

Environmental Sacredness and Health in Palau

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Abstract:

The migration from Africa to the Pacific would take many millennia with ever changing environment conditions including the physical, social, spiritual and economics. Evolutionary metamorphosis from Neanderthals to Homo sapiens, through the Stone Age and Ice Age, the journey continued in sacred milieu that would protect this predestined journey out of the Garden of Eden. On the arrival to the final destination, a sacred gift called Uab (Palau), life would be guided with sacredness of the land, the sea, the skies and operational structures of a society that would survive through the test of time and conditions. This paper will examine how such sacredness is violated and how that has led to the erosion, exploitation and prostitution of the environment or lukel a klengar (nest of life). It will explore what it would take to reclaim some of the sacredness lost. The premise is that sacredness of Palau (Chedotel Belau) lost would mean a society lost. (PHD, 2005 Vol 12 No 1 Pages 92 - 95)

Introduction

The journey from the Garden of Eden to the shores of Palau took several millennia and perhaps through several cycles of climate changes, several steps of evolutionary metamorphosis through Neanderthals to Homo sapiens, all dictated by genetic mutations. Genetic mapping utilizing maternal chromosomal heritage would prove useful in validating the migration to the Pacific. (Sykes, 2001)

This migration started about 50,000 years ago with the first people to the Pacific who mainly spoke an Australoid language and who settled the Greater Australia and Papua New Guinea. About 40,000 years later, at around 10,000 years ago, the Non Austronesians migrated down to inhabit the current Melanesian islands. Austronesian would follow in their migration from the south China through Taiwan southward through the western corridors of the Philippine Sea. They bounced off the Papua New Guinea in what has been described as the "speed boat" to the Pacific. The Austronesians would end up inhabiting the Micronesian islands. Their migration would be followed by the Lapita culture, with the first settlers to Tonga and Samoa around 2,000 years ago and later to the other Polynesian islands around 400 A.D. (Diamond, 1997)

The migration of the Austronesians to the Micronesian islands around 4,000 years ago would be told by the Palauans in Uchelel Belau (The Beginning of Palau). In short, the story would be told that "from the bottom of

sea" sprang forth the initial formation of Palau. A child was born and whose name was Uab. Uab began to grow and kept growing until he was about to consume all the food in the village. The villagers decided to kill Uab by setting him on fire. As they did that, Uab stood up and fell with his spine to the east, his belly toward the west, his feet southerly and head to the north and he would form Palau.

The forensic description of Uab would include the observations of Palauans over a span of 4,000 years since their arrival. All of these observations of common and uncommon occurrences in their environment would facilitate the prescription of the way of life in Palau. This included the lunar calendar that Palauans utilize in determining tides, blooming of flowers, spawning of fish, mating of land crabs and many of such rhythms of nature. It was a society that would survive in harmony with the any and all these environmental behaviors.

So who was Uab?

Was Uab a Homo erectus or Homo sapiens? Or was Uab a deity? Uab was a sacred gift bestowed upon the early settlers of Palau that would lay the foundation of life in Palau. Uab represents the description of a mystic phenomenon that was poorly understood by the early settlers who framed it with deity and mysticism. Uab would also provide the framework for a society that would form and survive through several millennia. All of these are best illustrated by the following poem, which describes the "speed boat to the Pacific," a voyage to Micronesia and specifically Palau.

THE JOURNEY AND UAB

*The journey was damp and long.
Few selected had come along.
A constellation directed navigation.
Fear became constant and central emotion.
Arising from the northern horizon was Uab.*

The ambivalent attitude of the waves.

*Hunger as those left behind in the caves.
 Navigation propelled by the trade winds.
 Trading of emotions as they passed the islands.
 Burning on the northern horizon was Uab
 There is a confusing sound of the journey.
 Cause all had become semi-looney.
 Mutiny had become daily act of challenge.
 Along the journey all have had to change.
 Falling down on the sea facing west was Uab.*

*The journey had come to the end.
 All could see the shadow of the land.
 And calmness of power eternal overwhelm.
 The klemat could now be rested at the helm.
 Floating on the sea is Belau the body of Uab.*

*Sacredness comes about as the undertow of sacrifices
 in our journey toward our various destinations. (Kuartei,
 2004)*

This was Uab, a mystic, a deity and a sacred phenomenon that would erupt to form Palau. However, it is her sacredness that would build her existence, her governance and her cultural systems. Uab was more than just a volcano erupting to form Palau because, it represented the sacred gift that when violated will lead to unhealthy inhabitants.

