

STEPHANIE WALDA-MANDEL

“There is no place like home”

Migration and
Cultural Identity
of the Sonsorolese, Micronesia

HEIDELBERG STUDIES IN PACIFIC ANTHROPOLOGY 5



Universitätsverlag
WINTER
Heidelberg



HEIDELBERG STUDIES
IN PACIFIC ANTHROPOLOGY

Volume 5

Edited by
JÜRIG WASSMANN



STEPHANIE WALDA-MANDEL

“There is no place like home”

Migration and Cultural Identity
of the Sonsorolese, Micronesia

Universitätsverlag
WINTER
Heidelberg

Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek
Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation
in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie;
detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet
über <http://dnb.d-nb.de> abrufbar.

Diese Veröffentlichung wurde als Dissertation im Jahr 2014
unter dem Titel "*There's No Place Like Home*": Auswirkungen von
Migration auf die kulturelle Identität von Sonsorolesen im Fach
Ethnologie an der Fakultät für Verhaltens- und Empirische
Kulturwissenschaften der Ruprecht-Karls-Universität Heidelberg
angenommen.

COVER:

Father and son on the way to Sonsorol
© S. Walda-Mandel 2004

ISBN 978-3-8253-6692-6

Dieses Werk einschließlich aller seiner Teile ist urheberrechtlich geschützt.
Jede Verwertung außerhalb der engen Grenzen des Urheberrechtsgesetzes
ist ohne Zustimmung des Verlages unzulässig und strafbar. Das gilt ins-
besondere für Vervielfältigungen, Übersetzungen, Mikroverfilmungen und
die Einspeicherung und Verarbeitung in elektronischen Systemen.

© 2016 Universitätsverlag Winter GmbH Heidelberg
Imprimé en Allemagne · Printed in Germany
Umschlaggestaltung: Klaus Brecht GmbH, Heidelberg
Druck: Memminger MedienCentrum, 87700 Memmingen
Gedruckt auf umweltfreundlichem, chlorfrei gebleichtem
und alterungsbeständigem Papier

Den Verlag erreichen Sie im Internet unter:
www.winter-verlag.de

Contents

List of Illustrations	ix
Acknowledgements	xi
1 INTRODUCTION	1
2 “DO YOU KNOW PARADISE ISLAND?” SONSOROL AND ITS INTEGRATION IN THE PALAUAN ARCHIPELAGO	9
Dongosaro: Sonsorol	9
Belu’uera Belau: The Republic of Palau	24
History and Colonial Heritage of Palau	27
Methodological Reflection	38
3 “A HOME AWAY FROM HOME.” MIGRATION DESTINATIONS OF THE SONSOROLESE	47
Echang	47
Saipan	53
Guam	55
Portland and Salem, Oregon	59
4 WHO AM I? FUNDAMENTAL NOTIONS OF IDENTITY FROM AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE	67
Cultural Identity	67
Collective Identity	75
Ethnic Identity	79
5 AN ASSESSMENT OF ANTHROPOLOGICAL KEY TERMS IN MIGRATION STUDIES	83
Transnationalism and Migration	83
Diaspora	91
Nation, Home and Belonging	95

6	TRADITIONAL SONSOROLESE IDENTITY MARKERS	101
	Community and Respect	105
	Religious Faith and Gods	116
	Mourning and Death	118
	Chants	120
	Healing Techniques	122
	Food	126
	Land Tenure	129
	Tattoos and Hair	132
	Navigation	135
	Language	137
7	DAILY LIFE OF THE SONSOROLESE IN A NEW HOME.....	141
	Causes for Sonsorolese Migration	144
	The Solid Network of the Family: Chain Migration	154
	Remittances and Staying in Touch	158
	Home is not a Country, but a Feeling:	
	Nostalgia and the Return Myth	166
	Faith as a Unifying Force: The Catholic Church	180
	Sports as an Identity-Forming Power	183
	The Taste of Home: Sonsorolese Cooking	184
8	CHALLENGES FOR THE SONSOROLESE IDENTITY	187
	Identity and Ethnicity	187
	“The Small Heart“: Sonsorolese Children and the	
	Educational System	197
	“Echang Language“: Loss of the Sonsorolese Language	204
	“The Money Comes from the Devil!“: Cultural Loss	
	and Social Change	211
	Struggling against Oblivion: Revitalization	
	of the Sonsorolese Traditions	218
	Transformations	233

