

# **The Whispered Memories of Belau's Bais**

## **A cherechar a lokelii**

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We certify that we have read this thesis and that, in our opinion, it is satisfactory  
in scope and quality as a thesis for the degree of Master of Arts in Pacific Islands Studies.

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## **Abstract**

Grounded in the Belauan proverb “A Cherechar a lokelii,” this thesis explores the ways the Bai, the Belauan meetinghouse, informs Belauan principles and identity as well as the roles it plays in illuminating strategies for thinking about contemporary issues. Today people in Belau and around the world face challenges such as cultural marginalization and climate change; although separate issues, both find paths connecting one to the other. The physical structure and the social, cultural and political structures that come out of the bai indirectly demonstrate the connectivity of such issues as well as illuminating strategies for thinking about them. Specifically, using the Belauan strategy of indirect replies as a central methodology, this thesis engages in the stories painted on and told about the bai, gathered through the interviewing of Belauan elders and other scholarly research. It traces the history of Belau, from origins to colonization to political independence, with a specific focus on the bai as a key site and catalyst for Belauan identity. Ultimately, the bai gives us the foundation to begin examining strategies to address contemporary issues and challenges in addition to provoking us to further explore other types of indigenous strategies and ways of viewing the world.

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## Glossary

**Aibebelau:** indirect replies.

**Aimeliik:** Belauan state located on the southwest corner of Babeldoab; Aimeliik is also the third of Miladeldil's four children.

**Angaur:** one of Belau's first islands, Angaur or Ngeaur is a remote southern island in Belau that was the site of phosphate mining and naval battles during WWII.

**Babeldoab:** largest island of Belau; literally means upper sea.

**Badrulchau:** stone megaliths in Ngerchelung that were once being used to build a bai for the gods.

**Bai:** village meetinghouse; guesthouse; community house (often referred to as abai in English).

**Bai ra Imeungs:** bai built in Aimeliik for the people and klobak of Aimeliik.

**Bai ra Melekeong:** bai built in Melekeok in 1992 for the people and klobak of Melekeok.

**Bai ra Ngechesechel ar Cherechar:** bai built in 1969 to replace the damaged Kebtot el Bai. Bai ra Ngechesechel ar Cherechar stands next to the Belau National Museum till this day.

**Bairulchau:** unfinished bai by the gods. See *badrulchau*.

**Beluu:** village

**Bersoech er Ngeaur:** snake of Angaur, also known as Mesaodngerel, who is said to have taught Belauan's the practice of kelulau.

**Bischerad:** step-terrace in Ngerchelung that was constructed by the gods as a ladder to heaven.

**Bitang ma bitang el taoch:** division of klobak into two groups (often even numbered chiefs are one group while odd number chiefs make up the other group).

**Cheldebechel:** club; association.

**Delal a telungalek:** mothers of the descent-based unit

**Dilukai:** large carving of women on bais gable.

**Dirrabkau:** name of Iluochel when she lived in Ngerchebukl under a bkau tree.  
Dirrabkau's name has changed every time she has moved. Her first name was originally Dirramellomes.

**Er a Ititiumd:** Literally translates into mossy past; time of the gods.

**Er a Rechuodel:** ancient times.

**Kelulau:** whisper; confidential and important political matters.

**Kebliil:** clan

**Kebtot el Bai:** bai commissioned to be built in 1951 as a meetinghouse and a museum.

**Klidm:** head

**Klobak:** council of chiefs in which usually contain ten members.

**Latmikaik:** women clam that gave birth to first Belauans.

**Lukes:** area of ocean between Angaur and Peleliu also known as Mekaeb; Origin place of Latmikaik, gaint clam who gave rise to Belauan people.

**Medechiibelau:** the god of Airai village; a trickster god

**Melekeok:** located on the central east cost of Babeldoab, Melekeok is home to Belau's capital. Melekeok is also the second of Miladeldil's children.

**Meklou ulechell a kelulau:** Six basic guiding principles that include: [1] respect and honor (omengull ma omeluu), [2] Praise or appreciation (odanges), [3] Compassion (klechubechub), [4] Cooperation and communication (klauiuerenges), [5] Good conduct/character (kldung), [6] Unity (odekial a reng).

**Meluus el kelulau:** a very secretive and mysterious strategy passed along and transacted between beluu and klobak. It is a fearful kelulau because it can lead to the seizure of land and murder or assassination.

**Miladeldil:** name given to Dirrabkau after she died in a flood and was revived by the tekiimelab.

**Ngcheed:** village in Angaur where first klobak was established.

**Ngeraod:** legendary sacred location in Ngerchebukl inhabited by demi-gods.

**Ngerechebukl:** a hamlet in Ngiwal

**Ngeremlengui:** located on the north-central west coast of Babeldoab, Ngeremlengui includes the large hill mass of Roimelengui, where Miladeldil gave birth to her four children – the oldest being Ngeremlengui.

**Ngerulchau:** place in Ngerchelong where megaliths remain today.

**Obekul ordomel:** ten rubak who create the beluu klobak; first-ranking rubak of all hamlets ruling an entire beluu.

**Olbiil ra Kelulau:** translating into “house of whispers” is the name for Belau’s national congress.

**Omengol:** services women provide at the bai as a way of earning income or escaping spouse.

**Ongeluluul:** stone platform with four stone backrest for the first four ranking chiefs built adjacent to the bai; platform where Chief’s met when a consensus cannot be reached among the full klobak.

**Orachel:** man who was taught by the gods how to build a bai.

**Oreor:** also known as Koror, the Belauan state of Oreor is an island in between Peleliu and Babeldoab. The youngest of Miladeldil’s children, Oreor was once Belau’s capital.

**Ourrot:** elder females who were members through matrilineal descent (ochell).

**Outang el bai:** name of Airai’s bai to farthest left. See Kramer’s 1919 photograph.

**Rubak:** elder or a chief

**Tekiimelab:** Legendary messengers of the gods (seven in number).

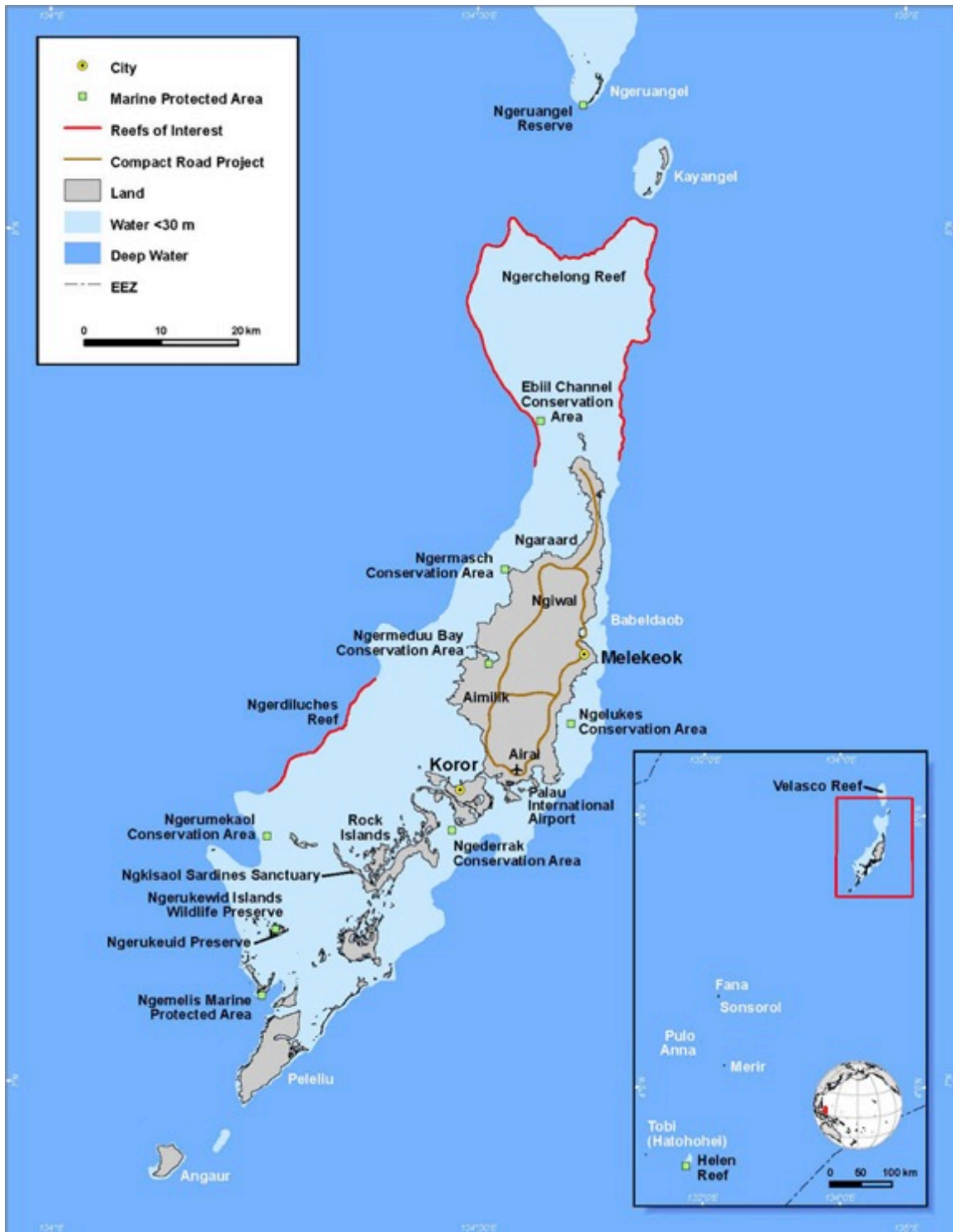
**Temdokl:** guardian at entrance of Ngeraod who had a large eye made out of Palauan money.

**Uab:** the son of Latmikaik who indulged himself with all the food in Angaur. Deceived by the community because of his greed, the people of Angaur burned him and as he fell to his death his body formed the islands of Belau.

**Uchelel:** origin; ancestors.

**Uchelianged:** foremost of Belauan gods. See *uchelel*.

**Ulong:** rock island in Oreor.



**Figure 1** Map of the Republic of Palau courtesy of Waddell, J.E. and A.M. Clarke (eds.), 2008. *The State of Coral Reef Ecosystems of the United States and Freely Associated States: 2008*. NOAA Technical Memorandum NOS NCCOS 73. NOAA/NCCOS Center for Coastal Monitoring and Assessment's Biogeography team. Silver Spring, MD. 569pp.



**Figure 2** Bai ra Irrai (Iyechad, 2010).



## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Growing up in Belau, my great grandmother would share through storytelling the role that the bai, our village meetinghouse (figure 2), played in the conservation and enhancement of the Belauan culture and society. The story that stood out most was that of the giant Uab. The last born to the mother clam Latmikaik, Uab was tasked by the foremost of gods, Ucheleanged, to create a council of chiefs called klobak that would preserve, protect, and uphold meklou ulechell a kelulau, a set of guiding principles which include respect and honor, praise or appreciation, compassion, cooperation and communication, good conduct and character, and unity to administering and unifying Belauan's and their surroundings. These principles subsequently guided and shaped the people of Belau through eras of cultural and political transformation and rebirth.

After establishing the first klobak at Rois in Angaur's Ngcheed village, Uab's greed for food began to overcome him. After he indulged himself with all the food the island and its surrounding sea had to offer, the villagers soon found their land and ocean resources scarce as a result of overharvesting. Inconsiderate of the villages' limited resources, Uab continuously grew heavier and larger as he ate, soon causing the destruction of the island's vegetation as well as causing the sea to seep into the island's fresh water sources leaving the villagers thirsty. The effects of Uab's appetite were so severe that even when little rain fell it washed the island's topsoil into the ocean killing the ocean's remaining reefs.

As time passed the great famine and environmental destruction brought about by Uab's greed caused the villagers to grow worrisome and angry. When they



gathered in secret to discuss what measures to take to survive, the villagers soon came to a unanimous decision to set Uab on fire. As they collected firewood and placed it around his feet, the giant began to question their actions. Not wanting to alarm him of their plans, the villagers simply replied that the wood would be used to cook more food. When enough wood was gathered the villagers started a fire setting Uab aflame. As the giant burned, he lost balance and fell into the reef, hitting it so hard that his body broke apart and scattered all across the sea forming all of the islands north of Angaur today. Belauans believe that each new-formed village and its people reflect the character of the part of Uab's body from which it came. The name of the islands, Belau, derives from the Belauan terminology 'aibebelau' meaning 'indirect replies,' such as those told to Uab about the activity to set him afire.

It was due to Uab's greed and the chaos that stemmed out of its effects that the ocean gods constructed a bai to house the klobak and to sit in the center of each village as a reminder of the central role meklou ulechell a kelulau plays in the everyday lives of Belauans. In addition to this, the gods told a man named Orachel to instruct the Belauan people to paint images of historical narratives on the bai that give root to Belauan history, culture, and identity. Once learning the art of bai construction and decoration, Orachel traveled throughout the Belauan archipelago introducing the basic social structure that continues today (Hart, 2002).

As Belauans migrated to other islands establishing new villages within the archipelago, the bais and klobaks they established became the storehouses of stories based on community events, traditions, and names, the nucleus of a beluu identity rooted in meklou ulechell a kelulau. As intended by the gods, the bai protected,

preserved, and enhanced meklou ulchell a kelulau, and became a symbol which “stands for the nation and the essence of ‘being [Belauan]” (Nero 1992, p. 247).

