

**The Cultural Situation of the West Caroline Islands  
Songosor, Pur, Merir, Tobi and Ngulu (pp. 245-249)**

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Similarity of individual cultural elements between Ngulu and the four isolated, small, west Caroline islands does not depend on direct contact after the time of their settlement. There are, also, no signs of this. The similarity comes much more from the old connections, established by all five islands, with Yap, the great meeting point in the west, associations that extend up to the most recent times. For Ngulu they are particularly vital and important; for Tobi they were probably broken a long time ago, but have been renewed in more recent times (through European influence) while on the other islands they have apparently never completely ceased. The common feature of the culture of these islands is the outcome of the influence of Yap culture. From the traditions of these island inhabitants it is clearly brought out that at one time their ancestors set out from the over-populated Mogemog to Yap, and from there, after a

fairly long stay, they settled the isolated islands. Now it is not the intention of this presentation to investigate the dependance situation of the Yap-Mogemog culture and determine to what extent the culture on Yap, dominant over the common Caroline characteristics, shows close ties to this island group<sup>1</sup>. Also an obstacle stands in the way of an exhaustive investigation of the cultural ties of west Caroline cultural values, in that by the time of conclusion of this volume not all of the material on the more easterly islands, particularly Mogemog, Oleai, Sorol and Hog was published. Thus in the meantime it remains an open question whether peculiarities of the cultural heritage as also occurred on Tobi, Songosor, etc. were once brought from Mogemog, the old homeland, or whether it is a matter of enrichment from the Yap culture. In other words whether the cultural heritage that is in part so similar on Yap and the small west Caroline islands can be traced back to Mogemog, the source common to them all, or whether the culture of the isolated islands bears less of the features of the Mogemog culture than that of Yap.

Since a direct connection between Ngulu and the four other islands does not exist, a further comparison is unnecessary, especially since as has been proved the similarities have the same source. As to connections between Ngulu and Yap, it might be reiterated at this point that Muller, Yap I, regards the island of Ngulu as a Yap colony. Thus there remains only an investigation of the cultural situation of the islands Songosor, Pur, Merir and Tobi.

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<sup>1</sup>Muller (Yap I, p.52) says in connection with the investigation on tattooing, principally the "γōl",.....and also from the magical incantations, a Mogemog origin of the "γōl" cannot be concluded. Otherwise the entire spiritual and material culture of the Yap people might considerably derive from there....Furthermore the Pur traditions (of Tibb. I, p.204) reveal two Yap immigrations from Mogemog and assert an extensive new settlement of Mogemog people a long time before the voyage of the Songosor, Tobi and Pur discoverers.

The Pur tradition maintains that Kerir in later times had been resettled from Pur, after the Papuans had slain all the Kerir people. With this then consideration could be confined only to the islands of Songosor, Pur and Tobi.

On all four islands tradition holds firmly to an origin from bogemog. Individual Pur people admit to Ihonor (Sorol), and Kerir people to Hog as a near or original homeland of their ancestors. However they all believe in a prolonged stay on Yap. From the stories, that are contradictory in details, somewhat of the following picture evolves: bogemog people at one time left the overpopulated homeland to go to Yap which offered them a better quality of life. They prospered there, after a long time of difficulties, to the point where they found it advisable to extend further. They did this by a couple of voyages together, and in five canoes sought a new homeland. Further and further they settled the islands of the southwest that had been previously uninhabited. The most astute people took the island of Pur that was discovered first, the others had to travel on, for better or worse. They must have even visited the already inhabited St. David's (Freewill) Islands, with the native name, Warat. Right into recent times they remain conscious of their original association and never entirely lose the sentiment for one another. In times of need they seek out their ancestral relatives. The first settlers were:

- |                        |                   |       |
|------------------------|-------------------|-------|
| ♂ Taleyes <sup>1</sup> | ♂ Saual           | ♂ Uat |
| 1. ♂ Talau             | 1. ♂ Kai          | ♂ Sau |
| 2. ♂ Saūgēpit          | 2. ♂ Kārētāi & āi |       |
| 3. ♀ Pimalēp āru       | ♀ Itararou        |       |
| ~ ♂ Manuat or Ean      | ♂ Xape            |       |
|                        | 3. ♂ Saūtēri      |       |
|                        | 4. ♂ Mōōa         |       |
|                        | 5. ♀ Mesianai     |       |
|                        | ~ ♂ Tāua          |       |
|                        | ♂ Rau             |       |

Talau obtains Songosor; Saugépit Merir; Rimalép áru goes later to Tobi; Māretáí s̄ āi takes Pur by cunning and forces Nesiamaí to go to Warat with her people, where she is slain. The most doubtful is the settlement of Songosor: according to some it would have been the first to be found and Talau, being the eldest son, would have remained there; others say that Uat and Sau took it, and later the survivors from Warat also.....

