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## SACRED SPACE, TABOO PLACE Negotiating *Roang* on Lamotrek Atoll

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In 1990, in the process of making a documentary film, three remarkable events were observed on Lamotrek Atoll, an Outer Island of Yap in the Federated States of Micronesia, which showed that the creation of sacred taboo space—called *roang* in the central Caroline Islands—was still a viable practice in the community. The events observed were as follows: 1) the resurrection of prohibitions relating to a sacred area of land called Lametag, 2) the performance of traditional massage healing techniques called *sheosheo*, and 3) the performance of a traditional navigator initiation and schooling ritual called *pwo*. This paper presents an ethnographic description of these *roang*-related events as witnessed by the author in the field, compares them to earlier reports of *roang* sites described in the anthropological literature, and discusses the status of *roang* as it exists today, making conclusions regarding the changing status of *roang* and the construction of community on Lamotrek.

### DEFINITION OF ROANG AND ITS DIALECTICAL VARIANTS

The title for this paper is adapted from the definition of “rang” given in the *Woleaian-English Dictionary*: “sacred place, taboo place where sacred affairs are performed” (Sohn and Tawerilmang 1976, p.121).<sup>1</sup> Even though there are dialectical differences, Woleaian is viewed by linguists as being the same language as Lamotrekese. The *Woleaian-English Dictionary* is considered the current standard orthography for the language spoken not only by the Woleaian and Lamotrekese peoples, but also the other neighboring populations in the central Carolines living on the atolls of Eauripik, Ifaluk, Faraulep, Elato, and Satawal. Linguistically and culturally this group collectively is referred to in the literature as “Woleai” (Lessa 1950b,1950c; Alkire 1970).

The “Woleai” language is linguistically related to numerous other similar languages in the Caroline Islands which make up the Chuukic continuum (see Figure 1), also known as

the “Trukic continuum” (Bellwood 1979, p.130). The islands on which Chuukic languages are indigenously spoken range a distance of approximately 1600 miles from Tobi Island in the western Caroline Islands across the central Caroline islands to Lukunor Atoll in the eastern Caroline Islands and includes Chuuk itself (formerly Truk). According to Quackenbush (1968) the entire Chuukic linguistic area is chained together by interlocking links of language cognate percentages greater than 80%. Nevertheless, the differences in the spelling of the term “rang” (meaning “sacred place” or “taboo place”) by various authors who have done field research in these linguistically-related islands is truly diverse as the following examples will show: “ron” (Girschner 1911, p.193), “rong” (Krämer 1935, p. 256 footnote no. 2), “rehan” (Elbert 1972, p. 148), “ranga” (Rubinstein 1978, p. 78), “róong” (Goodenough and Sugita 1980, p. 313), “ruung” (Thomas 1987, p. 201), and “roang” (Sudo 1997, p. 26).<sup>2</sup>

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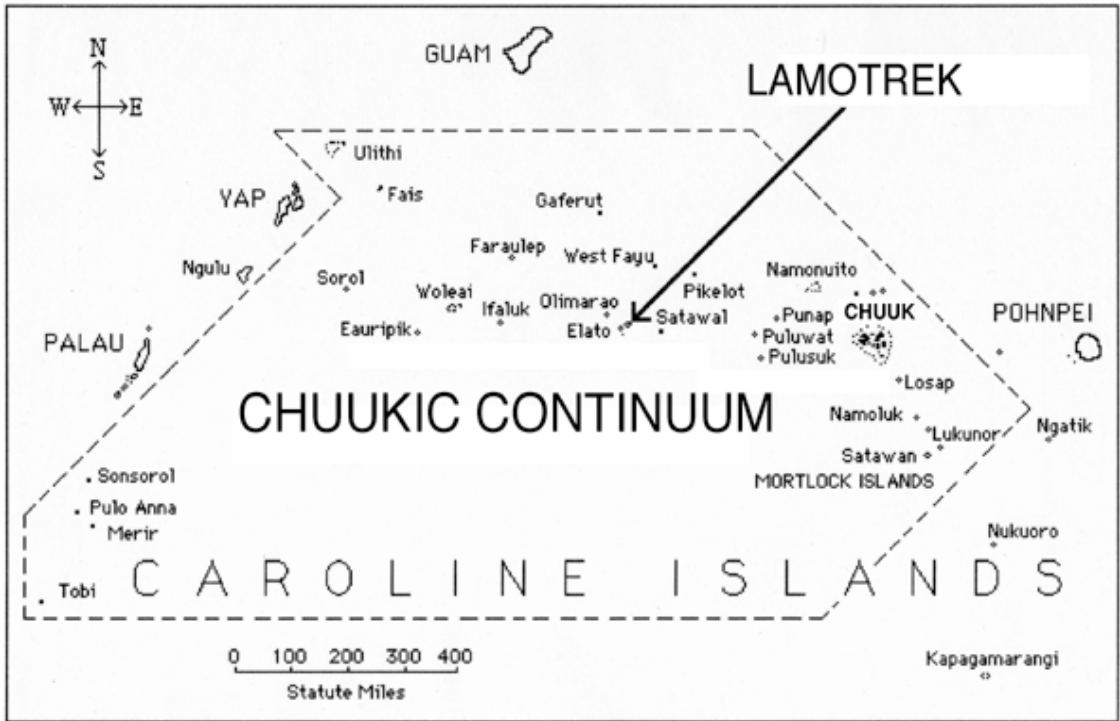


Figure 1. Chuukic Continuum Language Area

Although the *Woleaian-English Dictionary* spelling of this term is given as “rang,” I have chosen to use the dialectical variant of “roang.” My reasons for this choice are too complex to explain fully in a paper of this length but are discussed in detail in my dissertation (1991, pp. 111-114). The reader will also note that this is the same spelling used by Kenichi Sudo (see above) for Satawal, an island 40 miles east of Lamotrek.

#### OBSERVATIONS OF ROANG USE AND CREATION IN 1990

When I arrived on the inter-island passenger and cargo ship *M/V Micro Spirit* at Lamotrek Atoll in April 1990, our objective was to film the *pwo* navigator ritual.<sup>3</sup> Months of preparation and planning had preceded my arrival along with Ali Haleyalur, who wanted to be initiated by his father, Jesus Urupiy, to become a *paliuw* “navigator.” Urupiy was some eighty years old and a master navigator from Satawal who had married a Lamotrekian and raised his children on both Lamotrek and Satawal. When

we had set upon our plan to resurrect and film the *pwo* ritual, Ali was working as a policeman in Yap, an island 600 miles west of Lamotrek, and Urupiy was in temporary residence on Yap, living with Ali and other members of his extended family. It was here in July 1989 that Ali and I agreed to meet with Urupiy on Lamotrek about nine months later where he would be waiting for us to perform the *pwo* ceremony. The last *pwo* ceremony had been performed on Satawal about forty years earlier, between 1950-1952.<sup>4</sup> Since then this navigator rite of passage had come closer and closer to extinction with the demise of master navigators qualified to transmit the restricted navigational knowledge and chants which, by ancient custom, were only to be taught after apprentices were initiated in the *pwo* ceremony.