The stories of social and environmental destruction that occurred as a result of Uab’s greed are relevant today, especially in the approaches and impacts of development in Belau and elsewhere. Prior to the colonization of Belau, a thorough knowledge of Belauan social and environmental connectivity and conservation was essential to the well being of our islands. The arrival of colonial powers shifted Belau’s subsistence economy to one exposed to unknown goods and international trade eroding our social and environmental practices leaving an “ethical vacuum” (Ueki, 1999, p. 47) that has undermined our guiding principles of meklou ulchell a kelulau<sup>1</sup>. As generations of Belauans are being raised to value a cash-based economy over subsistence-based one, we find ourselves being modern-day Uabs – hungry, greedy, and contributing to the degradation of our environment, political corruption, and so forth<sup>2</sup>. We also find ourselves in a race to be defined as “developed<sup>3</sup>” by “first world” countries without fully understanding the consequences this game of development has on our island and our people.

Deeply concerned with what feels to be the lack of regard for our culture, environment, and guiding principles, I began discussing my frustrations with elders

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<sup>1</sup> In *Eco-consciousness and Development in Palau* (2000), Minoru F. Ueki discusses Belau’s shift in economy and Belauan’s difficulties in adjusting to new guiding principles in more depth.

<sup>2</sup> Examples of these topics are found in headlines of Belau’s local newspaper *Tia Belau, Palauan people struggle in the face of climate change* (2013), *Deep-sea mining stirs risk concerns* (2014), and *Two Palau Government staff charged with bribery* (2013).

<sup>3</sup> According to the World Bank, “developing countries are defined according to their Gross National Income (GNI) per capita per year. Countries with a GNI of US \$ 11,905 and less are defined as developing” (Developing Countries 2014).

from my village of Irrai. From these discussions I came away with the impression that our Belauan identity rooted in the connectivity and conservation of our society and environment and enacted through meklou ulechell a kelulau are no longer being ingrained in our society. In my pursuit of ways to address this issue, I came upon renowned Tongan scholar Epeli Hau'ofa's article "Pasts to Remember". It is in this article that he says, "I believe that in order for us to gain greater autonomy than we have today and maintain it within the global system, we must in addition to other measures be able to define and construct our pasts and present in our own ways" (Hau'ofa, 2008, p. 61).

Years of colonization have shifted our subsistence-based economy and guiding principles and have also concealed the need for connectivity and conservation of our society and environment. With new guiding principles focused on development, many feel our histories and traditional ways of knowing have become insufficient, such as expressed by Houston Wood in his article "Cultural Studies for Oceania" (2003). However, Wood adds that this is not that our histories and traditional ways of knowing are insufficient, but rather the colonization of our minds has altered our way of validating knowledge, empowering knowledge of the colonizers over that of our own. While development approaches such as industrial fishing and farming, high-end tourism, and seabed mining have turned us into modern-day Uabs, the social and environmental impacts that stem from such approaches have also caused great concern. To address some of these concerns,

Belauan elders and scholars like environmentalist Noah Idechong<sup>4</sup> have proposed using traditional methods of conservation to save what little natural resources we have left.

But in order to fully achieve the results of these proposed methods we must refocus our guiding principles to those that emphasize the need for social and environmental connectivity and conservation. In order to do this, Rotuman academic Vilsoni Hereniko emphasizes the need to “look back to our indigenous epistemologies to find valuable information about historical events that have shaped and continue to influence the social and cultural life of the island and its people” (Hereniko, n.a., 80). In Belau, this valuable information about historical events can be found in the physical structure and the social structures that stem out of the bai, the nucleus of our society. It is the intent of this thesis to demonstrate how the bai informs Belauan principles and identity and the contemporary role the bai plays in illuminating strategies for thinking about present and future issues and challenges.

In Belau, it is the responsibility of klobak (titled) women to provide for the village. These responsibilities include, but are not limited to the appointing of chiefs, preparation of food for bai feasts, and providing the funds for the construction and maintenance of the bai. No matter the cost, it is a woman’s responsibility to carry

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<sup>4</sup> Noah Idechong is a Belauan environmentalist who has created innovative ways of addressing the over-harvesting of fish and other natural resources by combining the traditional Belauan method of Bul (regulating) with modern-day methods of conservation. In 1995 he was awarded the Goldman Environmental Prize for his efforts in marine conservation. Idechong went on to help found the Palau Conservation Society and served as a member of the Belau House of Delegates, helping to enact conservation-oriented programs, such as the Protected Areas Network, the Micronesia Challenge, and the world’s first shark sanctuary in Belau.

upon her shoulders the welfare of the village<sup>5</sup>. Growing up with my great grandmother who descends from a long line of klobak women, I found myself spending a lot of time at the bai in our village of Irrai admiring the architecture and earth tone paintings (figure 2). The bai's architecture and paintings soon became my obsession as I listened to my great grandmother decode their histories and hidden meanings. These stories, painted and encrypted into the bai's architecture, became the foundation in which my great grandmother taught me about my history, culture, and the role the bai and bai stories play in decoding Belau's structurally complex society.

When discussing Belau's guiding principles throughout this thesis, the bai demonstrates how our principles have shifted and changed with our identity. Because identity is ubiquitous, elusive and in itself provides a means of evasion, we must begin by asking ourselves *how do we define Belauan identity?* Within Belauan society, one's identity is determined by their beluu, renged/hang, and kebliil. It is common for one to be asked who their parents are and what beluu they belong to in order to validate their identity. In Western society, it would come as a shock if one was to ask you who your parents are. As in many parts of the Pacific, "Palauans need to triangulate who you are to your places of origin and people associate to them...even if your parents are not known, the same process would be done until a known point of origin and peoples they are involved with is established then your identity is verified and validated" (Asanuma, 2014).

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<sup>5</sup> Isebong Maura Asang discusses the responsibilities of women in Belau and the negative stereotypes that have been associated with many of these responsibilities more in depth in her dissertation *Epistemological articulations: blebaol. Klomengelungel ma tekoi er Belau*.

Once knowing what clan one belongs to, Belauans are then able to connect the individual with their hamlet and beluu of origin. Unique histories and characteristics are associated with each landmass and set apart each beluu and hamlet from one another. An example of one characteristic associated to land was established during the creation of Belau from Uab's body. The beluu of Ngechelong for example, was created from Uab's head and so it is believed that people from Ngerchelong must be disciplined (*ungil cheldecheduch*). In his Facebook blog post *Kau ke ngalk er ker (You are child of where)* Santy Asanuma expands on this when he writes, "Palauans expect people of certain subdivisions like a hamlet or the other half of the same village to possess certain behavioral traits, talents, or skills...Even today Palauans need to connect you to a certain area like a neighborhood to ascertain your personality" (2014). A person's identity is constructed from this triangulation of place of origin and people associated to them.

Belau is a place of diverse identities specific to place and culture. The construction of a "national identity" only emerged during Belau's colonial years to simplify the complexities of Belauan identities for foreigners who were not able to triangulate our unique identities. In the late 1970s, this new national identity that culturally and linguistically identified the Belauan people was coupled with a presidential government to form Belau's nation-state. Not only is our national identity and nation-state a product of colonialism, but also overtime our eagerness to compete in a developing world resulted in the adopting of colonial principles that did not reflect our own or coincide with our indigenous identities.

As mentioned earlier, the bai plays a major role in the decrypting of Belau's complex society, specifically in the identity and guiding principles of the beluu in which it is erected. Carved and painted on the bais beams and gables are representations of histories, customs, traditions, behavioral traits, talents, and skills that are linked to specific beluu and hamlets. While years of colonization resulted in the banning of bai carvings and practices, which in turn led to the abandonment and destruction of many of Belau's bais, guiding principles, beluu characteristics and relationships embodied by the bai were not forgotten. Instead a revitalization movement after World War II resulted in the construction of Kebtot el bai founded on the same basic guiding principles uniting each beluu through bai paintings<sup>6</sup>. On the gables and beams of Kebtot el bai, each bai painting was strategically chosen from each beluu to demonstrate their interconnectedness and how Belauan identity shifts and changes when need be. When Belau gained independence in 1994, the bai became a symbol of a national Belauan identity founded on traditional principles and the relationships we have to one another.

Bai stories, which define and give us meaning, also help us find ways of navigating through issues and challenges that arise. Yet over time we have allowed ourselves to accept the Western classification of bai stories as myths and legends, undermining their importance to younger generations of Belauans. In *Decolonizing the Mind*, Kenyan scholar Ngugi Wa Thiong'o describes the consequences of accepting foreign classifications as a cultural bomb:

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<sup>6</sup> Discussion of bai revitalization movement can be found in Karen L. Nero's articles *Missed Opportunities: American Anthropological Studies of Micronesian Art* and *The Breadfruit Tree Story*. Further records of the Bai revitalization movement and kebtot el bai can be found in Homer G. Barnett's 1950 *Proposal to South Pacific Commission, Project S.12*.

The effect of a cultural bomb is to annihilate a people's belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves. It makes them see their past as one wasteland of non-achievement and it makes them want to distance themselves from that wasteland (1986, p. 3).

Today we struggle with the consequences of the cultural bomb. In an interview Pacific Worlds & Associates conducted with Rurecherudel Iyechad Yaoch and register for the Bureau of Arts and Culture Walter Metes they discuss these consequences saying,

The rubak's bai, the bai for the elder chiefs, is like a sacred site. The kids today don't know...these days, the new generations are seeing it as a community museum, where you see a lot of art...if they go to college and read books, they will eventually realize that we are a unique people, and if we try to emulate our Western or international models, we will fail, because we are not like them, we are unique" (Pacific Worlds & Associates, 2003).

As a Belauan woman, I feel it my responsibility to share with younger generations of Belauans the ways in which the bai can inform us about the past but also about the present and future. Not only does this structure give us a place to negotiate our identities and strategies but it also allows us to think conceptually about histories through bai stories such as the story of Uab. By using the structure of the bai and those that stem from it to define and construct the interrelations between our past and present, we will also be able to illuminate and create strategies that address current and future issues and challenge we face. Through the



use of strategies that reflect our principles and who we are, we can gain greater autonomy of our island and ourselves.

Pacific Islanders tend to explain their history, traditions, culture, wisdom and identities through stories and the arts. Examples of these stories are embodied in the paintings and architecture of community structures such as the bai in Belau, the Māori *marae*, Yapese *pebaey*, the *nahs* of Usennamw in Pohnpei, the Chamorro *latte house*, and even the Papua New Guinea parliament<sup>7</sup>, a modern version of traditional houses such as haus bilas in Sepik. It is in these buildings that our societies function and are given meaning. These “key symbols” (Ortner, 1973) located on and producing these community structures render, as Geertz underscored, “the broad process of collective self-definition explicit” and “transform the symbolic framework through which people experience social reality” (Geertz, 1973, pp. 252, 239).

In his book *Neocolonial Identity and Counter Consciousness* (1978), Renato Constantino asserts that our ways of thinking and understanding have been “affected by a systematic process of miseducation characterized by a thoroughgoing in-calculation of colonial values and attitudes” (Constantino, 1973, p. 1). Because of this process of miseducation, Elliot Eisner urges in *Art and Knowledge* the deliteralization<sup>8</sup> of our familiar ways of knowing in order to see all spectrums of knowledge rather than what knowledge is advertised to be (Eisner, *Art and*

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<sup>7</sup> Rosi, C. Pamela. *Papua New Guinea's New Parliament House: A contested national symbol*. Honolulu: The Contemporary Pacific, Volume 3, Number 2, Fall 1991, 298-323.

<sup>8</sup> Cognitive diffusion

Knowledge, 2008). In other words, “Colonized people need to be aware of their own stories as well as how the colonizer is maintaining its power and control through their own stories of economic, political and social development in their own image” (Chilton, 2008, p. 6).

These ‘cultural bombs’ as Ngugi calls them have become so ingrained in our society through educational systems, religion, colonial systems of government, and other colonial influences, that we run the risk of slowly losing sight of what makes us who we are. In his 2008 “Palauan Governance Design Proposal,” Belauan scholar Tutii Chilton states,

Once I began to understand that stories play a great part in our own behaviors I began to question them as Thomas King does in *The Truth about Stories* when he writes, ‘I tell the stories not to play on your sympathies but to *suggest how stories can control our lives*, for there is a part of me that has never been able to move past these stories, a part of me that will be chained to these stories as long as I live’ (Chilton, 2008, p. 6).

Belauans will be able to reclaim their identity by going back to the key symbols that hold the essence of what it means to be Belauan: going back to the bai to look upon and study its structure, architecture, historical paintings, and practices to determine whether we will continue to be modern-day Uabs or to be Belauan people whose culture and identity is rooted in the land and the sea.

Western scholars have often told indigenous peoples what to think about their histories, cultures, societies, and who they are individually. Solomon Islander scholar David Welchman Gegeo argues that as indigenous peoples we must “dehegemonize “ (Gegeo, 2001, p. 81) the established academy and “find our own research and epistemic frameworks rather than continuing to rely exclusively on those of the colonizers” (2001, p. 57). Over the past century, research by Pacific Islanders has come to focus on their own local epistemologies and accounts of the “cultural insiders’ ways of theorizing knowledge” (Subramani, 2003, p. 2). This push has also led to the decolonizing of Pacific Island Studies programs which allowing students the opportunity to understand the process by which knowledge is constructed, validated, and informed within their own communities.

