

Community Voices: Behind the Scenes of Intangible Cultural Heritage Safeguarding in Palau

Connie Ngirchemat

Island Ark Project, Palau



Figure 1: Interviewee and Workshop Participant, Julita "Julie" Tellei in Melekeok, Palau ©Diliaur Tellei

The effects of climate change and globalization are few reasons Pacific Island nations migrate elsewhere and seek better living standards and opportunities. The Island Ark Project understands this issue and despite these detrimental factors affecting the Pacific, IAP aims to use its platform as a way for communities to preserve and safeguard their cultural heritage. The organization's technical solutions through their digital template is offered a compatible resource for communities to input the ICH as they see significant. However, while conducting the workshop and finding certain technical and social challenges behind the ICH safeguarding process, the Island Ark Project focused on gaining personal insight from community voices around defining what ICH is, how it has changed over the decades from outside influences, how ICH may differ amongst specific communities in the larger island, and potentially seeking solutions that help gain community involvement.

Keywords: Intangible Cultural Heritage, digital technology, Pacific Islands, climate Change, out-migration, Palau.

Introduction

From around the world, communities continue to practice and comprehend centuries' worth of cultural knowledge and beliefs passed down through many generations. The same knowledge and beliefs also play a critical role in how communities carry out their way of life and standard of living. Hence, by upholding and safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH), it empowers. From valuable traditions and customs, dances, songs, craftsmanship, rituals, and even ideologies about seeing the world, every community possesses a wide variety of Intangible Cultural Heritage that is distinct to their own.

Like all unique communities around the world, the Pacific Island region is no different and the Island Ark Project has come to already recognize the region's pristine beauty. However, IAP has come to also realize the pressure the Pacific region are under in lieu of the effects of climate change, followed by eminent repercussions. IAP Co-founders David Eichert and Dennis Redeker have discussed the importance of preserving cultural heritage, while utilizing modern resources such as technology to assist with safeguarding ICH.

Founded in 2015, the Island Ark Project was co-founded by two of the organization's own Dennis Redeker and David Eichert. Since then, IAP aims to continue to emphasize the importance of safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage, while using digital technologies as the basis of the safeguarding process. Former interns at Harvard University, Eichert and Redeker originally focused their work on internet communities and culture online. While interning together, Eichert and Redeker eventually began to question how they could use the internet and digital technologies for the greater cause. Both realized that the issues of climate change and the gradual loss of cultural heritage within the Pacific region should be a resource provided for these communities in order for them to have ways to protect their intangible cultural heritage, while also allowing them to empower themselves at the same time. From there, Redeker and Eichert sought to find solutions that would incorporate technology as a way to gradually alleviate the issue behind safeguarding cultural heritage.

Cultural History:

Many communities within the Pacific Island region have passed down cultural heritage and knowledge orally or through general practice. A variable number of traditional ICH examples include craftsmanship like oars, funeral practices, traditional medicine, practices about chewing betel nuts, chants, different languages, conservation practices, agricultural development, idioms and proverbs, fishing techniques, knowledge about edible plants, and basket weaving. However, in the specific cases of transnationalism and individuals living abroad their native homes, cultural heritage and language haven't been passed down or practiced. Within these cases, we begin to wonder how cultural heritage will flourish in modern-day context and through factors including globalization. Another major challenge is that certain knowledge is kept in families, so it doesn't make sense that certain knowledge would be available to the entire population. Island Ark Project's future technical solution needs to fit these social rules, and realize that Palau consists of a structured society where information is kept within certain realms of people.

Technology

Island Ark Project was founded on the concept that technology could help utilize proactive ways to safeguard ICH for a community's cultural preservation. Aligning with the values of ICHCAP (the International Information and Networking Centre for Intangible Cultural Heritage in the Asia-Pacific Region under the auspices of UNESCO), Island Ark Project has worked with this institution to use technology for preserving and safeguarding ICH. Through this, ICHCAP has provided Island Ark Project with its own individual version of a web-based template so that Pacific Island partners may input the ICH they believe worth safeguarding. Behind the template, the Island Ark Project believes that developing a custom-tailored online platform is both practical and beneficial for ICH practitioners and groups engaged so that it is compatible to the specific information that communities choose to input in the template. The technicality behind the template is why it is important to bring safeguarding professionals together and provide trainings to ICH safeguarding stakeholders in order to plan how digital safeguarding can be best organized for groups, institutions and communities. From practices and knowledge which are shared with the broader public, to certain ICH tended to smaller groups such as the family home (e.g. including guarded family secrets), it is pivotal that many stakeholders cooperate and uphold the particular needs of the community. The Island Ark Project have studied in order to truly understand if there are manageable and ethical ways to preserve cultural heritage within the 21st century.



