

**Globalization and Tradition in Palau: Case Study of
the Syncretic *Omengat* (First Child Birth) and *Ngasech* Ceremonies**

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Abstract

This paper looks at how the traditional First Child Birth ceremony in Palau, Micronesia, has become hybridized over time, and what historical and contemporary global influences have affected this process. The ceremony, more commonly referred to as *Omengat* throughout Palau and *Ngasech* on the island of Angaur is central to the traditional exchange system of Palau. There are concerns that through colonization, decolonization and now globalization, Palauans are losing connections to ancestral customs. However, the First Child Birth ceremony is still widely practiced and can serve as a case-study regarding the effects of globalization. This paper reviews the various biocultural aspects of the ceremony such as bathing, food, construction, attire, plant use and the diaspora in light of the effects of globalization. The findings show that the ceremony is hybridized tending towards the traditional. Using a collaborative research model to further delve into the effects of outside influence, we document the use of biological organisms. Current and historical uses for 56 plant species and 3 animal species are presented. Plants were mainly used for medicine (25 species), body adornment (19 species), construction (8 species), ornamental (7 species), food (5 species), and food preparation (4 species). Traditional knowledge differed depending on place, traditional gender roles and clan practices. The modern influence coupled with a deep rooted continuation of historical tradition, form a syncretic event demonstrating the fluidity of culture in today's changing world, and the importance of these effects in the Pacific Islands.

Keywords: First Child Birth, *Ngasech*, *Omengat*, Palau, Micronesia, Globalization, Biocultural.

Introduction

Globalization affects cultures throughout the world (Hau'ofa 1993, Nero et al. 2000). Rapid modernization has had a significant influence in Micronesia and aspects of the cultures are being lost at significant rates. There is particular concern that the younger generations are not following the customs of their ancestors (Krause, 1992, Lee et al. 2001). There are many signs that Palauan society is losing its indigenous culture and systems during the past century, most of which can be attributed to the external forces of colonization, decolonization and globalization (Mita 2010). We contextualize our work within the framework of Jan Nederveen Pieterse's concept about globalization. In his book *Globalization and Culture: Global Mélange* (2015), he discusses how globalization is often "... considered a 'clash of civilizations'...that leads to cultural homogenization." Pieterse however, disputes that view, seeing "Globalization as hybridization" (Pieterse 2015:13). A hybrid, something made by combining two different elements, opens the discussion to include the possibilities of a syncretic culture with both tradition and new influences becoming the present reality. This paper asks, how has the traditional First Child Birth ceremony in Palau, Micronesia, become hybridized over time, and what historical and contemporary global influences have affected this process?

The loss of traditional practices is a threat to biodiversity globally and to Palau's communities (Palau National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan 2004). Researchers and island residents are increasingly asking, if these small island states and their Pacific Island traditions can survive the effects of globalization? Micronesian indigenous peoples are experiencing the incursion of western ideals through previous colonization and now with the increased influx of tourism and foreign workers (Mita 2010, Smith 1997, Yuping 2012). In Palau, this phenomenon takes on another level of meaning as researchers note that one of the characteristics of the Palauan culture is its receptivity to foreign cultures (Abe 1985, Yuping 2012). Recently, public concerns involving the rapid increase in tourism and foreign labor, have been pervasive within Palauan communities and government officials (AFP 2015, Carreon 2016., Carreon 2017).

This paper discusses the effects of outside influences in Micronesia, specifically affecting the Palauan First Child Birth ceremony. Palau's history of colonial occupation, its close relationship with the United States and its increasing allure as a destination for tourism and foreign workers from the Philippines, mainland China and Bangladesh adds to the dialogue about cultural change and its evolution (Nero et al. 2000). Although the indigenous culture of Palau is experiencing rapid change, there is also an active emphasis to retain traditional knowledge and practices.

Formal cultural preservation efforts are not new, especially with the effort of the Modekngai religion, or Ngara Modekngai (United Sect), a monotheistic religious movement founded around 1915. The Modekngai religion is a hybrid of ancient Palauan customs and Christianity. Followers believe in the Christian God and recognize Jesus Christ as the Savior while simultaneously following customary rituals, healing practices and making offerings to ancient deities (Machiko 2002). The origins of Modekngai are unknown, but one belief is that Modekngai began as a nonviolent opposition to the Japanese occupation and is an amalgamation of native animistic and Christian beliefs carried on in an oral tradition of chants called keskes, tending to reinforce the native culture heritage. The Belau Modekngai School in

Ibobang on the island of Babeldaob focusses on preserving traditional Palauan cultural heritage through teaching high school students to practice a traditional lifestyle centered on ancient ideas of family and community (Machiko 2002). Certain cultural aspects such as the traditional Palauan economy and exchange systems connected to life-cycle events have also remained intact (Force and Force 1981, Yuping 2012). One of the most important traditional ceremonies is the First Child Birth Ceremony (known as *Omengat* or *Ngasech*). This paper analyzes tradition and globalization within this ritual in relation to: plant use, construction, food, attire, adornment, gender roles, economic transactions, and ethnobotanical cultural markers.

The First Child Birth ceremony has two different names depending on where people are from and practice the ceremony. On the mainland (Babeldaob and Koror), they call it *Omengat* meaning “hot bath”. In Angaur, the ceremony is known as *Ngasech*, meaning “to elevate” or “to climb up”. This term describes the cultural practice in which the new mother ceremonially ascends a set of stairs to an elevated platform specially constructed for the event. Although these terms are distinct, the nomenclature is not as defined as it appears. For example, one can easily find a common misunderstanding of the terms in either oral discourse with Palauans or Internet discussion in which the *Omengat* ceremony is frequently referred to as *Ngasech*. Even a telephone book advertisement of a Koror florist refers to the event as *Ngasech* (Figure 2). In this paper, we will refer to the event as the First Child Birth ceremony, and in specific references we will call all ceremonies on Koror and Babeldaob, *Omengat*, and those on the island of Angaur, *Ngasech*.

The ritual itself is said to have begun with a mythical legend of the spider demi-god Mengidabrutkoel. He fell in love with a mortal, they married and she became pregnant. Previously all birth occurred through cesarean and frequently the new mother died. Mengidabrutkoel asked his new mother to help his wife live through childbirth, and thus began natural childbirth, and the celebration of a healthy baby and new mother (Society of Historians 1998, Besebes and Kintoki 2014).

The First Child Birth ceremony is of particular interest in terms of cultural cohesion, community building, traditional economy and exchange. Palau is a matrilineal society, a newborn child essentially belongs to the maternal clan and the father’s role in the ceremony was to connect his family to that child and the new mother’s clan (Nero 2000, Yuping 2012). The fact that the First Child Birth ceremony is actively practiced today, often in a more elaborate way than before, is notable because by the end of the Japanese period most traditional practices and cultural exchanges had presumably been eliminated (at least from public view) (Yuping 2012). In 1945, the high chiefs asked that the new government allow the practice of the old exchange ways (Force and Force 1981).

