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*The Meanings of Work in Contemporary
Palau: Policy Implications of
Globalization in the Pacific*

Karen L Nero, Fermina Brel Murray, and Michael L Burton

Everywhere we look, we see institutions that appear the same as they used to be from the outside, and carry the same names, but inside have become quite different. We continue to talk of the nation, the family, work, tradition, nature, as if they were all the same as in the past. They are not. The outer shell remains, but inside all is different.

ANTHONY GIDDENS, BBC REITH LECTURES

The globalization of labor, technology, capital, communications, and transport challenge ways of understanding contemporary societies and their ways of living in the world. This is especially true for Pacific Island nations, which commonly have one-third or more of their citizens living and working abroad, often counterbalanced by the importation of laborers from other cultures. To many writers, such as Anthony Giddens, the cultural and institutional transformations entailed are sweeping. But are they as deep-seated as they might appear? How can such issues be studied? Clearly research must be ethnographically based, but how are the “field” sites to be determined? (Hastrup and Olwig 1997; Gupta and Ferguson 1997). The Pacific presents special opportunities for the analysis of the transnationalization of households and the labor force (Wallerstein and Smith 1992). Long adapted to interisland linkages as a way of life as well as a survival strategy, Pacific Islanders now participate in regional and global economies and cultural practices (Nero 1997a, 439–451; Hau’ofa 1993). They also have had to fight for recognition of their primary resources—the sea and its products (Nero 1997b, 368–373). Most

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Islanders have retained active systems of food production. However, foreign workers were brought in to fill low-paid positions during most of the twentieth century, while Islanders sought or were forced to seek overseas labor. Currently few island nations are able to absorb their working-age population in wage labor, which has resulted in out-migration. Most now import workers for a range of professional to artisanal positions, and many struggle to maintain numerical superiority in their own homelands.

Palau is strategically located in the western Pacific, close to Southeast Asia and part of Oceania. Palauan involvement in regional trade networks predated European incursions, and linguistically and culturally Palau shares prehistoric links with the peoples of the Philippines and eastern Indonesia. Palau also shares with the Philippines a history of American colonization, and continues to use the US dollar as currency. Its varying positions in the networks of international capitalism and colonialism have influenced population flows.

During the early years of the American administration the Palauan economy was stagnant, and Palauans increasingly sought employment and education in the United States and its Pacific territories, thus beginning a process of Palauan out-migration. The current overseas Palauan population is estimated at 7,000, while the resident native population has been stable at around 13,000 since 1973. Natural increase has been counterbalanced by out-migration. There are now second- and third-generation emigrants, especially in Guam, Saipan, and Hawai'i, who have well-established social networks that facilitate education and employment opportunities for the extended families that now spread across Palau, Guam, the Northern Marianas, the United States, Japan, China, and the Philippines. Since the 1960s, Palauan students have had access to US scholarships and loans for college and other tertiary training. The educational level of the overseas Palauans is high, and many hold professional and managerial positions. Palau's 1994 Compact of Free Association with the United States provides overseas Palauans with the right to live and work in the United States and its territories. As a result, immigrants enjoy access to US social services, and those who hold skilled or semi-skilled positions enjoy pay levels higher than those available in Palau.

After Palau became self-governing in January 1981, successive Palauan administrations sought to provide increased social services and to support economic development. These policies produced considerable growth of Palauan public sector employment, an increase in the wage labor participation rate to 59 percent, high labor-force participation by Palauan

women, the introduction of many new categories of occupations, a rapid increase in foreign workers, and continued out-migration of young Palauans for education and employment.

Palauans are internationally recognized for the tenacity with which significant numbers successfully opposed proposals for an international superport, for US military use of Palauan lands, and for the fifteen-year struggle by the entire nation to resolve its political status. They now face a more serious threat: apparent prosperity. Palau became independent and joined the United Nations in 1994, and began to receive substantial front-end Compact of Free Association payments from the United States for the development of its infrastructure. In return for fifty years of exclusive strategic association with Palau, the United States granted Palau about \$450 million for its first fifteen years of independence, with an undetermined amount to be allocated in the remaining thirty-five years. This influx of new money is producing an even greater increase in foreign workers. In this paper we discuss the changes in Palauan society resulting from the introduction of many new occupations and the great increase in foreign workers. The paper has three parts. First we discuss in more detail the economic and demographic changes that have occurred in Palau. Second we describe ethnographic research on the meanings of work in Palau and how these have been affected by contemporary social processes. Finally we consider the results of a series of qualitative and structured cognitive interviews that we conducted with Palauans that we believe can provide insights into the ways Palauans have incorporated new occupations and values into contemporary conceptualizations of work.

ECONOMIC AND DEMOGRAPHIC TRANSFORMATIONS

The pre-European (1783) Palauan population has been estimated at 50,000, declining to fewer than 4,000 by the turn of the nineteenth century (CoPopChi 1997, 7). The indigenous population then began to recover, but was eclipsed by an influx of Japanese and Okinawans during the prewar and World War II periods. During the Japanese period, Koror, the Japanese administrative center, was mainly a Japanese town. Palauan participation in wage labor was limited to lower-level occupations. Japanese and Okinawans were imported to provide labor in farming, fishing, and food processing. Of the 1943 population of 32,000, roughly 7,000 were native Palauans.

During World War II, the significant economic and social infrastructure,

which had served Palauans as well as Japanese, was mostly destroyed. After an initial period of reconstruction, the Palauan economy languished during the early years of the US administration. Many of the basic services that are essential to economic development, such as roads and a transportation system, were never completed. Under the early US administration, high-level administrative positions were held mainly by Americans, while Palauans were increasingly drawn into other levels of public-sector employment.

As first President of the Republic Haruo Remeliik and his advisors pondered the development of the economy, it became apparent that Palauan workers might not be sufficient in number and training to perform all the tasks required. By then the Palauan labor force was dispersed not only throughout the islands of Micronesia, but into the United States as well. In many cases Palauans, who were highly educated in comparison to many other Islanders and to many US minority populations, had been quite successful in obtaining good positions abroad. The relatively higher earnings available in the United States, and Palauan youths' obligations to pay back student loans, contributed to difficulties that some Palauans encountered when trying to return to Palau. Nevertheless, beginning in 1980, many returned to join the new government and to start private-sector businesses.

