

1. 'Ken-pai', A Glass Bracelet from Yap

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In his paper on Palauan money, Force (1959) proves that the crescents of opaque glass, which with beads served for currency on Palau, are really segments of bracelets, identical to those found in ancient burial sites of the southern Philippines, especially on the island of Cebu. The question raised is: whether whole bracelets were diffused and then segmented, or whether only fragments reached Palau? The finding on Yap of a whole bracelet may contribute to the solution of this problem.

It was Kubary (1895) who first pointed to Yap as a source of the Palauan money. This agrees with traditions on present day Yap, that a great number of beads were traded to Palau, first as payment for food on canoe sailings, while later they were offered to the Palauans in order to obtain access to the quarries for chipping stone discs. Beads were taken along by the Yapese on sailing trips to distant islands to be bartered for food. This is of interest for the history of the spread of beads within the Pacific. On Yap, beads preceded necklace money of shell-discs and stone money as measure of value; a number of beads are still to be found in the possession of certain families on Yap. Their origin has been forgotten, and mythical stories are told telling how the ancestors of the present owner acquired the beads. Whether bracelets or fragments of these were also traded from Yap to Palau is not known. However, as one whole glass bracelet is today in the possession of an old man on Yap, it seems quite possible that in the past a similar piece found its way to Palau, though the details of the transaction are no longer remembered. About certain valuable beads, there is the story of a large bead *Galdait*, which reached Palau hidden in a cooked taro (*dait*), or that of the *Balul-ap*, brought over to Palau by Rengenbai, the pseudo-chief of Rul, and reported to be in the possession of a family in Mollroioch village.

The bracelet in question (Fig. 1) is owned by Fatamag, the present chief of the village of Onean, Gagil Municipality, in the eastern part of Yap. Fatamag must be about seventy years of age. He keeps the bracelet in a small bag plaited of sennit, buried under the stone platform of his former house—destroyed by the Japanese—on the land *Gothebiel*. The bracelet is considered a *vonod*, a valuable object endowed with magic power that cannot be traded and is not shown to outsiders. As revealed in a dream, it is animated by a spirit who gave his name as *Ken-pai*. (*Ken-pai* is one of the legion of minor spirits of Yap.) Accordingly, the bracelet became known and is spoken of as *Ken-pai*. It occupies the place of a *thagith*, or family spirit of the land *Gothebiel*. When, in former days, the tributaries of the 'Outer Islands' (Ulithi and Wooleai group of islands) arrived in Gagil to offer homage to the lords of their land and their ancestral spirits—*Gothebiel* having ties with the island Fanalop—*Ken-pai* was invoked, and a woven mat, the religious offering *mepel* or *mevil*, was hung up in its honour.

Fatamag is said to have been offered large sums of money by Palauans for his bracelet; in particular a man called Milliong, who spent many years on Yap where he married a Yapese woman, bade 500 dollars for its possession.

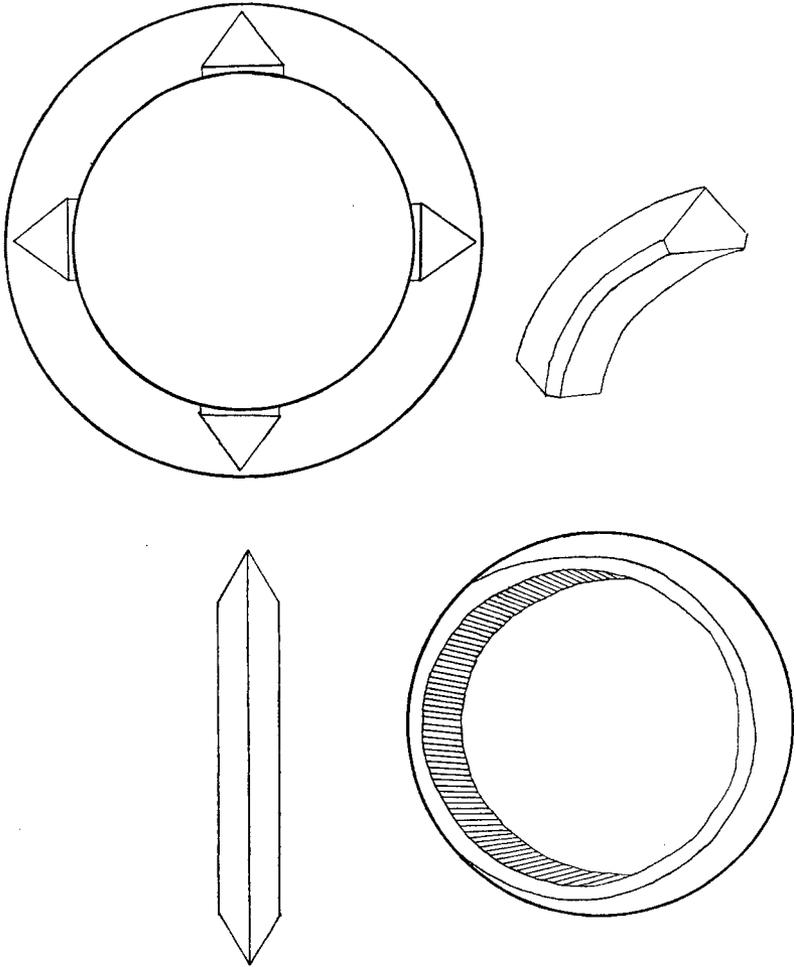


FIG. 1. Glass bracelet from Yap.

It is not known for how many years or generations the bracelet has been in the hands of the owner of the land *Rothebiel*. The story tells that, long ago, a woman of the village of Maki, to the north of Onean, got married to *Gothebiel*. Maki, being a village of an inferior rank to that of Onean, she could not take to her new home a valuable object of some kind. She was despised in Onean and when visiting her family in Maki she complained and spoke of divorce. During the following night, her grandmother, the mother of the young woman's father, had a dream: A spirit appeared to her and said, 'Send your son to his taro patch early tomorrow morning, and tell him to look carefully for some precious object.' The

old woman did as she had been told, but her son returned empty handed from his search. The next night the dream repeated itself. After the spirit had spoken, the woman woke up and remained awake until dawn. She called her son and told him, 'I have dreamed as before. You must go to the taro patch and look again.' Her son examined the leaves of the taro plants and found one leaf that had been pierced, but the split had already closed itself. He unfolded the leaf and found a bracelet on the ground beneath. He took it to his mother. At night the spirit appeared to the woman and asked her, 'Did your son find anything in the taro patch?' When she expressed her thanks, the spirit said, 'I am *Ken-pai*, and I give you the precious bracelet for your granddaughter.' The next morning the old woman summoned her granddaughter to Maki. She gave her the bracelet and told her that it was *Ken-pai*, the spirit, who presented it to her. 'You must pray to him as to your *thagith*.' From this time the successive owners of the land, *Gothebiel*, keep the bracelet as a treasure. . . .

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