The First Child Birth ceremony was originally described and discussed by Krämer in his seminal work on Palauan culture (Krämer 1917, 1919, 1929) as well as later researchers (Barnett 1960, Besebes and Kintoki 2014, Ferreira 1987, Force and Force 1972, Hillman Kitalong 2012, Hillman Kitalong et al. 2011, Nero 2000, Smith 1983, Society of Historians 1998). These studies provided a base for our topic: analyzing this traditional ceremony from the perspective of globalization. Furthermore, through a participatory approach with collaboration from the Belau National Museum (BNM) in partnership with the University of Hawaii and Florida Atlantic University our work provides specimen-based documentation of the ritual.

In terms of Palau's flora, it has been well-studied with notable examples such as Kanehira (1933) and Fosberg and his colleagues' extensive 45 years of systematics and floristic surveys (Fosberg 1946, 1947, 1957, 1960; Fosberg and Sachet 1975a, 1975b, 1977, 1979, 1980a, 1980b, 1981, 1984, 1987, 1991; Fosberg et al. 1979, 1982, 1987, 1993; Fosberg et al. 1980; Fosberg and Raulerson 1990). Palau's other vegetation studies consist of descriptions of wetland communities including mangrove forests (Stemmermann 1981), a comprehensive vegetation survey (Cole et al. 1987), a rapid ecological study of the Ngeremeduu Bay Drainage (Canfield et al. 1992) and a botanical reconnaissance of Babeldaob (Raulerson et al. 1997). Palau's forests have been systematically inventoried (Donnegan et al. 2007) and important forest areas, long-term vegetation trends, endemism, and species diversity were studied (Costion 2009; Costion et al. 2009; Costion and Lorence 2012; Hillman Kitalong and Holm 2004; Costion and Hillman Kitalong 2006; Hillman Kitalong 2008; Hillman Kitalong et al. 2009). This research adds to these previous studies as we address the plants specifically associated with the ceremony, some of this mirrors the previous work in this area (Hillman Kitalong 2012, Hillman Kitalong et al. 2011), while many of the plants are new to our collections.

Study Area and History

The Republic of Palau, located within latitudes 08°12' to 2°48' and longitudes 131°07' to 134°44', is one of the island groups in Micronesia, making up the westernmost portion of the Caroline Islands (Hillmann Kitalong et al. 2011) (Figure 1). Over 300 volcanic islands and atolls emerge from the ocean, covering an area of 191 sq. miles (Nero 2000). The weather is hot and humid with annual rainfall of 150 inches, and tropical flora and fauna live on the islands and in the seas (Black and Darius 2006). People are thought to have settled the Palauan Islands around 4,000 years ago, coming from the Southeast Asian Islands of the Philippines, Sulawesi and Halmahera (Nero 2000). The Spanish first colonized the islands in 1710, but following Spain's defeat in the Spanish–American War in 1898 subsequently sold the islands to Germany in 1899. Following Germany's defeat in WWI, the islands were formally passed to the Japanese under the 1919 Treaty of Versailles. The Japanese colonial government's influence on the Palauan culture from 1914-1944 was immense as it shifted the official language to Japanese, and the traditional economy from a level of subsistence to a market economy and property ownership from the clan to individuals. Large scale Japanese migration to Palau did not occur until the 1920s, when Palau came under Japanese rule who administered the area as part of the South Pacific Mandate. Japanese settlers took on leading administrative roles in the colonial government, and developed Palau's economy. In 1922, Koror became the administrative center for all Japanese possessions in the South Pacific. The town of Koror was a growing metropolis with factories, shops, public baths, restaurants and pharmacies. However, Japan's occupancy ended in 1944 during World War II, when the United States fought the bloody Battle of Peleliu to gain control of the islands. After the Japanese surrendered in 1945, most of the Japanese population was repatriated back to Japan. People of mixed Japanese-Palauan descent were allowed to remain behind, and now constitute a large minority of Palau's population. In 1947 Palau became part of the United Nations Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands, with the United States as its administrator. In 1978 it became the Independent Republic of Palau and in 1981

they made the Compact of Free Association with the United States. This is an international agreement that establishes a relationship between the United States government and various Pacific Island nations, one of which is Palau. Part of the understanding is that Palau is included in federal disaster relief programs, residents can work in the United States, and the U.S. military has land rights within the country for military bases with the responsibility to protect Palau. The United Nations formally recognized Palau in 1994 (Lee et al. 2012). Today, Palau has bilateral relations with more than 50 countries including the United States and the European Union.

Methods

We held preliminary meetings with the Belau National Museum staff to explain the project's purpose and to propose collaborative participatory research. After our meetings, informal interviews were arranged with those elders and individuals recommended by the National Museum collaborators as knowledgeable about the ceremony and related practices. We were also informed of future planned First Child Birth ceremonies which we could witness and were given permission to attend and participate. Fieldwork was conducted in February and March of 2015, in Babeldaob, Koror and Angaur (Figure 1). We chose these sites as we resided on Babeldaob and had access to neighboring elders, and most Palauans live on Koror Island and it is also the site of the Belau National Museum. We traveled to and visited with knowledgeable residents on the island of Angaur as well, because of the unique way they traditionally practice the ceremony compared to customs elsewhere throughout Palau.

Our methods included structured, semi-structured, and informal interviews, as well as participant observation, and digital and print photograph and video analysis of both historical and recent ceremonies. For the interviews we used open ended questions, allowing the interviewee to direct the flow of conversation (Bernard 2017). This qualitative method does not lend itself to statistical analysis, because not all interviewees discussed identical questions. However, through lengthy interviews repeated throughout the study period, collective views emerged from which patterns and results could be understood, a method outlined by O'Brien (2006) and Cashore et al. (2003). This technique provided a nuanced understanding of how globalization is functioning within the First Child Birth ceremony.

The participants were chosen through 1) snowball sampling, where an initial participant leads to others, and 2) opportunistic interviews as we moved through our daily activities. Interviews began by obtaining background information about the individuals, including birth place, age, time residing in villages, and the ceremonial activities they participated in or observed during childhood and adulthood. Specific questions focused on the individual's experience, especially if they were female, their role in food preparation, knowledge of plants used and their medicinal benefits, construction of related ceremonial structures and special customary practices. For example a line of questions would address the use of botanical specimens for hair adornment: What flowers did you use for your hair? Who in your family knows which ones to use? Did you use the same kind as your mother? From where do you collect? Is it easy or hard to find these flowers? Would you use different flowers? Questions did

not directly address globalization, as that theme emerged from how participants answered questions.