Positioning this work in the field of Pacific Island Studies has therefore allowed me the opportunity to use the Belauan methodology of indirect replies to frame this thesis. These indirect replies, often through the forms of storytelling, art, and proverbs, inform Belau’s sociopolitical, economic, and historical context and processes. It is for this reason that I engage in storytelling and the notion of whispered memories to draw on issues of identity, culture, and development. Strategically placing this work in a Pacific context also allows me the opportunity to draw upon – and contribute to – the critical work and context around the region that look at the marginalization of identity and culture, in addition to engaging questions about what development means and what it can look like.

This is a qualitative study using interviews, bai stories, and literature based research<sup>9</sup> to demonstrate how the bai informs Belauan identity and the contemporary role it plays in informing strategies and discourse about present and future issues and challenges. Because my over all goal is to demonstrate the interrelationships of our past and present by using bai stories, I begin by revisiting the stories about the architecture and paintings of our last remaining traditional bai, Bai ra Irrai, and contemporary bai, Bai ra Ngeachel a cherechar, to see how these bais have and continue to inform our identities as people of our individual beluu and as Belauans. These bai stories have been collected from village elders, the Belau National Museum, and those other literary works.

While this study is centered on the knowledge surrounding the bai and how it has shaped, re-created, and influenced Belauan ideology, traditional Belauan protocol prohibits any person to document the bai and record oral histories of the community unless they are asked by or seek permission from the village council. Being a member of Irrai village and granted permission to document and record the knowledge surrounding our village bai, many of the stories used in this thesis are those of the Bai ra Irrai. Other stories present in this thesis have been carefully selected from published works and granted permission to use.

Following this introduction, the thesis consists of three chapters and a conclusion. Chapter one begins by using the story of Uab to set up the relevant

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<sup>9</sup> Most of my literature based research came from Marciana Telmetang book *Bai*, documents from Pacific Worlds & Associates research website *Palau: Airai – Native Places: Bai ra Irrai*, and the Palau Society of Historians *Anthropology, Oral History, and Traditional & Customary Practices Research Series*.

historical background necessary to understand the purpose and importance of meklou ulechell a kelulau and how the bai became the symbol of the Belauan nation and the essence of being Belauan. By starting with the story of Uab and following with a discussion on correlating issues facing Belauan's today, we are able to understand the effects the prorogation of meklou ulechell a kelulau has had upon us over the years. In this chapter I also use the Oceanic notion of *our past being the key to our future* (Hau'ofa; Kame'eleihiwa) to build my argument in this thesis.

Chapter two surveys Belau's colonial and post-colonial histories to better understand the bai's roles within Belau's sociopolitical system. By analyzing the bai and the stories associated with it, we are able to identify and understand the events that have transformed and shaped the identities of each beluu and connected them to one another. Drawing on the foundational understanding of how Belauan's traditionally viewed themselves and the world from the previous chapter, this chapter explores how foreign influences in Belau resulted in the traumatic change of Belauan society, particularly revolving the bai and guiding principles.

When Belau was reaching its final days of colonization and the revitalization movement of Belau's bails was in full strength, the construction of Kehtot el Bai and later Bai ra Ngesechel a Cherechar brought about a national Belauan identity demonstrated in the paintings of beluu interrelations on the bail gable. In chapter three we also follow how this web of bai stories construct a Belauan story of the events that transformed and shaped Belau as a nation. As years pass and our race to compete with "first world" nations continued, outside influences have contributed

to our shift away from our traditional guiding principles and the relationships we have with our environment and one another.

Chapter Four is dedicated to analyzing the role the bai plays in illuminating strategies for thinking about the present and future. We now face threats caused by multimillion-dollar road projects, industrial fishing, and seabed mining. At stake are our culture and the identity of our people who have so long lived in harmony with the land and sea<sup>10</sup>. Belauan activist Noah Idechong comments on this saying, “There is no time. We need to decide what we want our island to be...what is the value of the subsistence fisherman, the value of culture and family bonding? We need to start a dialogue, to start talking about what we want for Palau. If Palau does not, the race for money and development will have no boundaries” (Radway, 2002, p. 5).

This fourth chapter focuses on some of the ways the bai underpins contemporary actions and organizations, and asks what paths we might take in the future. Will we continue to be modern-day Uabs whose eagerness to compete in the modern world costs us our home and our livelihoods? Will we find ourselves once again swallowed by the sea such as those during the time of Milad? What is to be done and who are we choosing to be? Reflecting back on the bai we find that our history is a “history of transformation and re-creation out of the structure and essence of the past” (Nero, 19, p. 236). It is time for us to gaze back on the bai in order to remember our past and fathom what we must do to survive. In Epeli Hau’ofa’s words, it is a *Past[s] to Remember*.

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<sup>10</sup> Radway, Scott. "Palau Seeks Environmental Identity." 25 March 2002. Small Islands VOICE. 28 September 2014 <<http://www.unesco.org/csi/smis/siv/Pacific/pacarticle2.htm>>.

In conclusion, I end this study by bringing back to view the ways in which the bai informs our identity and the contemporary role it plays in illuminating strategies for thinking about the present and future issues and challenges we face. Although I believe the challenges we face today echo in modern ways those painted on the beams and gables of the bai, I can only give light to our principles and the strategies our history provides with hope that you, my fellow Belauans, will look deep inside to find that our livelihood depends on the structure and essence of our distant eras. A cherechar a lokelii.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Relating to both the past as well as the future, *a chechar a lokelii* translates into “the distant eras reveal” better understood as “the distant past reveals the distant future” (McKnight, Telmetang).

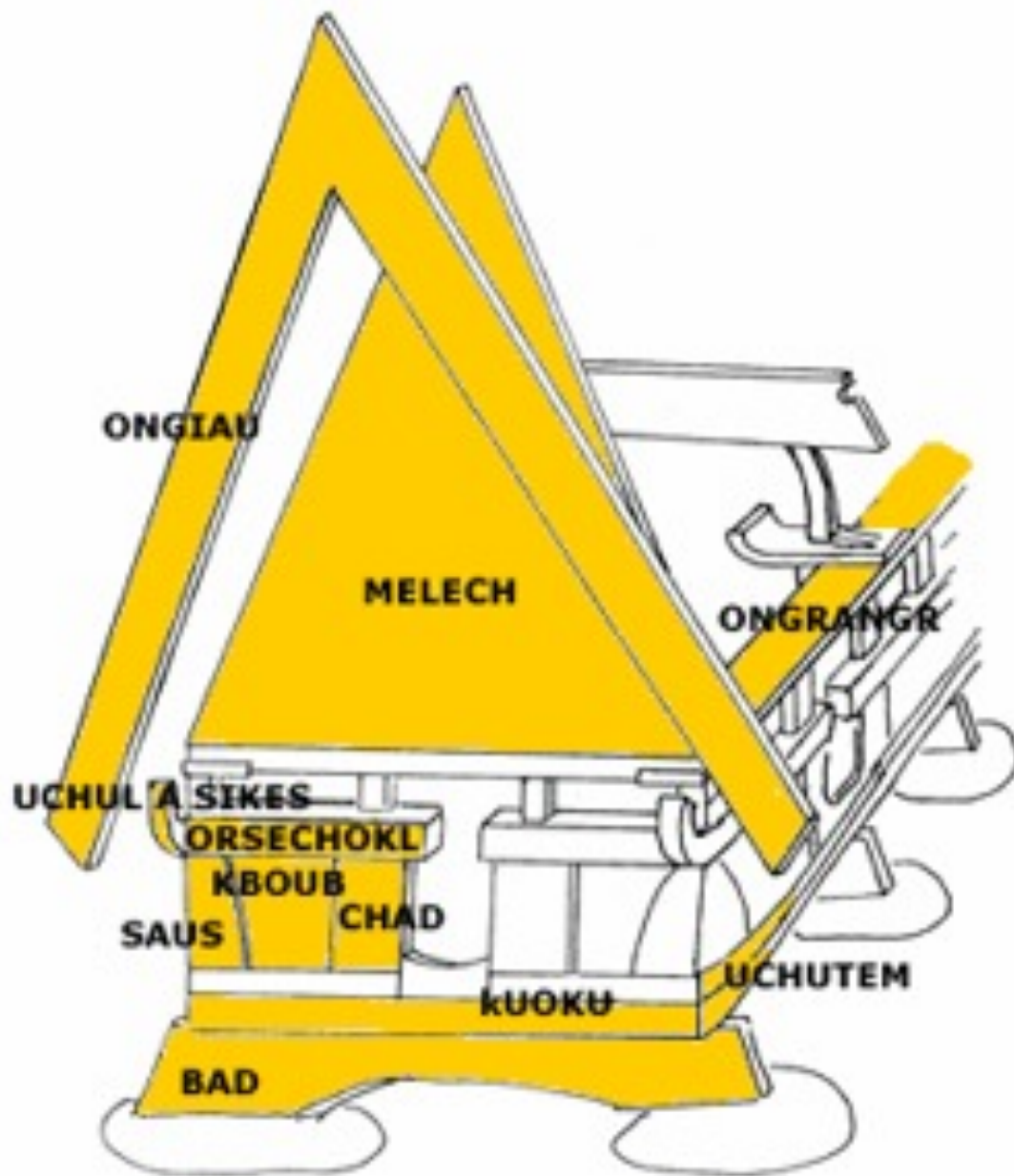


Figure 3: Bai Exterior (Belau National Museum, 2010).



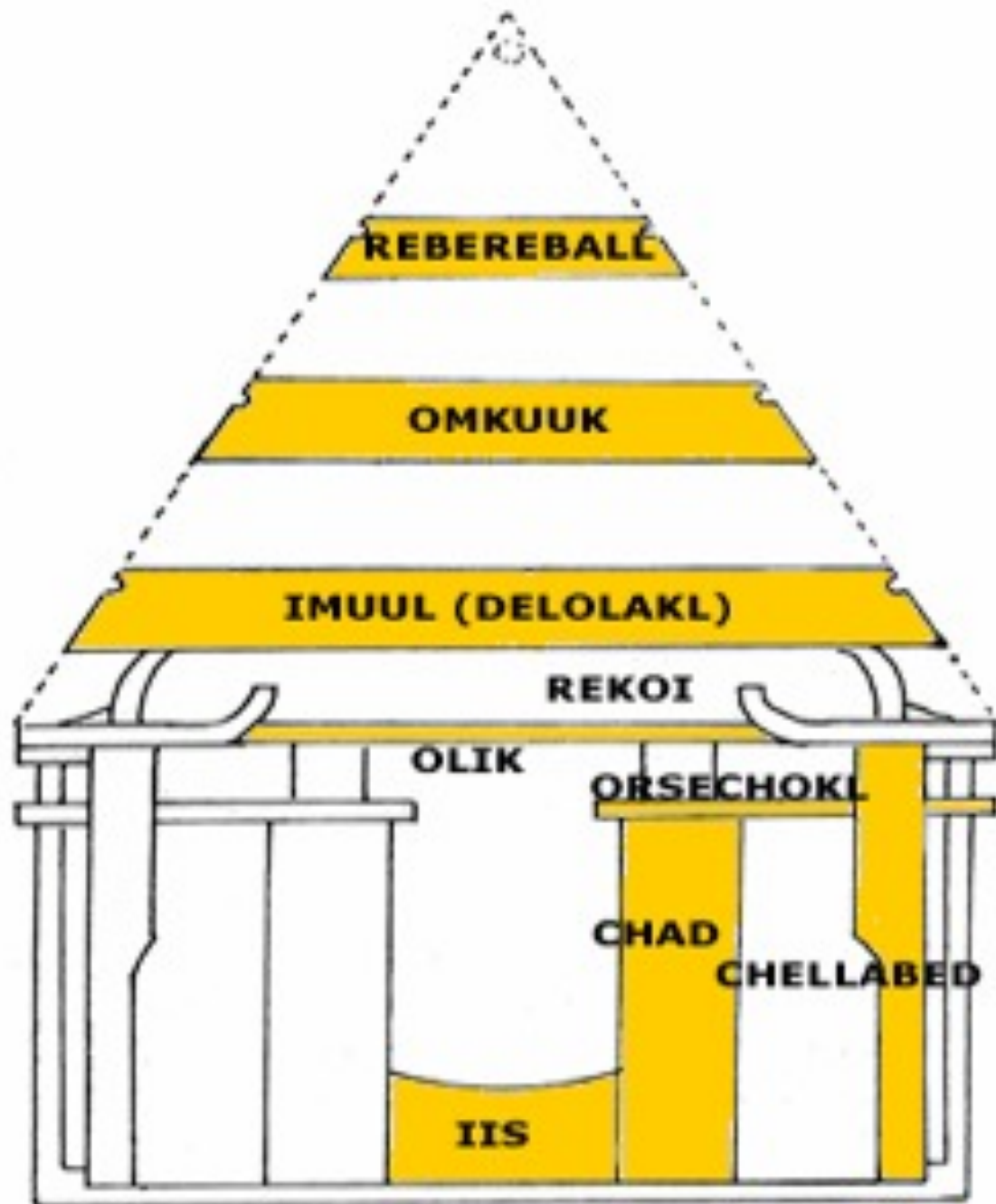


Figure 4: Bai Interior (Belau National Museum, 2010).