The mass conversion of the islanders in the 1950s to Catholicism coupled with the acculturation of islanders to outside values resulted in opposition by most islanders to many rituals connected to the traditional spirit world. The last time Lamotrekans were officially certified

as navigators in an initiation ritual was in 1948. By the 1980s there was a growing awareness amongst islanders that the so-called “good” elements of the traditional belief system should be allowed to co-exist with those of Christianity, and that the traditional spirit world and skills associated with it need not be altogether abandoned. This position was gradually supported by the advent of indigenous islander priests who had taken over the roles that were formerly held by priests from the United States.<sup>5</sup>

When Ali and I arrived on Lamotrek it was decided by Urupiy that a meeting of the Lamotrek chiefs should be held to talk about his plan to conduct the *pwo* ritual. Urupiy himself was a district chief of the southern part of Lamotrek so there was no problem with him proposing a meeting to clear the way for *pwo* to be included in the busy schedule of island activities. It was at this time that I received instructions concerning a new public policy regarding the correct behaviors that were being enforced in the vicinity of Lametag, a sacred area of land in the middle of the village and along the lagoon shore (see Figure 2). The one and only village on this small atoll numbered about 300 souls and the main path stretching the length of the village ran the inland perimeter of the Lametag area. This path was heavily traveled and adjacent to the land where the Catholic church was located; consequently, much of the population had reason to be in the vicinity of Lametag at some time during the course of the day. There were several prohibitions regarding Lametag, the site of a former *fenap* “men’s meeting house” and *roang* “sacred taboo space.” Everyone was required to show respect to the area of Lametag by demonstrating a respect gesture called *gebbarog*.<sup>6</sup> Sohn and Tawerilmang gloss the *gebbarog* gesture as “to walk with one’s body stooped” (1976, p. 52). The *gebbarog* show of respect is commonly used when walking past others who are seated. Persons often demonstrated the *gebbarog* gesture when walking past Lametag by placing one hand behind their back with palm up. Many of

the more traditionally devout would walk past Lametag stooped with both hands placed behind their back with one hand holding the other, both palms up. Standing upright in the Lametag area was strictly forbidden. Carrying loads such as coconuts, bananas or baskets of food and other goods on one’s shoulders was also forbidden. In such a circumstance, one was required to either carry the food under one’s arm or, if that was not possible, obtain a wheelbarrow to transport it. The overall objective of the prohibition was for persons to be “low” not “high” in deference to the sanctity of Lametag.<sup>7</sup> The reason given for the resurrection of the prohibitions was a general consensus by the chiefs that the younger generation was growing up “*Ye tabeey shag church*” (“They only follow the church”). As a result, they felt that the traditional values guiding respectful behaviors in the community were getting weaker. It bears mentioning that the newly enacted prohibitions were not intended to undermine the religious purpose of the church on the island—the Lamotrekans were avid church goers—but rather to balance the power of the physical space and authority of the Catholic church with the physical space and authority of Lametag, the traditionally most important space on Lamotrek.

On Lamotrek, the spirit of a legendary chief, Motaisam, is closely associated with the area of Lametag where his *fenap* men’s meeting house stood, the ruins of which are still visible in the form of rock supporting posts. It is said that Motaisam slept on a second level high above in the *fenap* because no one could be “higher” than Motaisam.

This also meant that no one could stand in his presence or climb trees where he might be sitting or walking. Women in the past were not allowed to walk the path that currently travels past Lametag but had to take a circuitous route inland to travel from one end of the village to the other. Nor were they allowed to enter the *fenap*.