In 1992, prior to free association, Palau's per capita gross domestic product was more than US\$5,000, placing Palau in the upper economic bracket of Pacific Island nations. Palau enjoys high literacy and health standards and ranks among those countries the United Nations classifies as having high levels of human development (UNDP 1995). Palau is blessed with favorable natural resources for fishing and agriculture, and has developed world-class diving attractions. The Bank of Hawaii estimated a 32.3 percent growth in gross domestic product in 1995 and a 23.4 percent increase in 1996 (1997, 12). Will Palau be able to turn its large public-sector investments into a strong private sector capable of generating sufficient income to maintain its current high standard of living once US government payments under the compact begin to decline? Agriculture, fishing, and tourism, Palau's three identified development options, all require careful monitoring to ensure that they are environmentally sustainable. More important, however, are labor and population issues and their impact on the social and natural environments.

Labor has been imported at all levels but particularly in the production and service industries. In 1973, just 4 percent of Palau residents were for-

eigners, but by 1995 that figure was 24 percent. Of the foreign residents, 80 percent were workers, and another 10 percent dependents of workers (CoPopChi 1997, 12). Table 1 compares foreign workers in Palau in 1981, the first year of self-government (Knowles 1982), with 1998 figures covering only private-sector employees (Palau Office of Administration, May 1998). The table shows the top seven countries of origin of these workers in 1998. In 1981 foreign workers made up 37 percent of the workforce.¹ To the 1998 private-sector workers we add several hundred public-sector employees, for a total of over 5,000 foreign workers. Thus, the number of foreign workers expanded eightfold in seventeen years.

The three largest groups of foreign workers, Filipinos, Chinese, and Bangladeshi, have increased even more rapidly, and are especially concentrated in the lowest-paid service and production sectors. Filipinos increased eightfold from a few hundred in 1981 to 3,241 just in the private sector in 1998. Filipinos today constitute 67 percent of Palau's resident foreign workers, including some who have been living and working in Palau for three decades. Whereas only 18 Chinese workers registered in Palau in 1983, there were 792 in the private sector alone in 1998.

The native Palauan workforce has increased less rapidly. Kick (1995) estimated there were 5,000 indigenous Palauan workers in 1995, with 1,800 of them in government employment, and that the indigenous workforce was increasing by 300 persons per year. This would make it about 5,900 in 1998, less than a sixfold increase since 1981. Foreign workers now constitute nearly half the workforce in Palau.

What kinds of jobs do foreign workers hold? In 1983, Antonio counted 418 private-sector foreign workers. Of these more than half (220) were fishers. Of the remainder, 63 worked in construction, and only 9 were domestic helpers (Antonio 1983). In 1995 Kick found that foreign workers held half or more of the production and construction jobs, and one-third of all service jobs. Foreign workers continued their high concentration in production occupations and greatly increased their representation in the service sector. As most foreign workers would accept lower private-sector wages than would Palauans, there was little incentive for Palauans to work in the private sector, especially in comparison to the government sector (Kick 1995).

In the 1998 data summarized in table 1, many foreign workers continue to be employed as carpenters, masons, electricians, or mechanics (19.2 percent of the total), in food production (9.4 percent), and in the food and tourism industries (10.4 percent).

Table 1. Foreign and Palauan workers, 1981 and 1998 by country of origin

Sector	1981 Workers		1998 Private-Sector Foreign Workers							Total Foreign
	Palau	Foreign	Philippines	China	Bangladesh	Japan	United States	Taiwan	Korea	
Professional	34	35	225	31	9	38	31	8	4	365
Managerial	69	39	83	79	2	68	41	35	22	353
Clerical	125	8	179	24	2	4	1	3	0	228
Sales	82	0	85	11	0	2	0	1	0	102
Service	172	18	1,157	138	129	12	44	13	14	1,533
Production	592	522	1,512	509	171	8	1	16	8	2,247
Total	1,074	622	3,241	792	313	132	118	76	48	4,828

Source: Figures for 1981 from Knowles 1982; figures for 1998 from Palau Office of Administration.

Notes: For 1998 only the first seven countries of origin are shown. The seven nations contribute 97.7 percent of all foreign workers. (Column and row figures may not add to totals shown because totals are drawn from the full data.)

The rising numbers of foreign workers will have not only social and environmental impacts, but also substantial cultural impacts, especially on the younger generations. Many private-sector foreign workers are employed as domestic helpers. In 1998 low-paid domestic helpers and housekeepers constituted 12.3 percent of all private-sector foreign workers. This category of employee increased more than sixtyfold in fifteen years, from 9 to 596.

High-ranking Palauan households historically had servants. Today an estimated one in five households employs a domestic helper. These workers support the participation of ordinary Palauan adults in the workforce. They care for children and the growing numbers of elders, and often assist with family farms and small businesses. Many children are cared for by women who do not speak Palauan, and who also undertake many of the tasks that were previously children's household work. In the past most domestic servants and ancillary workers were extended family members, or Palauan dependents. If they were hardworking and conformed to Palauan social practices, even foreign dependents could be incorporated into Palauan society, recreating a unified sociality. Many of the households incorporating foreign workers have modeled their interactions on such familial and incorporative models of humanity, which are deeply held in Palau. But others treat their workers poorly, as a separate class of transients hired simply to perform menial labor. Perhaps more important, certain types of work are becoming labeled "domestic helper" work, or, like janitorial work, are often now considered suitable only for foreigners.

Palauan government officials and community members are aware of the dangers of rapid economic growth and high foreign investment, and are concerned about the impact on Palauan society and culture of large numbers of foreign workers. Yet Palau would not have enough people to provide labor for currently planned infrastructure development even if all out-migrants returned. Palauan workers have become a scarce resource.

At present, Paluans still form the majority population, but foreign workers and their dependents make up approximately one-third of the total. These workers have made significant contributions to building the new nation. In addition, the presence of so many foreigners has generated growth in existing businesses and led to the creation of new businesses that provide services for residents and foreign workers. Even if the government could complete infrastructure construction during the next decade, and thereafter reduce the requirement for foreign workers, what would be the impact on businesses and buying power if several thousand people left Palau?

Palauan planners recognize that population management is the key to achieving sustainable development. In 1995 President Kuniwo Nakamura created the Palau National Committee on Population and Children (CoPopChi). This committee's policy recommendations consider three scenarios of Palau's future population growth (CoPopChi 1997). The low-growth, sustainable scenario would limit foreign workers to 70 percent of the total workforce. The moderate-growth scenario assumes a continuation of existing policies, some internal opposition to development, and a decline in public-sector employment. The high-growth scenario assumes unchanged government policies, high economic growth, and an increase in public-sector jobs. The projected percentage of Palauans in the total population at the end of the compact funding in 2010 would be 67 percent under low-growth conditions, 49 percent under medium-growth conditions, and 33 percent under high-growth conditions. By 2020 the population dynamics of the three scenarios are even more striking: 60 percent under low growth, 39 percent under moderate growth, and 25 percent under high growth conditions (derived from CoPopChi 1997, Table 10, 78). Even under the low-growth scenario the participation of foreigners in Palau would remain significant; under middle- and high-growth scenarios foreigners would outnumber locals in Palau, as they do in neighboring Saipan and Guam. This possibility is what Palauans most fear.