## CHAPTER 2: Whispered Memories

*Long ago when night overtook day, gods known throughout Belau as Uchelel (foremost), descended from the heavens with intentions of building themselves a bai on the plot of land called Ngerulchau. Trying to stay hidden from humankind the gods avoided the light of day. Working at night, the gods gathered and collected megaliths from Lukes, a shallow area of the ocean in between Peleliu and Angaur. As they gathered the large stones and began to carve and position them, Medechiibelau, who is known to be the god of laughter and jokes, decided to play a trick on the other gods. Taking the husk from a coconut tree, he lit it on fire and threw the burning husk up into the air where it turned into a rooster and squawked tricking the other gods into believing that day was at break. Accustomed to working only at night, the gods ascended back up bischerad abandoning the construction of the bai and leaving the collected megaliths where they currently sit today. Since that moment, people have referred to the stones standing at Ngerulchau as Badrulchau, the stones remnants of what could have been the largest Bai ever built in Belau<sup>12</sup>. It is also because of this event that the blackened colored feathers of roosters are called 'delul el suld,' meaning burned coconut husk<sup>13</sup>.*

- (Iechad, Bairulchau, 2014)

The bai, the Belauan meetinghouse, is the nucleus of administrative power where decisions are made on all elements essential to the lives of Belauans. The bai's elaborately painted wooden structure has overtime absorbed and carried our most sacred histories and traditions, and continuously whispers them to all who are willing to listen. I would not have centered this thesis on the bai if I did not believe that it informs Belauan identities and plays a role in our contemporary world. But there are those among us who act as if the bai is not a repository of our histories and

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<sup>12</sup> Ngechelong State Government. *Experience Ngerchelong's Culture & History*. Ngerchelong, Palau.

<sup>13</sup> According to another version of Bairulchau recorded in the 1998 journal *Imagineering*, the god Medechiibelau was falling behind in his assigned part of the construction. Not wanting to appear completely behind in his assigned task, he decided to trick the gods into believing dawn was approaching so that they would abandon their work until the next evening. It is because of Medechiibelau's prank that not only did the gods at Ngerulchau abandon their work but all gods throughout the archipelago. An example of this the oral accounts of the abandoned taro pounding implements at Ngerudechong in Ngerbau, Ngerchelong and other stone parts of the Bairulchau that can be found in other areas of Belau.

traditions and does not inform our identity. One can argue that these actions are the result of belief that the knowledge it carries and shares is no longer relevant today. In this discussion about the bai, it is worth addressing two questions: (i) How does the bai inform Belauan identity? (ii) What role does the bai play in our contemporary world?

### **Er a Ititiumd**

In order to understand the complexities of the bai's social and physical structure, let us begin by addressing the question of how the bai informs our identity. It was in the mossy past (er a ititiumd) that Ucheleanged tasked Uab to create a klobak made up of the obekul ordomel from each of the beluu kebliil's. Selected by the mothers (delal a telungalek/ourrot<sup>14</sup>) of each kebliil, the kobak was tasked to represent the full body of the beluu through the act of kelulau<sup>15</sup> that arranged and established the obekul ordomel titles, making them sacred and powerful. Thus, the klobak was the mechanism by which meklou ulechell a kelulau, "a profound set of basic principles used for administering and unifying all affairs within a beluu," (Smith, 1997, p. 11) were preserved, protected, practiced, pursued, and followed by the people.

Because the first Belauans lived on a remote island in the middle of the sea, their livelihoods depended on what the environment around them provided. Gods

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<sup>14</sup> Traditionally, these elder females are members of the kebliil through matrilineal descent (ochell). The decision of who will become bear their titles (kebekuul or teleuchel) are "based on observation and knowledge that the ourrot have about the conduct and performance" (Smith) of the person.

<sup>15</sup> Kelulau or *whisper* refers to the confidential and important beluu matters in which were whispered among the klobak. According to the Palau Society of Historians, kelulau was obtained from the snake of Angaur (Bersoech er Ngeaur). Through similar comparison, kelulau is well maintained and systemized from its head down to its tail (Smith).

such as Rak, who carried the moon, taught the villagers the knowledge of reading its lunar cycles to be able to observe the lunar month for fishing and harvesting.

“Motivated to engage in practices that allowed them to live in harmony with their environment,” (Ueki, 1999, p. 53) the klobak incorporated eco-consciousness into meklou ulechell a kelulau and societal practices. An example of this is in the technique of Dudalm el kelulau, in which elders trained specific people on the art and knowledge of conservation<sup>16</sup>.

When Uab became greedy, his self-indulgence and defiance of meklou ulechell a kelulau disrupted the social and environmental balance that had previously existed. To correct this imbalance, the klobak used meluus el kelulau, “a secretive and mysterious strategy passed along and transacted between the beluu and klobak,” (Smith, 1997, p. 12) to destroy Uab. As the giant fell to his death, his body hit the ocean so hard that it broke apart, creating the Belauan islands that stretch north to south of Angaur today. As the people of Angaur migrate to these new islands to escape the destruction Uab caused, they established klobak’s in eight new beluu. Although independent from one another, the eight new beluu sat parallel from south to north along the western coast of Babeldoab<sup>17</sup> (Parmentier, 1987, p. 128) still connected by stone pathways.

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<sup>16</sup> There are seven techniques of kelulau used by the klobak. These techniques include techniques of force and intimidation, diplomacy, battle, harmony, peace strategies, deceit, and resource and economy. For more on these techniques refer to *Rechuodel: Traditional Culture and Lifeways Long Ago in Palau* (1997).

<sup>17</sup> According to another version of the story of Uab recorded by Parmentier, Uab was tasked by Ucheleanged to create a klobak (council of chiefs), a political institution to control community affairs. After establishing the first klobak at Rois (Umetaro), Uab traveled throughout the Belauan archipelago establishing the next eight klobaks at Ngerechol, Secharaimul, Ngerusar, Ngeremid, Ngeruikl, Ulimang, and Mengellang (Parmentier, Miko).

However, the new settlements soon suffered from social discontent and lawlessness and this resulted in the plucking of Temdokl's (the gatekeeper of Ngeraod) eye. This angered Ucheleanged who decided to send a flood to destroy Belau. But before destroying Belau, he sent seven tekiimelab to find the perpetrator. While on their search, the tekiimelab grew hungry. Catching seven fish, they asked the elderly women Dirrabkau, whom they happened upon while on their journey, to cook the fish for them. Placing each of the seven fish in between taro to steam and then placing them in a basket, Dirrabkau's good character and compassion toward the tekiimelab deeply touched Ucheleanged. Please with Dirrabkau, Ucheleanged send the tekiimelab back down to Belau to give her instructions on how to survive the great flood.

Although Dirrabkau prepared herself to the best of her ability, she still lost her life when the ocean's waves flipped her raft and engulfed her. Saddened by her death, the tekiimelab breathed life back into Dirrabkau and she was reborn as Miladeldil, the lady who once died. As a token of appreciation for the Miladeldil's practice and preservation of meklou ulechell a kelulau, her children Ngeremlengui, Melekeok, Aimeliik and Oreor, came to constitute the four corner posts of Belau's cultural, political and social structures. With this change, the alignment of dominating villages shifted from a parallel to a quadripartite pattern alignment. "This order in turn became condensed in the post-contact period into two rival

alliances focused on the militarily powerful villages of Oreor and Melekeok<sup>18</sup>”  
(Parmentier, 1987, p. 159).

During this time of rebirth and rebuilding the gods taught Belauan’s many important aspects of life such as the roles and responsibilities of the chiefs, how to tend to taro patches,<sup>19</sup> arts and crafts, skills for building the bai, natural childbirth, and Kelulau – the whispered strategies for good governing (Miko 2011, Umetaro 1974). As Belau’s social and political structures evolved, so did the structure of the bai. This evolution included Mesaodngerel’s (snake god of Angaur) establishment of ongeluluul (place for whispering), a stone platform with four stone backrests built adjacent to the bai for the highest-ranking chiefs to sit and conduct political affairs (Hart, 2002); the division of the klobak into two major divisions, bitang ma bitang el taoch<sup>20</sup>, with the top two chiefs heading each of the divisions (Smith, 1997); pathways that lead to village hamlets and allied villages from the bai; and the recording of historical narratives through bai art.

As time passed and Belauans began to rely less on the gods, the gods began to return to the heavens leaving their earthly bodies as stone. “The many stone faces

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<sup>18</sup> In all Belauan chants and historical narrative, the alliances of Oreor (west) and Melekeok (east) are described as two opposed sides of heaven (Smith, Parmentier).

<sup>19</sup> The cultivating of taro patches was taught by a demi-god named Iluochel. When tracing Iluochel through different bai stories we find that her name was changed to Iluochel when tasked to teach women how to cultivate taro in Angaur. Before then she was Dilidechuu, a name given to her because she was a chicken at night and women by day. Her original name was Dirramellomes, a woman in whose form Uab was reincarnated. When Iluochel migrated to Ngerchebukl, she lived under a bkau tree and soon acquired the name Dirrabkau- the women who late became Miladeldil (Josephs).

<sup>20</sup> Bitang ma bitang el taoch (one-half of the channel and the other-half of the channel) is a term that comes from Ngeburech. Klobak’s are divided by either splitting the bai diagonally or lengthwise, both resulting in the first, third, fifth, seventh and ninth rubak comprising the first half-channel while the even number rubak’s make up the other half. According to the Palau Society of Historians, “the klobak are divided into bitang ma bitang el taoch when purchasing or paying for their bai, when building a boathouse and for any other traditional or political arrangement...there are other miscellaneous functions but they are not in use today” (Smith).

(klidm) scattered through [Belau] today are the bodies of these gods...reminders that the gods...continue to watch and monitor the people below" (Miko, 2011, 188). Because the gods no longer lived among the people, they decided to stay hidden from humankind and only went about their activities at night. Because of Medechiibelau's trick in the narrative of Bairulchau at the beginning of this chapter, that the gods disappeared into the heavens one last time leaving remnants of *Er a Ititiumd*, the time of the gods.

### **The Bai**

Not long after resettlement a man named Orachel heard noise coming from below the ocean in a place called Lukes<sup>21</sup> while sailing between Angaur and the nearby island of Peleliu. Diving into the ocean to investigate the noise, Orachel discovered the ocean gods constructing a triangular structure which they called bai to house the klobak. The gods taught Orachel the art of constructing the bai and the meaning of the bais designs. Orachel subsequently builds the first bai at Rois in Angaur's Ngcheed village, using the skills he learned from the gods. He later traveled north toward Babeldoab to introduce the bai to the newly formed klobaks (Hart, 2002).

Bais became so central to everyday life that one way a village could gain prestige and honor was through the display of wealth by purchasing the construction of a bai from an allied village. The villages that could purchase larger bais were often seen as wealthier and with more prestige. A village often hired an

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<sup>21</sup> Also referred to by some as Mekaeb.

allied village in which it had a sacred relationship tied together by the gods (cheledaol el deleuill) or a respected relationship in which is continuously maintained throughout the generations (kuoll el deleuill). Through the purchasing of a bai from an allied village, the villagers would strengthen their relationship referred as kengatechelabed ra delebdeb.

According to the art of bai construction, the chiefs of the allied village would choose a dachelbai (master builder) from among them or from their village men's club to overlook the construction process. A dachelbai was necessary in all bai construction because of his intricate knowledge on the structural components and ornamentations, and "expert [ise] in rituals designed to keep the work crews and the occupants of the bai from misfortune" (Telmetang, 1993, 5). In his 1929 ethnography, Kramer records parts of these rituals and chants as what he calls "magic during *Bai* construction" (p. 212).

After selecting a dachelbai, he goes into the woods and performs a ritual to determine which tree to select and the proper time to begin construction. Just like other Pacific Islanders and Indigenous people beyond the Pacific, Belauan spirituality includes a strong reverence for animal life, the environment, and each other. Conducting this ceremony ensures the dachelbai that no bad spirits or bad karma will come upon the workers or the village in which the bai will stand. Once the ritual is complete, and the tree selected, the dachelbai has the tree cut down and the process of carving and shaping the bais components begins. The structure is assembled at the temporary site by fitting and jointing each component together on eight floor beams (bad) resting on sixteen foundational stones in two parallel rows



(Morgan, 1988), spanning the 20-foot width of the bai as they are completed (refer to Figure 3).

When completed, the bai is disassembled, packed, and carried to the purchasing village. At the village, that the dachelbai's crew reassembles the bai on a stone platform designated by the village or hamlet chiefs. Layers of mats made of buuk (pandanus) cover the roof frame. The bai is then painted and a ceremony called *Osebekel a Melechul a Bai* is performed to rid Melech, the spirit of misfortune, who elders say live in the apex of the newly built structure.

In preparation for the sunset ritual, a large bachel (Belauan money) is hung for display in the middle of the front entrance. If you refer to figure 4, the bachel would be hung from the olik of the bai, the area in which a bat (olik) is painted to remind people to be reverent and humble when entering the bai. A basket full of bettlenut and kebui (pepper leaves) are placed near the fireplace in the bai for the conclusion of the ceremony. As the sun sets, the men seated inside the bai begin to chant *Otengelel a Melech* inviting *Melech* to join them: the chant describes the enticing of Melech to join the men. When dawn breaks and chemeraech (the morning star) is visible, the men begin to chant *Osebekel a Melech* enticing the spirit from the bai and dedicating the bai to the village god. During this time all the men gather into the bai leaving a narrow passageway through the center of the bai. Standing in the front row nearest to the front of the bai is the leader of the chant, while two men stand behind him, one carrying a basket of betelnut and kebui while the other holds a lit bundle of dried palm sheath (Telmetang, 1993, p. 8). The men

chant until early morning, when Melech is believed to leave the bai and made his way back up to the heavens.