Most interviews were carried out in one session, although time constraints sometimes required informants to have several interviews. Both group and individual interviews were conducted. In group interviews, it is difficult to attribute information to a single person, so information was accredited to the group. Attributing information to specific people documents ownership of their intellectual property, their rights for its use and any benefits derived from this knowledge under the principles of the Convention of Biological Diversity. It also establishes the concept of prior knowledge to identify the source of the information.

For identifying plants used ceremonially, the preferred method was to walk in the collaborator's area of frequent collection as they indicated specific plants for a given purpose. We also reviewed the related biocultural artifacts both on public display and from the extensive collections at the Belau National and the Etpison Museums. During fieldwork interviews, plant voucher specimens were collected from natural areas, along the side of the road and from cultivated home gardens. Plant specimens were georeferenced using a hand-held Garmin GPS unit. Specimens were processed in the national herbarium (BNM) immediately following the collection event. Data was subsequently entered into the herbarium database. Field notes were transcribed and provided data for voucher specimen labels that list the associated collection date, collector numbers, collectors, identification of taxa, common plant names, the description of the plant, the plant habitat, associated plants, and the respective collection site geolocation. The voucher specimen's identifications were confirmed by the herbarium curator and deposited in the Belau National Herbarium (Thomas, M.B. et al. 2016)

A total of 53 interviews were conducted: 43 in Koror and Babeldoab (36 women, 7 men) and 10 in Angaur (6 women, 4 men). The participants included: new mothers preparing for the ceremony, new mothers who recently completed the ceremony, new mothers having completed the ceremony decades previously, grandmothers, aunts, uncles, elders, and two *mechas* (*Omesurech* practitioners). Palau has a series of clan rankings, and the participants spanned the range of rank. All interviews were conducted in English, except for one woman who was bilingual in Japanese and Palauan, with whom we used an interpreter from the Belau National Museum. All interviews were conducted with verbal informed consent.

We also conducted participant observation by attending two *Omengat* ceremonies. Because of cultural restrictions related to gender, only the female researcher was able to fully observe one bathing (*Omesurech*) session and interview two new mothers during the multi-day bathing process (between baths). Male relatives of the new mother built a temporary hut to demonstrate the process of construction and the plant materials used. For analyzing media, the Belau National Museum provided access to their historical archives of First Child Birth ceremony photographs as well as a *Ngasech* video specifically from events that had occurred on Angaur. We analyzed these images looking for patterns of adornment, dress and customary practices through time. We also examined material culture that the museum provided, including artifacts such as skirts, waist belts, bracelets and jewelry.

Results and Discussion

Bathing Ritual

The First Child Birth ceremony is the presentation of a woman after the birth of her first child to the child's father's family and community. The ceremony comprises three primary activities in which the new mother (*mlechell*) participates including the hot bath (*Omesurech*), steam bath (*Omengat*), and the public presentation. This series of cultural activities represents beliefs and practices pertaining to a married woman's first pregnancy and birth. An unwed new mother is generally entitled to the same treatment as a married woman including the hot baths and steaming but she is not presented or adorned for a public presentation ceremony. The term used for this ceremony *Omengat el ralm* (hot baths with just water) (Society of Historians, 1998).

Before the final public presentation ceremony, or "coming out", the ritual involves an elaborate series of multi-day bathings, known as *Omesurech*. This portion lasts from between 4-14 days; the highest ranking clan members requiring the most number of days. The baths are intended to heal the new mother and to lighten, or remove dark skin spots (melasma or chloasma) and smooth stretch marks (also known as striae) on the skin resulting from pregnancy. These historical medical and aesthetic reasons are completely intact, as verified through interviewing locals and a doctor at a renowned clinic.

During the bathing ritual the new mother is not permitted to take a shower or bath using commercial bath soap and tap water but rather continues to apply turmeric infused coconut oil daily. The immediate female family members (grandmother, mother, sisters, auntie's) assume primary roles in preparing all meals and focus on providing and pampering the new mother's daily needs. All meals are prepared for her, and the primary role of the new mother is to simply rest and relax. Needs of the newborn infant are handled by the family relatives with the exception of breast feeding.

The new mother's family begins planning for the event months in advance, beginning with harvesting turmeric (*Curcuma longa*) from their own home garden, neighbors' or purchasing turmeric rhizomes (Figure 3). Strong emphasis is placed on this rhizomatous cultivated canoe plant. For unprocessed rhizomes, a family member dries the washed and cleaned rhizomes in the sun or on a metal tray over an open fire, after which they grind or grate the rhizome and then mix the substance with coconut oil. Fellow kin generally process the coconut oil from the fruits of their own trees, or they can purchase locally produced oil at markets or in small convenience stores (Figure 4).

In Palau the metaphor of the turmeric rhizome is used to explicate relations between kin and between villages. Traditionally, the people of Palau made sense of kin relations through matrilineal descent. To explain these relations they used what has been termed the 'turmeric metaphor' (Parmentier, 1987: 177). That turmeric maintained an importance following its introduction into the Pacific is suggested by its inclusion in inter-island exchange (Rainbird, 2001). Prior to our visit to Yap, an adjacent atoll in in the Federated States of Micronesia, we were even asked to purchase *reng*, a saffron colored dried and ground turmeric powder commonly balled and wrapped in hibiscus and coconut fibers since Palauan's consider the *reng* turmeric to be of high quality. When *reng* is mixed with coconut oil, this combining can have the effect of changing the colored powder from yellow-orange to red, as well as aromatic

attributes. The Palauans visualize the rhizome of the turmeric plant as having a ‘mother’ root from which the off shoots grow. The mother root symbolizes the female side of the matrilineal descent system with strong kin links retained from one generation to the next. The multiple off shoots represent the male side of the matrilineal society with these offspring finding links with other family members increasingly dissipated (Force and Force, 1972; Parmentier, 1987:177). The number of days a new mother spends bathing has remained consistent with the individuals rank, possibly with a slight emphasis on shorter periods.

Hot Water Bath – Omesurech

The men of the new mother’s clan build a special temporary shelter for the bathing with bamboo flooring through which water can drain. Woven coconut frond mats are frequently used to cover the floor and some huts have a raised wooden or bamboo bed. The walls can also be made from bamboo, local hardwood timber (Figure 5) (Table 1), or cloth curtains. The local materials used and the gender delineation of the men making the hut, are traditional, although the inclusion of readily available materials such as the pre-made fabric for the curtains, and the tools such as hammer and nails are now widely used.

Within this structure, the *mechas*, a woman trained in the practice of preparing the medicinal water and bathing new mothers, gives the new mother a hot bath two to three times a day. The new mother, often with her hair in a bun or top-knot, rests between baths in the shelter while applying herself with turmeric and coconut oil. She will spend several days in this space, and traditionally the nights as well. Today, however, many new mothers spend the night sleeping inside the adjacent main house. Some of the participants explained, that today, the comfort of the more modern house takes precedence over the tradition of staying in the outside shelter, a notable difference from earlier times.