Figure 2: David, far right, and workshop participant in discussion ©Diliaur Tellei

Digital Templates and Cultural Heritage:

Since the Island Ark Project had conducted its first workshop in November 2017 introducing the template with partner organizations including Belau National Museum, Palau Community College, The Bai Project, Palau Resource Institute, and the Sonsorol State Government, this was opted as a practice-run. And since this workshop, the respective feedback that was received had played out as valuable criticism for future improvement towards the template and ways to improve the workshop technicalities as well. Since then, a follow-up workshop had been conducted in January 2019, extensively considering older feedback from Island Ark Project's first workshop. Island Ark Project's David Eichert and Diliaur Tellei traveled back to Palau to facilitate another workshop with current and new participants. Despite the new setting and reconciling Island Ark Project's prior challenges that had hindered the first workshop, the follow-up workshop showed similar and new emerging challenges of its own.

Challenges

A certain number of threats to ICH were particular issues that workshop participants feared, from technical concerns such as the slow speed of the Internet to differing ideologies such as foreign influence (e.g. religion) that may alter how cultural heritage is defined and perceived to be. Globalization has influenced many communities all over the world, and Palau is no different. The introduction of new machines such as refrigeration¹ and mechanized fishing, for example, have ultimately changed the process in which Palauans practice ICH that have made certain forms of traditional knowledge obsolete. and personal issues of folks being too busy due to 8-hour jobs, adaptation to new lifestyle which makes ICH irrelevant, foreign influence (religion, colonization), climate change, challenges with online storage (funding a server), no formal writing system for native languages, computer literacy, and no Internet access in places like Sonsorol.

Solutions

Ironically, as challenging as the Internet may have been in Palau, it still plays a critical role towards the access to IAP's digital template, dictating the process and speed of ICH safeguarding overall. Nevertheless, since the development of the [cable] and improved internet access within the island, this is only the beginning. Other than technical solutions that the Internet and digital template have offered, many participants have discussed communal solutions that could engage community members in ICH within their environment. Firstly, bringing back old traditions that have been discontinued. For example, while discussing participants contributions to safeguard ICH within the community, the participants representing the government of Sonsorol have shown phenomenal effort through engaging ICH in two ways. First, the government sponsored a story-writing activity where children would write down stories from their grandparents. This effort was complicated by the fact that there is no standardized writing system for the 2 languages spoken in Sonsorol, so in the end, the government made audio recordings of

¹ *Ulkar* - Salt preservation as a process of keeping fish fresh

the stories instead. Secondly, a group of Sonsorolese women “rediscovered” traditional ceremonies meant to celebrate a girl’s first menstruation as a passage to womanhood. The group of women eventually practiced the very same ceremonies with their own daughters, helping with the transition and destigmatization of puberty. Participants have also mentioned a stronger partnership between governments and the community, including public awareness campaigns, grassroots efforts from the community, and emphasizing Palauan Studies and ICH safeguarding within the education system. The broader themes that have been evident throughout this trip have focused predominantly on coupling preservation with the lived practices and experiences of community members.

Overall, the discussion between the Island Ark Project and workshop participants were clear at the end of the workshop, establishing a relationship in which both participants and facilitators would continue to work closely for the foreseeable future, rather than losing contact. They set goals with solid milestones that they wanted to achieve during the next six months.

Roaming Palau: Outside the Workshop

The conclusion of the workshop, Tellei described that before being involved with Island Ark Project she was researching how technology was being taken up by Indigenous people to use and revive or supplement cultural practices, to promote community well-being, to speak truth to power and reassert sovereignty, and so on. *“If only you could design [technology] well enough, inclusively enough, and democratically enough. Being able to conduct the January workshop—at which I honestly feel I learned more from the participants than I was able to teach them—was a turning point that solidified my growing realization that... Indigenous people don't always need technological solutions, and when they do, it's best that [they] are the ones behind the steering wheel. I appreciate that Island Ark Project understands this.”* ICH safeguarding approaches are always much more complex than they appear, with each situation presents its own unique requirements and political landscape. ICH safeguarding is important, but what needs to be done, and what IAP continues to do, is center the voices of the members of the originating culture.

Of the remainder of Island Ark Project’s time in Palau, both Eichert and Tellei roamed the island visiting particular sites of cultural significance. Island Ark Project’s Diliaur Tellei, a native Palauan from Melekeok, described her experience coming back to Palau as surreal. *“Although most of our time was spent in Koror preparing for the workshop and meeting with potential project partners, David and I managed to visit some cultural sites in Koror, Melekeok, and Airai.”* Tellei had described that although she had felt a sense of relief to be back home after two years, she always spots subtle differences from her last visit in Palau.

From Koror, Tellei and Eichert visited the Belau National Museum and Koror Bai². From there, both eventually visited the Bureau of Historical and Cultural Preservation where they were both fortunate to

² *Bai* - Men’s Traditional Meeting House

speak to Director Sunny Ngirmang more directly about Island Ark Project's activities and the potential submission of the Palauan first childbirth ceremony to a UNESCO ICH list. Throughout this particular interaction with Director Ngirmang and the many other discussions of different aspects of ICH safeguarding during the workshop and beyond, it was a distinguished moment to witness and see ICH in both formal and informal settings. However, despite viewing Palauan culture from different perspectives outside the workshop, it was made clear that Palauans have a very fine-tuned sense of knowledge stewardship and generally understood that not all cultural knowledge is meant to be shared with the broader public.