During an interview with Ebil Martha Iechad of Airai village, she asserts that the ceremony to rid Melech is critical to the livelihood and existence of the village in which the bai stands. She continues by saying,

A belekul tial tekoi a kmo *osebek ra melech ra bai*. Tial omeruul a ngii ocheral a bai. Ngmo ileakl a chimong malechub eng teblong el beluu el ngara ngii a ileakl el klauchad er ngii el dedul kmong kengatchelabed a dedlongelir, ea ikeikid el beluu a mo mekemedadol el mer sel beluu lolsebek a melechul a bai er ngii. A osebekel a melechul el bai a bai ra klobak ma bai rar cheldebechel. Ear molsebek a melechul a bai a di sechal, le tobekul sel beluu el mlengemedadol mar mekekerei el chad er ngii ma rubekul sel beluu el mlekedadol mar meongel e mo tmak e mol sebek ra melecheul a bai (Iechad, Osebek a Melechul a Bai, 2014)

***Translation:***

This ritual is very important because Melech is the god of misfortune so if we do not cast him away then he will be the cause of great depression in the village where the bai stands. There will be a lot of sickness and famine in the village, affecting the taro patch and plants as well. There will also be a large number of deaths in the village. People will grow tired of work leading to the collapse of the village and increasing violence greatly. And so doing the ritual and chants are very important (Iechad, Osebek a Melechul a Bai, 2014).

The completion of the *Osebekel a Melechul a Bai* ceremony marks the end of the bais purchasing process and the beginning of a deeper relationship between the two villages.

As previously discussed in Chapter One and reemphasized throughout this thesis, the physical and spiritual relationships Belauan's have to one another and their environmental play a major role in their quality of life. The importance of these relationships are shared with us through stories such as those of Uab and Dirrabkau, as well as reiterated in the process of constructing the bai and the completed physical structure itself. The lack of regard for these relationships, as mentioned by Ebil Martha Iechad and indirectly stated in Belauan stories, result in the dwindling and eventual disappearance of the community. It is clear why our ancestors were motivated to engage in practices that contributed to nurturing of these relationships.

### **Er a Rechuodel**

Once the gods had left Belau, it was the responsibility of each beluu (village) klobak to continue to spread and build on the political structures and relationships created by the gods. As war, political problems, and natural disasters caused the migration of Belauans throughout the archipelago, they took with them the names of the places and titles from whence they came. According to the Belau Society of Historians, place names, names of titles, names mentioned in migration legends and alliances between individuals or beluu from this era [er a rechuodel] remain a central mode of integration today (Smith, 1995).

As time went on, the bai continued to evolve both socially and in structure. Apart from the beluu klobak and cheldebechel bais, bais were being built for the gods that no longer resided in Belau. German ethnographer Augustin Kramer writes in his 1929 ethnography that “like the sailboat among boats, the two-story bai *goutang* is one of the most beautiful and artistic... dedicated to the *Galid Medechi pelau*...they were built more to be impressive structures... There are even *Bai*...called *telegeier bai*...splendid dwellings for the priest, for whom a simpler blai was not enough for a person of high rank” (1929, 264-5). Kramer continues: “I must not neglect to mention that at one time there used to be ‘wide Bai’ *meteu l bai*, which had two doors on the gable side...the gable almost forms[ing] an isosceles triangle” (1929, p. 263).

The bai continued to become a central part of the everyday lives of Belauan people. The bai was it the nucleus of administrative power as well as a place of learning and negotiation, a place to record historical narratives, and space for social organization. As the heart of the village, the bai and the klobak who sat in it instilled meklou ulechell a kelulau into the political and social pathways that extended from it. From these sequences, both historical narrative, and sociopolitical patterns, that we see “the projection of corresponding cultural meanings in reflection on the past” (Parmentier, 1987, p. 135).



**Figure 5** Bai ra Irrai with images of war painted on its gables (Belau National Museum).

## **CHAPTER 3: The Shift**

Before the presence of foreign governments and the emergence of a cash-based economy, Belau functioned on a traditional check and balance system guided by meklou ulechell a kelulau, a set of basic principles that connected Belauans to the world around them. These principles and institutional structures kept balance within Belauan societies and between societies and their environments. However, as a result of foreign influences and colonial control by various colonial powers from 1783 to 1994, these principles that guided Belauan societies and behaviors changed, resulting in the weakening of check and balances (Ueki 2000, Matsutaro 2012). “Without the checks and balances of the traditional system...[Belauan’s] often fell prey to the comparative freedoms of a democratic style of government...[and] the following decades were marked by an overharvesting of marine and land resources and overall degradation of the environment through pollution and development” (Ueki, 1999, p. 47)

### **The Colonial Era: 1783-1973**

While the physical and sociopolitical structures of the bai ensured the balance of the world Belauans were a part of, the introduction of foreign influences and various colonizers gradually disrupted this order through the destruction of the bai. Belauans’ first contact with Europeans happened in August 1783 when Captain Henry Wilson shipwrecked on Belau's Ulong reef. In his shipping log, he describes the battle between Chief Ibedul from Belau's western federation and Chief Reklai from the northern federation that took place during the time he and his crew stayed

in Oreor with Chief Ibedul (Keate, 1923). In order to aid their host, Captain Wilson had his men attach cannons to war canoes and armed Ibedul's men with guns, allowing Ibedul the upper hand in all his future battles.

When Captain Henry Wilson left Belau on November 12, 1783, he took with him Ibedul's son Lebuu to learn about the world outside Belau. Only a year later, while living in London, Lebuu fell ill with smallpox and died. Wilson sent the *Panther*, an East India Company ship, to deliver the news of Lebuu's death to his father, Ibedul. With the arrival of the Englishmen in Belau and the muskets they carried, Ibedul planned seven wars against other districts between the years of 1783 to 1791. Overtime Ibedul's unfair advantage and domination over other villages had caused a disruption in Belau's balance of power<sup>22</sup>. It wasn't until a few decades later, when Melekeok attained firearms from a Portuguese sailboat that grounded in Beliliou (Peleliu) and from a Scottish trader named Andrew Cheyne, that Melekeok would be able to defend themselves and other villages against Oreor.

In her book *Modekngei* (1987), Machiko Aoyagi describes these events by writing that the people of Beliliou were given seven firearms by the men on the Portuguese sailboat as gratitude for their hospitality. Wanting to aid Melekeok, who they had kinship ties with, restore the balance of power between the two federations, the chiefs of Beliliou gave the firearms to the people of Melekeok who were said to have "carried them from Beliliou to Melekeok secretly, taking much

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<sup>22</sup> Indigenous alliances and use of foreigners to gain political and military power is not unique in Belau. This characteristic of political change also occurred throughout Oceania in the 1700s and into the 1800s. Examples of this can be seen in the rise of Kamehameha in Hawai'i, Pomare in Tahiti, Tui Bau in Fiji, and the Tui Tonga in Tonga.

longer course on the sea, so that the Koror people would not notice (Aoyagi, 1987, 62). Aoyagi states that when Cheyene arrived in Belau and demonstrated the strength of weapons he carried, Reklai “told an English chief officer that if the English would sail the ship to Melekeok and sell them muskets and powder, they would soon fill her cargo with sea cucumber” (1987, 62).

Not long after this transaction that Cheyene would align himself with Oreor and establish a sea cucumber factory that eventually proved disappointing. About a decade later, Cheyene returned to Belau and began trading muskets. In 1865 alone, Cheyene traded over 160 muskets for land in the villages of Imeliik, Melekeok, and Irrai (Palau Community Action Agency, 1977). Aoyagi states “Koror, which had gained a strong advantage by the visit of the Antelope and tried to make use of Cheyene again to consolidate its position, was thus fatally injured” (Aoyagi, 1987, 64). The balance of powers between the two federations that had been disrupted was once again similar in stance.

In the years to follow, as many as sixty-four English ships came to Belau trading firearms for sea cucumbers, copra, pearls, turtle shell, and so on (Hezel 1995, Kramer 1929, Aoyagi 1987). Aoyagi comments on the sociopolitical imbalances that resulted from foreign influences:

It is not difficult to see how such Western technology destroyed the conventional social order and frightened and troubled the people [Belauans]. The foreigners frightened the Belauans because they could manipulate technology beyond the imagination of the Belauans, making them feel inferior on all counts. The Belauans were more confused because the



conventional social order was rapidly disrupted. It is true that there had always been wars in Belauan society, but the reasons for them and their scope were comprehensible. The introduction of firearms, however, changed the style of battle...Thus war escalated in size and frequency, resulting in large-scale loss of life and destruction of villages (1987, 65).

### Spanish Colonial Territory

In 1885, in the midst of social disruption, the Spanish arrived in Belau and claimed the island for Spain in the name of Pope Leo XIII (Hezel 1970, Takaoka 1954, Aoyagi 1987). During this age of enlightenment, Spanish missionaries were sent into Belau to Christianize and “civilize” Belauans while establishing a place for Spanish dominance. The arrival of Spanish missionaries brought suspicion among the Belauan people who were unsure of whether they were traders or governors with soldiers en route (Hezel, 1970). In addition, Hezel 1970 and Kramer 1929 note that Belauans also stayed away from missionaries in fear that they might anger the Belauan gods.

Although Spanish political and economic influence on Belau was minimal the Spanish Capuchin missionaries, members of a strict Catholic order, directed their attention to abolishing institutionalized warfare and the practice of omengol<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Many scholars, even the Palauan dictionary, define omengol as prostitution. During an interview with Illabsis Santos Ngirasechedui, he describes omengol as being beyond the confines of prostitution. Instead he discusses how omengol was a way in which Belauan women would carry the burdens of their families and communities, working to provide enough money to pay for the construction of their village bai or other family obligations. It was because of the burdens they carried that women were upheld in Belauan society and given a voice of power (Ngirasechedui, 2014). Further discussion on the topic of omengol can be found in Isebong Asang’s dissertation, *Epistemological Articulations: Blebaol, Klomengelungel ma Tekoi er Belau*.

(Hezel 1970, Pacific Worlds & Associates 2003). Belauan historian Kathy Kesolei argues that the missionaries took the banning of omengol a step further by eliminating the image of women from bai paintings and carvings such as the dilukai (Pacific Worlds & Associates, 2003). In commenting on this era of Belau's history, Walter Metes states,

When the Spanish missionaries were here, they taught the people to change. Local people in Palau, they have their own gods and totems: they have their own family gods, individual gods, [and] village gods. Missionaries tried to change that: they taught Christianity. Then a little later new priests came with a different mission. I guess they were playing a key part of trying to convert people so they could be [in] control (Pacific Worlds & Associates, 2003).

Along with fear of their gods, the removal of women from the bai's architectural structure and their displacement in society during the advent of Capuchin missionaries resulted in the rejection of Catholicism by many Belauans. A small percentage of Belauans were baptized into the Catholic Church, and Father Antonius de Valencia records that they were converted because of the missionaries immunity and ability to tend to the needs of those who fell ill to influenza (Hezel, 1970).

### *German Colonial Territory*

Following Spain's defeat in the Spanish-American War of 1898 and the financial trouble that followed, Spain sold the Mariana Islands, Belau, and the rest of

the Caroline Islands to Germany for 25 million peseta, an equivalent of \$188,022.11 in U.S. dollars today (Aoyagi, 1987). This began Belau's German era, also bringing in Capuchin missionaries, but focusing more on economic development. Unlike the Spanish missionaries who tried to destabilize indigenous social and political structures, the Germans used indigenous structures to their advantage. Kesolei describes this in an interview with Pacific Worlds:

The Germans started a police force...it was a central police force that had a program of getting coconuts planted throughout Palau. So he [German Police administer Wrinkler] gives orders to all the chiefs in the community, saying that each family would plant so many coconuts. And there would be competitions...if you didn't follow orders, then you'd get jailed or your Palauan money would be taken as a fine" (Pacific Worlds & Associates, 2003).

Under Germany's *Neu Guinea Government*, the islands were placed under the administrative section *Deutsche Jaliut Gesellschaft*, and again divided into another two sections with Belau and Saipan composing one of the two. Under the *Deutsche Jaliut Gessellschaft* administration Arno Senfft, the district officer, appointed James Gibbons, a West Indian who had lived in Belau for over forty years, as his administrator. "Gibbons was put in charge of five Palauan policeman and was told to convene a council of high chiefs representing all parts of the island group" (Hezel, 1995, 115). Under Senfft's orders, that Gibbons and his police force were to relay his orders to the chiefs, punish small crimes with fines or labor, and plant coconuts throughout the island to increase the islands production of copra (Hezel 1995, Kramer 1929, Takaoka 1954).

