

COMMUNICATION

Comments on Settlement on Ulithi Atoll

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WILLIAM A. LESSA

THIS ARTICLE PROPOSES to rectify certain errors in the otherwise excellent article by John L. Craib, "Settlement on Ulithi Atoll, Western Caroline Islands" (1981). The mistakes in question are factual rather than errors in judgment, and have some bearing on Craib's views regarding settlement dynamics on Ulithi.

While I have given specific details to support my position, I have not had the immediate benefit of my field materials, which were collected from 1947 to 1961 during four field trips to the atoll. Most of these materials were deposited in 1979 and 1984 in the National Anthropological Archives of the Smithsonian Institution, where they are available for use by qualified scholars.

Although it is true that "the greatest impact on archaeological deposits occurred as the result of the U.S. military presence in the atoll" (Craib 1981:51), it is wrong to infer that this impact was as pervasive as alleged. It is particularly wrong to say: "On Mogmog [islet], only graves and the men's house platforms survived the military" (p. 51).

I am prepared to show that of the five islets—Falalop, Asor, Mogmog, Fathrai (Fas-sarai), and Lothou (Lossau)¹—that were inhabited when troops of the 81st Army Division came ashore uncontested on September 20, 1944, one of them was not excessively disturbed by the military and two were left virtually intact because they had been placed off limits to almost all military personnel.

In view of the fact that the atoll became the hub of U.S. naval operations in the western Pacific (with over a million men stopping over at various times but forced to remain aboard ship except for a few moments, especially on the "recreation" islet of Mogmog), it is astonishing that the military caused no more change than it did, except on Falalop, Asor, Soholoi (Sorlen), and Potongros (Potangeras). The last two islets were uninhabited at the time of the military presence. A German census taken in 1904 has shown that Soholoi was populated at that time, as were Pigelelei (Pigelelel), Mangeyang (Mangejang), and Lam (Lessa 1955:167; 1962:246). Craib (1981:51) reported that archaeological sites have been found not only on these once-populated islets but five others as well, none of which were occupied by the military.

The main evidence against Craib's claim that Mogmog's settlement had been severely damaged by the armed forces is an unpublished map of the islet that I made in 1948, using a plane table alidade (Fig. 1). The map shows clearly that by far most of the prewar dwellings and canoe sheds were still intact when the military left the atoll in 1946.²

Also intact was the Hafalciang, the great men's house or *metalefal* that Craib erroneously thought had been demolished by the military. On the contrary, it was wholly preserved when I first saw it in 1947, and was fully functioning in 1960, just before it was struck down by Typhoon Ophelia (Lessa 1964).³ Possibly, the structure I saw was not the survivor of the great typhoon of 1907 but a reconstruction; however, I do not think so. In any event it served as a meeting place, clubhouse, and dormitory for one of the two districts into which Mogmog is divided (Lessa 1950:82), until it took on a wider function. This *metalefal* was only one of three that had existed in the past. A second one, called the Hafelefo, which was also a district council house, no longer existed in 1947. Nor did the third great meeting house, called the Rolong, which was the atoll-wide "capitol" and the place where certain important rituals took place. Its site is well known and protected against trespass and disrespect by taboos that were still in force during my four field trips to the atoll (Lessa 1950:82; 1964:42; 1966:18–19). The site is indicated on my map by a dotted oblong just east of the still-functioning *metalefal*, and appropriately enough is bisected by the boundary line between the two districts of Mogmog.

This discussion of the three *metalefal* on Mogmog shows that although two of them were demolished before the war—probably by the 1907 typhoon—the third persisted until 1960 and was not at all affected by the military presence.⁴

As for the dwellings on Mogmog, the great majority on the map were prewar and are shown as black oblongs, although the actual shape of a house was like an elongated hexagon. The postwar dwellings are shown as black squares. Most of the "modern" structures seen by Craib were replacements not for houses destroyed by the military but by the typhoon of 1960. The location of traditional building sites in Ulithi is important because the structures were erected, usually but not always, on coral slab platforms. In 1948 I photographed and recorded the names of every house on Mogmog, this material being available at the Smithsonian.

The menstrual house, or *imol ipol*, on Mogmog had been preserved intact until the time of the typhoon. It was of traditional design and rested on a wide, raised coral platform. Archaeologists should bear in mind that although in later times each village had its own *imol ipol*, in earlier days each major corporate lineage had its own small menstrual hut, and, too, that each lineage had its own common hearth and canoe shed (Lessa 1950:77–78; 1966:28–29). Paul Hambruch reported the existence of menstrual houses in 1909, but he does not specifically say that they were communal. He does say that formerly there was a large menstrual house on Falalop that was destroyed by the last typhoon and replaced by smaller huts of this type (Damm et al. 1938:337–338, 341–342). There is no indication that there was a reversion to lineage-type huts.

