
BOOK REVIEW FORUM

Glenn Petersen. *Traditional Micronesian Societies: Adaptation, Integration, and Political Organization*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009. Pp. 288. ISBN: 978-0-8248-3248-3. US\$42.00 cloth.

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Traditional Micronesian Societies, the first major scholarly overview of the societies of the Northwest Pacific for decades, is a significant contribution to young Micronesians, scholars, and the general public. Petersen offers readers new perspectives of the region, simultaneously drawing upon knowledge his mentors shared with him during his thirty-year experience working in Pohnpei and the region, as well as data and perspectives from all fields of ethnology, anthropology, genetics, botany, history, political science, and philosophy. Following Pohnpeian (and Micronesian) values of respect and deference to both epistemologies, he presented the information in a clear set of discussions, so that the anticipated readers may reach their own conclusions concerning contested interpretations. Carefully chosen lithographs and photographs drawn from early explorers de Freycinet, d'Urville, Duperrey, and Lütke; the later German Südsee Expedition; and the unidentified portrait of a Pohnpeian man on the book's jacket permit the reader to picture some of the peoples and their activities described in the text.

No one argues the Eurocentric origin of the unifying label "Micronesia" (Tcherkézoff 2003) or the often-devastating impacts and influences of the succession of Spanish, German, Japanese, and American colonizers mainly during the twentieth century. Petersen disagrees with assertions by scholars

Hanlon and Rainbird that “Micronesia” exists only as a colonial construct, arguing instead that there are strong cultural continuities among the peoples of the region who have maintained ongoing social relations through active networks of marriage and exchanges. I have already published a comprehensive review of *Traditional Micronesian Societies* (Nero 2010), in which I agreed with Petersen (and other scholars) that the peoples of the Northwest Pacific (the Marianas, Carolines, Marshalls and Kiribati archipelagos, and Nauru) comprise a Micronesian cultural area as a subset of the Pacific societies. In this book review forum, therefore, I briefly summarize Petersen’s contributions and discuss some recent publications, not as a critique but as a continuation of the critical discussions Petersen has challenged us to consider. I focus on Palau, where I have mainly worked as a researcher.

Petersen’s cultural ecological approach equally values the region’s rich marine resources as well as appreciating its ecological constraints. I laud this extremely well-written and accessible syncretic study describing how the many different settler communities of the region not only survived but at times thrived in their often demanding environment. What did the agriculturalists and fishers find when they arrived at their new homes, and what cultigens, domesticated animals, tools, and ethnobiological, sociocultural, and navigational knowledge had they brought with them? How did they then adapt to their new environments over the last two millennia, during periods of major environmental changes? We do not yet have all the answers to these questions, but Petersen has provided a thoughtful overview of current research on the region, which provides an important foundation for ongoing research both of the early settlement history of the region and contemporary studies.

Petersen identified the “traditional Micronesian” period as the nineteenth century prior to most European contact (4). Despite potential inconsistencies, he used the present tense to discuss this period, in recognition of the underlying “*common framework of organizing social life*” (4, italics added) throughout the region. He argued that “Micronesia Perseveres” (230), and continues to rely upon its traditional matrilineal, principles of social organization, and traditional values as they continue to adapt to their changing environments. One such value is the importance of unquestioned sharing of resources. I will not repeat my earlier chapter-by-chapter review, but I will provide a brief overview through this topic. Petersen (2) observed that in traditional Micronesian societies virtually everything a Micronesian possesses is shared with family and neighbors, and every family and community is connected by a web of strands to many other islands and communities. In this way, everyone is ensured of being cared for and protected

when in need. While in contemporary life this may be an ideal not always practiced, with new forms of currencies more easily hidden, daily sharing is routinely offered and at times demanded. Following these values ensures that all are cared for. Petersen identified the “*central point of this book*” (2, italics added) as the ways that the region’s “*interlocking lineages and clans*” provided the primary mechanism to ensure this sharing. Throughout the book Petersen continuously shifted focus between the lineages and the clans (Chapter 4). These descent groups inhabited the named houses, so important throughout the Austronesian region, that are grounded in their lands and the labor that reproduces these houses (Chapter 5). Chapter 6 focuses on the descent-based chieftaincies and their governance, related to but separable from issues of politics and leadership (Chapter 7). All of these components, analytically separated but integrally connected, are held together by common aesthetics, beliefs, values, and prescribed behaviors (Chapter 8). Each of these is part of the whole, shifting in importance depending upon the circumstances. It is therefore difficult to identify one overriding or governing principle of Micronesian social organization or to state it in the common regional language of English, much less the nuanced differences found in each of the region’s languages.