9	“NO MORE TYPHOON, GO HOME!” SELF- AND EXTERNAL PERCEPTION OF SONSOROLESE IDENTITY	239
	“They are Palauan Citizens, but they are not Palauans!” Discrimination and Self-Perception	239
	“Don’t Go out with Tobian People or Guys, cause those People are not Good!”	262
	Perception of the Sonsorolese by Members of the Residence Societies from outside Palau	265
	Being In-between: Sonsorolese Children and Teenagers	269
	Self-Identification of the Sonsorolese	278
10	CONCLUSION	287
11	CONTRIBUTORS	295
	References	299
	Index	325

List of Illustrations

Map

2.1:	Location of Sonsorol Island	10
------	-----------------------------------	----

Plates

2.1:	Hunting on Fanna (Sonsorol in the background)	12
2.2:	Sonsorolese flag	13
2.3:	Arrival on Sonsorol	14
2.4:	Children on Sonsorol	16
2.5:	Wedding of Laura Ierago Miles and Joel Miles	39
3.1:	Wanita (left) and Satu (right) with a baby in a swing in Echang	49
3.2:	Sonsorolese women dancing at a village party in Echang	50
3.3:	Catholic service in the Santa Maria Pillar church on Sonsorol	51
6.1:	Traditional therapy for Mark's broken arm	125
6.2:	Raichy (left) cutting fish on Sonsorol	129
7.1:	Dolores Sablan, the pioneer settler in Portland	157
8.1:	The Sonsorolese men dancing in Malakal	221
8.2:	Learning from the master carver how to carve a canoe	227
8.3:	Students with their teacher and their Sonsorol story book	232
8.4:	First born ceremony in Echang (photo Victoria Nestor)	234
9.1:	Young Southwest Islanders in Echang	263

Acknowledgements

A book that is based on anthropological fieldwork is only possible with the help of many people. Much more than in other research projects worked on in libraries and at the writing desk, a cultural anthropologist is reliant on the active involvement of informants who encounter the scientist in an often private context and are willing to give their support. Therefore, my heartfelt thanks go to all the contributors of this adventure in Micronesia, Europe and the USA.

First, and most importantly, my deepest thanks go to all members of the Sonsorolese community, who shared their lives with me. They opened their doors and their hearts in Sonsorol, Echang, Saipan, Guam and Oregon. I would like to thank them for their friendliness, hospitality and friendship, which means a lot to me. They gave me an insight into their thoughts and feelings and made it easy for me to find “a home away from home” at the other end of the world. Without them this book would not exist, and I hope they can find themselves in it.

Laura Ierago Miles and her family who accepted me in their family as their daughter and sister deserve special thanks for being my second family. I greatly appreciate Laura’s sons Kaipō, Mark and Victor for sharing their home for a whole year with a German cultural anthropologist who was not as blonde and tall as they had expected. *Haparu ma hatawahi dewa!*

I am also grateful to Paul Pedro in Saipan who impressed me with his hospitality as well as to Alonze Theodore and Godwin Marion and their commitment with my research in Oregon.

Of course, my thanks go to my supervisor Jürg Wassmann and Verena Keck, who accompanied me on my way and who were always there for me. A special thanks to Verena who did a tremendous job preparing the layout for this publication. I also want to thank my second assessor Hermann Mückler from the University of Vienna. Thank you also to Carmen Petrosian-Husa for providing the impetus to go to Sonsorol. My interest for the migration and identity project was sparked

when I attended Loretta Baldassar's lectures at the University of Western Australia in Perth. Thank you for that.

My sincere thanks go to the Volkswagen-Stiftung. Without their funding my fieldwork would not have been possible the way it was. In addition to that, I would like to thank Lothar Käser and Manuel Rauchholz for their scientific advice. I also would like to thank David Sapiro for making texts about Sonsorol that are difficult to find, accessible to me.

The staff of the Belau Historic Preservation Office in Koror also deserves my gratitude for the opportunity to conduct my fieldwork in Palau. I would like to thank the former President of Palau, Kuniwo Nakamura, for taking the time to give me his personal view on his relations with the Sonsorolese.

In Guam, Donald Rubinstein shared with me his knowledge of Micronesia, and Sam McPhetres gave me some input on migrants in Saipan. Shelley and Rick Collins, the two former Peace Corps Volunteers, who lived on Sonsorol in the 1970s, shared their memories and their home in the USA with me. Thank you! I cannot leave out René Menz, the owner of the restaurant Krämer's, who always had good food and a sympathetic ear for me.

My deepest thanks go to my parents and my friends for their encouragement and support, particularly Christian Walda, who inspired me and always believed in me. Finally, I would like to thank Greg Mandel for his love and his patience on this journey. Thank you to all of you for making this project reality.