Palau's ability to achieve its low population growth scenario rests on its ability to cut emigration, attract an average of 150–200 overseas Palauans home each year, and restrict visas for foreign workers (CoPopChi 1997, 4). The third recommendation would require careful consideration of policy guidelines and the enactment of enabling legislation. Can the nation's politicians and citizens find the political will to limit the importation of foreign workers, on which economic growth now appears to depend, to levels that are sustainable by the environment and the culture? A related problem is the large public sector, currently supported by US compact payments. High dependency on public-sector employment, at "a ratio of three Government employees for each four Palauan households," constrains current public policy choices (POPS 1996, 2–11). Many Palauans enjoy the stability of public-sector employment, which has provided capital to invest in private-sector enterprises, but will such investments support a sufficient number of Palauans to shift to the private sector? National and local governments also employ foreign workers. Can and will Palauans provide services now provided by foreign workers?

THE INDIGENOUS ECONOMY AND CONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF WORK

To better understand the cultural impacts of new occupations and foreign workers on Palauan society we begin with an overview of traditional Palauan work roles. The two-volume study by the Palau Society of Historians, *Rechuodel* (PSH 1995, 1996) is an extraordinary resource; its discussions of the tasks of men and women in Palau in the past set the framework and linguistic understanding on which our study was based.

Underpinning the introduced economy supported by US transfer payments, the Palauan economy continued to exist in the late twentieth century, with its emphasis on food and labor exchanges. It is perhaps in the nexus of the deeper meanings of work that some of the transformations of the past century can best be understood. The indigenous economy of Palau is based on *ongraol* (starch) and *odoim* (protein). The primary starch foods are taro and other root crops, and the most important protein foods are fish and shellfish. As symbols, *ongraol* and *odoim* encompass Palauan society: they stand for the productivity of the land and the sea, and also the responsibilities of women and men within broad divisions of labor. Women as providers of *ongraol* are farmers, and men as providers of *odoim* are fishers. Encompassed in this complementary system, further organized by age and rank, are the myriad specialization and work activities necessary to maintain the *telungalek* (family), *kebliil* (clan), and *beluu* (village). Even the highly regarded specialists such as master carpenters or fishers participate in a full range of work activities.

Two fundamental Palauan concepts make up Palauan understandings of work: *kerruul*, and *omengereker*. It is difficult to translate these terms into single words in English. We have glossed *kerruul* in terms of the deep responsibilities of providing substance and nurturance to family members. The second concept, *omengereker*, might more directly translate as occupation. Nevertheless these concepts are highly interconnected and must not be applied simply as dichotomous representations of traditional and introduced occupations. We offer here a brief summary of the ways that these two concepts encompass the meanings of work.

Kerruul (from *meruul*, to do or to make) relates primarily to performing one's family responsibilities. In this matrilineal society, *kerruul* is integrally associated with the woman's economic support of the household and clan, although both men and women have their own areas of responsibility within *kerruul*. The *kerruul* responsibilities of Palauan women

and men are basic to the extensive system of exchanges of Palauan food and valuables, which continues today in a restructured form that incorporates the products of wage work—American dollars and purchased foods. In the gendered system of exchange, women are responsible for providing *ongraol* and men for providing *odoim*. Exchanges of food, traditional money, modern money, and goods operate within families, between families, and between larger social units.

Omengereker means to provide services or produce something in order to earn something. At the time of the earliest recorded European visit, Palauans had a well-established system of valuables, which included the earning of interest, so this “commodification” is not the result of recent interactions with outsiders. In the past, individuals could earn valuables or land by providing taro and other specialty foods, certain fish, turtles, or a dugong, or sexual or construction services to the male and female chiefs, among others. *Omengereker* literally refers to collecting provisions from the sea. It is therefore more associated with males than females in Palau, but both males and females *omengereker*, just as both men and women collect fish and shellfish from the seas and lagoon areas.

Like *ongraol* and *odoim*, *kerruul* and *omengereker* are complementary to one another. And, like *ongraol* and *odoim*, these concepts have been broadened to incorporate contemporary substances and activities. Today *kerruul* is interwoven with the workplace as well as the family. As observed ethnographically over the past two decades, the various government agencies have become, to a large extent, like villages to which one’s loyalty, identity, and reputation are tied. People today are commonly referred to by their workplaces, for example as *chad era ospitar* (hospital people). Traditional functions such as a funeral or a first child ceremony involving workmates invoke monetary contributions (*kerruul*) and representative visits from fellow workers. One’s ability to provide *ongraol* and *odoim* to the family depends not only on one’s skill in production, but also on one’s skills in acting appropriately to bring *ongraol*, *odoim*, and valuables into the family through *kerruul* and to a lesser extent *omengereker* (see Smith 1983). One can provide well for family needs through a skillful application of *kerruul* and *omengereker*, which today tap both the local food production and monetary sectors of the economy.

It is critical that *kerruul* and *omengereker* are understood as interlinked, each containing both local and introduced work activities and conceptualizations of relationships that transcend any simple dichotomies such as

traditional versus modern or familial versus village. Similarly *kerruul* and *omengereker* do not constitute simply a “traditional” frame of work activity that concerns local food production, but have incorporated new social relationships and valuables from the monetary economy. Through participation in the spheres of *kerruul* and *omengereker*, overseas Palauans can continue to hold their places in village and community hierarchies.

Similarly, and critically, in this chiefly matrilineal society one’s social status is derived primarily from one’s position in the family, clan, and village hierarchies. In addition, whereas an individual’s placement in the system rests to a substantial degree on lineage, that person’s actual position is only achieved through the hard work involved in producing and providing the appropriate foods and services for family, clan, and village elders during special occasions as well as on a daily basis. Hard work in the service of the community is a prerequisite of the actual position one will hold among a range of possibilities provided within the kin system.

In general, individuals are not associated with a single occupation. Rather they are seen as productive members of their household, clan, and village, who are responsible for a number of different tasks. To learn how to fish or to grow taro does not necessarily prepare a person to become a fisher or a farmer. Status is not based on specific career or vocational skills, but rather on learning a combination of life skills that can promote a Palauan way of life. The Palauan system of status and prestige, with its locus primarily in the position of the family, clan, and village rather than in individualized occupations, is the fundamental way in which Palauan and American (and other western) conceptualizations of work differ. While Palauans have incorporated many new work occupations and ways of thinking from the Japanese and the Americans during the past century of colonial administration, the ways in which they have incorporated new occupations do not necessarily imply a fundamental transformation of their conceptualizations of work and prestige systems.