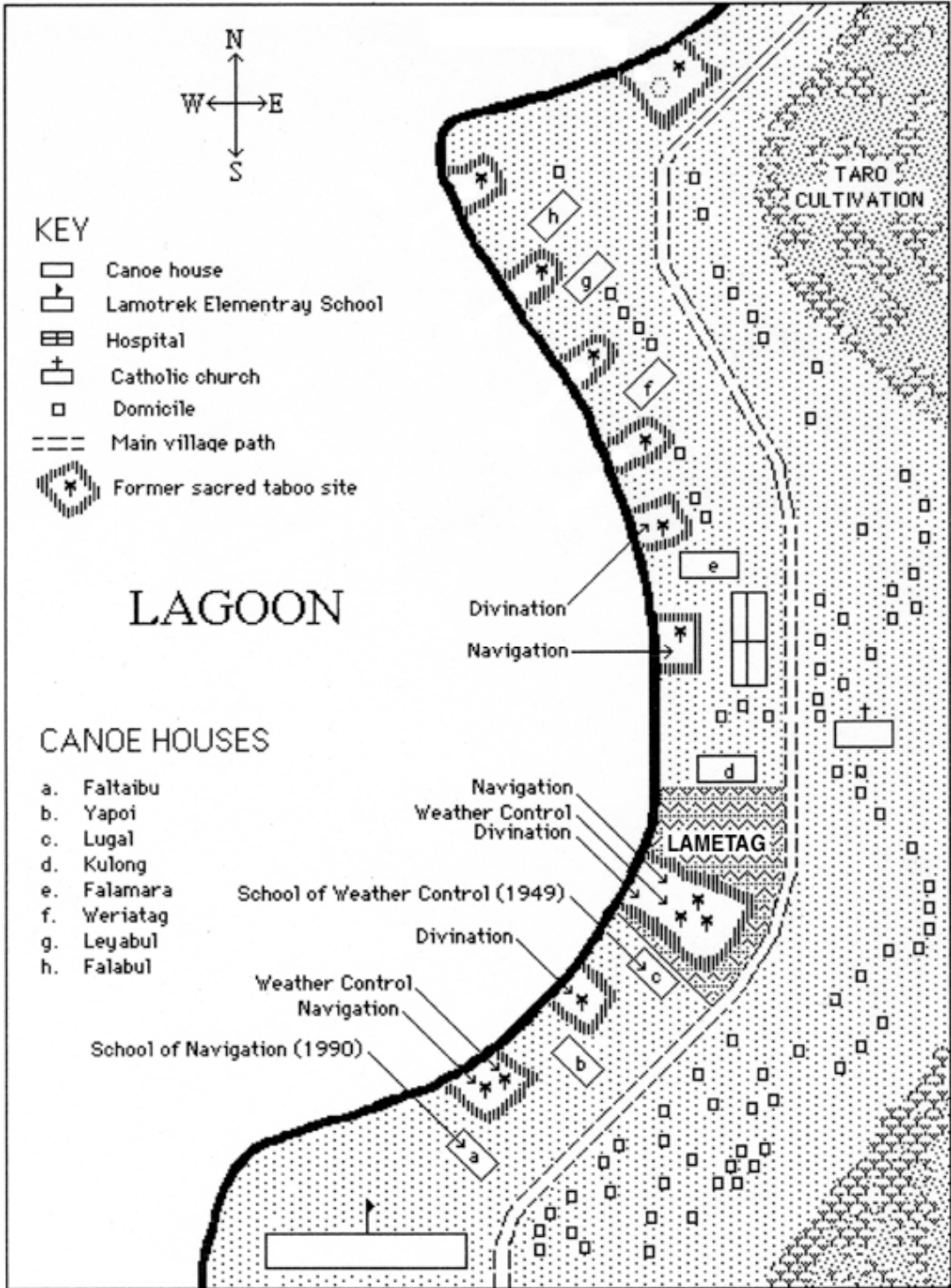


Figure 2. Lamotrek Village

I did not hear of any fine being levied for violations of the prohibitions that had been resurrected. I was informed that for an undetermined length of time there would be a grace period because the chiefs realized it would take a great deal of practice for the members of the community to adjust to the new rules. Although many adults forgot to bow down (*geb-barog*) to Lametag, they vigorously defended the axiom that everyone should try their best to show respect to this plot of land for the benefit of the island community. To do otherwise would, in the Lamotrekian worldview, be inviting misfortune to descend upon the island. Traditionally, disrespectful behavior toward Lametag was said to cause sickness and possibly result in typhoons striking the island.

After about two weeks had gone by since our arrival, and Urupiy was about to meet with the chiefs concerning the scheduling of *pwo* on the calendar of island events, an unsettling event occurred. Maaton, an adult male, was seriously injured in a fall from a palm tree. Four men arrived with Maaton in a motorboat from Pугue—an uninhabited island seven miles across the lagoon where he had been working—and carried him to his family estate. When I got to the house where he lay groaning in pain, he was surrounded by his kinfolk and other concerned individuals. An adult female had been summoned and payment in *toer* “woven textiles” had been given to secure her medical services as *tausheo*, a master of *sheosheo* “massage healing.” I was personally concerned because Maaton was supposed to be one of the apprentice navigators who was going to be initiated by Urupiy in the *pwo* ceremony. I started filming the events that transpired not knowing what this event would portend for *pwo*.

When it was determined that Maaton had a fractured leg and dislocated hip, Maaton’s *tausheo* sent for some medicine. Up to this point I was allowed to witness and record on film the flurry of activities which surrounded Maaton, but after the medicine arrived some hours later, the area was made taboo to all outsiders. Those who wanted to help were told that they could stay and become assistants to the *tausheo*. All others would be restricted from entering the area. Those who stayed to assist

the *tausheo* would have to obey various taboos over a four-day period called *bes*. They would not be allowed to have contact with anyone in the community except the *tausheo*, her other assistants, and Maaton, or perform any of their regular daily tasks such as making palm wine or cutting wood. Nor would they be allowed to eat the fish called *neg* (Siganidae family), sacred to her knowledge of *sheosheo* skills. The morning after the first night of the restricted period, young knotted coconut leaves called *ubut* were attached to the trees surrounding the house where Maaton lay. The coconut-leaf knots were used as *mesbang* “taboo markers” around the house, officially creating a *roang* “sacred taboo space” that for all intents and purposes announced to the community-at-large the presence of spirit powers involved with the application of *sheosheo* knowledge. At this point, all food arriving at the homestead had to be deposited outside the perimeter of the taboo markers. After the ritual four-day period of seclusion was over, the assistants were released from the taboos restricting their behavior and were allowed to go home. At this time, the coconut-leaf *mesbang* “taboo markers” were removed, which sent a message to the community at large that the *roang* “sacred taboo site” governing the exercise of *sheosheo* knowledge was no longer being enforced. Consequently, this allowed an instructional event called *tigerang* “marking with turmeric” to take place at the house. Any visitors who wished to take advantage of the opportunity to sit on the *giyegiy* “woven pandanus mat” next to Maaton with the *tausheo* and learn something about *sheosheo* skills were invited to do so. At this time the *tausheo* demonstrated some of her knowledge by marking specific healing points on Maaton’s body with turmeric and calling out the names of these locations. This rite which is really an educational opportunity for apprentices and non-apprentices alike is called *kapitalisheosheo* or “talk of healing by massage.” The next day, the *iles* “completion feast of offering” was made to give thanks to the spirit powers of *sheosheo* who were perceived as overseeing the exercise of the *sheosheo* skills performed. This feast, which was only attended by the *tausheo* and her

assistants, brought to a formal close the rites governing the initial treatment of the patient.

As a result of Maaton's accident, a gloomy atmosphere hung over the community which directly impacted Urupiy's plan to perform the *pwo* ritual. It was certain that Maaton would not be able to participate. Moreover, it was generally believed that malevolent spirits were involved in causing Maaton's accident because of Urupiy's intention to resurrect the *pwo* ritual. It would be a full six weeks before Urupiy would be able to conduct the *pwo* ritual. The general public sentiment against the performance of the ritual did not change until an omen was observed and recognized by the community-at-large. This omen took the form of two births which took place during the same night.<sup>8</sup> With this propitious sign the perceived danger that had been hanging over the island was believed to be neutralized and Urupiy was able to take the first initial steps towards performing the *pwo* ceremony.

One of the first rites which Urupiy performed determined who would be present in the physical space where the *pwo* ceremony took place inside Faltaibu, a canoe house which was located on Urupiy's clan property. This rite involved the collection of the wood for the creation of an *umw* "earth oven." All the would-be participants, including myself as cameraman, accompanied Urupiy to collect the wood which would be used to cook the breadfruit necessary for conducting the *pwo* ceremony. At this time, we individually stepped forward to receive a *baliubel* "protection rite" from Urupiy for the purpose of collecting the wood to fire the earth oven. This ritual, we later learned, would also allow us to be present within the *roang* "sacred taboo space" which Urupiy created for the purpose of performing the *pwo* ritual.