1 Introduction

A key reason for social upheavals and for public discussions about human co-operation can be found in the fact that some people decide not to stay in the place they were born. It seems as if, when it comes to fear of foreign infiltration, anti-Semitism, xenophobia, or cultural differences in a country, in the media prevails the unuttered presumption that migration – often caused by displacement, war and economic deprivation – is an abnormal issue. According to that view, migration challenges residence societies, since it ignores national borders and the organization principles, which they are able to establish. A commonly voiced cliché in this context is: “Things will go from bad to worse and everything gets more and more chaotic.” Many people see the orderly structure of nations on the brink of the abyss. However, it is a fact that mankind has always been migrating – perhaps continuous movement is *the* feature of the Homo sapiens. They originated in Africa, and less than 75,000 years ago began to leave the continent to spread over the whole world. The second fact is, that national borders prevailed not until the 19th century. Obviously, it is opposite to the preconception: Mankind has always been migrating (even though slowly), and only the relatively young development of self-contained nations got in its way, so that social upheavals of this kind occurred at a later stage.

Based on those considerations, human migration is a fundamental issue in the social sciences. It does not matter which came first – the chicken or the egg. The aspects for the individual, who goes abroad, lives in a foreign country with a different language, wondering where he belongs to, are of vital importance for the self-perception and the self-awareness of the individual, as well as for the perception by others. These issues are fundamental, since identity reference points (where do I belong to versus to as part of what group do I see the other one) are a relevant element of social structures. This also shows in the intense interdisciplinary identity discourse of the last decade. In this context, Bauman talks about an “era of identity” (Bauman 2001: 129).

My interest in identity issues was my main motivation to carry out ethnological research on this phenomenon. Already in my master thesis “Stabilität im Wandel: Identität von Samoanern in der neuseeländischen Migration” (Stability in Transition: Identity of Samoans Migrating to New Zealand) (Walda 2003) I have dealt with the issue of migration and identity. Some of the theoretical aspects I would like to take up now and develop them further on the basis of my own fieldwork. In this context, Sonsorol Island in Micronesia represents an ideal research subject to analyze the relation of migration and identity. The issues covered in this book represent in the course of globalization a contribution to the worldwide migration debate. Furthermore, the subjects dealt with – socialization in Micronesia, individuality, the significance of places, home, and material culture, for example – are relevant for the scientific discipline of Pacific Studies in dealing with today’s societies of the Pacific Islands in social, historical and political manners.

My research is part of the interdisciplinary project “Person, Space and Memory in the Contemporary Pacific. The Experience of New Worlds” under the leadership of Prof. Dr. Jürg Wassmann and has been funded by the Volkswagen-Stiftung. The project’s focus is on the analysis of tradition and change of local concepts of person and place in the Pacific region.

The identity construction in the case of the Sonsorolese is very much linked with their increasing migration. Taking the example of the Sonsorolese helps to understand global phenomena such as foreign influences, handling alternative lifestyles, networks across great distances through new means of communication, development of transnational cultures as well as consequences of migration for the emigrants and the ones left behind on their home island. However, also other accompanying factors such as discrimination of immigrants by people from the dominant residence societies need to be analyzed. Looking at the status of the Sonsorolese in the Republic of Palau today, they represent a minority, who used to be discriminated against in the past, even when politically they have always been Palauan citizens.

In this analysis, it is important not to see the Sonsorolese as victims of the current globalization processes, since this is neither in accordance with the facts, nor does it represent their self-image. When people leave their familiar environment, this always results in something new in their chosen home: “Particularly significant here is the claim that displacement necessarily creates placements, or novel forms of localization and

positioning” (Wassmann and Keck 2007: 3). Addressing the culture of a small Micronesian island also helps to question Western concepts of home and identity and not consider them universally valid.

Even when in this book Sonsorol is embedded in a bigger political, social and historical frame and the colonial history as well as the traditional culture is dealt with, in the center is still the analysis of current issues in relation to migration and identity. Therefore, this analysis will not give a comprehensive overview over Sonsorolese traditions and language, since it would be beyond my scope here. Instead, I will carve out historical and linguistic details when they are beneficial for the question of Sonsorolese identity in the migratory context.

Today, at the beginning of the 21st century not less than every second Pacific Islander lives outside of his or her home island (Mückler 2006: 64). Sonsorol is no exception, since by now, far more Sonsorolese live in migration than on their island of origin.