Water is boiled from a fire of Australian pine wood (*Casuarina equisetifolia*) that the men from the new mother’s clan gather. This species is preferred since a fire emits little smoke. Family members used to more commonly collect trees from mangrove habitat areas. They reported that these areas are now too muddy and mosquito ridden, so they more frequently cut them from alongside of the road. The *mechas* boils water with *rebotel* (*Syzygium samarangense*). The new mother applies the turmeric infused coconut oil generously to her skin immediately before each bathing treatment, as it helps protect her from the hot water. The *mechas* is trained to ensure that she does not scald the women, although many new mothers discussed their fear of being burned before they underwent the process. The *mechas* applies the boiled leaves with a slapping motion on all parts of her body, and then splashes hot water from a coconut shell or plastic bowl on these same areas. The inclusion of plastic bowls, replacing traditional wooden or clay bowls, is a clear sign of outside influence. Today, knowledgeable *mechas* are in high demand. As the practitioner can earn a considerable sum of money for their cultural expertise, one *mechas* reported, “I have five daughters. I figured I better learn how to do this myself!”

The essential plants including turmeric and coconut oil are still keystone species which remain commonly grown, harvested, and processed locally. The bathing is the component that has stayed the most traditional due primarily to the specialized associated knowledge pertaining to the use and preparation of plants used as an integral part of the ritual.

Herbal Steam Bath – Omengat

On the last day of the hot water bathing ritual the new mother undergoes a single herbal steam bath known as *Omengat*. There are specific plants that the *mechas* gathers to make a special medicinal preparation. These plant species are often clan based, and specific traditional knowledge of plants gathered belongs to individual *mechas* and their respective clans. The numerous medicinal plants the *mechas* collect still hold the utmost cultural importance, and are the most traditionally intact aspect of the land connection in reference to the ceremony.

Historically, there has been much ethnobotanical research published in the Palauan archipelago. Published literature has focused on the medicinal uses of plants (Palau Society of Historians 2000, 2001, Machiko 2002, Dahmer et al. 2012, Balick 2012), construction of the bai, the traditional men’s meeting house (Telmetang 1993) and general ethnobotany (Hillman Kitalong et al. 2011). The medicinal plant studies in Palau have documented more than 80 plant species with more than 235 medical uses (Hillman Kitalong et al. 2011). Palau’s early ethnohistorical source (Krämer 1917, 1919, 1929) also addresses plant use in Palauans’ daily lives. However, many of the previous works lack a comprehensive species checklist summary and documentation crediting individual sources. In Table 1, we present an exhaustive species checklist of plants collected and identified in our study along with species noted in cited literature reviewed.

Bliukel or Steam Bath Room Construction

The steam bath treatment takes place in a distinct temporary hut called the *bliukel* or steam room. The men of the new mother’s clan build the hut. The most common species used for framing is wild bamboo (*Bambusa vulgaris*), preferably harvested from natural areas, or when necessary, from a neighbor’s home garden. Long bamboo stems are split using a machete propped between two trees by pushing the stem forward against the blade (Figure 6). Traditionally, coconut fibers were used to lash the bamboo together, but today it is more common to use small strips of cloth and a few nails, or strips of rubber from the inner tubes of tires to secure the frame together. The herbal steam bath hut is still mostly traditionally constructed, especially in terms of gender, with the men building the hut, yet the inclusion of the modern materials shows an inclusion of globalized materials in the construction. The decline of collection sites for bamboo and the firewood reflects changes in land tenure including ownership and accessibility.

Three framing pieces are tied together vertically and then spiraled out to evenly distribute the weight. Then the frame is bent to the ground where the ends have been sharpened into pointed stakes, and stuck in the earth. Another bamboo strip is wrapped around these in a circle, creating a small half dome shape. Historically, banana leaves were used to cover the hut. Today, they cover the structure with a locally purchased weather-proof polyethylene tarpaulin or blankets in order to retain the heat inside, thus this element is the most foreign influenced change of the *bliukel*.

When the men complete the hut, the new mother enters and sits in the middle on a 3-legged stool (*osokeuakl*) or a specially constructed box seat with a hole cut out designed to facilitate herbal steam treatment of her body, specifically her vaginal area (Figure 7). Underneath the stool, the *mechas* places the prepared boiled herbs with hot water. The new

mother remains in the steam bath as long as she can tolerate the heat. She will also be accompanied by other kinswomen from the new mother's side of the family, three or four at a time, assisting in creating more steam from the medicinal plants (by churning the medicinal plants in the bucket) for healing and making sure that the new mother stays strong and does not become dizzy from the heat. Other kinswomen, normally blood relatives, from the new mother's family will be at the *omeachel*, the place where the steam bath occurs, who are tasked to ensure the new mother's well-being and that the treatment is well implemented (e.g. that the water for the steam bath is hot enough and that the *rebotel* leaves are well boiled for the healing process). Traditionally, baskets of cooked taro corms (*Colocasia esculenta*) are also placed inside the structure to receive herbal steam treatment. This food is called *ongat* and distributed to the kinswomen who have participated in the activities. These are subsequently presented to the family of the husband. At the conclusion of the activity, the new mother exits, she is dried off and rubbed down with oil. She is then led to where she prepares for public presentation and final celebration. Following the treatment, the *mechas* who performed the baths will be paid as much as \$500.00 for her services and one *toluk*. Traditionally, a small *udoud*, *toluk* (trays made from turtle shell which served as traditional women's money) or a newly made grass skirt (*telechad*) would be provided as compensation. This whole aspect of the ceremony has remained intact, and an important aspect about which many new and old mothers discussed.

Food

The changes in the food prepared for and at the ceremony is where one can most easily identify tradition blending with the effects of globalization. On the day of her public presentation or "coming out", after she has received the hot water bath and steam treatment and while her relatives are helping adorn and dress her, relatives and invited guests arrive to witness the final ceremonial event. In ancient times, just the women of the father's clan would have attended, but today the event has grown to include sometimes as many as several hundred people, not all of whom are relatives. Prior to the new mother's public presentation, the distribution of food provided by the kinswomen in the new mother's clan plays a central role. The food is highly traditional in terms of the new mother's clan providing the fare in beautiful arrangements and large quantities. This is still a point of pride, social contact and the expectation and fulfillment of responsibility. Many women before the ceremony talked about the making of the food. Often there is a large fruit-vegetable bouquet or arrangement on display filled with local tropical produce, they traditionally and currently grow on their land, such as coconut, pineapple, banana, eggplant, passionfruit, beans, cucumber. However, there is also the globalized and notable inclusion of commercial produce, such as apples, kiwifruit, grapes, oranges, strawberries, squash, and watermelon.