For the purposes of this paper I will only touch on those aspects relevant to the creation of the *roang* "sacred taboo space" which encompassed Faltaibu canoe house where the *pwo* ritual took place (see Figure 2).<sup>9</sup> A number of similarities between the *sheosheo* event described above were observed in connection with the *pwo* ritual: They were as follows: 1) the use of *meshang* "taboo markers" to identify the sacred

space of the ritual; 2) the use of a four-day period during which time participants followed taboos belonging to the spirit powers believed to be present; 3) the use of a *giyegiy* "woven pandanus mat" for instruction; and 4) the use of the *iles* "completion feast of offering" to give thanks to the spirit powers believed to be involved with the efficacy of the arts and skills taught and/or performed. The instruction, which formed the core of the *pwo* ritual is called *kapitalimetaw* or "talk of the sea." As with the *sheosheo* event, the *meshang* "taboo markers" for the *pwo* ritual were removed after the ritual four-day period of taboos were lifted and before the *iles* feast was given. After the taboo markers were removed, non-participants were allowed to enter the canoe house; but in general, this did not happen until a couple of days later, after the *iles* completion feast was given. Most outsiders waited until after the feast for fear that the *yaliusepwo* "spirits of *pwo*" might still be lingering about Faltaibu canoe house.

In addition to the above characteristics used to negotiate the sacred space for the above discussed events within the physical space of the island as a whole, a permanent *roang* was created by Urupiy for the future use of the newly initiated navigators. On the day after the *iles* feast, Urupiy designated one of his coconut trees near Faltaibu canoe house as a *roangopal-iuw* or "sacred taboo site belonging to navigators." Now the coconuts and resources of this tree would be viewed as being the property of the newly initiated navigators and only them, to be used in rituals connected to their exercise of navigational arts and skills. A simple but dramatic ritual marked this occasion. The *pwojefo* "new navigators" were told to stand with their backs against the trunk of the coconut tree and Urupiy waved young coconut leaves back and forth in front of them like a wand, lightly striking their chests, all the while reciting a chant. After he was finished with the chant Urupiy wrapped the young coconut leaves around the trunk of the tree as a *meshang* taboo marker to protect it from the non-initiated. Between the young coconut leaves encircling the tree and the trunk were placed the leaves called *lel* (*Morinda citrifolia*)<sup>10</sup> and the knotted young coconut leaves called *yaliulap*. This entire

complex of leaves was then referred to as *melangiuw gapitalipwo* or “amulet for the anointment of initiated navigators.” The new navigators then removed the four coconut-leaf bracelets called *rorpai* which had ritually been tied to their wrists during the four-day period of instruction and gave them to Urupiy. Urupiy took these bracelets and the herbal pouches which he had used to make *tafey gateram* or “medicine of enlightenment” and deposited them at the base of the tree. In so doing, Urupiy removed them from any potential contact they might have had with uninitiated members of the community.

### EARLY DESCRIPTIONS OF ROANG USE AND CREATION

In the previous section I described the social behaviors that were resurrected in 1990 and were being enforced in connection with the use of the traditionally most important space on Lamotrek: the permanent plot of land called Lametag. I also described the social behaviors involved with the creation of sacred taboo spaces which played a central role in the exercise of two specialized skills on Lamotrek in 1990: massage healing (*sbeosbeo*) and an initiation ritual for navigators (*pwo*). In order to better understand the meaning and significance of these events as they pertain to the use and creation of sacred taboo sites on Lamotrek, it may be helpful to compare them with earlier reports.

With regard to Lametag, we are fortunate in that there are two published reports. The first report is by Augustin Krämer who visited Lamotrek in 1909:

*This is also the location of the grove with the house of the spirits fal'lap [EM: dialectical variant of fenap “men’s meeting house”]<sup>11</sup> Lématag (or Lámetag) which in 1890 already lay in ruins. Dense virgin forest-like cordia shrubbery was found here (1937, p. 19).*

In the previous discussion it has already been mentioned that the legendary chief, Mo-taisam, whose *fenap* men’s meeting house stood on the sacred ground of Lametag, was the tutelary spirit inhabiting the *roang* sacred taboo area of Lametag. That Krämer mentions the

area was overgrown with “dense virgin forest-like cordia shrubbery” is indicative of the sacred taboo nature of the “grove” at the time of his visit in 1909.

An additional report for Lametag was published in 1965 by William Alkire. For comparison purposes and analysis his observations concerning Lametag (which he spells “Lamitakh”) are a valuable source of comparative information:

*... the most important land on the island is ... Lamitakh, which lies between Kulong and Lugal canoe houses and is bounded on the east by the path and the west by the lagoon. Lamitakh is the land on which the men’s house once stood (and where its ruins can still be seen) and the plot which symbolizes the authority of the tamolufalu [EM: “paramount chief of the island”]. When the paramount chief issues a directive it is often paraphrased as being “word from Lamitakh.” ... Sauwel [EM: clan name] may own and exploit the land agriculturally, but neither they nor anyone else may build a structure on this land without the permission of the tamolufalu; and there is no evidence that any such building has stood on this land since the men’s house (fal-lap) [EM: dialectical variant of fenap] was abandoned around 1860 (1965, p. 65).*

The above descriptions are instructive for a number of reasons, the most important being that both Krämer and Alkire describe the area of land called Lametag/Lamitakh as a site of spiritual and chiefly power. Both associate the area with a legendary men’s meeting house, a structure which Krämer calls the “house of the spirits” and which Alkire informs us is associated with the power of the paramount chief. What Krämer calls a “grove” and what Alkire calls “the most important land” has direct ties with the former men’s meeting house that lay in ruins on the site when they were on Lamotrek.

