
RIPPLES IN CLIO'S POND

Palau: A Parable for the Twenty-First Century

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Everyone on the Pacific Island of Palau knows the story of the fish-bearing breadfruit tree of Ngibtal. It is carved and painted on the rafters of the *bai*, the traditional meetinghouse of each village, and on storyboards that are sold to tourists in every shop in the town of Koror. It is only one story of many, but it is by far the best known. It runs as follows:

In the old days in Palau, an old woman named Dirrabkau lived on an island called Ngibtal. She had a hard life because she lived alone in her house, and the fishermen of the island never offered to share their catch with her, so she had to live on the fruit of the breadfruit tree that grew in her yard. One day, her son who lived afar came to visit her, and when she complained that she had no fish to eat, he chopped off part of a limb of the breadfruit tree. The tree was hollow, and the surges of the sea came up through its trunk and out through the branch, bringing fish with them. All Dirrabkau needed to do was to catch the fish in a basket. The fishermen became very jealous, since while they had to labor all day to catch fish, all the old woman had to do was to sit under her tree. "Let's cut down her tree," one of them said, "and then so many fish will come up that we'll all have all we want." So they cut down the breadfruit tree. But then the sea poured up through the trunk of the tree and brought not only fish, but also a huge flood that caused the whole island of Ngibtal to sink beneath the waves. Today when you take a boat into that part of the lagoon on a calm day, you can look down into the water and see Ngibtal with its houses and the stump of the breadfruit tree.

Palau (also called Belau) is one of the most beautiful places in the world. An archipelago of some 340 islands of volcanic and coral origin, it is one of the ten nations with the highest percentage of forested land today (about 70 percent). One island, Babeldaob, constitutes 73 percent of the total land area of 458 square kilometers, but the great majority of the population of 19,000 lives on the much smaller island of Koror, connected to Babeldaob by a bridge. To the south of these is a vast coral lagoon adorned by the Rock Islands, whose greenly forested tops overhang the water, because their edges have been undercut by the actions of waves and sea creatures. On some of the Rock Islands are saltwater lakes including the famous Jellyfish Lake, where stingless jellyfish as thick as flakes in an underwater snowstorm surround

awestruck snorkelers. But the paramount environmental treasure is the undersea life. An outpost of Micronesia on the edge of the Philippine Sea, Palau is within the area of the greatest marine biodiversity on Earth, with hundreds of species of fish, many sharks and rays among them, shellfish including giant clams, and sea mammals such as dolphins and whales. A great variety of hard and soft corals, many of them colorful, forms the environmental framework. Granted such natural splendor, Palau finds that tourism is its major source of income, along with fishing, forest products, and mining. The preponderance of tourists are Taiwan Chinese, Koreans, and Japanese. American visitors are few, partly because few Americans have heard of Palau or have any idea where it is. The last sentence is unfortunately true in spite of the fact that the United States fought one of the bitterest and costliest battles—in terms of American and Japanese lives—of the Second World War to capture Peleliu, one of Palau's islands. The U.S., which ruled Palau under a United Nations trusteeship for almost 40 years ending in 1994, deeply influenced its cultural and economic development and still has financial and military obligations toward the Republic of Palau.

Part of the Caroline Islands in Micronesia, Palau is about 740 kilometers east of the Philippines and 1,300 kilometers southwest of Guam. The first inhabitants arrived from Southeast Asia around 1,000 BC and established villages on Babeldaob and a few other islands. As the population increased, some resources became scarce, and communities adapted with methods of conservation. For example, the council of chiefs (*rubaks*) of a village often put forth a moratorium (*bul*) controlling fishing of a certain species or other resource use to prevent overharvesting. The same method continues to some extent today. During a recent visit to the village of Airai on Babeldaob, I asked a *rubak* whether the village council was concerned with environmental issues, and he answered, "That is our main business."

Spanish, British, and Russian ships landed in Palau during the course of the 18th century, trading and introducing infectious diseases. Spain attempted to exercise sovereignty until 1899, when Germany purchased the Carolines. The Germans established a few plantations and mined phosphate but lost the islands to Japan in 1914 at the start of the First World War. Japanese colonists soon greatly outnumbered the native Palauans, and developed infrastructure and the copra and phosphate industries, using Palauans as forced laborers. Environmental impacts included removal of native forests to plant coconut palm groves and the excavation of huge phosphate mining pits. As the Second World War approached, Japan militarized Palau, building a large airbase on Peleliu. In 1944 during the war, General Douglas MacArthur insisted that U.S. forces take the base in preparation for the invasion of the Philippines, and the resulting battle was one of the most brutal in the Pacific campaign. At least 1,800 Americans died and 8,000 were wounded, while perhaps 12,500 Japanese died with few survivors. The rest of Palau, with its capital, Koror, which had been bombed to rubble by U.S. air raids, was surrendered months afterwards at the end of the war, and all Japanese colonists were repatriated to Japan.