To outsiders Sonsorol seems to be one of the last paradises on earth and is also described as one by some of my informants. However, even on this remote island one can feel the impact of globalization and social change and “the end of insularity” (Nero 1997). One of these consequences is the increasing number of Sonsorolese leaving their island and as a first step moving to one of Palau’s main islands to settle down in the village of Echang. The name “Echang” has the Palauan spelling, where the “ch” is pronounced as a glottal stop. It results from closure and then sudden opening of the vocal folds. An alternative spelling is “Eang.”

The migration to Palau’s center is only the first step, which is followed by others to Saipan, Guam, Chuuk, Hawai’i or the USA mainland. Within Micronesia, the people from the Palauan archipelago (including the Sonsorolese) were the first who left their home in big numbers (Hezel 2013b: 5). Today, the Sonsorolese community is located in many different places. Geographic mobility has always been part of the Sonsorolese culture, since they have often visited other islands with their outrigger canoes. Nowadays, this happens on a larger scale. However, the question arises why the tiny, idyllic appearing home islands for many people are “beautiful but not places to live” (Bedford 1980: 57)?

The decision to leave their home has a huge impact on the ones staying at home as well as on the emigrants. In what way do the islanders preserve their traditional island culture with a decreasing population?

Which challenges are the Sonsorolese facing in an increasingly globalized and connected world?

The Sonsorolese have never limited their attention on their island life only. The children after graduating from elementary school on Sonsorol are supposed to attend secondary school on one of Palau's bigger islands or even further away, since there is no high school on Sonsorol. The pursuit of good education is an important catalyst for migration. Furthermore, there is neither a doctor nor a nurse on the island, and the traditional healing techniques are hardly used any more.

Today, Sonsorolese are found in Hawaiian shopping centers, in Saipanese libraries, Guamanian fast food restaurants, as well as in accounting offices in Portland. For the immigrants the challenges are even bigger than for the ones staying on the depopulating island. Without the protecting safety network of the extended family, they need to learn how to organize their new life in the residence society.

Like on some other Micronesian islands, the Sonsorolese underwent a rapid change in regard to their culture and society and had to face the enormous social and political challenges of globalization. They all of a sudden got confronted with a Western lifestyle and new consumption concepts. Instead of family and clan ownership, for example, individual property has gained more importance, and wisdom of the older population is in some cases replaced by Western education of the younger people. In the Pacific Islands, the growing hopes and dreams can lead to disappointment when they do not get fulfilled, and sometimes they manifest in social problems, such as alcoholism, when people see no prospects in their home. In this context of emerging needs and their non-fulfillment, Mückler (2009a: 236) talks about serious identity crises the people on the Oceanic islands need to cope with sometimes.

The main question discussed here is how external conditions in the form of migration and social change influence the cultural identity of the Sonsorolese. What constitutes Sonsorolese identity, and how is it passed to their children raised in migration? Do links to the home community lead to a multidimensional identity? Are the emigrated Sonsorolese emotionally and socially only attached to their island of origin or also rooted in the residence society? What does it mean to be a minority in the context of identity building? How much do they adapt to the circumstances in the residence societies? How does the time abroad reflect in their attitude to life when they return? And for how long is the residence society a foreign place for the Sonsorolese?

Wherever I met Sonsorolese people, I always felt their deep connection with their home island – whether it is based on own lived memories or it manifests on an emotional level in the stories of parents and grandparents or other relatives. It is important for me to let the Sonsorolese express their motifs and hopes and let them speak in their own words about Sonsorolese identity. This way, we are getting a mosaic of many different perspectives on the issue, which result in an entity, which does justice to the individuals and their different experiences on the island and abroad. I have decided to portray their opinions by using direct, original quotes instead of letting them disappear in a continuous text, even when the informants are mostly anonymized to protect them.

Besides fieldwork, theoretical reflections are needed to help analyze the empirical findings in regards to similarities in the migration movements. On this account, I am dealing with the relevant key concepts for the topic area of migration and identity to apply them to my fieldwork experiences.

Why now this book about the Sonsorolese and their migration activities? My fieldwork intends to fill an empirical gap in the research activities in the Micronesian region. There is no general work dealing fundamentally with the people of the Southwest Islands, let alone Sonsorol. All we have is a linguistic study of the Sonsorolese language written by Arthur Capell (1969) based on his notes from the year 1948. About the island Hatohobei (in the following referred to as “Tobi”), which also belongs to the Southwest Islands, there are comprehensive scientific publications, many of them published by the cultural anthropologist Peter Black. There are also numerous publications about the majority population of Palau. In the following, the term “Palauan” is used for this majority population who has a different language and culture than the people from the Southwest Islands (including Sonsorol), which distinguishes the Palauans from them. Politically, the Sonsorolese belong to Palaus, however, they are culturally different. In this book, the term “Palauan” is used neither for people from Sonsorol nor Tobi state. It is used only for the inhabitants of all other Palauan Islands.