Sacredness of Palau (Chedolel Belau)

An elderly Palauan man once said, "Not until the sacredness of Palau (Chedolel Belau) is returned, would there ever be a completeness of being a Palauan or the Palauan society." Chedolel Belau are words that are not only hard to understand but quite difficult to feel. They are words for the heart and not the brain, as the old man was trying to convey the essence of Chedolel Belau.

The omnipresence of this sacredness provided the milieu in which Palauans behaved including the proper utilization of all resources including the land. There was a reverence to all that nature had to offer and that exploitation would bring about discordance with ancestral and spiritual governance, which might then exposes one to illness or "wrongness with the spirit."

Practically, it was implemented in very simple rules of behavior that had a deep-rooted conveyance of this sacredness. (Hisashi, 1993) For example. Rule #1. "Do not throw your trash around because, one might put magic on it and make you sick." Rule #2. "If you leave behind a smaller clam, you will find a bigger one." Rule #3. "Take only and all the fish that you need and not one extra because the spirit might not give you fish next

time." Rule #4. "The head of the fish is for the father, not the children." And there many other rules much like these. If we translated the rules it would be as follows. Rule #1. Do not litter. Rule #2. Conserve by sparing the small clams. Rule #3. Do not misuse resources. Rule #4. When kids are alone, they will eat the tail of a fish where there is much less bones. These rules were observed within the framework of sacredness and therefore a sense of reverence. This was ingrained into the psyche of all Palauans. These rules spanned the whole cultural structure including the control of sexuality and sexual behaviors as would be observed by Peter Black in Tobi. (Black, 1978)

Sacredness Undressed

The "Winds of Change" as articulated by Father Hezel, has brought about the contemporary challenges to Chedolel Belau. These challenges have led to changes that have altered the foundation of spirituality and the philosophical definition of Palau as a society and Palauans as a distinct member of the global village. The sacredness of leadership is fading away in the name of contemporary governance, to the extent that politics is getting the best of true governance. Traditional and contemporary leadership positions are used to propel the politics of economy and power rather than altruistic governance, and many willingly accept this as a product of modern governance. This neo-governance exploited surely will erode Chedolel Belau. This erosion of Chedolel Belau has subtly infiltrated to the very essence of daily lives of Palauans and in many different ways. The destruction of environment involved erosion of most if not all fabrics that harnesses a society together. The following are just few examples of such erosion.

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Erosion of Chedolel Belau and Conservation.

The rules of conservation and stewardship of resources was not a family or clan issue, but rather a community issue. The essence of conservation

was out of respect for the security that Palau had to offer rather than the security of what was stored away. For example, the availability of freezers would change the active consciousness of "collecting beyond your need."

Around Palau, there are at least 9 coral dredging and 6 rock quarries. Are they all necessary and could one be enough? Of course, they are not all necessary and one or two would fulfill the current demand however, greed has overridden the sacredness of conservation. How long will it take before we begin to see ciguatera? How long until the terrestrial silt will overwhelm the marine environment and strangled it to death? And just how many unmanaged garbage dumping area does Palau really need?

Erosion of *Chedolel Belau* and Education.

Education has been a modality of transfer of knowledge from one generation to another with regards to environment and its sacredness. In the contemporary Palau, many are saying that education is a right of every Palauan however, traditional Palauan says that education is a societal obligation and is not negotiable. It is not one system but rather a congruent of many teaching modalities including instructional, apprenticeship, formal and even sophisticated longitudinal participatory education. Herenniko in writing about Tongan children says, "I know Shakespeare was/is a great writer...but can you tell me why 13 year old Tongan children should memorize "Daffodils" when they do not even have any idea what "daffodils" are or look like?" (Rapaport, 1999). The sacredness of education did not lie on the content or the system but rather on the societal obligation to make sure its members incurred the knowledge and the skills necessary for them to survive.

Under such traditional system of education, there was no "pass or fail" measurement but rather, it was based on task performance and obligation fulfillment.