The early years of the U.S. "strategic trusteeship" of Micronesia into the 1960s were marked by little economic development, along with poor education and

inadequate health care. Subsequently the Micronesia Development Fund was initiated and federal appropriations increased. Palau voted in 1978 to leave the Micronesian Federation and seek independence as a Freely Associated State, a status achieved in 1994. The latter part of the American period saw the rapid integration of Palau into the world market economy, improvement of infrastructure with Japanese and Taiwanese aid, and unmistakable evidence of cultural Americanization. This is particularly so in Koror and the nearer parts of Babeldaob, where automobiles (but not traffic lights), gas stations, a U.S. Post Office, a mall dominated by a well-stocked Ben Franklin store, and internet bars have appeared. The youth have been easily influenced by new trends in fashion, foods, and language. The environmental problems associated with the American throwaway lifestyle have also materialized, since there are no adequate facilities for disposal of solid waste, including abandoned car bodies.

Resistance to outside influences is an important cultural fact and has existed ever since Spanish Catholic missionaries began to destroy the houses of the gods in Palauan villages. Beginning in the Japanese period, a nationalistic religious movement called Modekngai (Let Us Go Forward Together) grew in support to include perhaps half of all native Palauans. Among its principles are respect for Palau's natural environment, including land and sea, plants and animals, the traditional gods, and people from the elderly to the young. Traditional leaders with perspectives like these have opposed projects potentially damaging to the environment, such as the construction of a petroleum transshipment facility and the import of nuclear substances. The first constitution drafted for the Republic of Palau included an antinuclear provision, but relentless opposition by the United States eventually forced its removal.

Incorporated in the year of independence, 1994, the Palau Conservation Society has worked in the areas of environmental education, eco-friendly development, and protection of marine and terrestrial preserves. Its directors are all Palauans living in Palau. It follows a non-confrontational style and cooperates with local communities, governmental and non-governmental agencies. The Palau International Coral Reef Center, founded in 2000, is an admirable research facility with a small but very well designed aquarium organized on ecological principles. With energetic and enlightened organizations like these, and with the seemingly undeniable fact that the economic future of Palau is tied to eco-tourism and therefore the survival of its unique environmental ensemble, it would be reasonable to expect that the government of Palau, in its own self-interest, would adopt environmental protection, particularly the conservation of biodiversity, as a paramount national goal. In fact, one can easily find pronouncements embodying this principle, and there are laws on the books intended to carry it out in practice. Two things give me pause, however. One is the comment made by a Russian friend of mine when I remarked that the constitution of the USSR was almost unique in guaranteeing the right of the people to a healthy environment. He said, "Paper will tolerate anything." The other is that the government of Palau is closely modeled upon that of the United States of America.

When I was in Palau in late 2004, I visited the new capitol building, which is under construction. Like Brazil, Palau has embarked on creating a new capital city

in a large, relatively undeveloped part of the country rich in natural resources. This venture offers a number of unparalleled opportunities. For one, Palau has an impressive architectural tradition involving a structure called the *bai*, a meeting center where clan chiefs discuss important matters affecting their community. The analogy with a capitol is impossible to miss. The *bai* stands on a stone foundation and has a dramatic roofline sweeping upward and forward to a peak. The triangular pediment thus achieved is filled with images telling traditional stories, with figures of women and men, birds and sea creatures, trees and animals of every kind. Similar themes decorate the many inner beams. The sides have openings to admit the breezes, and by the entrances painted roosters greet the dawn. What an inspiration for a creative architect designing a national capitol! But no, the model is from somewhere else. Palau's new capitol looks like one of the state capitols in the U.S. that are smaller copies of the one in Washington. A recent news release notes that the columns for the façade have been imported from the Philippines and are stone casts made of concrete, epoxy, resins and stone dust. The capitol is one of the points accessed by a new 85-kilometer road now under construction that will circle the island of Babeldaob. It is funded by the United States as one of its obligations under the Compact of Free Association, and it is being constructed to meet U.S. standards for a 30-mph road. To avoid possible delays, the president of Palau has exempted the capitol project from all environmental restrictions.

Many of the environmental impacts are already evident. The road is opening new areas of land for development, while land use and resource planning are minimal and yet to be implemented. Development leads to habitat loss on land, introduction of exotic species, and forest fragmentation. Dredging of sand and coral for road building destroys underwater habitat. Clearing and earthmoving in road construction opens the soil to erosion by Palau's heavy rainfall, which carries silt into streams and rivers and eventually into offshore lagoons, where it settles on the reefs, killing the coral and destroying spawning grounds for fish. Solid and hazardous waste disposal into the water adds to the damage. Meanwhile, other factors such as overfishing, illegal fishing practices, and rising sea temperatures due to the El Niño oscillation and global warming further stress the coral and lead to widespread death and bleaching. Although Palau's reefs are in good condition compared to those of many other Pacific islands, damage can be seen in many places around Babeldaob and even in the Rock Islands.

Political leaders have been apt students of their American tutors. The search for ever greater economic development in the context of the world market economy is like the fishermen of Ngibtal cutting down the breadfruit tree to get more fish without the labor of fishing. The island is small, the forces of destruction work rapidly, and forests and coral reefs are slow to regenerate. The parable is there on the storyboards for all to read.