When Senfft returned to Belau in 1904, he discovered Gibbons was ineffective as an administrator and “decreed that henceforth no able-bodied man was to spend day-light hours in the clubhouse [bai]... called[ing] on his policemen to oust men by force if necessary” (Hezel, 1995, 115). A year later, Senfft sent a police chief named Winkler to head Belau’s branch station. Within the first few months of his arrival, Winkler took possession of two bais in Koror, established phosphate mines in Angaur, and added twelve more Belauans to his police force with whom he traveled, enforcing government regulation and punishing those who did not obey. Winkler even went to the extent of “deposing” chief Reklai of Melekeok and appointing one of his police men, Ruluked, in his place<sup>24</sup>.

In the years to follow, the German government’s systemized penalties lead to the disposal and exile of many of Belau’s chiefs and leading figures who did not agree with Winkler’s pro-modernized ways. Like the Spanish missionaries before them, German missionaries promoted the abolition of traditional Belauan beliefs, customs, and religion by decreeing them a source of divination and destroying the place in which these beliefs and customs were practiced and preserved: the bai. By 1910, four years before German rule in Belau would end, German ethnographers Augustin and Elizabeth Kramer recorded only eighty-five bais on Belau<sup>25</sup>. It was under colonial domination, beginning with the Germans and continuing throughout

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<sup>24</sup> Despite Winkler’s deposition of the chief, Reklai “continued to preside at council meetings in his own district, while Ruluked dealt with the Germans on all official matters” (Hezel, *Strangers In Their Own Land*).

<sup>25</sup> It was during their research that Kramer and his wife also recorded over two hundred historical stories painted on the bais structures. According to Nero’s analysis of these stories, the spatial representation of the stories indicated that the paintings did not only depict the histories of the village but its connection to other villages as well (245).

the three decade rule of the Japanese that baidō “were repressed, and their functions transferred to other newly introduced institutions” (Kreps, 2003, p. 66).

### Nan'yō-chō

On August 23, 1914, on the basis of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance, Japan joined Britain in declaring war on Germany. Within ten days of its declaration, Japan set out to conquer all German territories in Micronesia despite British request for Japanese to only provide the islands with “direct operational necessity” (Peattie, 1988, p. 40). After American strategists learned of Japan’s secretive and strategic move into Micronesia, tension rose between the two countries. After World War I and four years of an intense game of diplomatic tug-of-war, the Japanese government agreed to follow the League of Nations’ mandate system. In June 1919 at the Paris Peace Conference, Japan became a category C mandate (Nan’yō-chō) to the islands of Micronesia.

When Japan conquered the German territories of Micronesia in 1914, it began its occupation with a less abrasive approach. In his October 15<sup>th</sup> address to the commanders of Japan’s Special Ground Forces, Japanese Minister of Navy Yashiro Rokurō mandated:

During the occupation you must calm the minds of the people and allow them to continue in their work easily. Although, needless to say, you must strictly punish those who resist our troops or those who intend to cause any harm to our troops, you must respect the native customs and not interfere with their religious worship. By providing medical care and in other proper ways, you

must try to conciliate them with virtuous administration and concentrate on persuading them to revere us (Aoyagi, 1987, p. 78).

Unlike the Germans, who created fixed district boundaries and appointed chiefs of their choosing, the Japanese administration tried to make use of the local political system by keeping Reklai and Ibedul as high chiefs of Belau's two confederacies overlooking district chiefs. But unlike the authority they had under Belau's traditional sociopolitical structure, they were unable to give orders to chiefs of districts under their jurisdiction (Aoyagi, 1987). Aoyagi also notes that the high chiefs main tasks, along with others, was "to inform the people of the laws and regulations, to pass down orders from the governor of Belau branch administration office or to carry the orders out, and so on"<sup>26</sup> (1987, p. 80).

Despite their attempts to use Belau's tradition sociopolitical structure, the Japanese kept the German-formed native police force to keep law and order, hygiene and punishments affecting the Belauan people (Aoyagi, 1987). Overtime, the education and Japanese linguistic skills the police force attained help them rise in Japan's meritocracy, creating a new type of elite. The police force was eventually "given authority to enforce the laws of the ruling nation and to punish violators...[in addition to] controlling the Modekngei religion" (Aoyagi, 1987, p. 82).<sup>27</sup> Eventually with the power shift from the klobak to this new class of elite and the shift from clan economy to a colonial economy, the practice and preservation of Belauan customs

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<sup>26</sup> Information retrieved from Gaimushō (Ministry of Foreign Affairs) 1929 official serial report *Nihon Teikoku Inintōchi Chiji Gyōsei Nenpō* (Annual Report of the Mandate Territory under the Japanese Imperial Administration).

<sup>27</sup> It is also interesting to note the number of people that composed the new elite class during certain points of history. Aoyagi writes that in 1929, the group consisted of eight men and only increasing two in number by 1937.

and beliefs rooted in meklou ulechell a kelulau began to degenerate. When interviewed by Greenwood in 2006, Anthropologist Donald Rubenstein, also emphasizes that it was also due to the economic shift that many kebliil's become in cohesive resulting in the abandonment of much of the bais' maintenance (Greenwood, 2006).

By 1914, the impact of the Japanese administration on Belau was visible and largely felt. With the shift in power from traditional to new elite and the degeneration of Belauan customs and beliefs rooted in meklou ulechell a kelulau, the Japanese government began suppressing Modekngei by outlawing it, burning bais, and arresting its followers. Outraged with the imbalances caused by the Japanese administration, Temedad, the founder of Modekngei, began pushing Modekngei as an anticolonial social movement to bring back ancestral gods, customs and traditions, and to unite the Belauan people against their colonizers. Infuriated with Temedad's defiance, the Japanese arrested him and his followers. When questioned by the police why they believed in the teachings of Modekngei, followers often stated, "I believe in the traditional teachings of Belau" (Aoyagi, 1987, p. 201).

The two decades that followed brought urbanization and more local displacement. Japanese development resulted in limited schooling<sup>28</sup> for Belauans and forced and low wage labor at agricultural experiment stations, phosphate and

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<sup>28</sup> Belauan elders who lived during this time discuss how they were only allowed to attend Kogakko (school for Belauan children). Some state that for Belauans who performed well in school, they would be able to attend hoshuka (advanced courses). Both levels of schooling were about five years. After this, Belauan students were sent to work. To read more on this, refer to Maki Mita's 2009 *Ethnological Reports Palauan Children under Japanese Rule*.

bauxite mining, and the construction of airports, seaplane ramps, and buildings causing major environmental impacts (Hughes, 2006). In 1939, Japan Airlines began offering commercial air services to Belau which caused a wave of Japanese migration, further suppressing Belauans. Kathy Kesolei notes that within one year of Japan airlines first flight, the population of Japanese in Belau was estimated at an overwhelming 23,700 while Belau native population lingered at an estimated 7,000 (Pacific Worlds & Associates, 2003). In 1941, as World War II approached, Japan militarized Belau, building an airbase for the Japanese 31<sup>st</sup> Army in Peleliu and military installations throughout Koror and Babeldaob.

In 1944, barely ten months after the carnage of Tarawa<sup>29</sup>, General Douglas MacArthur insisted that U.S. forces take the Japanese airbase in Peleliu in preparation for the invasion of the Philippines. With approval to MacArthur's request, the U.S. 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division and 81<sup>st</sup> Army Division invaded the Belauan island of Peleliu on September 15, 1944 (Sledge, 2007). With the war going on in their backyards, the people of Peleliu were displaced from their homes and took refuge in villages throughout Babeldaob. Despite trying to escape, all Belauan's were eventually displaced and hid in caves while they watched as their homes, bais, and environment were bombed during U.S. air raids. After a brutal battle the Japanese surrendered, leaving the islands of Belau in the control of the United States Navy and the Belauan people to pick up the shattered pieces of their lives.

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<sup>29</sup> The Battle of Tarawa took place during the Pacific Theater of World War II. The battle between the U.S. and Japan began on November 20<sup>th</sup> and lasting a 23 day time span, leaving the Kiribati atoll in ruins (World War 2 Facts).



### *Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands*

As Belauans made their way out of caves and began to return home after the war, one of their main focuses was the revitalization of the Bai ra Irrai, Belau's last remaining bai. Walter Metes, registrar for Bureau of Arts and Culture, recalls this time saying:

People from Ngerusar, Ngerkedam, and people from a village in Ngerchelong came and did it (the renovation of Bai ra Irrai)...they repainted the front end with the history of Airai during World War II [as pictured in Figure 5]. And so they put the Japanese, Europeans, and all the guns, and the history of how the war actually started. The Japanese zero planes flying...there were a lot of interesting stories. That was very important – a change of history. They saw it, and they painted whatever it was that took place. It was the people in the village's version of the war (Pacific Worlds & Associates, 2003).

Not long after the reassembly and painting of the bai, members of the Historical Preservation Office under the U.S. Department of the Interior argued that bai paintings should only include pre-contact historical narratives. This caused many, such as Walter Metes, to argue against the Historical Preservation Office emphasizing how the bai was a space for all historical narratives that reminded Belauan's of the importance of meklou ulechell a kelulau and the events that played key roles in the history of Belau. Unfortunately, the paintings were painted over and only narratives from Belau's precolonial history remained on the bai's beams and gables.

The revitalization of the Bai ra Irrai had begun a cultural revitalization movement in Belau, with the reconstruction of bais on the top of the list. In 1951, District anthropologist Homer Barnett proposed that a new community house be built with the assistance of the South Pacific Commission in Oreor (Barnett, 1947-1951). The Kebtot el Bai was created to meet both traditional and contemporary needs and to represent the community as a whole, rather than being a traditional men's meetinghouse (Kreps, 2003). Nero describes the Kebtot el Bai:

Rather than the double-ended construction found in the village bai, at times doubled in the chiefly double bai of the highest-ranking village, the new community center, called Kebtot el Bai (Twin Meetinghouse), was constructed with four gables, one pointing toward each of the four cardinal directions, The Kebtot el Bai was the community center for all of Palau, symbolically represented by the four gables, each associated with one of the four 'corner post' village children of Milad (1992, p. 246).

Only a decade after being built, the Kebtot el Bai was destroyed by a typhoon.

In 1969, the Kebtot el Bai was replaced with a more traditional bai – Bai ra Ngechesechel ar Cherechar. Following traditional social and architectural practices, Bai ra Ngechesechel ar Cherechar was constructed in Ngeremlengui, Oreor's "oldest brother," then reassembled on the museum grounds in Ngerbeched. Although the traditional site for the bai would be elsewhere in Oreor, its erection on the museum grounds shows it to be a bai for the Belauan community rather than for the village of Oreor itself. The painted stories from each state on the bais beams and gables represent this as a bai for the Belauan community.

## **The Republic of Belau**

Even before the colonization of Belau, Belauans believed in a Belau for Belauans (Hart, 2002). While colonization resulted in the impairment of Belauan traditions and the imposition of new concepts and ways of life, the events of both World War one and two left Belau in destruction and despair. Although it is still believed by many that the end of misery came when the United States began its administration of the islands in the 1940s (Gibbons, 1983), many Belauan elders who lived during this time know that the strategic aspect of US military interests began to dominate Belau's destiny. Disclosing the US's plans for Belau which included the use of nuclear and harmful substances, along with the seizing of land, Belau's struggle for independence moved to outlaw these plans.

Drafting Belau's first constitution in 1979, elders emphasized Belau for Belauans by proclaiming and reaffirming the people's immemorial right to be supreme in their islands and through the preservation and enhancement of Belau's traditional heritage and environment. With a nuclear ban included in Belau's constitution to reaffirm the preservation and enhancement of all things Belauan, the United States refused to envision a future for Belau that did not meet their military interests. During confrontations surrounding Belau's second referendum on its Nuclear Free Constitution and its agreement of free association with the United States in 1978, the Bai ra Ngechesechel ar Cherechar, a symbol of Belauan people united, was destroyed by arson (Shuster, 1988). After extreme power struggles and three constitutional referendums to approve the Compact of Free Association, Belau's constitution was ratified in 1980 and entered into force on January 1<sup>st</sup>, 1981.

On the path to independence from the United States, the bai became the nation's foundation. While adopting a democratic form of government strongly influenced by the United States model, Belauans added the Council of Chiefs<sup>30</sup> among the three main government branches to "advise the president on matters concerning traditional laws, customs and their relationship to the Constitution and laws of Belau" (Constitutional Convention, 1979, p. 49). Attempting to continue the thread of reestablishing a Belau for Belauans, the legislature was called Olbiil ra Kelulau (House of Whispered Strategies) which explicitly evokes the bai "in which negotiations were conducted according to strict, private protocols" (Nero, 1992, p. 238). Incorporating both traditional and modern forms of government, the Olbiil ra Kelulau was founded on the bai's political principles and traditions while using a modern form of government to venture into the future.

The years that followed brought about the reconstruction of the Bai ra Ngechesechel ar Cherechar in 1991, the construction of Bai el Melekeong in 1992 (located in Melekeok), and the construction of Bai ra Imeungs in Aimeliik that same year. When Belau finally gained independence on October 1<sup>st</sup>, 1994, the people of Belau and their allies gathered at Asahi Baseball field in Ngerbeched, Koror to sing the nation's national anthem *Belau Rekid (Our Belau)* for the first time. Found on the national seal and represented through other means over the years, "the bai has moved from being a symbol of the local community to one that stands for the nation of Palau and the essence of 'being Palauan'" (Nero, 1992, p. 247).