Kinswomen make plates of prepared food, which would have been served in woven baskets, some of which still are, but more often are served in the non-traditional Styrofoam-boxed plate lunches or aluminum bento box trays, the latter provided with chopsticks. The bento boxes demonstrate the incorporation of specific Japanese cultural influences as they are common in Japanese cuisine. A traditional bento holds rice, fish or meat, with pickled or cooked vegetables, usually in a box-shaped container with separate sections for each piece of food.

Furthermore, the use of chopsticks as the preferred eating utensil with the box is an adoption directly from the Japanese occupation.

Traditional crops and meats such as cooked taro, tapioca (cassava), pork, chicken, fish and sugar cane, are presented and distributed in woven baskets to the young father's side of the family who come with *toluk*, (the women's turtle shell money) and to see their son's wife and child, for the marriage exchange, which is all deeply Palauan. Increasingly today, the presentation of imported processed and packaged goods is also popular. These goods may include imported rice, soy sauce, cereal, and cookies, packed inside a container as part of the ceremonial exchange. These foods are examples of commodities now purchased in the cash economy with external market influences, mostly from Guam, Hawaii and the mainland United States. Processed foods high in salt, high fructose corn syrup, and sugar is increasingly becoming a nutritional problem with a rise in the incidence of diabetes in the country (Hilawe et al. 2016). This addition of commercial food products is likely the result of the decline of the production of traditional farming and shift to the consumption of foods more commonly consumed in the Western diet

Adornment, Attire and Presentation

Following the herbal steam bath treatment and after guests have been provided food the new mother is formally presented to the guests. The main purpose for the formal presentation is for the parents to publically present their daughter to the baby father's family. This presentation reflects a vital non-verbal communication between the new mother's family's belief of the high regard and beauty of their daughter and the father's family's willingness and public affirmation to accept her into the family.

Historically, new mothers were publically presented topless, as the women's breasts are emphasized as a demonstration of her nursing abilities. Topless presentation may not be an individual choice but influenced by the clan status and direction from immediate family members. However, today most women choose to cover their bare breasts, often wearing a bra made of coconut shells, woven pandanus leaves and turtle shells. Although the practice of modestly covering themselves is not traditional, the raw materials used for the tops, are still collected locally.

Historical archival photos reviewed from the 1970s and 80s also identified a common practice in which women once wore large numerous flower leis over their bare breasts. Our review of historical archive photos provided evidence that there was also a transitional post WWII era when women were bare breasted, but covered themselves with numerous flowered Hawaiian-styled lei. Lei were not historically a tradition of the Palauan culture, so presumably this practice was adopted from other Pacific Islands, most likely from Palauan migrants returning from Guam or the Hawaiian islands.

One collaborator explained why women are more modest today stating that "These ceremony pictures all get posted on Facebook". Indeed, at every First Child Birth ceremony we observed, there were large groups of family and friends taking digital photos and videos. The application of social media especially by the youth and young adults has empowered them to publicly broadcast and distribute the event like never before

Nonetheless, the pose and length of time required remains traditional. Every new mother stands somewhat stiffly in a traditional pose with her left arm under her breasts,

cupping her right elbow to support and show her breasts while holding up to 3 traditional *rebotel* leaves. Traditionally these were used to wipe the sweat from her face, while today most new mothers remain in their stoic pose and a close relative uses a cloth or paper towel. Alternatively, some new mothers hold an introduced ornamental flower bouquet (Figure 8). Participants were opinionated about the importance of holding the traditional leaves as opposed to locally harvested or commercial floral bouquets. Since the leaves are no longer used for their traditional purpose, the opening was created to replace them with a tied arrangement of flowers, not of their original culture. When interviewing local florists, they showed us a United States wedding bridal reference book from which floral bouquets can be selected and ordered. The book clearly demonstrated an effect of the close relationship between the United States and Palau, as the ceremony is not a wedding in the western interpretation.

The presentation of the new mother is steeped in tradition with her walking out on mats in the Palau-centered ritual. She is guided by hand when walking during the presentation. A few of her female relatives lay down several woven green coconut frond mats (*telutau*) to provide a pathway, lifting one mat on which she has just stepped barefoot and moving it to the front so that her newly bathed feet do not touch the ground. She walks on these revolving mats until she reaches the center of the presentation area, often a low tiered decorated stage. In one ceremony we attended in Melekeok, the new mother was presented walking backwards. In Angaur, a new mother is expected to climb a tall platform, the higher the number of steps, the higher her clan rank. It was reported to us that the highest ranking clan would traditionally have constructed the platform with as many as one hundred steps supported by felled coconut trees, and could exceed 30 feet in height and two women would accompany her to the top. Two types of food are presented one from the sea, fish, and another from the land, taro (*Colocasia esculenta*). Her feet always touching mats or the ascension as well as these particular foods are fully traditional.

Attire has remained mostly traditional with small influences of the modern cash economy. Following the steam bath, the new mothers face and body are once again rubbed with turmeric-infused coconut oil and adorned by their kinswomen according to observed clan traditions and family histories. A new mother's clothing generally features the following traditionally made items: a skirt, waist belt, bra, earrings, necklace, and headdress. Combinations of the following items vary widely within Palau. Traditional skirts (*cheriut*) were used and made from hibiscus fiber (*Hibiscus tiliceaus*) and dyed in multi-colored sections. Certain special patterns and colors are associated with the new mother's clan's rank and an individual's status (Salmi-Saslaw 1988). Older traditional ceremonial skirts are often revered and passed down matrilineal lines from new mother to daughter. Today, the new mother often wears a locally-made cotton yarn skirt which reaches beyond her knees and the upper parts of which are tied round the waist below the navel. The skirt remains in respective clan colors, but today is more often made from cotton yarn. For those who do choose the traditional material, due to lack of hibiscus fiber producers, Palau imports its *chermall* hibiscus fibers from Yap for the more traditional skirts, and the Palauan weavers make the skirts in country, as Palauan grass skirts differ from the Yapese.

The new mother also wears a waist belt (*chelius*), the significance of which is to hold in her waist, emphasizing a smaller waist and engorged breasts ready for nursing. These belts are often made of Hawksbill turtle shell (*Eretmochelys imbricata*), coconuts (*Coco nucifera*), or

woven pandanus (*Pandanus tectorius*). The wearing of the belt has remained intact, although the styles for some have changed. We were informed that after the WWII era, a popular practice for women was to use wide men's belts. In one of the ceremonies we observed, the new mother wore a belt woven from pandanus, yet it replicated the form of a square leather belt. This was an interesting combination of western influence and traditional style.

Hair adornments or headdresses are clan specific, and remain important and highly connected to traditions. A close relative or aunt generally styles the new mother's hair according to their tradition, rank, and lineage. The headdress may include ornamental, native or introduced flowers (Table 1), as well as the exceptionally long central tail feathers of the White-tailed Tropicbird (*Phaethon lepturus*) or more uncommonly a simple or ornate Hawksbill turtle shell comb. Family relatives often collect the flowers themselves, or today they can more easily purchase them from a local florist in Koror. One new mother we interviewed discussed how she was disappointed that the desired flowers were not available, so her aunts insisted that she use plastic artificial flowers. The participant's level of disappointment years later, at having had to use plastic, demonstrates the importance of having this aspect of their adornment be customary.

