English, Math and Social Studies to 7th and 8th graders.



Author with Students

My role as teacher on Lamotrek had been arranged for me by my sponsor-father, Chief Lewis Magowe, who was also my mentor in learning the language and culture of Lamotrek.



Chief Lewis Magowe

During my school lunch break I would return to my hut at the northern end of the village, climb “my” coconut trees, and collect the fermented juice. This would give me an opportunity to visit the men’s canoe houses along the way to see what activities were taking place that day.



Canoe House Repair

School would end at three o'clock in the afternoon, after which I was free to pursue whatever I liked. This usually involved fishing, working in the canoe house, or if the situation warranted the effort, shooting film.



Sailing Canoe Repair

Around four o'clock in the afternoon the men would start drinking the palm wine that they had collected in the morning. They did this in various canoe houses while engaged in a variety of work-related activities such as building canoes, making fish traps or producing coconut fiber rope.



Hauling a Sailing Canoe

I would return to my hut to eat supper before sunset, climb my coconut trees again to collect a second batch of palm wine, then bring it to a canoe house in the early evening where a “men’s circle” would gather. There we would drink, talk, ask questions, and sing island songs until it was time to go to sleep.



Man at
Drinking Circle

After awhile, it was difficult for me to get on with the process of filmmaking. I had to find ways of talking myself into putting film in the camera rather than getting involved with participating in the men's activities. The collective pressure to assist in community projects was constant. To dismiss or deny the individual responsibility that I had to the island was, in the Lamotrekan scheme of things, like denying the existence of the community. Every individual that was capable was expected to contribute to the general welfare of the community in a multiplicity of ways, not just teaching or making movies.



Smoking Island
Tabacco

Sitting with both feet in my bright orange, all-purpose, plastic washtub, I pondered the events of the past month. I had recently made a conscious effort to stop joining in with the daily routine of making palm wine and other community work projects in order to pay more attention to producing the film that I had come to make about Lamotrekan arts and skills.



Young Men Carrying Green Sea Turtle

It almost goes without saying that devoting one's energy toward the making of a movie is dramatically different from all other Lamotrekan activities. It is a type of production that a Lamotrekan would not have trouble conceiving but would probably have difficulty carrying out. He or she would likely be faced with the conflict of having to stand aside from the community and his or her obligation to be involved in numerous subsistence activities. It would also take tremendous will power because the personal desires of individuals tend to be, for the most part, sublimated to the needs of family, clan, and community.



Turtle Meat Distribution

Filming the people of Lamotrek posed a challenge. I found that permission to film adults needed to be asked beforehand, otherwise, the response might be one of shocked surprise or blatant disapproval. Once the camera was turned on, the adult males usually reacted with taciturn ignorance of its presence and the adult females were embarrassed to the point of hysterical laughter.



**Girl in
Traditional Dress**

Permission to film did not need to be asked, however, from adolescents since I was twenty-nine years old and therefore, according to Lamotrekan custom “did not need to listen to them.” The teenage boys treated the occasion as a chance to show off but were so self-conscious that they were hard to work with. The teenage girls would never give their approval for fear of being observed “talking to me” — behavior which was interpreted in public as a willingness to engage in an intimate relationship. Children always were excited when I got out my camera and would do almost anything I asked, but they were totally unpredictable.



Boys

Naturally, the adults were the first ones to be reckoned with in trying to do any serious filmmaking and here I tread a fine line. I was faced with a problem of getting support to carry out my film work but in filming individuals who seemed cooperative I found that I risked alienating them from future, meaningful communication. This problem was eventually solved by becoming a participant in as many community activities as I could, and in the process, learning to speak the Lamotrekesse language.



Girls

One can shoot several hours of film, capture the performance of a dance or the making of a canoe, and still have nothing more than a demonstration and the mood of the participants involved. It seemed useless to continue just documenting the arts of Lamotrek — dances for enjoyment, celebration, and ritual; songs and chants for navigators, medicine men, canoe builders, and lovers. On and on, they never seemed to end. Was there no theme that could bind these art forms together?



Preparations for Caulking a Sailing Canoe

Like a person who is wary of stepping into a tide pool for fear of disturbing the natural processes within it, I had sought to maintain a working relationship with the community. But on a small island of 300 people without electricity, where the only real diversions are your family, friends, and neighbors, “to make story” is a common method of passing the time. I was soon being tested on two accounts: my ability to decipher true stories from untrue ones, and my cleverness at *misimis*.



Young Ladies Preparing Taro

It is unduly harsh to say that *misimis* is outright lying although it certainly can be defined that way. More often, it is viewed as telling a “white lie” and is used, more or less, for defensive or protective purposes. For example, if you are walking on an island path and someone asks you if you have cigarettes , you may *misimis* by replying that you do not have any even if you do. If you acknowledge that you have cigarettes, then you may be socially obligated to share them. The same goes for food and other possessions.



Wood Carvings for Tourists

A reverse form of *misimis* is also used. If someone walks by a group of people eating, the people eating will usually call that person to join them; but proper etiquette requires unrelated individuals to decline the offer with a *misimis* by saying that they are full, even if they may, in fact, be hungry.