Also comparable in function and significance to Lametag is another *roang* sacred taboo site reported for Ifaluk Atoll, whence it is said Lamotrek was repopulated after a war occurred between the two islands in ancient times. Edwin Burrows, who performed anthropological

research on Ifaluk in the 1940s, gives the following account:

*The tract Katelu includes the site of an ancient "men's house" as well as the present Fan Nap [EM: yet another alternative spelling for fal'lap, fal-lap, and fenap]. To a considerable extent, this whole tract is a symbol of chiefly authority. The site of the old men's house, of which only the platform and a few back-rest slabs remain, is overgrown with tall trees and dense undergrowth. It is tabu to all but the chiefs, and I never saw even a chief enter it (Burrows 1952, p. 19).*

It is important to recognize that although *roang* areas such as Lametag and Katelu were taboo to the general populace, they were accessible to certain individuals who had the authority and magical knowledge to do so. Marston Bates and Donald Abbott, who were on Ifaluk in the 1950s made this observation:

*On the left side of this trail was the dense vegetation of Katelu, the sacred site of the ancient Men's House which was in use in the time of Maur, the island's "culture hero." This sacred spot was never entered by anyone except Maroligar (1958, p. 44).*

The above mentioned Maroligar is later described by Bates and Abbot as a ritual specialist in the art of divination. From my research on Lamotrek, I learned that the "dense virgin forest-like cordia shrubbery" area (borrowing Krämer's above description) that occupied the Lametag area was also the preserve of ritual specialists. Not only did men who were skilled in divination have access to Lametag, but also weather magicians and navigators. It was there, it was said, that they received the spiritual power to exercise their skills and each had their own coconut trees and plants for ritual use. The "dense vegetation of Katelu" in Bates' and Abbott's report for Ifaluk and the "dense undergrowth" mentioned also for Katelu by Burrows are directly comparable to the above description given by Krämer for Lametag. Comparable also are the reports of a tutelary spirit being associated with the *fenap* men's houses of Katelu and Lametag. On Ifaluk the tutelary spirit is the legendary "culture hero" Maur and on Lamotrek it is the legendary chief Motaisam. Jurisdiction over these *roang* sacred taboo sites was passed down to succeeding

chiefs. The following observation by Edwin Burrows and Melford Spiro in the 1940s demonstrates the chiefly responsibility with regard to the sacred space of Katelu on Ifaluk:

*In our entire stay only one taboo was discovered which involved the idea of holiness or sanctity per se, rather than being connected with some pragmatic activity. The plot of ground, known as Katelu, which belongs to the chiefs, and on which the fannap [EM: men's meeting house] is located, is considered sacred ground; and one portion of it, directly behind our tent, is so sacred that no one may tread on it. The violation of this taboo results in rain and even in typhoons. We discovered this taboo purely accidentally. The trade winds had set in, but the rains, which usually cease with the onset of the Trades, continued to come. Both the people and the anthropologists [EM: Burrows and Spiro are referring to themselves here] were very surprised and the former were alarmed. One afternoon I observed the people moving an old over-water-head to the beach directly in front of our tent. When they had finished their work, Tom [EM: an Ifalukan informant] came to us and said that this little hut was for our use. We had been using part of the Katelu as our private lavatory, and perhaps, he pointed out, that is why the rain continued, since it is taboo to walk on that ground, and the penalty for the violation of the taboo is rain (1953, p. 237).*

The above eye-witness account clearly shows that the "taboos" associated with the "sacred ground" of Katelu were still being enforced when Burrows and Spiro were on Ifaluk in the 1940s. I was told by informants on Lamotrek that the same was true for Lametag in the 1940s because neither island had yet been converted to Christianity.

Now I should like to turn to the published evidence relating to the creation of *roang* "sacred taboo sites." Unfortunately, reports on this subject are non-existent for *sheosheo* (massage healing) and lack sufficient detail for comparative analysis for *pwo* (navigator initiation rituals). Nevertheless, the following published information concerning the initiation and education of navigators leaves little doubt that special taboos were enforced:



*During the term of instruction the pupils are subject to a series of taboos ... These taboos are strictest for the first four days and nights; then the students may not leave the canoe house under any circumstances (Damm 1935, p. 85).*

*Certain individuals are picked by certain clans ... and those are the ones that will actually become navigators. These chosen people, they can't go out. They just sit in the men's house ... No women allowed. No other men allowed except those men that will bring food. They keep everybody away from there (Brower 1983, p. 122).*

From the above reports we may infer that a taboo space was created, but how this was done and what materials were used, if any, is not explained. The use of coconut leaves as taboo markers was a common practice throughout Micronesia in former times and still is practiced in varying degrees in some places, but published reports of coconut leaves being used to enclose sacred taboo areas are relatively few and those specifically mentioning *roang* sacred taboo sites are rarer still.<sup>12</sup> There is documentation of *meshang* taboo markers being used and descriptions of *roang* sacred taboo sites, but I could find no examples specifically mentioning a relationship between the creation of *meshang* taboo markers and *roang* sacred taboo sites for Lamotrek or any other island in the central Carolines. This is probably an oversight in the anthropological record for the central Caroline islands because Alkire (1965, p. 110) mentions “*meshang*” in connection with a taboo placed on fishing for certain sections of Lamotrek, and Akimichi (1986, p. 18) reports the use of “*merhang*” (a dialectical variant) in connection with chiefly prohibition of land resources on Satawal. Neither Alkire nor Akimichi specifically identify “certain sections of Lamotrek” or “land resources on Satawal” as being *roang* “sacred taboo sites” that have been created as a result of the use of *meshang* taboo markers, but there is evidence of this relationship which is available to us in the literature for Chuuk:

*mehenin róong... sign of prohibition against trespass, made from young coconut leaves (wupwut) that may simply girdle a tree or stake or be strung to form an enclosure around the prohibited*

*or restricted area (Goodenough and Sugita 1980, p. 201).*

It is important to note here that the use of the Chuukese term “*mehenin*” in the above quote is formed from the root term *mehen* (see Goodenough and Sugita 1980, p. 201) which is a dialectical variant of the Lamotrekese *meshang*. Likewise the Chuukese *róong* is a dialectical variant of *roang* and the Chuukese *wupwut* is a dialectical variant of *abut*.