In contrast to the practices throughout Palau, the red-orange kelau flower (*Cordia sebestena*) represents an important component of the unique customs and traditions practiced by the people of Angaur Island. The kelau flower which appears symbolically on the flag of Angaur state is prominently used in the *Ngasech* as a headdress, earrings and wrist adornments. This single flower symbolizes the oneness and the unity of all of Angaur's people into a cooperative whole (*kltalreng*). The eighteen black stamens of the flower represent the eighteen clans of Angaur. This flower has such significance, that children are restricted from playing play with it, and no one is to regularly adorn themselves with the flower. Today, recent major cyclone events have resulted in the decline of *Cordia sebestena* in its native coastal forest habitat making the flower increasingly difficult to harvest.

Earrings are often worn and are commonly made from either coconut shell or Hawksbill turtle shell. The most important adornment is a Palauan Money bead or *iek*, a set of Palauan money beads strung on a black cord from the father's family, and this is still uniformly practiced. This is part of a public display of the wealth exchange that had been negotiated privately before the ceremony with the uncles of the new father and the new mother's household. In addition to the Palauan Money bead, money and gifts of turtle shell "money," *toluk*, are exchanged to mark this significant moment in their life. Made from the shell of the Hawksbill sea turtle, these shallow, oval-shaped bowls were originally used as serving vessels but eventually evolved into ceremonial objects that function as a traditional form of currency. The process of making women's money begins with the capture of a sea turtle, whose individual shell plates are heated in freshwater and formed into bowls using a wooden mold. Once it has cooled, the bowl is removed from the mold and an artist polishes its surface and carves ornamental projections around its edges. The objective is to keep surface decoration to a minimum so as to highlight the natural patterns inherent in the turtle's shell. Decoration is typically limited to abstract forms around the edges of the bowl. All of these material items are still used, holding a firm place in the present day ritual, demonstrating the connection to land and sea, and how people have used it for centuries.

Since the development of portable cameras, and more commonly today, driven by the availability of digital cameras, iPads, and cellular phones, family members often pose for photographs with the new mother. It is not uncommon to have numerous photographers instantly pushing event photos or video content to social media accounts such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and Snapchat. The father's family participates first, with the father himself often holding the newborn infant. Historically, men would not have attended the ceremony. When we interviewed males, and asked if they were going to attend a particular *Omengat*, many responded that they were not attending, because "It's for women". However, today men are clearly present at ceremonies but often remain gathered in small groups at the outskirts of ceremonial site. For many families, after the initial photographs are taken, the men withdraw from the main presentation area. Also, today the newborn baby is being included in the presentation and photography. In one occasion we witnessed an infant dressed in an identical adornment and skirt as the new mother with a yarn skirt and a tiny woven pandanus bra. Historically, the newborn baby was not a participant of the ceremony. Following the photography, dancing and revelry begins. Today, there is normally a lead singer supported by a local band, or a DJ with music. Many artists are popular local musicians with a specialty of providing entertainment for First Child Birth ceremonies.

Dancing begins with the women from the father's clan appearing together adjacent to the new mother. As a means of affirmation and acceptance they splash her feet with the medicinal herbs and water prepared for the herbal steam bath which have been placed in several plastic buckets at her feet. This activity serves as a non-verbal acknowledgement and recognition of welcoming and accepting the new mother into the father's family. Other women then continuously join the group for different songs. All the while, the new mother stands stoically in a traditional pose while female friends and family dance around her. Traditionally it would just have been the women from the new father's family dancing, but now women from all different kinds of family relations and friendships participate.

This is the most notable dramatic effect of globalization. Today, the First Child Birth ritual has evolved from a small ceremony at which historically only the new mother and a few of her clanswomen presented the new mother to the women from the father's clan to now a larger ceremony. Many relatives and friends attend, photographing the event and sending near synchronous video and digital media to the Internet through social media applications, hosting up to several hundred people and costing up to tens of thousands of dollars with extra food and drink being prepared for unexpected guests. Perhaps these large events today relate to the gift giving and sense of cultural renaissance prestige, as they are also occurring on the mainland US and in Hawaii as well. These changes may represent a changing of the ceremony's meaning, or simply interpreted as a growing influence and an increased presence of the traditional ceremony itself within the larger community. Having all kinds of women dancing, the inclusion of the DJ music, the bands and singers, have changed greatly from the original format, where just the women from the father's clan would have danced around her and slapped her feet with the steam bath herbs.

United States currency, commonly dollar bills (an object already intrinsically steeped in symbolism) are presented and waved by female dancers as they circle the new mother. These dollar bills in the more recent past would have simply been stuck to the new mother adhering as a result of the heavy turmeric infused coconut oil on her skin. However, currently local banks

stopped accepting the often yellowed-soiled bills. Now a family member usually stands nearby with a woven basket and collects the bills. The waving and gifting of US dollars to the new mother, is an example again of the influence of the cash economy and external influence. It does however, add to the formal exchange tradition through an informal practice in which more family and friends can contribute and participate. This custom is a way of having guests contribute to the start of the new mother's life with a little extra income. It is also wishing the couple and baby, although indirectly, good fortune. This is perhaps a syncretic post WWII contemporary addition to the ceremony possibly influenced by the popular wedding money dance common to the Philippines.

As guests to a ceremony held on Koror we witnessed a new mother also decoratively adorned in money lei, a type of garland fashioned in a traditional Hawaiian style but made entirely out of genuine United States dollar bills. The example of the money lei can be interpreted as an added rendition of money around the neck like the money bead with the added influence of flower leis from earlier external influence. The fact that they were dollar bills demonstrates the colonial influence of the United States, manifested as part of a traditional exchange system.

Ethnobotanical Cultural Markers-Plants Used as Part of the First Born Ceremony

Women and men use numerous plants as part of the ceremony. The following are the plants that we recorded during our study (Table 1). Plants play a large role in all parts of the ceremony, from bathing, hut construction, food preparation to adornment. As noted, the plants used are specific to clans, thus they carry not only environmental importance, but are cultural indicators as well. We also see a difference, especially with the kelau flower from Anguar, in plants that play a large role in certain geographic areas. These plants are distinct, carrying the markers of tradition in terms of their representation in the First Child Birth ceremony. Furthermore, their collection or lack thereof, adds to the importance of certain species availability and draws attention to the environmental factors affecting the ceremony traditionally, and today.