For this study, I evaluated all the literature available on Sonsorol, even when it is mostly short articles where the island is only mentioned. Also in the context of migration to the USA, there are significantly less publications about immigrating Micronesians than, for example, about immigrating Chinese or Japanese people.

The Sonsorolese community is very suitable for the study of migration and identity, since it is very small. Its size allowed me direct access to almost all its members. I had the great opportunity to talk to respected traditional leaders like the chief of Sonsorol as well as leaders of the modern political system, like the governor and former governor of Sonsorol and the former president of Palau, Kuniwo Nakamura. The older generation is heard in this study as well as the younger people who are often striving for Western education ideals. According to the inhabitants, the large number of emigrating Sonsorolese represents a threat for the indigenous island culture and language, so that in their eyes, this development makes this analysis even more important. Due to the former colonial powers, Spain, Germany, Japan and the USA, there are many different linguistic influences, particularly from the USA, which together with the Palauan language weaken the Sonsorolese language. However, there are also other threats for the Sonsorolese people that worry them. For example, the rising sea level due to the progressing global warming endangers the small, remote island directly.

The discipline of cultural anthropology is very useful to comprehend these threats as well as identity issues and other topics in societies, since its classical qualitative methods help understanding the processes and structures in small-scale communities.

To analyze Sonsorolese migration and identity, in the following second chapter I introduce Sonsorol as part of the Palauan archipelago. I will also discuss the historical and colonial context and its impact on Sonsorol. Then I describe the methods applied and my role as an anthropologist in the Sonsorolese community. The third chapter provides an overview of the main migration destinations of the Sonsorolese. Here I begin with the village Echang in Palau to then follow the tracks of the Sonsorolese via Guam and Saipan to the USA mainland. This way, we move away further and further away from Sonsorol. The fourth chapter then illustrates the theoretical framework of the Sonsorolese identity construction by presenting different ways of identity attribution in form of cultural, collective and ethnic identity. The fifth chapter widens the theoretical background with the explanation of key terms from migration studies, such as transnationalism, diaspora, nation, home and belonging. To address these issues in the Sonsorolese example, in chapter six the traditional Sonsorolese identity markers are introduced, which today have more or less significance in Sonsorolese life. Chapter seven then deals with the background and the causes for Sonsorolese migration and

examines everyday life of the Sonsorolese in the different residence societies. Here, chain migration, ties with the home community, return migration and identity-defining spheres of life such as church, sports and food, for example, play an important role. The next chapter then describes the challenges for the Sonsorolese identity in the context of migration, particularly with regard to their language and education. I will also go into detail on the possible loss of the Sonsorolese culture and the people's battle against this development. The last chapter then describes the self-perception of the Sonsorolese and the impact that the people in the residence societies have on it. At the end, we find a summary where all these aspects are merged and where I will provide a glimpse in the future of the Sonsorolese community on the island and far away from home.

I am a person of this world, but specifically from Sonsorol.
As long as you know your language and culture,
it defines your behavior and attitude.
(Sonsorolese woman)

2 “Do You Know Paradise Island?” Sonsorol and Its Integration in the Palauan Archipelago

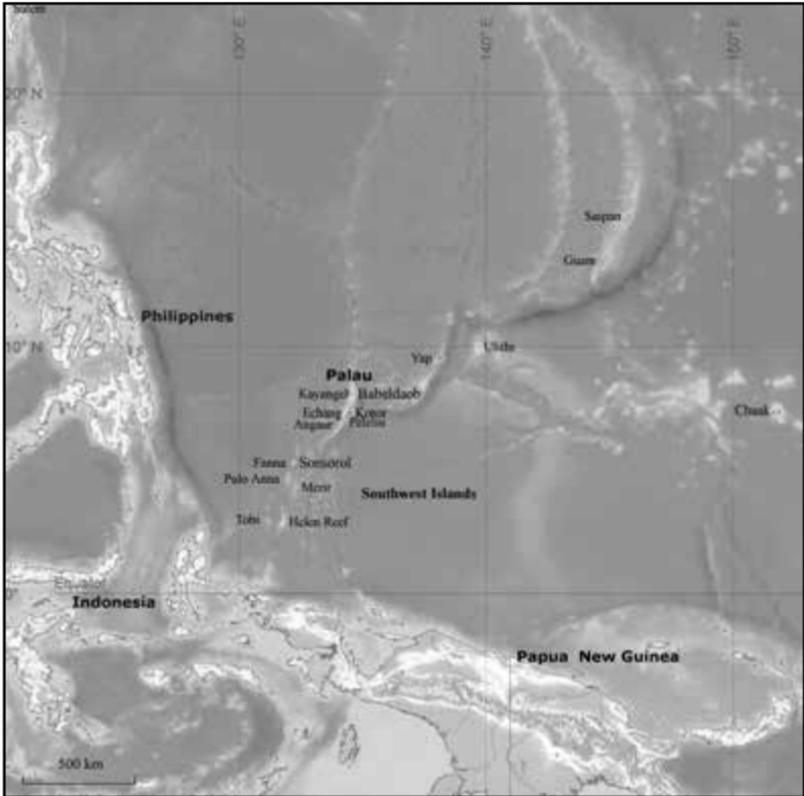
With the term “Paradise Island” referring to the US TV show “Fantasy Island” a young female Sonsorolese answered, when I asked her to describe her home island Sonsorol. However, before Sonsorolese people colorfully tell us about their attachment to their island, I would like to introduce Sonsorol Island as the originating island of the Sonsorolese people.