The following report, also from Chuuk, brings evidence to support the hypothesis that the creation of sacred taboo space was/is directly related to the use of coconut leaves as taboo markers:

*... On the day when the tree comes into this house, a sacred time begins for the sofalafal [EM: master canoe builder] and his helpers. Ubud [EM: young coconut leaves] are made around the house as signs that nobody, and least of all women are allowed to enter (Bollig 1927, p. 71).*

Temporary sacred taboo enclosures were also commonly made for the purpose of making medicines in Chuuk:

*Trukese regard this kind of medicine [EM: “safeiso” in the text] as by far the most important and powerful. A fire must be prepared to heat rocks, and in former times the importance of this treatment was underlined by surrounding the fire with special decorations. Three or more specially carved short sticks (wotomoosor) were stuck in the ground near the patient's house forming a small triangle or circle. A line was tied to the top of the first stick and then connected to the top of each stick in turn, enclosing a small area, but leaving a space open between two of the sticks for entrance and exit. Palm leaves were tied to the line for decoration (Mahoney 1970, p. 68).*

In contrast to the creation of temporary sacred taboo enclosures formed by *meshang* “taboo markers,” the permanent *roang* “sacred taboo sites” located at Lametag on Lamotrek and at Katelu on Ifaluk did not generally exhibit coconut-leaf taboo markers. These permanent sacred taboo areas did not need to be identified by taboo markers because their perimeters were/are well known to the island community, not only because these sacred areas were/are still an important part of the lore and history of

Lamotrek and Ifaluk, respectively, but because of the unbridled growth of trees and plants which characterize these areas as permanent *roang* sites. Still, sometimes strangers had to be informed of the sanctity of these areas, and in such a case, the ritual specialist in charge of the site would undertake the task of making taboo markers to ward off possible violations of the sacred space. Two American anthropologists were two such strangers on Ifaluk in 1947–1948 when they made the following report:

*The only concealment near our tent was the foliage on the overgrown part of Katelu. We took to using the edges of that part of the time [EM: as a lavatory]. Maroligar delicately dissuaded use by intertwining the leaves of the young coconuts about the old site, forming a flimsy barrier, which is a traditional tabu sign. The hint was not lost on us, but now and then under pressure of time and when we thought we were unobserved, we disregarded it (Burrows and Spiro 1953, p. 182).*

As mentioned earlier, Burrow's and Spiro's indiscretions with regard to the sanctity of Katelu were not uneventful. Their use of Katelu as a private lavatory was interpreted as the reason for the continuance of bad weather on Ifaluk during their stay, with the result that the Ifalukans installed a small lavatory "hut" near the beach for their private use.

To return for a moment to the *roang*-related events which I observed in connection with *sheosheo* and *pwo*, the reader will recall that not only was a temporary *roang* created as part of the *pwo* ritual but also a permanent *roang*. This permanent *roang* was given by the master navigator, Urupiy, to his apprentices after they had been initiated in the *pwo* ceremony and received special instruction. The coconut tree and the space in its immediate vicinity (called *roangopal-iuw* "sacred space belonging to navigators") was given for the future use of the initiates, to be used for ritualistic purposes connected to their exercise of navigational arts and skills. What evidence is there of sacred trees being used in the past by ritual specialists such as navigators? Not only is there evidence in the anthropological literature that navigators had their own special trees but there is evidence

that other ritual specialists had sacred trees as well:

*When completed, the navigator takes the effigy to a particular coconut tree, which may have been given to him by the individual from whom he learned navigation and which is located near his canoe houses. Here he recites a chant and Yalulawei [EM: a major patron spirit of navigators] is asked to protect the navigator through the effigy where he travels (Alkire 1965, p. 119).*

*Every canoe house has sacred palms nearby that are used in divination and navigation rituals ... (Alkire 1989, p. 81).*

Neither do the *roang* sacred trees by necessity have to be palm trees. Krämer gives the following eye-witness account of a navigator on Lamotrek in 1909 who deposited used medicine in what was most probably a *roang* site:

*Urupo ... upon the return from a voyage placed one [EM: a tukemoil "medicine pouch"] under a mog tree (1937, p. 138 footnote no. 3).*

In addition, there is collaborative evidence from Bollig for similar behaviors in Chuuk relating to the use of "sacred" trees:

*Every sourong [EM: "master of specialized knowledge"] also has his particular sacred tree ... Nobody may venture to approach this tree to pick its fruit (1927, p. 45).*

*The remains of the food, as well as the scraps of the ubud [EM: "young coconut leaves"] are put down at the sacred tree of the soupue [EM: "master of divination"] (1927, p. 68).*

From the above descriptions we may infer that permanent *roang* sacred taboo sites were important for a least two professions: navigation and divination. In addition to these, I learned on Lamotrek that weather magicians also had their own *roang* areas. So important were these *roang* that three classes of ritual specialists—navigators (*palium*), diviners (*taubwe*), and weather magicians (*wang*)—maintained sacred taboo sites in the Lametag area (see Figure 2). These ritual specialists were collectively known as *mwaletab* "taboo men" in the social hierarchy of the community. Supporting evidence for this view comes again from Alkire,

who reports the following information about “*mwaletabw*” for Lamotrek and Woleai:

*These “gods” ... are of greatest importance to mwaletabw “taboo men.” The gods are patron spirits who oversee and influence the outcome of important and sacred events. Mwaletabw are qualified specialists in technical fields, the most important being sennap “canoe builders,” and pelu [EM: alternative spelling for paliuw] “navigators” ... (1989, p. 86).*

*Mwaletab* taboo men were bound by several constraints with regard to their behavior in Lamotrek society. Although all ritual specialists were bound by systems of taboos in accordance with their individual professions, “taboo men” had the unique distinction of retaining certain taboos for life.<sup>13</sup> And women were strictly forbidden from permanent *roang* areas even if they were knowledgeable in specialized skills such as *sheosheo* massage healing. Only *mwaletab* could use the coconuts or other resources located on *roang* sacred taboo sites. The coconuts and leaves from the sacred trees found there were sometimes used to make sacred anointments and medicines. After they were imbued with sacred power they were considered “hot” and potentially dangerous. Consequently, they were left after use in *roang* areas where they would not hurt anyone who was not connected to the spirit powers involved with the arts and skills being practiced (cf. Mahoney 1970, pp. 84-86).

From the above comparative analysis of descriptions of *roang* use and creation, we can see that many of the social behaviors manifested in the context of the events which I observed in 1990 are substantiated by earlier published reports for Lamotrek and other islands in Chuukic continuum. We have also seen that the most distinguishing feature associated with the establishment of *roang* “sacred taboo sites” is the use of young coconut leaves (*ubut*) as taboo markers (*meshang*) to protect an object such as a coconut tree or to enclose a prohibited area.<sup>14</sup>

#### NEGOTIATING ROANG AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF COMMUNITY

In the summer of 1999 I returned to the central Carolines and gathered information on the

current status of *roang* for Lamotrek, Ifaluk, and Satawal. Although my visits were never longer than two days for any one island, this afforded me an opportunity to research the changes that had occurred.