Unfortunately, a survey of the dwellings on Mogmog made in 1909 by Hambruch was lost in a storm, but he did leave a three-column list of (1) place names, (2) the kind of structure on each, and (3) the names of their residents, except for the spirit houses and the men's house (Damm et al. 1938:336–337). It is significant that Hambruch lists only one men's house, not three. He lists no menstrual house at all, which could mean that either the former communal menstrual house had not yet been rebuilt after its destruction by the typhoon, its functions having been dispersed among temporary huts, or, less likely, that the communal house had not yet come into being. Hambruch's three-columned list seems

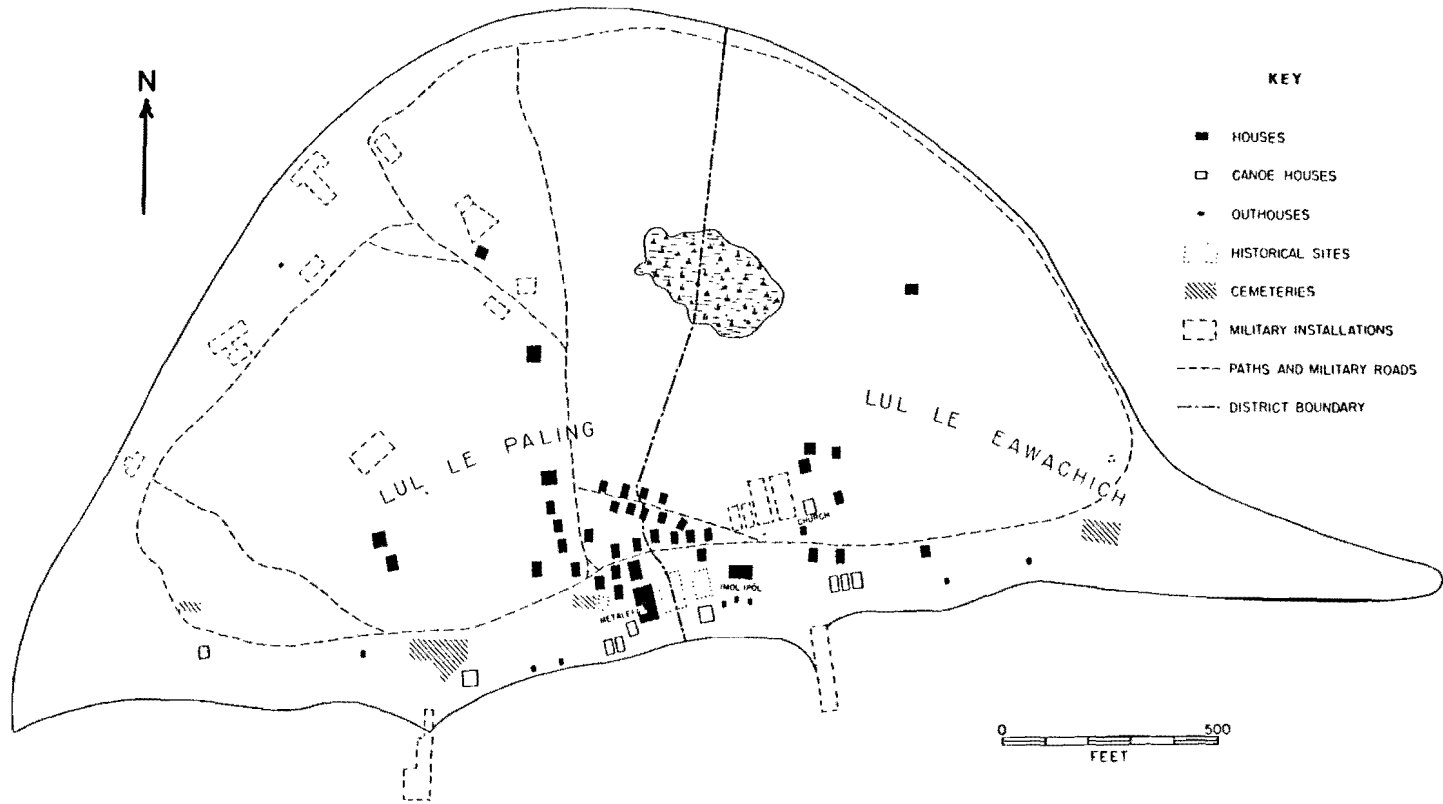


Fig. 1 Map of Mogmog made by the author in 1948 shows the extensive survival of native structures despite the military presence during World War II.

to be incomplete because of its brevity, or else reflects the devastation and depopulation caused by the 1907 typhoon, after which time the German government removed large numbers of Ulithians to Yap, Saipan, and Angaur.

Graves on Mogmog, as Craib concedes, did survive the military. In 1947 the two large cemeteries to the west and east were still intact and were surrounded by low picket fences built by the military for their protection. Scattered clusters of isolated graves, with coral slab sides and tops placed by the natives over each burial pit, were undisturbed. But archaeologists should bear in mind that inhumation is probably postcontact and that in this area the usual way of disposing of the dead was by aquatic means.

Much military construction had taken place on Mogmog during the war. The question is: How much and how destructive? In the middle of the village two huge Quonsets had been erected, as well as smaller ones here and there. A dispensary with a concrete floor was built on the northwest shore. I restored this dispensary sufficiently to make it suitable as my quarters in 1947 and 1948–1949, after which it was taken apart by the natives. A large galley was set up on the north shore some distance from the village. Two small piers were built on the south shore. A small airstrip for Piper Cub liaison planes was constructed on the spit at the easternmost part of Mogmog, and a short runway for seaplanes at the west tip. As my map indicates, the military had constructed a few roads for jeeps, probably by merely scraping the coralline surface with bulldozers.