Eastern Micronesia is quite rightfully Petersen’s focus (39–44). The peoples of the eastern and central Carolines, Marshalls, Kiribati, and Nauru speak nuclear Micronesian languages that belong to the Austronesian Oceanic Languages dominant in much of the Pacific. They were settled approximately 2,000 years ago (Dickinson 2003) when the mainly coral islands and atolls, and few volcanic islands, became inhabitable. Scholars agree that initial settlers would have come from the various Melanesian islands, including the Santa Cruz and Reefs Islands that are comprised of volcanic and atoll islands far beyond sight of the Solomon Islands. These islands too maintained an interisland network of exchanges and relied on tree crops. Eastern Micronesia could be considered a culture area in its own right according to many of the normal criteria used to identify subregions within the larger set of regions. Micronesia fits two of Burton et al.’s (1996, 88) criteria for higher-level regions: historical and physical continuity, and homogeneity and pattern, the latter defined in terms of social structure. Closely related languages are another key criterion. However, such a subregion would not include all the island groups included in Micronesia on geographical grounds.

The islands considered Western Micronesia—the Palau and Marianas archipelagos—were settled initially from two different areas of islands in Southeast Asia, as early as 4,500–3,200 calibrated years before present (cal BP) by voyagers speaking Western Austronesian languages. Interpretations

vary whether early pollen and charcoal in core samples indicate human-induced or natural environmental changes. These interpretations are difficult to resolve, since the earliest archaeological sites are buried under current shorelines (Clark et al. 2006; Carson 2011; Dickinson and Athens 2007). Over the next millennia multiple waves of settlers arrived in the Palauan archipelago from Southeast Asia, including the Philippines, New Guinea, and elsewhere in Oceania, not to mention traders from Malay and other areas. Undoubtedly the new settlers brought new cultigens, including the important *Artocarpus altilis* breadfruit, called *meduu* in Palau.

Geographically, Yap is also in Western Micronesia, but current research suggest that it was settled perhaps 2,000 years later than the Admiralty Islands based on linguistic analyses by Ross. Clearly Yap played an important role as an intermediary between Palau and the other Carolinian islands, and more than 24 generations ago the small islands and atolls of Hatahobei and Sonsorol of Palau were settled by voyagers from Ulithi. There is a long history of interactions, exchange, and cultural/linguistic sharing between Palau and Yap. In contrast, the early prehistory of Guam and the Mariana Islands is less understood, partly due to the environmental changes discussed earlier, but see the recent study of Carson (2011).

We do not have the bases from which to argue that Western Micronesian islands comprised a cultural area prior to the settlement of Eastern Micronesia; it is only after the settlement of Eastern Micronesia that one could argue a cultural area developed through social and trade interactions. While Palau in particular is peripheral, one of Peterson's tasks in this book was to demonstrate ongoing communications and exchanges (52). He discussed research documenting the presence of Yapese and Palauan pottery in sites of the Central Carolines, especially Lamotrek, dating from AD 1200 to 1400 by Alkire and Fujimura and Intoh, and links between the Chamorros of the Mariana Islands with the Western Carolines by Barratt. Riesenbergs and Lessa also documented that very early drift voyagers from the Central Carolines to the Philippines, who then sailed home again via Palau and Marianas, were aware of Palau and drew maps of the region's islands for the priests.

Petersen's endnotes hold a wealth of supporting materials that he has not included in the texts. For instance, he was aware of the recent genetic studies of Micronesia and the Pacific (236), but judiciously did not discuss them in the text due to inconsistencies in these early works. However, the genetic studies do treat Micronesia as a region and focus both on matrilineages (via mitochondrial DNA, or mtDNA) and a later biparental perspective (Lum et al. 2002; Cann and Lum 2004). The literature including Micronesia is growing, including mtDNA research on the Marianas (Vilar et al. 2013).

Petersen provided a full review of the research that demonstrates that the islands of the northwest Pacific were not isolates (like many Polynesian islands after their settlement) but were societies linked together by voyaging networks such as the *sawei* that have long provided ways to share and trade economic resources, access marital partners across islands, and provide security from environmental challenges through interisland support systems. In a recent publication, Fitzpatrick (2008) reviewed "Maritime interregional interaction in Micronesia," drawing upon established and recent research on the region's exchange system that he presented using Stein's (2002) "paradigm of interregional actions" (137). Fitzpatrick (2008) provided a "Topologic structure of the Yapese Empire," following Hage and Harary (Fig. 7, 141) and modeled the acquisition and distribution of goods and services that expanded the normal schema of the sawei exchange (Fig. 6, 140) by incorporating other nodes of interactions in the Marianas, Philippines, Palau, and Indonesia, to which I would add New Guinea and the Marshalls. Although these models are undated, and Hage and Harary's book received mixed reviews, Fitzpatrick's figures and review of supporting literature are worth considering.

