

**Radoslava Delieva, The Tobians: thankful to life and with no "thank you" in the Tobian language. Interview with Peter W. Black. Odysseus, August 2009: 18-19.**

**Translation from Bulgarian into English by Radoslava Delieva.**

- **Did you choose anthropology or did anthropology choose you?**  
It chose me or at least that's how it felt at the time. After I left the Peace Corps and Tobi, all I wanted to do was get back to Tobi for another year or so as soon as possible. I thought I could do a quick graduate program and they could find a grant to let me do that. Instead, the program took me seven years; I ended up with a Ph.D. and a whole career in anthropology ahead of me.
- **How would you describe Palau to someone who never heard of it in no more than five sentences?**  
It is one of the world's smallest independent nations. The Republic of Palau is a very beautiful archipelago of tropical islands and reefs with a fascinating history, a very rich culture, and an amazing political life. Home to some of the world's friendliest people, it is located in the tropical Pacific north of the equator and about 600 miles east of the Philippines. About 20,000 people call Palau home and most of them live in the port town of Koror. Koror is increasingly diverse—socially, culturally, and ethnically. All of this diversity rests on Palauan culture, which has very deep roots, definite matriarchal tendencies, and a genius for absorbing cultural change.
- **What is it about the Tobians that made them the primary focus of your research interests?**  
When I first knew them, they were a tiny population of gardeners and fishermen, one of the most remote island communities in all the Pacific. They were just beginning to emerge from their isolation. Something about how they had solved all the issues that communal life requires every society to solve—on their own and in an innovative way—drew me to them.

Traditional Tobian society was very small scale, highly egalitarian, and not incorporated within any larger, more complex society. Its culture reflected these attributes. For example, one of the issues which most interested me was how the Tobians managed conflict. This was far from a trivial issue because mutual cooperation of everyone with everyone else in subsistence activities was a key feature in the economic life of the island. It was a necessity for survival. How in the absence of a power hierarchy or any formal mechanisms of social control such as police or a judicial system, were the many antagonisms that permeated the society prevented from disrupting that cooperation? The answer seems to be that a combination of ideas about the person (for example, adults should never lose their temper), rules about respect (for example, quarreling in the presence of someone to whom you owe respect is highly shameful and should cease as soon as that presence is known), religious beliefs (for

example, the spirits who watch over the island would send sickness or other evils if people stopped being peaceful) led people to act out their disputes in very indirect and subtle ways, while still maintaining pleasant and cooperative relations even with their enemies.

Over the years since, I've been able to see how those ways have been preserved or changed as they left their isolated habitat behind them.

- **One of the main projects you and your wife are working on is recording Tobian and posting it on the Friends of Tobi Island website. How will you remember your first contact with the language?**

When I first lived on the island of Tobi, I kept asking people how to say "thank you" in their language. No one could ever tell me, and this was a problem because I was constantly being given things...food, fishhooks, information, etc. Later I came to understand that in the Tobian world, the polite response to receiving a gift is to act as though it was a completely ordinary event, in other words to not acknowledge it. The underlying logic seemed to be that to do otherwise would be to imply that the gift was unexpected because you did not think the giver was a generous, sharing person and that you had to pay them back with a verbal token. This logic, by the way, is entirely consistent with the huge stress on generosity and sharing which formed the basis for their economic relations. Long before this realization, though, someone invented the expression "hapari ma hatowa sewa" to be used by me or other outsiders made uncomfortable by their inability to say "thank you." The actual translation is "I respect you very much" and it is now part of the Tobian language.

There were of course funny moments as well. Once I was practicing my Tobian with a friend of mine—Santos. Here is how the conversation went:

Me: Santos, how many clans are on this island?

Santos (when I said clan, he heard chicken): There are lots of chickens here.

Me (when he said chicken, I heard clan): What are the names of Tobi's clans?

Santos (again): There are no names for the chickens here. Do chickens have names in America?

Me: Yes, for example, the name of my family is Black.

Santos: Oh, chickens from here are black, red, and white.

After this, I called another friend to come and fix the misunderstanding.

- **What are your other research interests and projects regarding Palau?**

Tobian conflict and its management has long been of interest to me and stems from my first introduction to the community. Tobians traditionally had no formal judicial system at all. Like any human community, there were all kinds of disputes and conflicts and enmities, yet they managed to maintain a way of life characterized by mutual cooperation, in which good humor, jokes, and laughter were the norm. They now live in a world of

courts and lawyers, judges and policemen.

Related to this interest in Tobian conflict management and how it has changed over the years is my long-standing interest in the changing Tobian understandings of, and orientation toward, the self.

On a more practical level, I am interested in changes in diet and health as store-bought food replaces a subsistence diet and diseases of modernity begin to appear in the community.

Over the years, as I have gotten older, different aspects of the culture have been opening to me.

Finally I should say that most of my involvement with Palau these days is through the Friends of Tobi Island website. I'm coming to learn a number of interesting things about how this new technology expands research interests while at the same time shaping the way that information is not just transmitted, but understood. From this perspective the strongly American cultural understandings built into the technology become very apparent.

- **In your Tobian diary you wrote about usual newness. What is it in fact?**

I always expect newness when I return to Palau and I'm never disappointed. Things are always changing there. I have just returned from two weeks in Palau. Our Tobian foster daughter, who lived with us in Virginia for four years while attending secondary school before moving back to Palau, is a new first time mother, and we were able to be there for the baby's christening. Shortly after we got there, a young Tobian man was killed in a car wreck. Birth and death brought the Tobian community together in joy and in sadness, making this an unforgettable visit.

- **What was the most surprising change you faced when you last returned to Palau in 2006? And what do you hope will never change there?**

I had been in Palau in 2004 and in just those two years, locally-owned and spectacularly beautiful remote rental beach cottages emerged, made possible by a new road that opened up previously isolated coasts. What a great innovation.

I hope the openness and generosity of the Palauan people never change.

- **You say that "anthropology is the academic discipline that has invested enormous effort developing elaborate arguments about whether or not hanging out is an art or a science?" How will you interpret this after having lived and worked in one of the most beautiful parts of the world?**

Maybe the important question is not so much whether it is an art or a science but whether or not you can retain a focus on a question or interesting topic and not succumb to the temptation to do nothing but enjoy yourself in a beautiful place.

- **Which is the memory you would strongly recommend to anyone visiting Palau and which is the challenge you'd recommend to those exploring it?**

The memory—sunrise on a beach in the Rock Islands.

The challenge—get out of the tourist bubble, eat local food, spend time with local people.