To further understand how traditional work activities are valued today, we obtained judgments of the importance of 22 traditional work activities to the family and to the village community. We asked 118 individuals to select the eight tasks that they would most want family members to be skilled in. We then asked 126 individuals to select the eight tasks that they would want a member of their community to do well. Responses are listed in table 2.

While .84 is a high correlation, there are some notable differences in the relative importance of work activities to the two contexts. For exam-

ple master fishing is selected more often in the family context than in the village context, while chanting and building a community house are selected more often in the village context. Figure 1 represents the relative importance of these tasks to the two contexts. This figure places the two contexts—village and family—on the same scale as the work activities, which are ordered in terms of their role in discriminating between the two contexts.² Activities that are relatively more important to family are at the top of the scale, while activities that are more important to village are at the bottom of the scale. Activities that are equally important to either context are placed near the zero point of the scale.

Tasks that have highest relative importance to the family include building a summerhouse, knowledge of clan histories, and four activities pertaining to food production (master fisher, taro farmer, pigeon hunter, and fishing toolmaker). Tasks that have highest relative importance in the village context include building a community house and four activities associated with public ceremonies—carving plates, chanting, making feast food, and making shell money.

In summary, there are four fundamental aspects of traditional conceptualizations of work and occupations:

Table 2. Individual judgments of the importance of traditional tasks to the family and to the community.

Task	Village	Family	Task	Village	Family
Know clan history	69	87	Build summerhouse	35	53
Make fishing tools	64	82	Feast fishing	41	45
Master fisher	56	86	Chanting	45	32
Know local medicine	59	71	Mat weaving	34	42
Dancing	59	63	Make turtle/shell money	39	31
Know community history	61	59	Make grass skirts	25	29
Prepare feast food	64	49	Know local massage	19	23
Build community house	69	43	Carve plates/dishes	24	17
Taro farming	47	64	Pigeon hunting	16	21
Navigating	53	55	Jewelry making	14	11
Master farming	44	49	Stone masonry	11	4

Notes: Responses are listed in decreasing order of total choices across the two contexts. The correlation between judgments regarding the contexts is .84.

- *Kerruul* and *omengereker* together comprise the types of work that men and women perform, both to fulfill their customary obligations to their families and communities, and to earn income for their families and communities (which is also a family obligation).
- While there is a high correlation between the cultural valuation of tasks in the contexts of family and community, there are also systematic differences between the two contexts.
- Palauan conceptualizations and practices emphasize mastery of a basic area of responsibility that is highly gendered, although both men and women may do particular work tasks within either domain.
- In basic concept and in practice, individuals are expected to perform well a number of different *omengereker*, or occupations, especially over the course of their lifetimes.

We will next demonstrate that these fundamental Palauan conceptualizations of work remain active in the face of change. Many Palauans fulfill new occupations introduced during colonial administrations, and derive much of their sense of personal identity and worth from these occupations. They also continue to fulfil their responsibilities of *kerruul* and *omengereker*, which have become interlinked with the new occupations. Most notably, with the exception of a few highly educated professions such as doctor and nurse, most Palauans continue to traverse a number of occupations.

PALAUAN PERCEPTIONS OF CHANGING MEANINGS OF WORK

The rise of new occupations, the increased prevalence of wage labor, and the influx of foreign workers have had profound effects on Palauan society. To explore how these changes are perceived we conducted a series of qualitative interviews about Palauans' concerns. We then collected structured cognitive data to examine how Palauans have integrated traditional and modern occupations into a single, uniquely Palauan system.

The Palauans whom we interviewed included government officials and a number of other individuals. Those consulted were highly concerned about the number of foreign workers and their dependents living in Palau and their potentially significant impact on Palauan ways of life. Concerns centered around the numbers of foreign workers and investors involved in the development of tourism, changes in the relative valuation of dif-