Then, I want to place Sonsorol geographically, politically and culturally in the archipelago Palau and describe Palau both in its current and in its historical dimension. There will be also room for Palau’s colonial history, since the colonial powers and the Christian mission caused changes that still influence today’s Palau and by this also the identity perceptions of today’s Sonsorolese.

Dongosaro: Sonsorol

The Palauan archipelago consists of four groups of islands called Babeldaob, Peleliu, Angaur, Kayangel Atoll and the Southwest Islands. Sonsorol State is one of Palau’s 16 administration units that are called “states” within Palau. These units are comparable to the 16 federal states in Germany. Sonsorol State comprises of four low islands that are named Fanna, Sonsorol, Pulo Anna and Merir, seen from north to south. Traditionally and also officially within Sonsorol State the respective islands are named Fanna, Dongosaro, Purr and Meilieli (Watson, Pedro

and Ierago 2002: unpagged) or also Puro and Melieli (Constitution of the State of Sonsorol 1983: Article XI, Section 1). In this book, I will use the names that you find also in the Constitution of the State of Sonsorol and in the literature: Fanna, Sonsorol, Pulo Anna and Merir. Within the administration unit of Sonsorol State, Fanna and Sonsorol combined constitute the Sonsorol Islands.



Map 2.1: Location of Sonsorol Island

Together with the neighboring state Hatohobei, also called Tobi, which consists of Tobi Island and the uninhabited atoll Helen Reef, the islands of Sonsorol state are the Southwest Islands. Besides Helen Reef they are all coral islands that arise three to six meters above sea level. Helen Reef, is

also called “Hotsari Hie” in the Tobian language, which means “Reef of clam.” During my residence on Tobi, there were only nine people and on Helen Reef only a few rangers, who lived there to protect the so-called “bird island.”

In literature these remote Southwest Islands are also called outer islands. They consist of a number of low reef flats resulting from a shift of the Pacific plate. The Southwest Islands are located about 300 kilometers southwest of Angaur, an island that marks the south end of the Palauan main islands. Lessa calls the Southwest Islands also the “westernmost Carolines” and emphasizes their inner cohesion by marriage and by filling up each other’s population after it got decimated by typhoons, famine or raids by inhabitants from Papua New Guinea or Indonesia (Lessa 1978: 233). The Southwest Islands are situated closer to Indonesia than to Palau’s urban center Koror and are regarded as some of the most isolated islands in the Pacific. All islands belonging to Sonsorol and Tobi state suffer from a decrease in population that increases every year. According to this development, during my stay on Pulo Anna there were 16 people on the island. In the year 1970, there were only 19 people on Pulo Anna, out of which nine inhabitants were ten years old or even younger, two were over 70 years old (Boucher 1971: 31). Connell (1983: 14) describes the drastic population decline on Sonsorol as follows: 1946 172 inhabitants, 1954 136 inhabitants, 1958 82 inhabitants, 1963 75 inhabitants, 1973 56 inhabitants. The Statistical Yearbook 2001 of Palau numbers 1980 79 inhabitants, 1986 42, 1990 61 and 1995 80 (Republic of Palau: 2001: 15). In the year 2001, Sonsorol had 39 inhabitants (Republic of Palau 2002: 21).