Driving northbound, Eichert and Tellei briefly visited the Airai Bai and eventually arrived in Melekeok, where Tellei's family are originally from. While in Melekeok, Eichert and Tellei accompanied Kornelia Ibuuch Thomas and Julita "Julie" Tellei, both whom participated in Island Ark Project's follow-up workshop. Ibuuch had graciously showed and explained a few cultural sites of significance from the Capitol Building of Ngerulmud, to the Melekeok Bai (Melekeong). While showing Eichert and Tellei around the Melekeok Bai (*see next page*), Ibuuch began recollecting her thoughts and feelings about the significance behind the Bai and what it meant to her. *"I fully identify myself as a Palauan, and [the Bai] is one of the symbols of Palau that is very unique. There are less than 30,000 Palauans in the whole world, and [the Bai] is one of the symbols that represent those 30,000 people... So preserving this culture and heritage is very important for our identity."*





Figure 3 and 4: Ibuuch Thomas explaining the *Bai* to Island Ark Project's David Eichert ©Diliaur Tellei

Julita Tellei, also known as Julie, was one of the participants of Island Ark Project's follow-up workshop, and a relative of IAP's Diliaur Tellei. While roaming the state of Melekeok, Eichert found it vital to understand the context and genealogy of the knowledge they were recording from the community's perspective and point of view. For example, Julie explained that sometimes a story may have three different versions, all informed by geography, language, and etc. It is important to record both the story *and* where the story came from (what family, region, time period). The templates theoretically allow for this, but it should be clearer and more intuitive.

Julie began the interview discussing that it should seemingly be a given for residents of Palau to have and show concern over the protection of their cultural heritage, especially in circumstances where a certain number of Palauans today already have a lack of cultural knowledge. Julie additionally discusses that within the broader term of 'Cultural Heritage', family relationships and moral values are just as important, if not critical, when practicing and passing cultural knowledge to future generations. Comparing her experiences from studying abroad in the United States to her experiences growing up in a Palauan environment with distinct values around reciprocity and respect, Julie recognized these differences ultimately appreciating her Palauan culture even more.

And throughout Island Ark Project and Tellei's interview discussion, Julie pressed that having the youth involved in these discussions of cultural preservation is critical. Julie understands that in this day and age, globalization is evident and has already occurred in Palau. However, these changes have also affected the way that cultural values, practices, and knowledge are being passed down to the younger generation. Voicing the concern of ICH in the community is important, but if the narrative is only being initiated by a certain age group, then it isn't representative of the larger population. In conclusion, Julie wanted to emphasize that the Palauan government should also not hold back from standardizing the Palauan language, despite disagreements and differing perspectives on the account.

"I believe that probably one of the biggest threats is modernization. Modernization, in that, with technological changes... unless we consciously identify the values that we think [are] important and consciously weave them into what's happening in Palau, we can lose those values." Julie continues but elaborating that the same cultural values the community claim significant are values important in any society. However, with modernization, how do you move through these changes while still keeping these cultural values intact despite encounters with individuals of different faiths, ideologies, and cultures? *"Of course, someone must focus on their own needs like food, shelter, sleep, etc. But in these times of modernization, will our cultural values of reciprocity, respect, exchange continue to carry through also?"*

Long Term Impact behind Preserving Cultural Heritage:

Island Ark Project was predominantly founded around the concern that the effects of climate change are evident for Pacific Island communities. In extension to this, other intersecting factors have also contributed to the loss of ICH including emigration and globalization. Palau, in particular, *"was the first island group in Micronesia to experience heavy emigration, with a total migrant population numbering several thousand by 1980... Emigration from Palau began early... where, by 1953, there were already about a hundred Palauans residing on [Guam]. For the next two decades emigration from Palau to Guam and other destinations was measured at 50 or 60 people a year"* (Hezel, 2013: 5). Since this research was compiled, more island communities, including Palau, have only been increasing. As emigrating communities continue to live abroad and seek educational and/or economic opportunities, how cultural heritage is continued and passed down within these transitional moments is subjective. Referring back to the very solutions that IAP's workshop participants offered specifically on community engagement is the very reason that community members need to be the focal point and voice behind these challenges. Whether creating the Palauan language as a standardized language in the school system, as Julie insisted, or even promoting grassroots organizing in the community, it all depends on the specific needs each community asks for. And by this, Island Ark Project hopes they can offer compatible digital tools to meet them.

While interacting with community members and indulging aspects of Palauan life and culture, the Island Ark Project hopes that its online platform will allow islanders to discuss, curate, and eventually pass on ICH to future generations. In the long-term, the Island Ark Project hopes to continue to coordinate and expand its work with local cultural organizations to preserve and protect at-risk ICH in all island communities.

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