Regarding the inhabited islets of Fathrai and Lothou, it should be noted that except for the presence on the former during the first six months of 1945 of a physician, Lieutenant Commander Marshall P. Wees, and his chief pharmacist's mate, neither of these two islets was occupied by the military. Indeed, the Navy took stern measures to keep all intruders off, allowing only brief excursions to Fathrai by selected visitors stationed aboard the thousand warships anchored at one time or other in the lagoon. Dr. Wees's experience in looking after the medical and other needs of the people on these two islets, whose population had been swelled by transferring the rest of the population of the atoll to Fathrai,⁵ has been described in two books, one of them factual (Wees and Thornton 1950) and the other thinly fictionalized (Divine 1950).

But archaeologists should be aware that if the Americans did not disturb Fathrai, the Germans did so about the turn of the century when they caused "streets" to be built out of coral rubble, giving the village a tidy European look not found on the other islets of the atoll. They should also be aware of the probability that in precontact times—not only on Fathrai but the rest of the atoll as well—the type of community was not the village, with its concentration of buildings, but the neighborhood, with its families scattered in lineage homesteads.

I am in agreement with Craib that certain other islets were severely damaged by the military. Falalop, the largest of Ulithi's islets, was taken over by a Marine air group and especially hurt by the construction at its north side of a large airstrip and tower which were built over a great swamp garden that had served as the chief single source of food for the whole atoll. The strip could accommodate large amphibian planes. If memory serves me correctly, I was told by the natives that the two adjacent villages on Falalop had been fire-bombed, destroying many houses. However, the heavily wooded areas of the islet, which is by far the largest in the atoll, remained fairly intact.

Soholoi was nearly stripped of all its trees and converted into a base for 400 small boats used to provide ferry service for men of the fleet (Lessa 1950:16). Although Soholoi had a population of 70 in 1904 it was devoid of settlement when I first saw it in 1947 and may have been abandoned, except for gardening, before the outbreak of war. Of all the islets it appeared to me to have been the most damaged, with row upon row of Quonsets still

standing, although they had already been extensively cannibalized by the natives for their valuable corrugated iron panels.

Asor, which according to the German census of 1904 had had a population of 101 at that time (Lessa 1955:167; Lessa and Myers 1962:146), was greatly levelled by U.S. military installations, although some changes had been made by the Japanese before the American occupation, as it had been the site of a small weather station manned by a small crew.

During the war the uninhabited island of Potongros was the site of a highly secret LORAN station that required the clearing of extensive garden land surrounding its tall tower. The LORAN station and a small detachment of sailors manning a weather station continued to remain after the war, but the meteorological personnel soon left and the LORAN station was moved to Falalop.⁶

In concluding I wish to offer some gratuitous suggestions regarding factors which archaeologists might want to consider in doing archaeological work in Ulithi. I have already mentioned the probability that early settlement patterns were of the neighborhood rather than the village type, that precontact burials were aquatic rather than terrestrial, and that menstrual lodges were small and familial rather than large and communal. To these may be added such factors as (1) the great erosion and inundation caused over the centuries by tidal waves, (2) changes in settlement brought on by internal warfare, (3) postwar disturbances caused by the people themselves in digging wells, latrines, and numerous pits for burying commercial trochus, and (4) extended stays by foreigners, such as the Portuguese crew apparently marooned in 1525–1526, and the Cantova mission stationed in 1731.

NOTES

1. Place names in parentheses are those I used in my publications and are less accurate than those adopted by Craib. I deliberately used the less accurate names because they were the standard set long ago by the U.S. Hydrographic Office. In my CIMA report (1950) and in field notes deposited at the Smithsonian Institution I list proper spellings derived from interviews with informants.
2. This map was made from an original drawing made on a plane table. Finer details are recorded both in this original and in the notebook that I used. They are available at the Smithsonian.
3. In my article on Typhoon Ophelia (1964) I show two photographs of the *metalefal*, one as it was intact in 1948 after the military had left, and another as it appeared in 1960, before it collapsed from the wind two months later.
4. The islet of Falalop in 1947 had three *metalefal*—one for each of its two adjacent villages and one for the island community as a whole (Lessa 1950:82, 91). They were named Iapai, Sulial, and Hachlau, but seem to have been rebuilt in the “modern” style soon after World War II.
5. Absent from the atoll were about 120 able-bodied men and a few women who had been unwillingly removed to Yap by the Japanese.
6. In an earlier monograph by Craib (1980) there appears a valuable set of maps showing military installations on Asor, Falalop, Soholoi, Mogmog, Potangeras, and Horaizon. These maps, apparently taken from contemporary sources, show how extensive these installations were, but on the basis of the Mogmog evidence, it is possible that they give an exaggerated idea of the destruction involved on some of the islets. One would like to know how much simple scraping was done and how much excavating.

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