Merir was considered as almost deserted in 1954: “[...] the island is dying, at least as far as the present generations are concerned. [...] The women are too old to cultivate taro in any quantity and the men cannot keep the coconut groves cleared” (Osborne 1966: 49). However, a development as on Merir is rare:

Total depopulation such as this is an extremely rare event in the contemporary Pacific; on many other small islands in the Pacific the prediction of extinction has long preceded the event. Yet the pattern of decline in small outer island communities is well exemplified in Tobi, Merir, Sonsorol, and Pulo Anna, as the movement to Koror continues (Connell and Lea 1998: 58).

During my visit on Merir there were only two brothers living there who were also not planning on leaving the island. The development of the Southwest Islands precludes the one in the rest of Palau. Thus, there was a population increase recorded in Palau in 1980 to 1986, while the population of the Southwest islands decreased continuously: “The population profiles of all the southwest islands suggest they are no longer viable” (Connell and Lea 1998: 59). This assessment from the year 1998 could not be confirmed, because even when there is a population decline, there are still people living on these islands making a life there. All in all, in 1994 it was assumed that there are 70 people living in the Southwest Islands, 100 in Echang and 50 in the migration communities outside of Palau, so that the total number of Southwest Islanders was about 220 (Republic of Palau 1994: 1). Today, in 2016 there are currently living 20 people on Sonsorol, 3 on Pulo Anna (after 19 people just moved to Koror for summer programs coming back in a few months) and 5 on Merir. Indeed, today there are living less people in the islands, but therefore a lot more in Echang and in the migration communities.



Plate 2.1: Hunting on Fanna (Sonsorol in the background)

When I am using the term Sonsorol in the following, I am referring only to the island of Sonsorol, since Fanna Island, which belongs to Sonsorol is uninhabited today.

There are only two houses on Fanna and it is only peripheral for my research. Fanna measures in the west-east direction 0.6 kilometers and in the north-south direction 0.81 kilometers. As the furthest north island of Sonsorol State it is situated about two kilometers north of Sonsorol and is visited by the inhabitants of Sonsorol to catch coconut crabs and to hunt sea birds. They used to use traditional canoes for the trip, today they take the motorboat through the channel called *nipatat*, which means as much as “between” in English. When people go from Sonsorol to Fanna or take the opposite route, one calls that *hadai rap* in Sonsorolese (Palau Society of Historians 2002: 41). Here the expression *hadai rap* is put together by the word *dai* (journey) and *rap* (big). Originally *hadai rap* describes the custom to give food to the people from Sonsorol who are not related to the Fanna people and have no land there as a welcoming gesture on their first visit. This favor will be returned by the Sonsorolese family when guests from Fanna are coming to visit.



Plate 2.2: Sonsorolese flag

Within Palau the 16 states have their own flags, one of which is Sonsorol State’s showing a canoe in front of a blue background and four stars. The blue background symbolizes the ocean and shows the strong bond of the

Sonsorolese with the ocean that gives them food and connects them with the different islands. Closely linked to that is the canoe, a vehicle that is used to travel between the islands. It emphasizes the great mobility of the people that they have always had. The four stars stand for the four islands that form Sonsorol State: Sonsorol, Fanna, Pulo Anna, and Merir. At the same time, from the beginning the stars have served the island inhabitants as a source for orientation at night and have helped them reaching their destination when traveling with their outrigger canoes.

In the indigenous language of the Sonsorolese, Sonsorol is called *Dongosaro*, which means “place where strong currents prevail” – a fitting name as I found out on my strenuous long trip to Sonsorol, which took 22 hours. It is not harmless to get to Sonsorol, since you have to climb from the big ship to the small dinghy that takes you to the island, even with the strong currents.



Plate 2.3: Arrival on Sonsorol

Approaching the low islands by boat, one recognizes from far the hybrid mix of leaf thatched roofs and house walls made of corrugated iron. Reaching the island early in the morning one sees young men climbing palm trees to harvest coconuts and to produce the popular fermented juice

from the flower sheaths of the coconut trees, the locals call *tuba*. Younger children in their school uniforms, looking like the ones from the USA with a white shirt and black pants, are walking to the elementary school of the island. Here a male and a female teacher are teaching, getting paid by the government. A school day usually lasts from eight in the morning until two in the afternoon. Meanwhile, the adults are keeping the paths and water tanks clean, which serve to catch rainwater – the only water supply for drinking, washing and cooking on the island. They get paid for these jobs by Sonsorol State. Indeed, one still finds old wells from colonial times. However, they are not used by the inhabitants any more. If it does not rain over a longer period of time the residents are getting a little anxious, since water scarcity impends. Sonsorol and Helen Reef are also not protected against typhoons and high waves (Republic of Palau 1994: 3).