**Woman
Weaving a Skirt**

Misimisi is commonly employed to embellish an otherwise straight forward event, to elaborate an emotion, the size of some object, or simply to startle someone for a good laugh. Some of the wildest stories centered around romantic encounters and secret trysts. Being single, I was certainly game for talk.



Young Ladies

The women would advance their ideas concerning my suitability for marriage and the men would relate stories of my encounters with certain ladies despite the fact that these stories were untrue. Fact and fiction soon blended to the point where I did not know what the Lamotrekans thought of me. I believed my behavior had little to do with the image that the community had created.



Protecting a Sailing Canoe with Palm-Leaf Mats

The community's interest in having me stay on Lamotrek was a provocative notion. I already felt that the people on Lamotrek lived a good life. I liked the intensity and the fact that almost everyone developed a multiplicity of talents including practical food gathering skills, a multilingual capability, the making of aesthetic crafts, the composition of songs and dances, and the ever-present creation of humor.



Dance Practice

After six months, I came to feel that my filmmaking attempts had gone about as far as I could take them. With this realization my fears and resistance to becoming a more active participant in the social life of the community disappeared. At this point I resigned myself to the inevitable conclusion that the film recordings I had made would only amount to a straight-forward documentation of some little known arts and skills. I had lost the will to remain the staunch observer, standing aside from the mainstream that called me closer and closer.



Sailing Canoe at Sea

I gave up filming for a couple of months and immersed myself in the culture. I engaged in a wider array of social and work-related activities which included more fishing and involvement in voyaging expeditions to other islands, and I started collecting folk tales and myths. During this time, I also found that all the talk about my marrying and settling down on the island had little to do with reality and everything to do with *misimisi*.



Girl Weaving in Canoe House

The tables had turned. Now I watched as supposedly “interested” young ladies avoided me. This response reminded me of occasions when I would be walking down an island path and a small child would suddenly run away. If a parent was near, they would offer a bemused smile as if to say, “How cute” and then tell me that their child probably thought I was a ghost because of my blonde hair and light-colored skin.



Boys Looking at a Catch of Fish

Many times I had been asked if ghosts ever visited my hut at night. Not many men nor women would venture alone at night for fear of them. For a brief moment, I entertained the absurd notion that the ladies who were avoiding me thought I was a ghost. Then I recalled a story that my sponsor-father, Chief Magowe, had told me. This story, as it turned out, became the key to discovering the theme for my film.



Lamotrek Lagoon Sailing Canoe

In a myth about a specialized ocean fish trap, a spirit named Yarohonga lives in a log drifting on the open sea. Eventually an ocean current carries it onto the shores of Lamotrek where Yarohonga reveals himself to a woman, talks her into marrying him, and has a son by her. He teaches his son how to make a fish trap that is designed to be attached to large, drifting logs. He also teaches his son the magic for using the fish trap. Suddenly, I realized that the knowledge for making this specialized fish trap was connected to the spirit world.



Preparing a Fish Trap for Use in the Lagoon

I began to see the relationship of mythological deities with a system of specialized skills called *rong*, and I started to understand that a craft, decoration, dance or chant would often be employed for magical protection or empowerment. In the Lamotrekan belief system such magic permitted the exercise of skills such as canoe building and navigation to be successful.



Navigator Using a Weather Charm
(Image from "Lamotrek: Heritage of an Island")

Using *rong* magic a canoe would be fast, travelers would arrive safely at a destination, rain would come, typhoons would be prevented, turtles would crawl ashore, sharks would not bite, schools of fish would be called, and enemies would be unable to strike a blow.



Martial Arts Stick Dance

(Image from "Lamotrek: Heritage of an Island")

It all seemed so simple. When making the film, I could isolate a specialized *rong* skill because a patron spirit was connected with it. Then I could film the art forms associated with the performance of the skill. Now the film had a theme: the traditional arts and skills of *rong* are connected with the mythological deities that are credited with their origin. These deities are literally the “creative spirits” behind the performance of the most valued arts and skills practiced on Lamotrek.



Weather Magician

(Image from "Lamotrek: Heritage of an Island")

There are numerous tales of persons “going native” on isolated islands. Certainly, after six months on Lamotrek with little contact with the outside world, I was going through some psychological changes. Remaining fixed in my purpose, I was caught in a vicious cycle — in order to continue filming the culture, I had to maintain separateness; in maintaining separateness, I felt alienated and alone.



Filming on the Reef

As long as the film work I was doing had direction and meaning, I did not mind being considered a misfit in Lamotrekan society; but without the inner sense that the film was making progress, there was no choice but to give up the fight and join the dance.



Sailing Canoe at Rest

The change in my perspective was an important one. Indeed, without it, I doubt if I would have started collecting the folk tales that later played such a pivotal role in my recognition of the mysterious pattern that had eluded me. Moreover, I suspect that if I had not had a least a year on Lamotrek to work these problems out, that I never would have finished shooting the film that I had come to make ... beyond the blue horizon.



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For information about the completed film
and to see video clips from the film
click on the below link:

[Lamotrek: Heritage of an Island](#)