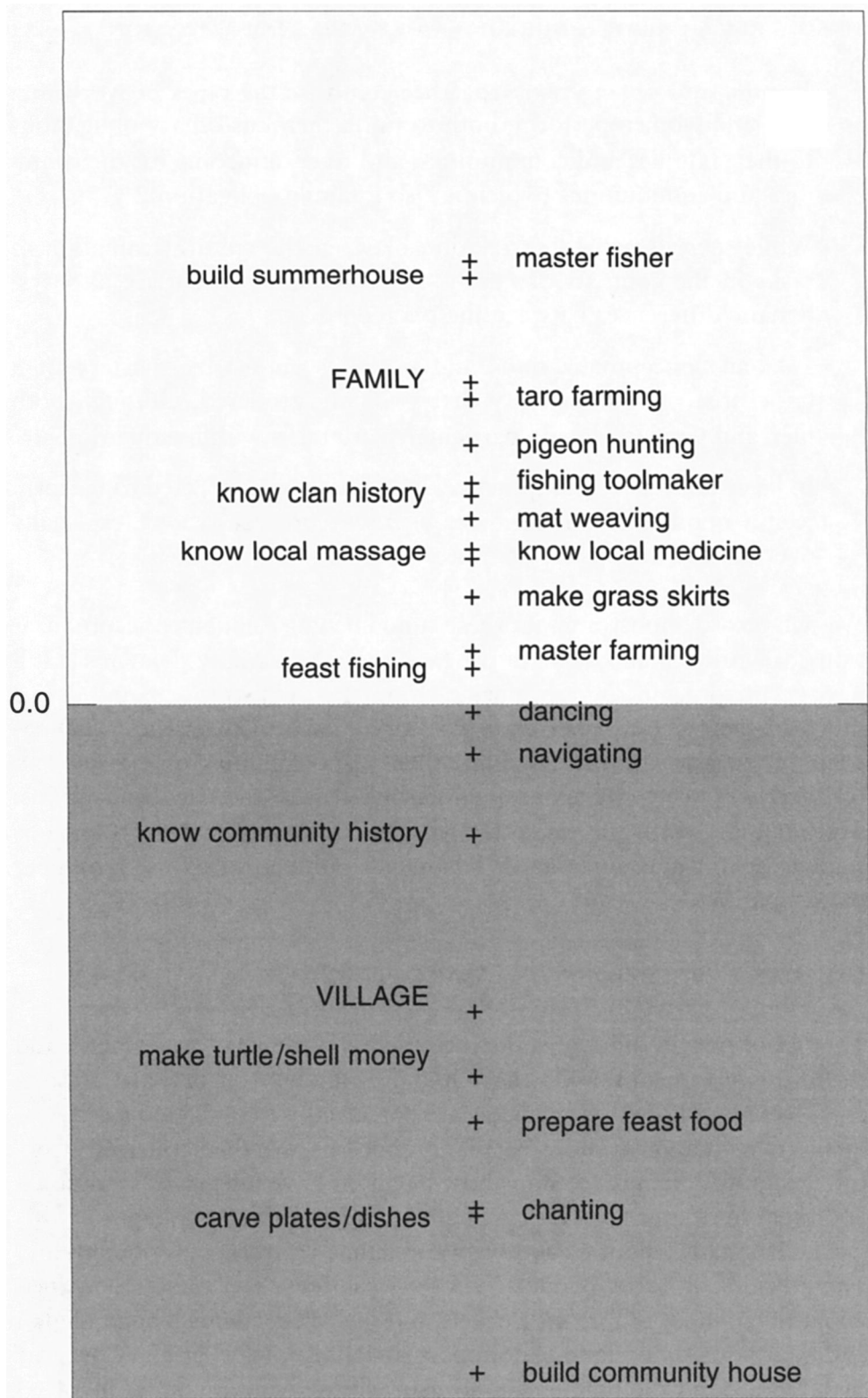


FIGURE 1. Relative importance of work activities to village and family.

ferent kinds of work, and the impact of domestic servants on the socialization of children.

Tourism is one of the most rapidly expanding sectors of the economy. Since the 1970s Palau has been among the top diving destinations in the world. The luxury hotel Palau Pacific Resort has recently expanded, and the new Palasia Hotel opened with 165 rooms. Numerous diving and other tourism-related businesses are currently in operation, under construction, or in the planning stage. Cabinet ministers, community members, and government agencies are concerned that existing plans and policies will be unable to control the tourism industry in Palau, in particular the importation of foreign workers, resulting in a repetition of the experience of the Northern Marianas. The Palau National Committee on Population and Children has investigated these issues, and recommended strategies that would balance economic growth with cultural and environmental sustainability. The Palau Visitors Authority (PVA) is equally concerned with proposed tourism developments and has begun strategizing ways to achieve a sustainable tourism development (PVA 1996). As of December 1996 it had published information outlining twenty-six tourism plans then under consideration (see CoPopChi 1997, 81–82). Even if only a portion of these were approved, the numbers of foreign workers required for construction, hotel, and restaurant employment would increase significantly. A key concern is that there is no legislated mechanism to limit the absolute number of projects that may be approved. If each plan in turn complies with environmental and planning criteria, must each be approved? What criteria would be used to select among the plans?

A related area of serious concern was the effect of large numbers of foreign workers employed in Palau on the meanings of the various occupations they fill and on work-based inequality. This issue related, in part, to various placements of both Palauan and foreign workers in the larger international economy. Many Palauans can find higher-paid employment overseas, and many foreign workers who hold good jobs in Palau receive higher pay or special allowances (such as for housing) that are not generally available to Palauans. At the other end of the spectrum, some foreign workers will accept very low wages in order to earn US dollars, as they will be able to remit significant sums to support family members at home.

A significant area of impact is in the low-skilled and low-prestige jobs. The occupations of domestic servant, janitor, and even farmer, are often held by foreign workers, with the result that many young Palauans refuse to train for or fill these occupations. Similarly, because many of the workers in the construction trades are foreigners, some of these occupations

are becoming more segregated by ethnic groups, and fewer Palauans are attracted to them. While many young Palauans would like to find jobs, they do not wish to be seen publicly in low-status jobs, believing that foreigners should fill these instead, and that Palauans should supervise the foreigners. These labor practices have a long history in Palau, going back several hundred years to the time when Palauans liked to hire low-caste Yapese to perform certain tasks. Later in Palauan history the ethnic differentiation was between Japanese and Palauans, then between Americans and Palauans. Today the primary distinction is between Palauans and foreign workers.

This process has led Palauan elders to fear that certain occupations are now becoming racialized, and that Palauan children are coming to consider some categories of foreigners as less than human. In the recent past there was no loss of status if, say, a male elder chose to contribute to society and to earn money through being a janitor. His status depended, after all, on his position within his family, clan, and village, rather than where he worked. And he was a part of the workplace community as an active contributing member. However, the new system of occupations threatens to undermine the community-based system.

At the national government level, we found that all of the Palauan traditional work activities (fishing, farming, weaving, and carving) are now considered parts of the "informal sector of the economy" as stated in the republic's Master Plan. These occupations tend to be marginalized in terms of government policies and support. Only recently, as a result of a United Nations Development Program initiative, have informal-sector activities been recognized as part of the gross domestic product, and policies considering their integration into the national economy considered. Under the previous international labor categories, as described in the analyses for the 1980 Palau Community Action Agency census, many of these activities were generally practiced by those considered "economically not active" (Nero 1983). Subsistence farming and fishing activities at the household and village level are supported primarily by the Palau Community Action Agency, a nongovernment organization. The Palau Senior Citizens Center and the Belau National Museum carry out preservation of Palau's arts in weaving, carving, dancing, and music.

One of the common themes of the interviews was the fear that Palauan children are losing the traditional values. People, especially elders, complain that the children are not literate in the Palauan language, and that they don't do any household chores or learn family responsibilities because

hired Filipino workers are filling those jobs. Further, because most parents carry full-time employment, they no longer have time to teach their children the Palauan values and traditional skills. What happens when these activities are delegated to foreign workers? Dr Kuartei, one of speakers at the 1997 Moving Cultures conference in Palau, posed the questions, "What do Palauans give up when they allow foreigners to butcher the pig at the funeral? Are we letting our sacred cultural rites be taken over by foreign labor? The right hand says there are too many foreigners in Palau—it is a big problem—but the left hand hires the foreign workers to do a lot of tasks that perhaps could be done by Palauans."

Palauans remain ambivalent about the foreigners living among them (see Pierantozzi, this issue). At one level many fear the presence of so many foreigners. They desire that foreigners come to Palau for a while and then return home. Nevertheless, one of the core Palauan values is hospitality and care for strangers. Foreign workers, especially domestic workers who reside in Palauan households, are generally considered as dependent "children" for whom the household has responsibility. It is difficult not to consider such foreigners in personal, human terms, rather than in the less personal category of "foreign laborer." While everyone agrees that foreign laborers should not stay too long, once individuals enter a household or a company as employees, they are often treated as family members. Individuals may be in favor of controlling foreign workers, but at the same time they are equally adamant in supporting their "children," not only because of the time they have invested in training them, but also because of the personal relationships they have established.