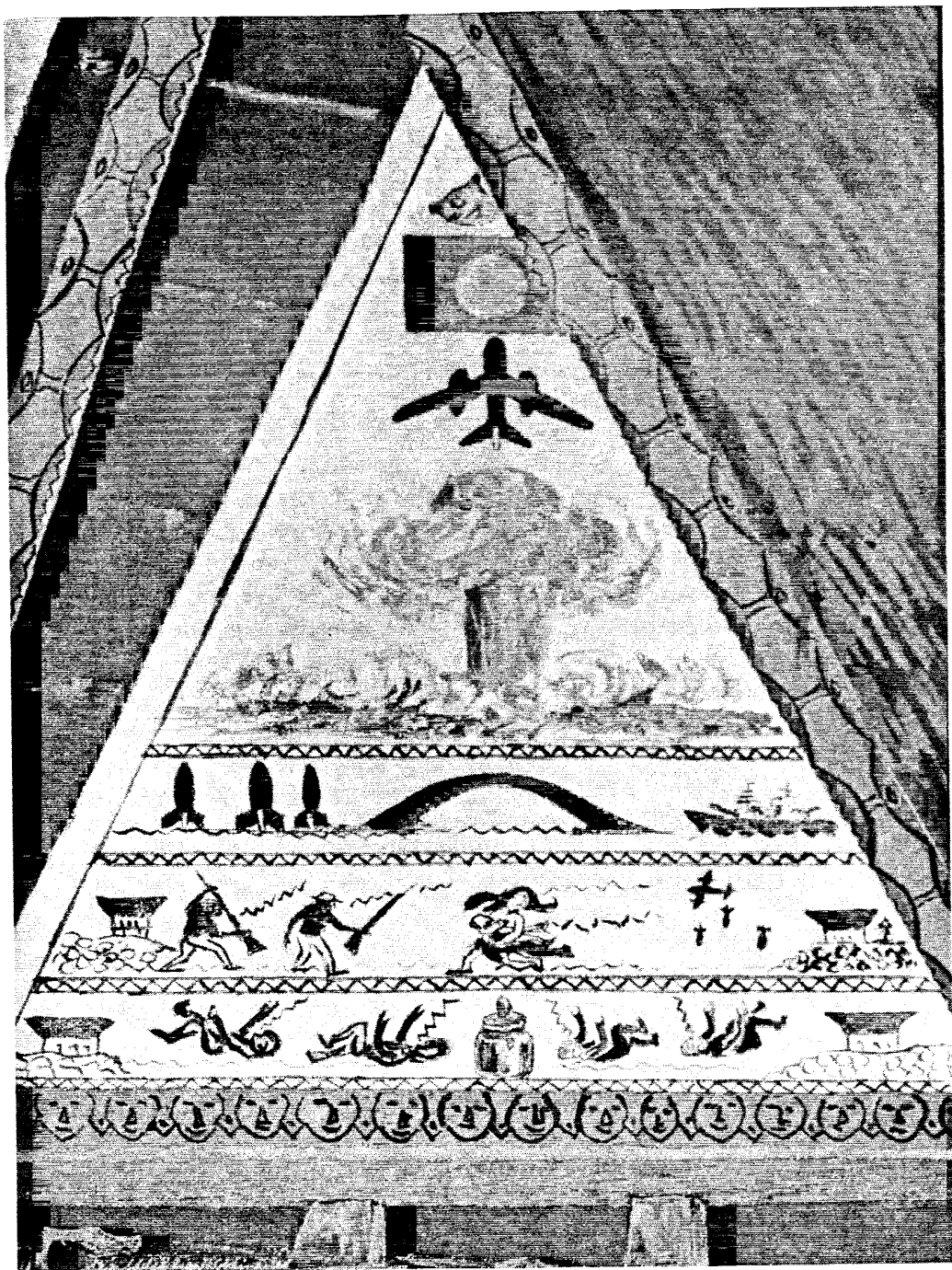
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<sup>30</sup> The Council of Chiefs is made up of the highest-ranking traditional leaders of each state. The council advises the President on issues pertaining to Belauan land, environment, conservation, traditional practices, and any arising public issues (Hart, 2002).

## Conclusion

As demonstrated in Chapters Two and Three, the bai has always played a central role in the lives of Belauans. Originating as a place of governance, the purpose and use of the bai over the years came to encompass a repository of histories, traditions, and guiding principles, in addition to a space where indigenous gods and Belauans themselves could commune with one another. When we trace the bai throughout Belau's colonial period, we come to recognize that the bai was not only important to Belauans but to colonizers as well. Despite their different methods, the colonizing powers all used the bai as a strategy to administer Belau. These strategies included tactics such as the demolishing of bais to gain power, the German and Japanese administrative use of village klobaks to inform villagers about new laws and mandates, and the use of bais as police stations which in turn reemphasized the structure as the nucleus of Belauan society.

Colonial mistreatment of the bai, klobak, and the Belauan people and environment ultimately resulted in the Belauan use of the bai to form strategies against colonial oppression and degradation while under Nan'yō-chō and the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands. These strategies, as seen throughout Chapter Three and further discussed in Chapter Four, include the establishment of the anti-colonial social movement Modekgnei, the bai revitalization movement, and political campaign billboards using the historical narratives resembling those on the bai as a method of indirect commentary on the issues and challenges that arose during Belau's fight for independence.



**Figure 6** Oil Painting by Samuel Adelbai, Medad el Bai: Bo Domes er Ngii el Bai (The Bai of the Future), ca. 1988. (Nero).



## CHATER 4: A Cherechar a Lokelii

The bai and the klobak that sits in it preserves, protects, and enacts meklou ulechell a kelulau, reminding us about the balance we needed to keep in our relationships with our environment and one another. When foreign colonizers made their way onto our islands and began dismantling bais to shift us away from our principles, our ancestors rose up time and time again in resistance. During our fight for independence, our elders began a revitalization movement to remind and reemphasize the importance of the bai and the lesson and principles it preserves and protects. As we look throughout history – painted on the bai, passed down orally, and written in books – we find that the bai has informed our identity both socially and politically.

Despite the efforts of our ancestors and elders have made to keep the bai visible and instill its principles has the bai and all it encompasses “become just a museum of art” (Pacific Worlds & Associates, 2003)? Our eagerness to compete in the modern world has resulted in rapid development and “cultural Americanization” (Hughes, 2006). Dr. Steven Kuartei expands on this in his article “Environmental Sacredness and Health in Palau” where he writes,

The “winds of change” as articulated by Father Hezel has brought about contemporary challenges to Chedolel Belau [the sacredness of Palau]. 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 ways. The destruction of environment involved erosion of most if not all fabrics that harnesses a society together (2005, p. 93).

The challenges we face today are not only political but are social and environmental. Not only do they affect our nation and our livelihood but also they affect those who are connected to us by the Ocean and distant relations. In order to ensure a future for upcoming generations and ourselves, we should begin by asking how we are to go about addressing the issues and challenges at hand? After years of listening to elders and through my own research, I have come to the conclusion that the solutions to the issues and challenges we face lay within the commonly known Belauan proverb *A cherechar a lokelii*, meaning *the distant past reveals our future*.

When asking elders during my research why they believe the bai is important to us today, they all responded with stories of the historical narratives painted on the beams and gables of the bai, indirectly linking us and the contemporary issues and challenges we face to those of our past. Examples of these links are demonstrated in the stories of Uab and Dirrabkau in Chapters One and Two, as well as in the story of Meduu Ribtal told to me in an interview by Ebil Martha Iechad. As the story goes, long ago there was a village in Ngiwal called Ngibtal. It was in this



village that an elderly woman lived alone because her son, Mangidabrutkoel, often traveled to other villages. From her house the elderly women watched the people of Ngibtal return from sea with their daily catch of fish, but never offered her any as they passed by her house.

During one of Mangidabrutkoel's visit home, the elderly woman complained of how she watched the people of her village have an abundance of fish to eat while she had none. Listening to his mother's complaint, Mangidabrutkoel walked over to a breadfruit tree growing by the edge of the water in his mother's yard and chopped off one of its branches. Immediately water began gushing out of the tree bringing up fish with each rhythmic flow of the ocean's waves. Overtime, villagers came to envy the elderly woman and her tree. Finally, one night, an envious man chopped the tree down causing the ocean to burst out of the tree stump in a torrent that eventually flooded the island.

Our eagerness to compete in development is like the envious man of Ngibtal who cut down the breadfruit tree to get more fish and the thief who plucked out Temdokl's eyes for economical and social advancement. Similar to the flooding results of the actions of the characters in our historical narratives, what we have come to envision as development has resulted in the decline of natural resources, destruction of island vegetation, the marginalization of our cultural traditions and principles, and the sinking of our islands. As we have already come to understand, the historical events and knowledge that has shaped and defined who we are as Belauans have been incorporated into the nucleus of our society, the bai. By looking

at the structures of the bai and those that stem from it, we are able to hear the whispered memories and strategies in which it illuminates.

Not only is this strategy of looking to the past for answers significant, but it is also one that is common amongst the people of Oceania and the world. In *Native Land and Foreign Desires*, Lilikalā Kame‘eleihiwa describes the same proverb through a Hawaiian view when she writes,

It is interesting to note that in Hawaiian, the past is referred to as Ka wa mamua, “the time in front or before.” Whereas the future, when thought of at all, is Ka wa mahope, or “the time which comes after or behind.” It is as if the Hawaiian stands firmly in the present, with his back to the future, and his eyes fixed upon the past, seeking historical answers for present-day dilemmas. Such an orientation is to the Hawaiian an eminently practical one, for the future is always unknown, whereas the past is rich in glory and knowledge (1992, pp. 22-23).

This chapter focuses on ways the bai can help illuminate strategies for thinking about the contemporary issues and challenges we face. In order to do this, this chapter examines the kinds of strategies taken from the bai that Belauans have used in the past, are using today, and can use in the future. This chapter also discusses how other groups have and can adopt these strategies to address current or future challenge they may face as well.

## Political Strategies

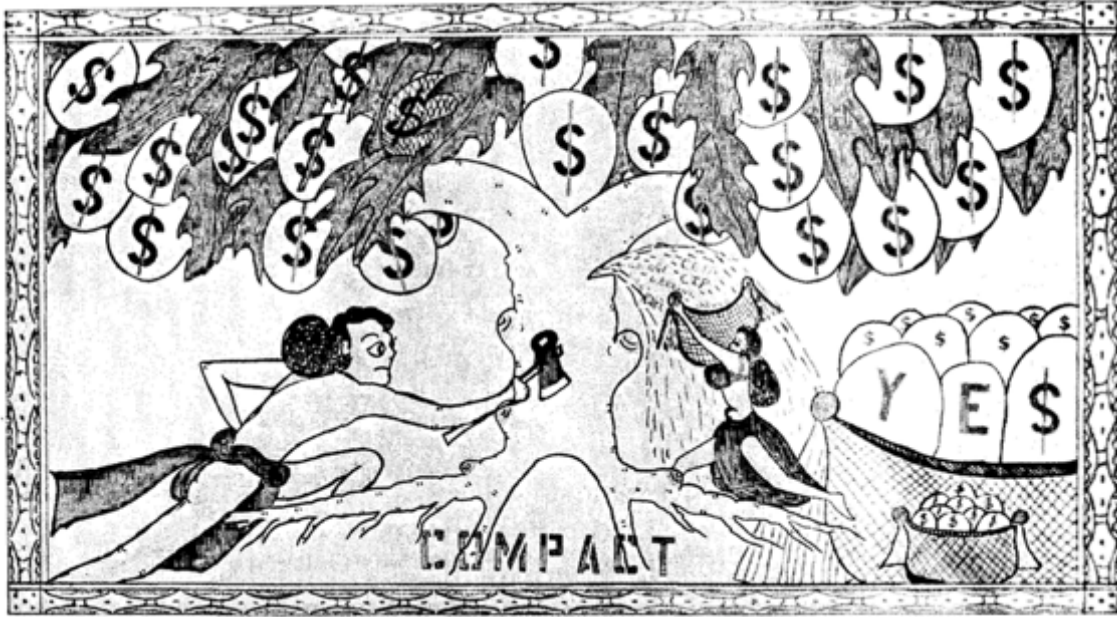
As the nucleus of our society, the bai informs our sociopolitical structures, our histories, relationships, and most importantly the principles that have guide and shaped us throughout our years of transformation and rebirth. Despite colonial attempts to marginalize our culture and principles by dismantling the bai, our elders used the histories and knowledge attached to the bai to create strategies in which would help lead Belau into the future. The first of these strategies to emerge during the colonial era was in 1914, during the Japanese occupation of Belau. Displeased with the dismantling of Belau's bais and the marginalization of Belauan culture and traditions, Tamadad (Kodep of Chomkuul lineage) began Modekngei (to come together), an anticolonial social movement founded on meklou ulechell a kelulau and Belauan traditions. Although this movement was later targeted and banned by the Japanese police force, Modekngei continued to be active, embracing one-third of the population by 1963, establishing a union and school by 1974, and playing a role in the 1974 Constitutional Convention and the 1980 presidential elections (Poyer, 2004).

When the Pacific Campaign happened in Belau during World War II, a new colonial power would take over the islands. Placed under the United Nations Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands Mandate, Belau would remain under American administration for a period of 47 years (1947-1994). When the United Nations Special Committee on Decolonization announced the process of decolonizing Oceania, the Congress of Micronesia was created to allow representatives from each island of Micronesia the opportunity to determine their country's political status. By

1978, Belauan elders decided to become a separate entity from the rest of Micronesia, setting the stage for Belauans to establish their own constitution, which was eventually ratified in 1980 (Shuster, 1988).