Connection with the rest of the world is established via a short wave radio that connects the Sonsorolese with the Sonsorol State Office that is situated in Meyuns on one of Palau’s main islands. Since December 2009, there also has existed an internet connection, which the residents use to stay in touch with their family members, who have spread in Micronesia and the United States.

However, most of the Sonsorolese living in their home island do not miss the rest of the world as much as one would think they do. The ones living on Sonsorol love their island and the life they have there.

A day on Sonsorol is very relaxed. According to the young Sonsorolese, they enjoy learning from the older ones how to catch and cook fish, turtles and coconut crabs. They weave baskets the traditional way, and one of the young men has learned from the older ones how to carve a canoe and works on it every single minute. At night, they sit by the beach and tell stories. From the village resounds softly Raichy’s guitar and mixes with the sound of the ocean. However, suddenly Nick’s stereo pervades the atmosphere. It is Sonsorolese songs, which some Sonsorolese released as a CD and that now with the help of solar power find their way to the Sonsorolese stereos. Once again island life mixes with modern technology.

During my stays in December 2004 and February 2005 there were 15 people on the 1.36 km² island of Sonsorol. One reaches the island only through the so-called channel, an opening in the reef, that only experienced boaters know and use. The actual settlement on Sonsorol is found on the middle of the west coast. There is a slightly elevated path that leads straight through the settlement and three different pathways that run from the West to the East coast. Circling the entire island by foot in about an hour, one

walks the path called *Yarai Fari Yalower*. In the island’s interior, there is densely grown mixed forest. On the island and around it, there lives a huge variety of sea birds, fruit bats, different sea turtles such as green turtles and hawksbill turtles.

Sonsorol runs in north-south direction with a length of 1.8 kilometers and a width of 0.88 kilometers (Bureau of Arts and Culture 2004: 4). On the islands is a Catholic church named Santa Maria Pillar as well as an Elementary School established in 1972. For the children there is a school kitchen that serves lunch every day. The children are taught from grade one to eight the subjects of science, mathematics, Palauan, Sonsorolese and gardening. In 2003, there were three computers installed, which they can use. Furthermore, there is a library and also a cemetery on the island. The islanders use an outhouse, and they shower behind a wooden wall with rainwater that you catch beforehand with the help of a bucket from a water tank.



Plate 2.4: Children on Sonsorol

Further, there is the Sonsorol State Office established in 1958 and a dispensary from the year 1972 that provides the inhabitants with the essentials. However, there is no nurse or doctor on the island.

The inhabitants are in touch with the Sonsorol State Office in Meyuns on the main islands several times a day by radio. The Sonsorolese day is usually divided by the activities described above: The children are going to school, the adults establish radio contact with the office in Meyuns, clean, work around the house and go fishing. Together with the older islanders they prepare food and attend church daily.

Since the year 2000 Sonsorol has a photovoltaic system, with the help of which the people use the sunlight to generate electricity to run stereos, refrigerators and fans. Nevertheless, they deal with technical problems, also because there is no regular maintenance. Fans are particularly necessary in those houses that are not thatched with bundles of leaves, but where the roofs consist of corrugated iron. Corrugated iron creates intense heat, however, in Micronesia it is often used for reasons of prestige.

Sonsorol is a mainly maritime culture, and in contrast to former times, farming does not play a huge role in their lives. This has to do with a change of lifestyle and a changed consumer behavior. Over and above, Sonsorol's ground is described by the residents as relatively infertile. For instance, it is a challenge to do horticulture on the island, since the salt water in the ground makes it impossible for many plants to grow there. In addition to that, the ground is very sandy and therefore barren. In former times, the dwellers were growing bananas, taro, breadfruit and papaya. Today, however, one can barely speak of pure subsistence on Sonsorol, since the people still catch fish and seafood and keep a few pigs and chicken, but they are also very dependent on the irregular food supplies that come with a ship called *Atoll Way*, which belongs to Tobi State. Since 1999, the Sonsorolese are getting to their home island this way after their own two ships were not seaworthy any more (Bureau of Arts and Culture 2004: 4). Most of the Micronesians growing up today, only know the self-sufficient way of life, characterized by subsistence, from narratives by their ancestors:

[...] young people have little memory of a time when self-reliance was the norm, trade took place largely within localized island cultures, and imported food was almost unknown. Today, as much as 90 percent of all food in the Marshall Islands and more than half in the other Compact states is imported (Connell and Lea 1998: 86).

With this development, living and food conditions within Micronesia have changed. While in the past, natural disasters and food shortages made the