How Contemporary Palauans Classify Occupations

To further explore changes in concepts of work we administered a triads test on a set of nineteen occupation terms. Triads tests are one way to measure similarities and differences in order to map cognitive domains according to the cultural values of the respondents (Weller and Romney 1988). Ideally we would have preferred using pile-sort techniques that would have allowed the inclusion of more occupations. However, Palauan coresearchers and advisors suggested that the additional complexity and time required for administration would make pile sorts of occupations unwieldy. Together we selected and pretested nineteen occupations for the tests.

Important issues identified during qualitative interviews included the increasing designation of certain types of unskilled work as appropriate

only for lower-status foreign workers, the fear of replacement of Palauan cultural values with externally based values, and changes in the gender composition of occupations. The triads data collection was designed to address these questions.

We focused primarily on youth between 17 and 25 years of age, drawing the younger respondents primarily from classes at the Palau Community College. This group included college students from other Micronesian societies (mainly Yap), and a few from the Philippines, Taiwan, and Korea, many of whom had grown up in Palau. Here we have used the more inclusive term *Islander* for our participants, although 90 percent of the sample participants were of Palauan ancestry. Other young respondents were drawn from the National Congress of Youth Leaders, and from youth who had left formal education and were pursuing graduate equivalency diplomas. We obtained smaller samples in the 26–54, and 55+ age groups, primarily among the staff at the Palau Community College, a number of private and public sector employees, self-employed researchers, officials, and elders of the community. About equal numbers of men and women were interviewed in each age group. Twenty-five different randomizations of the questionnaire that included 57 triads were administered to 111 participants.

English is an official language of the Republic of Palau, is used for most reading materials, and is often the preferred language for writing. Furthermore, most Palauan occupation names are loan words from either English or Japanese. Thus we decided to conduct the tests in English. Occupations were presented three at a time (hence triads), with respondents asked to select the item that was most different. In each case one of the researchers, or the teacher to whom the tasks had been explained, provided the introduction to the tasks and solicited any questions or clarifications desired by the participants. After the questionnaires were completed researchers asked individuals to indicate what sorts of criteria they had used in making their selections, any difficulties they encountered, and what they felt about the tasks.

Figure 2 presents a spatial analysis of the judged similarity data from the respondents. Identification of the underlying principles represented by the graph was then made by the researchers and members of the community studying the spatial representation.

After completing the triads questionnaire, respondents of all age groups told us that the most important distinction was whether the occupation or work-related task was “Islander,” or introduced. We can see this distinction horizontally in the figure. “Islander” occupations (farmer,

fisher, carpenter, carver, boat driver, maid, food preparer, and weaver) are on the right and introduced occupations on the left.

Several of the Islander occupations have been reshaped since the colonial period. “Boat driver,” for example, is categorized among the Islander occupations. The boat driven today is generally a motorboat, sometimes primarily to take tourists sightseeing. However it appears that the various work tasks associated with driving the boat (knowledge of the lagoons, navigating safely within and outside the reefs) remain firmly within Islander cognitive frames. Even more significant in meaning is “maid.” Historically Palauan families, especially of the high clans, included servants who performed routine household tasks such as caring for children, preparing food, cleaning, and carrying water. The occupation of maid or servant is long-standing in Palau, as is the possibility of a

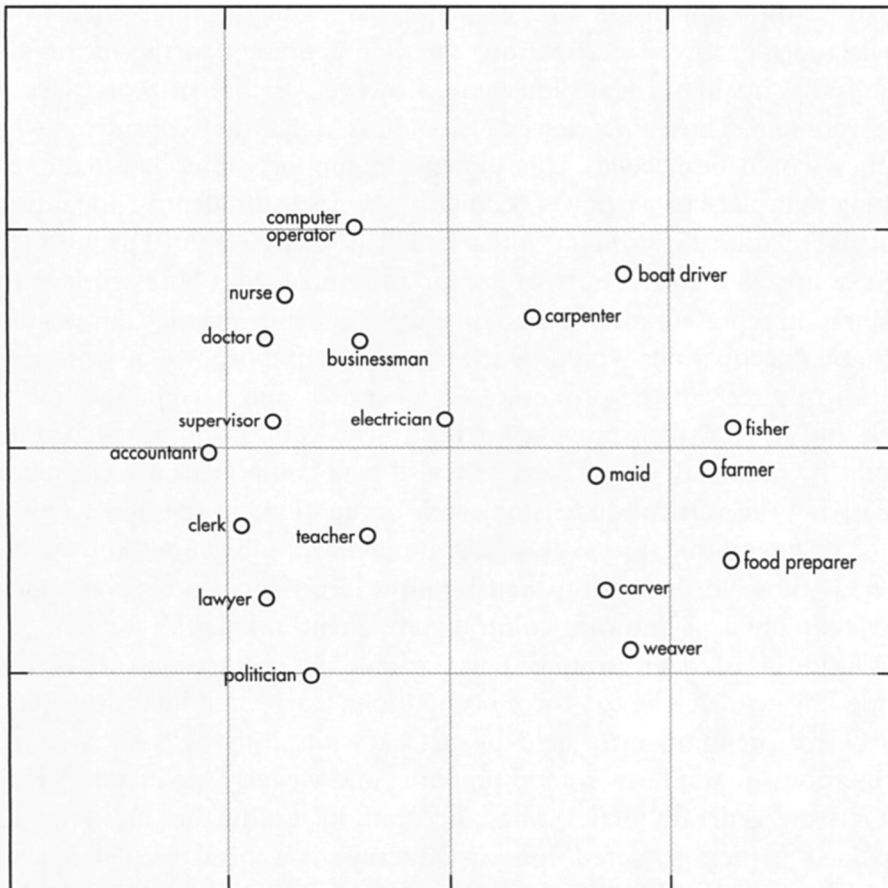


FIGURE 2. Multidimensional representation of occupations.

foreigner being in this position. Of the nearly 5,000 foreign workers in Palau at this time, nearly 500 are domestic helpers, and another 100 are houseboys. Yet this occupational category remains within the Islander portion of the occupational grid.

The horizontal dimension has some resemblance to the prestige dimension that is often found in studies of occupations, and Treiman's (1977) occupational prestige scale has a correlation of .75 with the left side of the scale. What this means is that people from countries such as the United States would see the introduced occupations on the left of the figure as having greater prestige than the Palauan occupations. However, this is lower than the correlations obtained in comparable studies done in the United States, which are greater than .90, and it would not be correct to interpret the scale as meaning "prestige" to Palauans (Burton 1972; Magaña, Burton, and Ferreira-Pinto 1995).