In order to sway Belauan votes on topics such as independence, a nuclear-free amendment in the constitution, and the Compact of Free Association with the United States, political billboards with historical narratives and proverbs resembling those painted on the bai, or what bai paintings would look like based on how one voted, were used as a political campaign strategy to address these issues and provide an “arena in which confrontation could be depersonalized” (Nero, 1992, p. 235). Nero writes about these billboards during Belau’s seventh plebiscite saying,

One of the most striking visual images of the 1983 plebiscite campaign was a billboard prominently placed in Koror depicting a modern version of the Breadfruit Tree Story, with a breadfruit tree from which round money bags hung, being happily harvested by a Palauan man in traditional loincloth. The images of the past – the Breadfruit Tree, the man in loincloth – clearly set the Palauan in continuity with his past, although the ever-magical Breadfruit Tree has now sprouted the new, non-gendered source of wealth in Palau – the U.S. dollar. The poster clearly supported the ‘yes’ position, implying that great wealth would come follow acceptance of the compact (1992, p. 258).



**Figure 6** Breadfruit Tree Billboard, first plebiscite, 1983 (photo by Karen Nero).

Belauans such as contemporary artist Samuel Adelbai have also used the strategy of combining political commentary into bai paintings to express an antinuclear message in his oil painting *Medad el Bai: Bo Domes er Ngii el Bai* (The Bai of the Future) (Figure 6). Nero also describes this painting when she writes,

At first glance the painting depicts a traditional bai, yet a closer look reveals a series of iconographic substitutions of critical import. The chicken has been replaced by Pepsi cans, the gods of construction by the Christian Jesus, replete, with graphic crown of thorns. Replacing the outstretched limbs of the Breadfruit Tree of the traditional gable is the spreading mushroom cloud of a nuclear explosion (1992, p. 258).

Over the years, bai paintings have continued to be used for political and social campaigns to send messages to voters. Lining Belau's main street, these billboards

link us to our past and reinforce the importance our culture, traditions, principles, and the bai.

### **Educational Strategies**

Another arena in which the bai provides us with a foundation is education. According to the Palau Society of Historians, there are eight fundamental principles and components that were taught to Belauan children at home and within their clubhouses. These included: (i) respect, (ii) responsibility, (iii) obedience, kindness, and preservation, (iv) humility and verbal conduct, (v) care and compassion, (vi) concern for the needs and problems of family, (viii) occupation, and (ix) visit to kin and others. This educational approach was key to the sustainability and strength of the Belauan society.

After years of colonization and the introduction of new educational approaches, the traditional educational principles and components once taught at home and within bai settings were not being instilled in Belauan students. To address this issue, Modekngei elders established the Belau Modekngei School in 1974 to promote self-sustainability and teach Belauan principles and customs. Today students at Belau Modekngei School study core academic subjects such as Math, English, Science, History, and Palauan. Students also have the opportunity to farm medicinal crops and practice traditional customs that stem from the sociopolitical structures and health practices of the bai, as well as traditional dances in elective classes.

In a news article by the *Pacific Daily News*, Modekngei leader of the time Ngirchobeketang stated, “Every day we see our culture is being replaced by another culture, and we want to assist in preserving what is good in Palauan culture” (Aoyagi, 1987, p. 238). These words are not only those of the Ngirchobeketang but also those of many Belauans. Over the years, this statement has been stressed time and time again in scholars work’s such as that of Edelene Uriate’s *Omesubel A Klechibelau: The Rise of a New Program at the Palau Community College* (2010), Kiblas Yalap Soaladoab’s *Cultivating Identities: Re-Thinking Education in Palau* (2010), Virginia Luka’s *Palau: Impacts of Education and Cultural Change* (2012), and Faith Swords *Promoting Intangible Cultural Heritage in the Palauan Education System* (2014).

The marginalization of Belauan culture has not only led to the adoption of Belauan educational principles, language, and culture into the curriculum of Belau Modekngei School but has also led to laws mandating the inclusion of Belauan educational principles, language, and writing courses into the curriculum of all schools in Belau, whether chartered or publicly funded (Gerundio-Dizon, 2012). According to a news article that came out in *Island Times*, this new law promises to:

- allow children to better understand their Palauan background and identity,
- provides universal experience from children in Palau, promoting a society-wide sense of community and ensures that the language will serve as
- foundation for the Republic’s children through their education (Gerundio-Dizon, 2012).

Today, the curriculum surrounding Belauan studies has expanded to including teaching history with the historical narratives painted on the bai, as well as using bai principles and strategies to discuss issues around health and conservation.

### **Environmental Strategies**

Just as the bai has promoted political and educational strategies, the klobak's kelulau strategies have also been used as a form of public policy to address contemporary challenges Belauans have faced throughout the decade. One major challenge continuously affecting Belau is the effects that development and climate change has had and continues to have on our society and environment. In the early 1990s, Belauan environmentalist Noah Idechong created an innovative model of marine conservation that combines traditional and modern knowledge. Convincing beluu klobaks to reinstate an age-old conservation strategy known as bul, the klobak was able to protect marine resources from being overharvested by restricting areas during known spawning and feed periods.

Over time the traditional bul system has become the basis for Belau's network of protected areas and its new Protected Area Network (PAN) law. The use of kelulau strategies such as bul has also led to the drafting and implementation of various environmental and conservation laws. These laws have also made Belauan's aware of other issues confronting us such as food security and our future livelihood. Because Belau's livelihood largely depends on the natural resources the ocean provides, Belau started the Micronesia Challenge in 2006 urging the islands of



Micronesia to “preserve the natural resources that are crucial to the survival of Pacific traditions, cultures and livelihoods” (Micronesia Challenge, 2010-2012).

In more recent years, Belauan President Tommy Remengesau Jr. has extended this challenge to the World as effects of climate change are becoming evermore visible. President Remengesau has also taken an active stance by declaring Belau’s entire 200 nautical miles exclusive economic zone (EEZ) a marine conservation area (Shiffman, 2014). Since retiring from congress, Noah Idechong continues to help other countries, in particular the islands of Micronesia, Hawai’i, and Fiji, adopt and/or create innovative conservation strategies to slow down the effects of climate change and ensure future generation have a island to call home and nature based sustainability. Although this is not explicitly linked to the physical structure of the bai, it is based on the knowledge and cultural understandings whose home is the bai.

### **The Bai of the Future**

Just like our history, culture, and traditions, the bai has been manifested in different ways over the years in the form of new structures, art, and even the internet. During Belau’s fight for independence, the Bai er a Ngesechel a Cherechar was constructed to bring Belau together as a nation. Belauans painted historical narratives on this bai that would “feed” the future, such as expressed in the name of the bai. In 2006, the Ngaramayong Cultural Center in Medalaii was constructed to provide a place where educational programs aimed at preserving and conserving

the culture and traditions of Belau. Not only does this space promote Belauan educational principles and practices but also lead with meklou ulechell a kelulau.

Following these examples, the Palau Community College constructed their Mesekui bai to provide students a space to gather with other students, elders, and faculty. Belauans in the diaspora have also created spaces for gathering and dialogue in Guam, adopting the architecture and roles of Belau's traditional bais. These structures have been and continue to be spaces where elders, community members, and students gather to discuss contemporary issues, exchange old and new knowledge, and to have social events.

As Belau becomes technologically advanced, easier and faster access to the Internet, Wi-Fi, computers, and tablets over the years have allowed Belauan's at home and in the diaspora the opportunity to easily discuss their issues and concerns. As a result of this, internet forums such as *Belau 2012*, *Belau 2013*, *680 Palauan Customs-Siukang*, and *Beluad Belau, Palau* on Facebook have become cyber bais in which provided a space for gathering and discussion. Just as issues and concerns were discussed through Kelulau (whispers) within the physical space of the bai, discussions that happen within our virtual bais are as silent as whispers but have greater waves of effect as discussions are share and expanded through satellites connecting us to one another no matter where we are in the world.

## **Conclusion**

From what has been explored in this chapter, the bai can be used to illuminate strategies for thinking about the present and future issues and challenge

we face. By comparing oral narratives painted on the bai to contemporary issues, we are able to determine the effects our decisions of today will have in the future. With the environmental and social devastation we currently face, traditional laws and customs associated with meklou ulechell a kelulau can be used to stabilize these threats, such as traditional leaders and elders have demonstrated with the use of bul. Yet talks about expanding development in Belau to include seabed mining and a larger tourism industry only push us farther away from creating solutions. But if we take into consideration the advice of our traditional leaders and elders, along with the lessons painted on the bai, we can rest assure that future generations will be able to share in beauty our island and culture have to offer.

It is my hope that this chapter, as in the rest of this thesis, has demonstrated ways the bai can be used to define and gives us meaning as well as help us find ways of navigating through issues and challenges that we face. Such as emphasized in the Belauan proverb “A cherechar a lokelii,” the distant past reveals our future. By being able to define and construct the interrelations between our past and present in our own ways, we as Belauans can gain greater autonomy of our island and ourselves, unique and unlike any other.

## CHAPTER 5: Conclusion

Before the presence of foreign governments and the emergence of a cash-based economy, Belau functioned on a check and balance system guided by meklou ulechell a kelulau, a set of basic principles in that connect us to our environment and one another. The natural balance of our environment and society was kept through this system and practice of these traditional principles. With the introduction of various colonial administrations and foreign influences, we began drifting away from our own principles and beliefs, becoming modern-day Uabs causing destruction to our island and ourselves. Guided by the Belauan proverb “A cherechar a lokelii,” it is the intent of this thesis to demonstrate how the bai, a structure of the past, continues to inform Belauan identity and illuminate strategies for thinking about the present and future issues and challenges we face.

The first chapter of this thesis begins by using the story of Uab to set up the relevant background necessary to understand the importance of meklou ulechell a kelulau and how the bai became the symbol of our nation and essence of being Belauan. It is from this jumping point that I fast forward us to the present and refer to the issues facing us today. With headlines that read of seabed mining, effect of climate change, and bribery, I position us to recall the historical narratives painted on the bai. As the nucleus of administrative power where decisions are made on all elements essential to our lives, this structure has overtime absorbed our most sacred histories and traditions and continuously whispered them to all who would listen.

After the klobak was created, the gods gathered together to teach Orachel the art of bai construction and decoration. Subsequently, Orachel constructed the first bai, Bai ra Ngcheed, to serve as the villages' nucleus of administrative power. As time passed, the defiance and lawlessness of people brought about a flood cleansing the land and causing the rebirth of Belauan people and transformation of the bai. It is during this era that bai construction evolves and is not only utilized as the klobak's Olbiil ra Kelulau but also as a community center, a place of education, and dwelling for the village god and priest.

As natural disasters, political problems, and war emerged people began to migrate throughout the archipelago taking with them the names of places and title from where they came, along with names and the alliances they made along the way. Linked to the stories of origin, migration, and settlement of people throughout the archipelago, bai paintings became more elaborate transforming the bai into a repository of history and moral lessons. As a result, "the essential structural aspects of Palauan social and political organization were chartered" (Smith D. R., 1997, p. 14).

When missionaries and colonizers began making their way into Belau in the early 1800s, they began to reform Belauan society by challenging traditions and social and political organizations associated with the bai. Not long after outlawing bai practices and embroiling the klobaks of Belau's cornerpost (saus) states, Belau's colonizers began to target the bais physical structure. During these years of colonization all but one of Belau's bais were destroyed. When Belau was mandated by the United Nations as the of the six districts of the Trust Territory of the Pacific

after World War II, Belau's first focus was on the revitalization of the bai. After reassembling the Bai ra Irrai and reconstructing new bais in other villages, the Kebtot el Bai, later destroyed by a typhoon and replaced by the current Bai ra Ngechesechel ar Cherechar, was constructed to represent the Belauan community and meet both traditional and contemporary needs.

On our path towards independence, we established the Olbiil ra Kelulau (Belau Congress) and its constitution embodying the basic principles and political practices of the bai. When Belau became independent on October 1<sup>st</sup>, 1994, Belau's leaders vowed that our island would be a nation that honors its traditions (Hart, 2002). Over the years, the bai has not only played a major part in the creation and transformation of Belau's social and political organizations but has also come to symbolize the evolution of cultural identity as indicated in bai paintings and oral histories.

Despite our efforts to revitalize Belau's bais and reemphasize the importance of the bai within our community, our eagerness to compete in the modern world has further shifted us away from the bai and our traditional principles. As we dove into development we did not think about the price we would have to pay. Today we face the consequences of these decisions and are left looking for strategies we can use to confront them. Some of the strategies for these issues are demonstrated in Chapter Four while other issues are still waiting to be tackled. Because our bai is now not only limited to its physical structure we as Belauans have the opportunity to collaborate and create other innovate strategies that will benefit the preservation and enhancement of Belau.

As we take a step back from this thesis, let us think globally about how we can use the past to feed the future. Although this thesis is only focused on Belau, the issues discussed are universal. The marginalization of indigenous principles and culture, the effects of development, climate change, and the fading of natural resources are all issues and challenges we face. We must begin to examine our historical narratives, indigenous structures, and arts, to find ways to address these issues. It would also be thought provoking to see what ways our indigenous strategies of conservation, education, and politics can help create a better future for us universally.

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