Petersen recognized that connections between Eastern Micronesia could have been achieved either indirectly through the Yap-Outer Islands sawei exchanges (33-35) or perhaps through direct trips from the Central Carolines to Palau (31). (Palau no longer practiced long-distance voyaging by the time Eastern Micronesia was settled.) Links to the Mariana Islands had been broken after their harsh colonization and depopulation under the early Spanish wars of the 1600s and remained more tenuous because of those early colonial histories.

I believe one of Petersen's important contributions to Micronesia's regional studies is his identification and research upon what he has called "the Breadfruit Revolution" (53-64) that has spurred at least this writer to further research. Petersen had noted that prehistorians identified the period AD 1000-1500 as a time of sociocultural transformation. He did not connect this transformative period with early climate change events in the Pacific, perhaps due to an ongoing controversy among archaeologists about the degree of variation in both timing and characteristics of such events across the Pacific. Recent and continuing archaeological, botanical, paleoecological, and oral historical research on Palau has considerably clarified our understanding of Palauan society prior to and during this period. Based on a series of early studies, Clark et al. (2006) summarized current research that "while Babeldaob may have been colonized by 4300 cal BP on palaeo-environmental evidence . . . at present [h]uman arrival in southern Palau is dated at no earlier than 3100-2900 cal BP" (215). This is a significant

length of inhabitation and adaptation to the islands and their resources. Masse et al. (2006) published an evaluation of early climate change in Palau that has now been modified by Clark and Reepmeyer (2012) for the occupation and abandonment of Rock Island villages. The Clark and Reepmeyer report should settle earlier debates on regional variation, since the Palauan data do not fit within Nunn's (2007) expected sequence of events during a pan-Pacific catastrophe. Rather than Nunn's expected shift from large island villages to offshore islands around AD 1300, Clark and Reepmeyer's (2012) recent research and careful recalibration of radiocarbon dates demonstrate that "permanent settlements in the Rock Islands were established as early as AD 800–1100" (33), and the majority of the village sites were abandoned between AD 1350 and 1500 (34), much earlier than expected. The Rock Islands' Stonework Villages, with a population estimated between 4,000 and 6,000 people, were inhabited during the same time period as the Palauan ceramics found in Central Carolinian sites, demonstrating the existence of direct or indirect exchange relationships.

This is important for our understanding of the Breadfruit Revolution. It is unlikely that researchers will ever identify the site(s) where the important *Artocarpus mariannensis* × *Artocarpus altilis* was hybridized. The Palauan salt-tolerant seeded breadfruit (*A. mariannensis* Trécul), known as *chebiei*, is native to Palau and is found predominantly in the Rock Islands and southern islands of Peleliu, Angaur, and the Southwest Islands; an alternate name is *meduuliou* (southern breadfruit). Palauans are excellent agriculturalists and arboriculturalists, and the salt-intolerant *A. altilis* with their large breadfruits would probably have arrived with early waves of settlers. The hybrid between the two would have provided an improved food resource important to those living on small atolls and limestone islands and coastal fringes. Based upon his observations in 1946, Fosberg (1960) reported both that identifications of wild and cultivated *A. mariannensis* and *A. altilis* were often confounded, and due to introgression at that time there were perhaps four different forms, part of "hybrid swarms" that could be related to both. Given the large populations living in the Rock Islands in during the AD 800–1500 period who relied upon the *chebiei*, among other tree, root, and marine food resources, it is possible that there may have been both natural and carefully monitored genetic cultigens developed either in Palau and/or on Eastern Micronesian sites. The possibility of a Western Micronesian hybridization should not be excluded without further research.

I believe that Petersen's identification and analyses of "the Breadfruit Revolution" sheds light on an extremely transformative period in the region that strengthened the foundations of traditional Micronesia societies.

Petersen provided very complete analyses of Eastern Micronesian perspectives on the period (53–64) as well as seeking to understand views from the periphery. He also reconsidered how this new understanding of breadfruit might help solve a long puzzle in Micronesian ethnology recorded by Goodenough concerning a “cult of *Achaw* or ‘*Kachaw*,’” involving Chuuk and Pohnpei (that are recurrently linked linguistically), and the islands to the east perhaps as far as Kiribati. I agree with his conclusion that in the early periods “interactions between west and east were probably as important as were the webs of linkages among the Nuclear-speaking peoples.” (65)

It is always more difficult to understand the participation of societies on the periphery. Petersen hypothesizes that (a) only Eastern Micronesians were responsible for developing the *A. mariannensis* × *A. altilis* hybrid, (b) the Eastern Micronesians were responsible for disseminating the hybrid breadfruit cultigens throughout the region, and (c) in the process the Eastern Micronesians with their matrilineages and dispersed clans strongly influenced the existing kinship practices and social organization of Palau. The second hypothesis, the Eastern Micronesian dissemination of the hybrid breadfruit cultigens, is strongly supported by the existence of their extensive trading networks across the region. The first and third hypotheses are possible and pose an excellent challenge to researchers to prove or disprove, if that is possible so long after the events.