The vertical dimension is slightly more difficult to identify. Partly this is because a third dimension discussed later, that of gender, intervenes within the Islander group of occupations but is not present in the introduced group. The main vertical dimension, however, is that of workplace or work domain. Those interviewed also indicated that they considered what clothes would be needed. This dimension supports interview data suggesting that place of work has become a new focus of identity and a basis of social relationships similar to that of village membership. The most telling example is the proximity of doctor and nurse, who both work in the hospital. In representations based on either gender or prestige dimensions, these two occupations would be separated. The importance of workplace can also be seen in the proximity of supervisor and accountant, and of clerk and lawyer, then moving further toward politician, an occupation sought by many lawyers. There may also be a component of skill source underlying the vertical dimension, with occupations in the upper half of the chart integrating new skills and materials with indigenous knowledge, whereas those in the bottom half retain a larger indigenous component (the law retains a significant cultural component in Palau).

Within the Islander group of occupations, the occupations are further divided by gender. The top three occupations (carpenter, boat driver, and fisher) are predominantly held by males, while four of the lower five occupations (maid, farmer, food preparer, and weaver) are mostly female (carvers are generally male). These occupations are further clustered. As discussed earlier gendered food production is central to Palauan or Islander conceptions of meaningful work and is organized mainly at the

level of the family. Farmers and fishers are central to this gendered representation of Islander occupations, and closely associated with maids who work within the households. The occupations of food preparer, carver, and weaver are primarily indigenous and related to the family, but also outwardly directed through village and exchange relationships. The skills of boat driver and carpenter are generally exercised outside the family and involve the wider society; today these skills also contain a much larger component of introduced materials and knowledge.

One of the young Palauans interviewed reported that within Palauan occupations and work tasks such as farming and fishing, the young people in general conform to accepted gender differentiation. However, in other occupations they feel they can all compete equally for positions regardless of gender. These conceptualizations are confirmed in practice; there are Palauan women doctors and male nurses, women as well as men who are professional administrators. Within Palauan society it appears that new money and wage labor have not significantly damaged women's economic position. While it has been difficult to get good data, there appears to be a high level of equality between Palauan men and women with respect to kinds of wage jobs held as well as compensation levels. Furthermore, the position of Palauan women in the exchange system assures that men will give them money, goods, and valuables. The de-gendering of work, however, has been mostly within the introduced occupations. Palauans (and other Islanders in the sample) continue to gender Islander occupations such as farmer and weaver, as opposed to fisher and carver. In both interviews and in the structured data, Palauans told us that occupations such as doctor, nurse, and lawyer, which may be strongly gendered in the American occupational system from which they were derived, are not gendered in the Palauan model.

The one occupation that continues to be highly (male) gendered is that of politician, especially at national levels. In the past and today, both men and women hold significant traditional statuses as village and clan elders, but the roles are spatially separated. Current practices perhaps reflect more deep-seated distinctions between male and female chiefly councils, which hold complementary responsibilities but meet separately.

Perhaps most significant, given the concerns of those interviewed, the configuration in figure 2 does not seem to classify occupations according to the ethnicity of those who hold them. Foreign workers may be found in most of the nineteen occupations, but the occupations most frequently held by foreign workers (maid, electrician, carpenter) do not cluster

closely together. While these occupations are proximate to one another, they do not form a close group. The Islander or Introduced and Workplace dimensions are more important than considerations of the outsider ethnicity of many of those in the occupation.

The mean consensus among respondents was .62, showing a significant degree of sharing of the aggregate pattern, but not so high as to rule out meaningful variability within subgroups of respondents (Romney, Weller, and Batchelder 1986). We examined variability across respondents by ethnicity, gender, and age. To our surprise, there was no significant difference between data produced by ethnic Palauans and data obtained from members of other ethnic groups resident in Palau. Similarly, there were no significant differences by gender of respondent. The only significant differences were between elders and all others. While these seemed interesting, we have too few elders in the sample to generalize about the possible differences.

One might think that Palauans, who were administered by the United States for fifty years, would be greatly influenced by American conceptions of occupations. Although many new occupations have been incorporated into Palauan life, Palauans do not conceptualize them in the same way as do residents of the United States. We compared the Palauan representation of occupations with those derived from respondents in the United States (Burton 1972; Magaña, Burton, and Ferreira-Pinto 1995), and found the two systems substantially different.

As we have discussed, the first dimension of the US system is based on status, or prestige. In the US model "computer operator," "electrician," "clerk," and "nurse" would be noticeably lower in prestige than occupations such as "lawyer," "doctor," and "supervisor." In the US model, nurse and physician differ in prestige value, whereas the Palauans put the two close together. This is interesting given the strongly gendered nature of the doctor–nurse relationship in the United States, and given that our Palauan information stressed the gender-free nature of the "modern" occupations in the Palauan setting.

Furthermore, in the US model, the higher status occupations are divided between service occupations (doctor, teacher, lawyer, nurse) and business or bureaucratic occupations (clerk, supervisor, computer operator, businessperson, politician, accountant). This dimension does not replicate in the Palauan structure, where businessperson is next to doctor and nurse, and lawyer and politician are next to teacher.

Finally, the US model has a cluster of skilled craft occupations (carver,

carpenter, weaver, and electrician) whereas in the Palauan system these are not together. There is nothing in the US picture comparable to the cluster of weaver, carver, food preparer, maid, farmer, and fisher that we see in the Palauan system. This point is critical, because these are the most traditional Palauan occupations. The cluster is meaningful in the Palauan setting, and would not be meaningful in the US system.

To summarize, we find in English-language structured interviews that Palauans and members of other ethnic groups living in Palau share a Palauan/Islander conceptualization of both traditional and introduced occupations. This shared view among contemporary Palauan residents is a new cultural formation. It is not purely traditional Palauan, nor does it represent the view of modernity represented by the system of occupational cognition found in the most recent colonizer of Palau, the United States, even though Palauans have long participated in modern western bureaucratic systems and use International Labor Organization categorizations. What we have seen is a distinctively Palauan system, one that is not restricted to ethnic Palauans, but is shared by residents in Palau who appear to participate in the Palauan economic and social system sufficiently to know how it works. While the system includes “traditional” work activities, many of them have been restricted. We see the emergence of a new Palauan system geared to the present era.

CONCLUSIONS, AND A DILEMMA

Our research partly supports Giddens’ cautions on the effects of globalization. Whether or not servants existed in Palauan families in the past, the incorporation of so many foreign domestic helpers in child care and family work tasks, along with wage labor and formal education, is transforming the institution of the Palauan family. Parents must now work hard to ensure that core values and relationships retain desired meanings; some succeed, others do not. Yet urbanization and the incorporation of new occupations and workplaces appear to have had less impact and appear to have been integrated into a new Palauan framework. Their inside meanings reflect Palauan values and practices. Islanders treat and rely on social relationships among workmates much as they used to rely on village mates, and workmates are now brought into the realms of *ker-ruul* and *omengereker*, fulfilling long-standing cultural practices. Thus we cannot assume the inner meanings of apparent outside-based transformations, but must take them as the subject of careful research.