In Palau, it is beer drinking adult that liters more than the gum-chewing children. But the paradoxical irony is that the adults are much closer to understanding the sacredness of environment than that of the children who have been taught that "it is the right thing to do."

Erosion of *Chedolel Belau* and Language.

Language is one of those things that define being a Palauan. This is best articulated by Pio Manoa, 1995, "There our words will find the delicate filaments that anchor brain to belly or heart, words to tease other words and words that bear unseen, the source which we must touch to see." (Rapaport, 1999). While the word "sacredness" and *chedolel* might mean the same, sacredness speaks to the brain as *chedolel* speaks to the Palauan heart.

The same is said for the word "environment" and *lukel a klengar* (the nest of life) while are used interchangeably, the environment is cerebral and *lukel a klengar* is a matter of the heart. As we move away from the language of the heart to the language of the brain, so does the erosion of the sacredness become more apparent.

Erosion of *Chedolel Belau* and Religion. While some may argue that sacredness and deity are the same, they are not, because sacredness is a property of spirituality and deity is that of religion. Religion has contributed a lot to the erosion of sacredness of Palau.

In many instances the religious establishment has used "cultural paganism" as way to define what is moral and what is immoral. For example, there are congregation who believe that traditional dancing was immoral. As misconception quite vividly captured by Mr. Poch Suzara in book titled, "Philippines: Damaged Culture" in which he says, "the rhetoric of sin and spiritual terror has been the main weapon used by churches to gain converts, instill fear and compel obedience. Freedom (in God) is meaningless if we do not learn to recognize the harm done by fear, ignorance and superstitions." (Suzara, 2001).

Erosion of *Chedolel Belau* and Physical Environment.

What would happen if the body of Uab is violated? It would bleed, and when it bleeds to the sea, all will become unhealthy. The terrestrial and marine environment would suffer and this would lead to the destruction of limited resources. In many ways

the environment is being prostituted now in Palau because of the erosion of *Chedolel Belau* and mainly by Palauans serving as pimps or liaison for international pimps. This include major business ventures that are involved with dredging coral, rock quarries,

causing major chemical pollution and now discussion of oil exploration.

Sacredness Returned

In the midst of this contemporary Palauan Society, the issue of *Chedolel Belau* is becoming more crucial as a cultural moral framework in the search of personal and national sense of philosophical satiety (sense of contentment). *Chedolel Belau* is what defines the Palauan Society, the Palauans, Palauanness and Palauism. The constructive attempt to define "Being a Palauan" by Dr. Barnett (Barnett, 1949) and the sarcastic definition of Palauans, as "obese, betel nut chewing (&spitting), schizophrenic Budweiser dependent" are both representative of this contemporary definition. But who are Palauans outside of that *Chedolel Belau*? Who are they outside of their culture, their language, their food, their environment and their governance? The evolution or dissolution from traditional sacredness based to jurisprudence based conservation presents a journey that is a suspect for exploitation. The schism created between the neo-democratic and the traditional (democratic aristocracy) leadership may actually be counter-productive in the search for *Chedolel Belau* and preservation of what are limited resources.

While this may have been a crude excerpt in the struggle to understand the old man, perhaps lie in there, is the

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answer to some of the societal disharmony that Palauan as a society is going through and specifically in relation to environmental issues. The inconsistencies of words and actions of the leaders, the cognitive understanding of sacredness, the heartfelt undertow of Chedolel Belau and the conflict that greed presents are some of the disharmonious forces in the Palauan society.

And in this critical time the survivability of country lies in return of the Chedolel Belau, not only terms of religion and morality, but also of integrated cultural, societal, and political morality. Such a framework is not legislated, it shall be instilled in every Palauan within the spirit of true palauaness and palauism. Palauaness and palauism are process of living by which Palauans are defined as distinct people, society, culture and even if they are in the midst of transition. The process of implementing palauaness and palauism brings about the issue of Chedolel Belau. This is not so different that when we talk about being Jewish and or Hebrew.

The critical issue has been articulated by Sionil Jose (2001) when he said to the Philippine Military, "We are paradox even to ourselves. The cliché question of identity, for instance, bedevils many of us not because we are unsure of ourselves but because we cannot, to our own satisfaction, define ourselves."

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To know how to grow old is the master-work of wisdom, and one of the most difficult chapters in the great art of living
(Henri Frederic Amiel)