Conclusions

In looking at elements that have remained traditional, gender was always an organizing principle in Palauan society. Kin, money, services, and food were categorized as male or female and flowed back and forth in patterned exchanges. The gender roles within the First Child Birth ceremony are as strong as ever. The men and women each delineate their activities and fulfill the duties accordingly. The only difference is the presence of men from both clans at the ceremony itself. Our research looks at globalization in terms of hybridization and what factors influence these shifts or those parts that remain historically similar to the past. Through this traditional ceremony we look at culture and the environmental connection of the people to the plants used for this event, and how that have evolved and/or remained intact. The importance of the plants that the *mechas* use, demonstrates the strong connection to land and clan specific biological knowledge. Although some plant use is imported, such as the bouquets, the flora that is most meaningful, those plants used for the bath and steam, have remained traditional and

central to the ritual. As noted, the ceremony incorporates some modern elements, while keeping the tradition strong. Thus, the First Child Birth ceremony, *Omengat* and *Ngasech* can be seen in many ways as an anchor to an element of the ancestors' customs as the culture evolves. Analyzing this ceremony is important to the larger discussion about globalization in the region. At the same time, with the First Child Birth ceremony, tradition and modern culture are hybridizing and evolving together. Future studies can explore how the ceremony affects, or is affected by, the diaspora participating in First Child Birth ceremonies in other countries.

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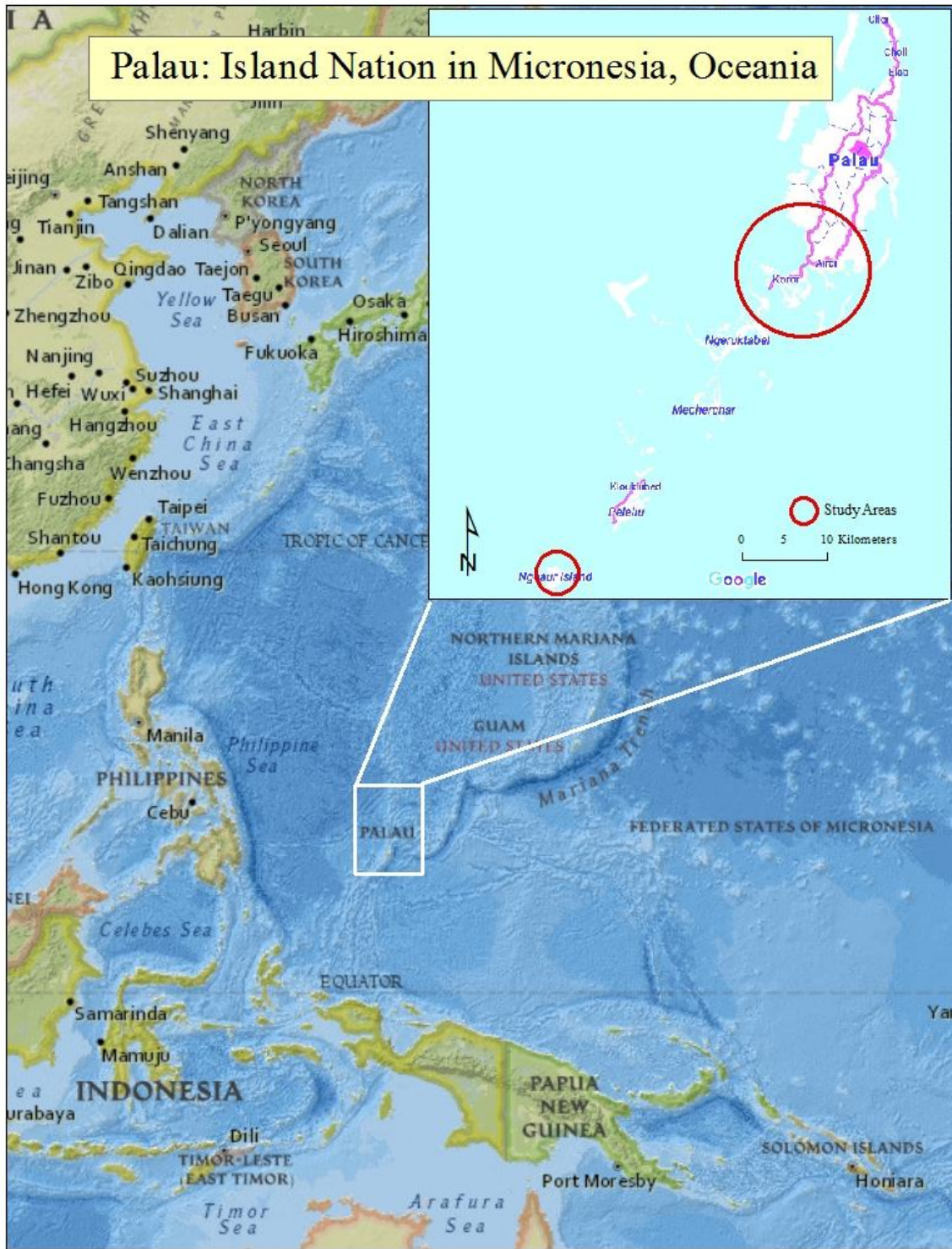


Figure 1

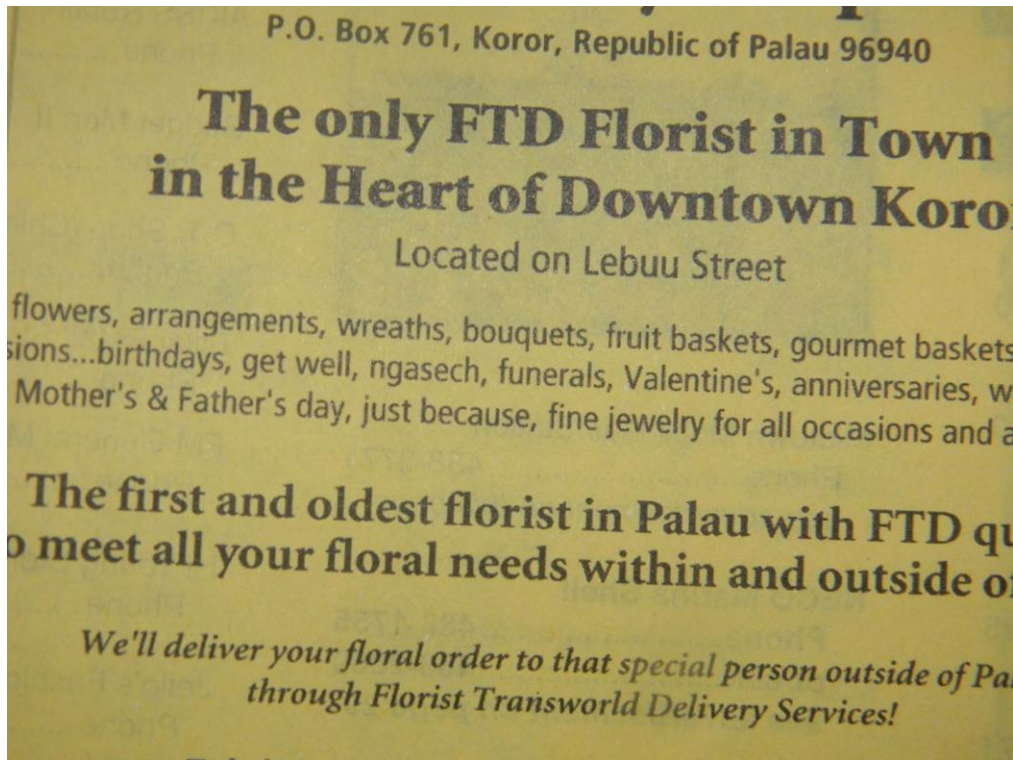


Figure 2.