We have discussed new forms of ethnic inequality due to the influx of foreign labor. Perhaps the most striking change in the system of social inequality involves relationships within Palauan families. Wage labor is increasing the levels of inequality within extended families, as some households have access to wages and others do not. Seventy percent of the population resides in Koror, but most urban residents have their primary clan membership and land rights in one of the rural states. In the recent past, urban wage-earning households would give rural members of their family money and consumer goods in exchange for food produced in the rural communities. This allowed urban women to continue their contributions to food exchanges without themselves having to work in the taro gardens, for which they no longer had time. This exchange relationship gave members of unwaged households access to the benefits of wage labor, while supporting their continued participation in systems of local food production.

More recently, members of urban households have begun to use domestic helpers to work in their taro gardens, as well as for commercial farming on lands near Koror. This process undercuts intrafamilial exchange relationships, and deprives members of unwaged households of the benefits of wage labor. Concern about this process was expressed in interviews in the early 1990s.

How do we reconcile the different emphases we found, depending on the style of ethnographic research, on the contemporary meanings of work in Palau in 1997? In the qualitative interviews we heard about fears that occupations are becoming associated with ethnicity. However, the triads judgments did not seem to be based on ethnic identities ascribed to the occupations, nor was there variation in the judgments by ethnicity of respondent. At one level, perhaps no simple reconciliation is either necessary or valuable. The cognitive measures may perhaps reflect more deeply held beliefs or more slowly changing systems, while open-ended interviews elicit current concerns. The differing representations stand for the tensions currently existing as Palauans try to contain the possible deleterious effects of rapid economic growth and incorporation of new cultural groups. Since many of the foreign workers are living and working as domestic helpers in Palauan households, caring for young children and performing many of the tasks previously performed by children and youth, these are very real issues. It is possible that only through this tension and constant vigilance to protect Palauan values from change, may negative transformations be avoided.

They Looked for Labor and Found Human Beings

In the process of bringing together two disparate systems, the internal tensions generated may themselves bring about radical transformations (Sahlins 1981). The differences in perspectives and practices between the systems reflect the very essence of the problem identified by the elders. Palauan government infrastructure and tourism development projects require a large number of short-term laborers. If these foreign laborers are to be contained and controlled, and their impacts minimized, then measures such as recent proposed legislation to control the entry of the laborers' dependents may be necessary. Such measures treat the workers as labor, not as human beings. Palauans can benefit from their relatively strong position in the world economy to bring in less fortunate people willing to work in service and production jobs at low wages. If however, as the elders fear, the low status of these workers is allowed to be generalized to the work they perform, then a Palauan's personal status may come to be defined primarily in terms of a job (a relatively ephemeral identity from an Islander perspective) rather than being based on one's kin and village position. The janitor from our earlier example is in danger of having his work contribution devalued and his status undermined.

Perhaps more important to the elders, however, acceptance of this generic devaluation of a category of persons would itself be a significant transformation of Palauan social thought and practices. While the society is strongly hierarchical, any one individual or family will be positioned differently in the different communities with which they are linked, and few are universally highly ranked. In the past even low-ranking individuals and families could better their positions through hard work and participation in *kerruul* and *omengereker*. Under the ethics of equality and individual action propagated during the American administration through the system of education, such hierarchical rankings have been significantly leveled. The institution of new, ethnically based distinctions could be highly divisive, creating separable categories of personhood and increased racism. If foreign workers do not speak English (at least), and come from cultural systems outside those of the islands, Japan, and the United States (to which Palauans are now accustomed), the possibility of racism is increased.

Cross-cutting these tendencies for increased social differentiation is the Palauan practice of incorporating foreigners as family members and socializing them into understanding and following Palauan norms of

behavior—treating foreigners as human, making them into human beings. In the past individuals accepted into a home as foreign worker or visitor gradually became accepted as members of the family. Over time, such individuals might also be accepted into the community and allowed to marry Palauans, with their children accepted as Palauans. Foreigners could thus be incorporated as members of the family and village into which they had been accepted. This practice continues today. Many of the domestic helpers who have been with families for some years are now treated as family members. Their sponsors may support their desire to marry a Palauan, or to bring a child to Palau, even while supporting a general ban on the practice. For this person has become a human being, not a unit of labor.

If foreigners are socialized and humanized, then Palauan values are not abrogated. Perhaps it is a matter of scale: how many people can thus be incorporated into Palauan society? What are the effects of incorporating too many?

One striking conclusion of the cognitive studies we conducted is that, despite the common rhetoric concerning foreign workers, the deep-seated ways in which Palauans and other resident Islanders conceptualize work occupations has not radically changed. Occupations held mainly by foreigners are not segregated into a low-prestige category. Equally important, those foreigners who now reside in Palau appear to have learned the same cognitive system concerning occupational domains. Hence, at least in this arena, there is a new shared cultural competence that transcends ethnic identities.

The greatest area of change is in the gendering of occupations. While the more traditional tasks are still strongly gendered, gender is not a primary consideration of the introduced occupations. The introduced occupations still show few signs of being segregated by status, similar to western conceptualizations of labor, and they still do not cluster along the lines of ethnic groups. While Palauans have added a whole new domain to their understandings of the meanings of work and occupations, they have not fundamentally altered the ways in which such work is valued. This is highly significant, for if Palauans are able to control labor migration, to maintain policies that result in the repatriation of the majority of foreign workers, and to consider high-level importation of foreign workers as a transitory factor, it is possible that the feared deep-seated transformations of social values may be less pervasive than expected. If, however, in the

process of controlling the numbers of foreigners such measures succeed in creating a separate, lower-status category of human, the desired mitigation of impact will have failed.

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Notes

1 Antonio showed an average of 35 percent foreign workers between 1980 and 1983, ranging from 25.2 percent to 40.7 percent (Antonio 1983).

2 The figure was derived using the correspondence analysis module of Anthropac (Borgatti 1992).

3 This was done using the multidimensional scaling module of Anthropac.

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Abstract

Economic and political changes in Palau in the last two decades have led to a rapid increase in the numbers of foreign workers. At current levels of growth, Palauans could become a minority in their own country. We examine the global processes that have produced this phenomenon and discuss their social and cultural impacts on Palau. In doing so we examine ways the meanings of work in Palau are understood, and how these are changing. We conclude that a new distinctly Palauan system of occupations is emerging that is neither traditional nor purely western and that is widely shared between Palauans and non-Palauans.

KEYWORDS: foreign labor, globalization, occupations, Palau, work