As stated earlier, several prohibitions regarding Lametag—the site of a former *fenap* “men’s meeting house” and *roang* “sacred taboo site”—had been resurrected in 1990 to counterbalance the rising influence and authority of the Catholic church. The prohibitions that were being enforced at that time were based on the traditional premise that members in the community should show respect to Lametag. As described earlier, this involved the demonstration of a number of respect behaviors, the most important of which was the *gebbarog* gesture of lowering one’s head and bending from the waist with at least one hand placed behind one’s back as one walked through or nearby the Lametag area. When I arrived on Lamotrek in 1999 this show of respect to Lametag was no longer being practiced. When questioned as to what had happened, the acting chief informed me that they had given up enforcing the prohibition after typhoon Owen had devastated the island.

In November of 1990, typhoon Owen hit Lamotrek. The island was completely inundated by the sea and all the family dwellings and canoe houses were destroyed. During the storm the entire community took refuge within the concrete walls of the Catholic church and it was indeed fortunate that no one perished. It is probable that typhoon Owen was the catalyst for the cessation of respect behaviors being shown to Lametag. After typhoon Ophelia struck Ulithi in 1960, William Lessa observed that the disaster caused an acceleration of the social changes toward modernization that were already in progress (1964, p. 44). The most visible evidence of this on Lamotrek in 1999 was the greater number of plywood houses with aluminum roofs that had replaced the former thatched houses. Plastic tarps and buckets, which were a rare sight in 1990, were in use everywhere in 1999. Also, unlike the situation in 1990, several pigs were being raised in the Lametag area. Their presence indicated

that Lametag had been adapted to serve the utilitarian needs of the community.

It is interesting to speculate that one of the reasons for the failure of the Lametag revivalist movement may have been a perception on the part of the community-at-large that typhoon Owen was a result of supernatural retribution. It will be recalled in the case of Burrows and Bates on Ifaluk, that misfortune in the form of rain was perceived as being visited on the island because of their transgression of the *roang* “sacred taboo space” of Katelu. In the case of Lamotrek, the difficulty of the community to show proper respect to Lametag might have been interpreted as the cause for typhoon Owen, or it might have equally been a perception that not enough respect by the community as a whole was being shown to the authority of the Catholic church. The fact that the salvation of the community was due in no small part to the population seeking safety at the church may have been a deciding factor contributing to the reduced significance of Lametag as a functioning sacred taboo site. In 1990, both the physical space of Lametag and the Catholic church received demonstrations of social respect, but in 1999 I observed that only the Catholic church was a recipient of the *gebbarog* respect gesture.

*Roang* sites with taboos still enforced are extremely rare. One such *roang* site called Rolong is located on Mogmog Island in Ulithi Atoll. It was first reported by William Lessa in his study, *The Ethnography of Ulithi Atoll* (1950, p. 82) and mentioned again later by Lessa in connection with the site of the former atoll-wide “great assembly house” on Mogmog, also called Rolong, “whose site is still sacred today” (Lessa 1976, p. 73). Rolong is similar to Lametag in that a men’s house once occupied the site but both buildings disappeared in the nineteenth century and have not been reconstructed since. Traditionally, any sea turtles caught in the waters of Ulithi Atoll or on other islands in the atoll must first be taken to the Rolong site on Mogmog before they can be distributed and consumed (Lessa 1983, pp. 1193-1194). The Rolong area is still considered sacred ground today and no one who is not authorized may walk across it or perform ac-

tivities on it (Pacific Worlds 2003). The only other *roang* site in the islands that has taboos associated with it that are still being enforced is Katelu on Ifaluk. However, the influence of Katelu appears to be in a state of decline. An Ifalukan chief reported to me that he believes unauthorized members of the community are going into the Katelu *roang* under the cover of darkness. He told me that “the weather is changed” with regards to Katelu because the taboos associated with it are being ignored, which I was made to understand meant that he believes the balance of religious power on Ifaluk has shifted from Katelu to that of the Catholic church.

The power of the church has steadily been replacing traditional religious values ever since the Christian conversion of the central Caroline Islands in the early 1950s. The continuing decline of permanent *roang* “sacred taboo sites” seems to be inevitable, but whether they will be taken over entirely by outside influences is uncertain. The *roang* sites on Lamotrek and Satawal have more or less been secularized but no modern-day structures have yet been built on them. As long as they remain as such, then the potential exists that the traditional taboos associated with them could be resurrected by chiefs as part of a revival of island traditions like that which was attempted in 1990. On the other hand, there is evidence that the taboos which once were operational for traditional *roang* sites have now been adapted for use in the context of the church. One finds, for example, the use of *meshang* “taboo markers” around the altar table in Catholic churches where communion is performed. Another interesting adaptation of the *meshang* prohibition that occurred on Lamotrek is worth including here. On Christmas eve in 1987, a rectangular section in front of the Catholic church was enclosed with decorative young coconut leaves of a particular knotted type traditionally used for creating a *roang* “sacred taboo site.” Someone dressed as Santa Claus with a beard made of cotton balls arrived around midnight and used the enclosure to give away presents to the children. One by one the children were allowed to enter the fenced-off area and receive a gift of food from Santa Claus. The traditional use of

*meshang* “taboo markers” was adapted in this case to celebrate a non-indigenous patron spirit of Christmas named Santa Claus!

The process of adapting traditional forms and behaviors has been taking place ever since the Catholic church was established on Lamotrek in the 1950s. When I was on Lamotrek in 1977, the church was constructed mostly out of natural materials in the style of a thatched meeting house. Then in 1978, a modern-style building was constructed out of reinforced concrete, with concrete floor and aluminum roof. With the use of imported materials – steel rods, concrete, aluminum roofing, and acrylic paint – the status and importance of the church grew in the eyes of the community. This event marked a significant moment in the transformation of physical space on Lamotrek because not only did the new church solidify its role in the community, it also was praised as the strongest and safest building on Lamotrek. This was twelve years before typhoon Owen hit the island. The fact that the church stood fast and protected the entire population from harm in 1990 was a great source of pride in the community.

Typhoon Owen also impacted the permanent *roang* “sacred taboo site” established by Urupiy for the use of the *pwo* navigator initiates. The coconut tree which served as a permanent *roangopaliuw* “sacred taboo site for navigation” in 1990 was washed away by the typhoon and another coconut tree has not been selected to take its place. Consequently, there are no permanent traditional *roang* sites functioning (taboos being enforced) on Lamotrek.