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<sup>1</sup>According to the Pur people, originating from Ihoror-Sorol, according to the Merir people originating from Hog.

went there. On Songosor itself nobody knows anything about Talau as an ancestor; he is regarded only as the spirit of Fagarum, the son of Uat. 247

Of the five settlement stations of the Yap-Mogemog culture, Tobi lies the most isolated and has every appearance that after the time of the ancestors' Yap sojourn there have been no new influences from there. That is until quite recently, about 1900. The population's turning aside from the new and the foreign, the tenacious clinging to the old customs, had a side effect, the creation of a unique character. Thus as a fact in this small island there is found the greatest variety of form within the culture developed. Nowhere does one come across such an abundance of innovations in the production of wooden goods, whose prototypes are also found on Yap and Songosor. And on no neighbouring island are the weaving patterns, that reflect the Mogemog patterns, so full of variety as here. If it were a matter of less simple objects and more difficult techniques, one would have to say that the culture handed down has deepened and been refined on this small island. It is also noteworthy that Tobi has preserved the large fish weir basket whose internal structure however is not a long tube running from front to back as on Yap, but instead consists of two tubes open front and back and extending to the middle. Also on Tobi there are several varieties of hook fishing that

Songosor and Pur do not have. In the following only a few peculiarities are referred to, out of an abundance of material: in spite of the extraordinary seaworthiness of the boats the Tobi people of old have declined to undertake voyages to neighbouring islands. The grounds for this may indeed lie above all in their character. Self-sufficient, and being enclosed against foreigners, nothing has ever driven them far. Certainly they would have had a great distance to travel even to their nearest neighbours, as with the ancestral voyages. Yet the Caroline sailors do not tend to be scared off.---The house bears no resemblance to the Yap house. Not only is the stone foundation missing but the entire timber structure is totally different, noticeably more simple and, too, the position of the posts differs completely. The verandah is likewise missing. It is noteworthy that the old Tobi house had such a spacious loft that a man could easily be hidden in it. People swung themselves up through a hatch by means of a rope. The prototype of the house on Tobi, Songosor and Pur is found further in the east, somewhat on Elato. Mogemog, Fallalap and Paraulip have similar buildings as on Yap, that may also lack the stone foundation, as in the first two.

Furthermore the women's clothing is also remarkable. On Songosor and Tobi the women wear plaited clothing mats. Likewise on Lerir and Pur originally, but since their stay on Palau a fibre skirt is worn over it. Yap and Ngulu know only the fibre skirt as women's costume, and Palau the same. On Mogemog, Paraulip, Nama, Olol, Fais and Truk, Hok and Oleai they wear.....

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woven clothing mats. They are worn in the same way as the plaited ones on the four western islands, and since weaving is also carried out here, plaiting of the same garment is extraordinary.

The men's tattooing is on all islands the "yöl"-tattooing of Yap, that Mallor regards as the heritage of the Chamorro population, but is seen by others as a Mogemog

possession that has immigrated to Sorol and Yap. With regard to the detailed characteristics, there are found on Yap and the western islands more deviations than similarities. The tattooing of the women is without doubt most closely related to the Mogemog tattooing; the usual tattooing on Yap shows quite a deviating form.

In the area of spiritual and social life there offer only few conspicuous features that allow a comparison. Most are raised only little above the general Caroline situation or are too superficially known to permit an investigation of dependent states to be carried out. What is important is the method of burial and belief in an afterlife. On the small islands of the west burial at sea is practised. Burial in the ground is to a great extent prevented by the rocky terrain. Where it is possible, this method is quickly adopted; so with the Merir on Palau. Yet the value placed on the method of burial is noteworthy where both methods are possible. On Yap the dead person is committed to the sea only on the occasion of an important death. Otherwise the corpse is buried in the ground. The reasons, fear and time expediency, are obvious. Sorol and Mok have both methods of burial but the chief is always accorded the honour of a grave on land in a coffin. Mogemog has only burial in the ground. There is a regular cemetery, the "ul'pái". On Merir burial in the ground is regarded as insulting. It is reserved for thieves and murderers, and on all the islands suckling infants who have died before cutting their teeth are buried in this way. Tobi has a children's cemetery. Generally, interment of the dead in canoes that are committed to the sea is found only in Polynesia and particular areas of Melanesia. In the Carolines it is unusual. Only on the remote islands of the west, including Ngulu, it is taken for granted and is firmly linked with the notion of the abode of souls. On Mogemog and Yap, Sorol and Mok they believe that the dead enter a spirit world, a house in heaven. The Tobi, Fur and Songosor people

imagine their kingdom of the dead in great canoes, that the souls of the corpses carried forth in the boats reach in one way or another.---Whoever can have one, is laid in a wooden coffin that is so small that the corpse has to be firmly tied together. On Ngulu the custom of trussing the dead is practised and it is explained in that as soon as decomposition sets in the dead begin to sprawl out.---On Yap it is believed that death arises through the god of death catching the soul in his net<sup>1</sup>;.... the Songosor and Pur people explain it thus, that the 249 god Rugeiren, who holds all the threads of life in his hand, breaks that of the man who must die. Unique to, and only authenticated for Tobi, is the veneration of spirit boats that corresponds well with the notions of the world of the dead on boats. Already by Kubary's time nothing could be discovered of this on Songosor. This notion is no longer found on Yap nor on Mogenog<sup>2</sup>.---The following small, common features are also referred to: On Tobi the god Yaris forbids the alteration of fish hooks, and punishes a violation of the commandment with a typhoon. On Mogenog the spirit "Xalik" teaches a sleeping man the manufacture of fish hooks and threatens a typhoon should he not imitate his method.

A small vocabulary containing a selection of words from the islands referred to in this discussion could form a conclusion to this small comparison. Recapitulating, all things indicate that the native tradition, that the western islands were settled on the way from Mogenog to Yap, stands in full agreement with their entire cultural heritage.