Figure 3.



Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8

Table 1. Animals and Plants Used in the First-Birth *Ngasech* and *Omengat* ceremonies.

Palauan Name	Scientific Name	Family	Form	Uses
ANIMALS				
buich	<i>Cypraea tigris</i>	Cypraeidae	mollusk	Body adornment
dudek	<i>Phaethon lepturus</i>	Phaethontidae	bird	Body adornment
ngasech	<i>Eretmochelys imbricata</i>	Cheloniidae	turtle	Body adornment
PLANTS				
chebeludes	<i>Allophylus timoriensis</i>	Sapindaceae	tree	Medicine
	<i>Alpinia purpurata</i>	Zingiberaceae	herbaceous	Ornamental
buuch	<i>Areca catechu</i>	Arecaceae	tree	Ornamental
bambuu	<i>Bambusa vulgaris</i>	Poaceae	herbaceous	Construction
kodenges	<i>Bruguiera sexangula</i>	Rhizophoraceae	tree	Construction
	<i>Buddleja globosa</i>	Scrophulariaceae	shrub	Body adornment
	<i>Calotropis gigantea</i>	Apocynaceae	shrub	Body adornment
irang irang	<i>Cananga odorata</i>	Annonaceae	tree	Medicine
ngas	<i>Casuarina equisetifolia</i>	Casuarinaceae	tree	Food Preparation
techellela chull	<i>Cassytha filiformis</i>	Lauraceae	vine	Medicine
ochod	<i>Cinnamomum pedatinervium</i>	Lauraceae	tree	Medicine
malchianged	<i>Citrus aurantiifolia</i>	Rutaceae	tree	Medicine, Food
lius	<i>Cocos nucifera</i>	Arecaceae	tree	Medicine, Food, Food preparation, Body adornment
kesuk	<i>Codiaeum variegatum</i>	Euphorbiaceae	shrub	Ornamental
kukau	<i>Colocasia esculenta</i>	Araceae	herbaceous	Food
kelau	<i>Cordia sebestena</i>	Boraginaceae	tree	Body adornment
sis	<i>Cordyline fruticosa</i>	Asparagaceae	shrub	Body adornment
chedebsungel	<i>Crateva religiosa</i>	Capparaceae	shrub	Medicine, Food

kesol	<i>Curcuma longa</i>	Zingiberaceae	herbaceous	Medicine, Body adornment
keskus	<i>Cymbopogon citratus</i>	Poaceae	herbaceous	Medicine
kertaku	<i>Decaspermum parviflorum</i>	Myrtaceae	shrub	Medicine
kemokem	<i>Derris trifoliata</i>	Fabaceae	vine	Medicine, Construction
	<i>Dianthus caryophyllus</i>	Caryophyllaceae	herbaceous	Body adornment
kobesos	<i>Dianella carolinensis</i>	Xanthorrhoeaceae	herbaceous	Medicine
kesiil	<i>Eugenia reinwardtiana</i>	Myrtaceae	shrub-tree	Medicine
kertaku	<i>Eurya japonica var. nitida</i>	Theaceae	shrub	Medicine
itouch	<i>Dicranopteris linearis var. ferruginea</i>	Gleicheniaceae	fern	Ornamental
blacheos	<i>Gmelina palawensis</i>	Lamiaceae	tree	Construction
	<i>Gypsophila paniculata</i>	Caryophyllaceae	herbaceous	Body adornment
chemudelach	<i>Hedyotis korrorensis</i>	Rubiaceae	shrub	Medicine
bussonge	<i>Hibiscus rosa-sinensis var. rosa-sinensis</i>	Malvaceae	shrub	Ornamental
chermall	<i>Hibiscus tiliaceus</i>	Malvaceae	tree	Body adornment
kerdeu	<i>Ixora casei</i>	Rubiaceae	shrub	Body adornment
kerdeurangebard	<i>Ixora coccinea</i>	Rubiaceae	herbaceous	Body adornment
iaml	<i>Limnophila aromatica</i>	Plantaginaceae	herbaceous	Medicine
iuetekill	<i>Lophopyxis maingayi</i>	Lophophyxidaceae	liana	Medicine, Food
mekekad	<i>Lumnitzera littorea</i>	Combretaceae	tree	Construction
olochouila beab	<i>Lycopodiella cernua</i>	Lycopodiaceae	clubmoss	Ornamental
bkau	<i>Maranthes corymbosa</i>	Chrysobalanaceae	tree	Food preparation
matakui	<i>Melastoma malabathricum var. marianum</i>	Melastomataceae	shrub	Medicine
kertub	<i>Melicope denhamii</i>	Rutaceae	tree	Medicine

chebechab	<i>Microsorium scolopendria</i>	Polypodiaceae	fern	Medicine
meliik	<i>Nepenthes mirabilis</i>	Nepenthaceae	herbaceous	Medicine
kisaks	<i>Pongamia pinnata</i>	Fabaceae	tree	Medicine
ongor	<i>Pandanus tectorius</i>	Pandanaceae	tree	Body adornment
ongael	<i>Phaleria nisidai</i>	Thymelaeaceae	tree	Medicine
dudurs, udoud	<i>Phyllanthus amarus</i>	Phyllanthaceae	shrub	Medicine
kebui	<i>Piper betle</i>	Piperaceae	vine	Body adornment
chelilairangebard	<i>Plumeria rubra</i>	Apocynaceae	tree	Body adornment
chelangel	<i>Planchonella obovata</i>	Sapotaceae	tree	Medicine, Food preparation
	<i>Raphia taedigera</i>	Arecaceae	tree	Body adornment
tebechel	<i>Rhizophora mucronata</i>	Rhizophoraceae	herbaceous	Construction
	<i>Sansevieria trifasciata</i>	Asparagaceae	herbaceous	Ornamental
ukall	<i>Serianthes kanehirae</i> <i>var. kanehirae</i>	Fabaceae	tree	Construction
	<i>Strelitzia reginae</i>	Strelitziaceae	herbaceous	Body adornment, Ornamental
rebotel	<i>Syzygium samarangense</i>	Myrtaceae	tree	Medicine
ngmui	<i>Stemonorus ammui</i>	Stemonuraceae	tree	Construction

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