Despite the decline of permanent *roang* sites on Lamotrek, there is evidence that the creation of temporary *roang* sites on Lamotrek and neighboring islands is a continuing practice. On Lamotrek, for instance, I observed a *meshang* taboo marker that had been erected in one canoe house in connection with medicine making, and on Satawal I learned that a navigator had performed the *pwo* ritual on Pollap (in Chuuk State) and created a *meshang* taboo boundary around the canoe house where he was teaching navigation.<sup>15</sup> From these examples, it is safe to say that ritual specialists such

as navigators, massage healers, and medicine makers are still creating temporary *roang* “sacred taboo sites” as part of the exercise of their traditional skills, but they are no longer creating permanent *roang* “sacred taboo sites.”<sup>16</sup> This is probably because the creation of a permanent *roang* site for the exclusive use of ritual specialists would be interpreted by the community-at-large as a challenge not only to the spiritual authority of the Catholic church but to the chiefly authority of Lametag. Similarly, chiefs no longer seem to be able to maintain the taboos associated with permanent *roang* sites under their control. The decline of Lametag as a “sacred taboo site” is evidence of that. Nonetheless, chiefs still have the authority to create temporary *roang* sites, for instance, when an important person has died. In this case, it is still customary to place *meshang* taboo markers for a period of time on plots of land and parcels of reef to prohibit the harvesting of resources associated with the deceased (cf. Alkire 1965, p. 110; Akimichi 1986, p. 18).

## CONCLUSION

On Lamotrek and other islands in the Central Carolines, two sets of groups have the authority to make *roang* “sacred taboo sites”: chiefs and ritual specialists. These individuals now weigh their actions in the context of an adopted belief system—Catholicism—and the role it plays in the lives of islanders today.

The negotiation of *roang* “sacred taboo sites” plays a pivotal role in the construction of community on Lamotrek. The decline of permanent *roang* areas, especially Lametag, has given greater hegemony to the power of the Catholic church and, by extension, has allowed outside values and behaviors to play a greater role in the affairs of the community. These outside influences continue to be mediated, however, by the creation of temporary *roang* areas, allowing for the traditional culture to be actualized. Through the use of powerful traditional symbols and signs such as *meshang* “taboo markers” to create temporary *roang* areas, chiefs and ritual specialists continue to recapitulate the traditional values, behaviors, and skills which are deemed central to the culture. By these means the community strikes a bal-

ance between the adoption of new ideas and the maintenance of Lamotrek's cultural heritage.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Not to be confused with another definition for *rang* which is "turmeric" (Sohn and Tawerilmang 1976, p. 121).
- 2 The noun form of *rang* as "sacred place, taboo place" (Sohn and Tawerilmang 1976, p. 121) is related to a complex of other noun and verb forms which have most often been spelled "*rong*" in the literature for the Chuukic continuum. Krämer has called attention to the varied interpretations of "*rong*" referring to it as an "ambiguous word" (1932, p. 108) and gives the following definitions for it: "*rong* = taboo, *rong* = to hear, *rong* = office, *rong* = fence" (1932, p. 256 footnote no. 2). Krämer's definitions "*rong* = taboo" and "*rong* = fence" are subsumed in Sohn and Tawerilmang's definition for "*rang*" as "sacred place, taboo place."
- 3 This film was completed in 1996 and entitled, "Spirits of the Voyage." The co-producers on the project were *paliuw* navigators Jesus Urupiy and his son, Ali Haleyalur.
- 4 This was the *pwo* ceremony in which the Satawalese *paliuw* Mau Pailug was initiated. Pailug achieved worldwide recognition by guiding the Hokule'a— a replica of an ancient double-hulled Polynesian sailing canoe — from Hawaii to Tahiti without the aid of instruments in 1976, a distance of 2,400 miles. David Lewis in his book, *The Voyaging Stars* (1978), states that Pailug was born in 1932 and was eighteen years old when he was initiated in the *pwo* ceremony. This would mean that the last *pwo* ceremony on Satawal took place in 1950. I was told on Lamotrek that Pailug's initiation took place in 1952. In either case, it was the last *pwo* ceremony in Micronesia to be performed before it was resurrected on Lamotrek in 1990.
- 5 Personal communication 1990, Fr. Nicholas Rahoy and Fr. Apollo Thall S.J., Catholic Mission, Colonia, Yap.
- 6 The "*gebbarog*" gesture is a generic gesture of respect. It simply means to bow or bend down.
- 7 I was told that I could take movies in the Lametag area but I could not stand upright or put the camera up "high" on a tripod. Both myself and the camera had to be "low." This problem of showing proper respect to the Lametag area was solved by filming from ground level with the camera supported on a small tripod called a "high hat."
- 8 Urupiy's youngest daughter was one of the new mothers and it was her first-born child.
- 9 A detailed discussion of *pwo* is given in my Ph.D. dissertation (Metzgar 1991, pp. 187-261).
- 10 William Lessa gives information regarding the many medicinal uses of *Morinda citrifolia* in the Caroline Islands (1977, pp. 182-183). *Morinda citrifolia* in Polynesia is called *noni* and is also known for its healing properties (White 2003).
- 11 Clarifications will appear in brackets after the author's initials, "EM". For example, "... the only thing they [EM: the boys] learn [EM: is that] there are some vague principles of astronomy." Comments will also appear after my initial when cognates to Lamotrek words are quoted from other sources. For instance, "... traditional navigation (*penu*) [EM: dialectical variant of *paliuw*]."
- 12 This is not to suggest that the practice is limited to only Pacific Islanders in Micronesia. There is a report, for instance, of the use of coconut leaves as taboo markers for Polynesia (Buck 1971, p. 551).
- 13 Alkire gives the names of seven classes of *mvaletabw* "taboo men": *sennap* "canoe builders," *pelu* "navigators," *wag* "magicians," *sarawale* and *taubwe* "diviners," *soyilee* "fish magicians," and *tabutobo* "agricultural magicians" (1989, pp. 86, 93 footnote no. 19). Lessa refers to these high-ranking ritual specialists as "magicians of primary rank" and lists five classes for Ulithi: *rebwe* "diviner," *serawi* "weather magician," *pelu* "navigator," *temalip* "fish magician," and *chai* "doctor in massaging." (1950a, pp. 129-141). For information on the nature and extent of the taboos required of ritual specialists see Lessa (1950a, pp. 100, 130), Alkire (1989, p. 86), and Metzgar (1991, pp. 95-99).
- 14 The coconut-leaf knots which are strung on a string and used to make a restricted enclosure are called *roangoubut*.
- 15 This *pwo* ritual was conducted by Ignathio Ep-eimai, a Satawalese *paliuw* navigator, on Pollap Atoll in 1997.
- 16 To this list of ritual specialists who are still creating temporary *roang* "sacred taboo sites" may be added *sennap* "canoe builders." The wood chips which fall in the course of adzing the hull of a sailing canoe are said to create a taboo area into which women may not enter.

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