The popular Palauan Breadfruit Story is associated with the overturn of the offshore island of Ngibtal and clearly retains cultural memory on the importance of breadfruit at that period of transformation in a series of transitions in the title used for the Goddess. Dirrabkau was her final incarnation just preceding the transition to Milad, mother of the four stones representing the currently high ranked villages. Palauans maintain a number of strong migration histories of the people who escaped when Ngeruangel was overturned by storms, traveled on to Kayangel and then to many places throughout Babeldaob and Koror; some of the migrants founded the clans of the two paramount chieftaincies. However, Palauans normally discuss the people from Ngeruangel as being the descendants of Portuguese sailors. And, understanding Palauan social organization and Palauan “clans”—the *kebliil* whose membership is based on factors other than just “blood” (Smith 1983, 59) and *klebliil* sometimes glossed as super-sib—is a task for experts. Smith (1983: 37–71) provides a careful analysis of the nuances of Palauan group membership in relationship to changing land rights. Tracing the establishment of the “clans” over the long period of Palauan habitation and identifying a particular period when the matrilineages first began recognizing clans are interesting challenges. Did that happen at one time, or over a long period?

While interesting, these questions may not address the issue of whether a Micronesian cultural area or subregion is a reasonable model of the histories and lifestyles of the peoples of the region prior to the Europeans' arrival. I do not believe that either being able to link Palauan matrilineages to Eastern Micronesia or identifying the site(s) where the salt-tolerant *A. mariannensis* × *A. altilis* hybrid was first developed is necessary to the main task of confirming the presence of a Micronesian cultural area. Eastern Micronesia is clearly the core of the matrilineal cultural area, including some strongly connected overlapping dialect groups, interisland marriages that supported the dispersion of the associated clans, and long-established extensive trade networks. I agree that Palau's documented early social relationships and either direct or indirect involvement in trade networks linking the islands of Yap and Eastern Micronesia suffice to confirm membership of this peripheral island group.

In conclusion, I briefly return to the controversy over whether Micronesia was ever anything but a colonial construct. I believe that the recent research on Palau has if anything strengthened Petersen's argument that around 2,000 years ago, a Micronesian culture area began to develop across the region despite a long hiatus between the Western and Eastern settlements. I do concur that at the core Micronesia is matrilineal and that this is one of and perhaps the most important characteristic that separates Micronesia from the other subregions of the Pacific. However, I believe the stronger foundation of Peterson's argument that Micronesia is a cultural area is that these societies have long been bound together through social relationships that link islands and people across this very large area of the northwest Pacific.

Relationships in Micronesia are often couched in kinship terms. Petersen focuses on matrilineages and dispersed clans, but all Micronesians and many visitors know that their "*multiple, crosscutting, and sometimes apparently contradictory principles allow for a great deal of flexibility*" (211) both within societies and across the region. Petersen discusses the considerable variation in regional social organization during the traditional period—variation that continued, of course, to adapt and change during colonial periods and new, postindependence governments. Perhaps the culture is not best described by a close focus on matrilineages despite the region's strong matrilineal social organization. Following Burton et al. (1996) in their Regions paper, the broader description "matri-centric societies" might be more useful and less contentious when making comparisons across the entire Micronesian region. One could reserve the focus on matrilineages to a single society and its direct linkages through dispersed clans where applicable. But this is an approach that would work best with living societies,

where they can be more directly traced. And I expect that not all of the important interisland linkages now, or at any time period, would follow kin lines, no matter how broadly defined, so once again we are refocused upon the social relationships of long-term linkages between islands. The unconditional support one might receive in case of need might be through matrilineages or dispersed clans, but these are not the only types of relationships that link societies in closest communication. One must look beyond clan relationships, and Palau and Yap provide an excellent example. Their deep interisland relationships, including the quarrying of Yapese stone money pieces on Palau, were mediated primarily through their respective high chiefs, who retain strong relationships to this day.

Once again, I thank Petersen for providing us with a very challenging and thoughtful overview of the traditional period of Micronesian societies. I leave it to the readers to discover and enjoy the richness and depth of the book and come to their own conclusions of the degree to which Petersen's analyses of the traditional period are persuasive and might be relevant to contemporary issues in the region. I expect and hope that this exciting book will continue to spur heated discussions and further research.

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