

An aerial photograph of a lush green landscape. A winding river flows through the center, surrounded by vibrant green fields and dense vegetation. In the foreground, there are terraced agricultural fields with distinct rows of crops. The overall scene is a rich, verdant rural landscape.

# 3 HARVEST AND LANDSCAPES

In this region of many “lands” surrounded by water, knowledge of the land and its harvests is tied closely to identity and heritage. This section’s themes thus offer a closer look at how the knowledge of caring for the land and harvests is a way of feeling for the Pacific islanders. This ICH, in addition to coloring people’s interactions on the land and carrying expressions of respect, is a means of ensuring sustainability and prosperity.

Pacific islanders depend largely on the land and their harvests from it for their survival, but these also hold deeper meaning for life. To the people of Vanuatu, for instance, *laplap soso'ur* is more than an edible delicacy: it is a feature of their cultural identity and a means to bring people together across societal levels. Similarly, in Palau, the *mesei* taro fields are valuable property, but they are also much more in that these pieces of land are deeply connected to the identity of the people, particularly women, and figure prominently in the colorful oral histories of the Palauans. Both of these cases, along with the other themes in this section, reflect the profound value of ICH related to the Pacific islands and their harvests.







# MESEI: TARO FIELD LANDSCAPES IN PALAU

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*A mesei a delal a telid.*  
(A taro field is the mother of life.)

—A Palauan proverb

## INTRODUCTION

This paper focuses on *mesei*, cultivated taro fields, where *kukau* (*Colocasia esculenta*), also referred to as purple taro, is cultivated and grown. The field cultivation system is as old as the introduction of the *kukau* plant itself in Palau. According to Robert Bishop, *kukau* in Palau “dates back to the misty past.” Bishop notes taro as “a prominent and identifying component of Palauan culture. The traditional system of utilizing wetlands to produce *kukau* is ancient, distinctive, rich, and varied. Palau has a reservoir of traditional knowledge, practices, and skills related to taro.”<sup>1</sup> In the Palauan language while *kukau* refers to the purple taro corm, *dait* refers to the plant itself. References to *brak* (*Cytosperma taro*), also known as yellow taro, and *dechel* (wetland plantation) left for *brak* cultivation will also be made in this discussion as both types of taro and *dechel* are important components in the *mesei* field cultivation system.

1. Robert Bishop, “Taro Cultivation and Value Adding in Palau,” Third Taro Symposium, SPC-Fiji, 2001: 1.

*A iukerelii...iang!*  
*Me ngungiang el beluu a Idesei,*  
*El di chelelabel omouachel me a ralm a urrurt er ngii,*  
*Tè kmo ralm a urrurt er ngii me a kibora mesei,*  
*Ea ki rodir a iaml leng telul obengakl,*  
*Me a telau el chosm a disesei meng buulii...iang!*  
*E lekong, o hui!*

(In praise of the village of Idesei<sup>2</sup> with great streams  
 where clean water runs through,  
 They say clean water runs through to the mesei in  
 which to tend, one can  
 take the medicinal plants with fragrances for ear  
 ornaments, including shrubs.  
 Oh yes, that is how it goes!)

This chant, "Rebetii," signifies the responsibility and function of water, trees, shrubs, and grasses in the development of taro fields to ensure proper fertilization, crop production, and quality of taro corms ("meat" of the taro plant). Taro fields are the domain of Palauan women. As a matrilineal and at times matriarchal society, Palau's social and political structures revolve around women and their role in the nurturing of family, lineage, and clan.

2. *Idesei* is a watershed in Mengellakl, Ngarchelong.



① *Mesei* showing taro in different stages of growth; *kllaeb*, small waterways between sections with newly planted taro plants with *dekedek*, mulch, *bong*, ditch, and *brak*, planted around *mesei*. © Faustina K. Rehuher-Marugg

② Women at work in the taro patch, a sketch by E. Krämer as she saw it in 1908. © Museum fuer Voelkerkunde Hamburg

## Oral Histories Associated with Creation of Palau and Mesei Origin

Chants, stories, proverbs, genealogies, skills, and knowledge serve as vehicles for documenting taro fields' roles in the lives of the people. The following migration oral histories attest to the origin and sacredness of taro field cultivation as the life and breath of the Palauan people.

When Uab fell,<sup>3</sup> a female demigod emerged from the reefs of Ngarchelong. She was Dirramellomes (literally, “she of the light”), and she went around spreading the light to the whole of Belau (Palau). As she illuminated the whole island, she traveled, turning into a chicken at night and taking the form of a human being in daylight. Thus, they named her Dilidechuu, (literally, “she, a female”). Moving on, she reached Irrai (now Airai) and heard of a visiting party to Ngeaur (now Angaur). When it was time for the trip to Ngeaur, Dilidechuu desired to accompany the expedition and obtained permission to join the Ngeaur party.

While visiting Ngeaur, Dilidechuu married Olungiis. It was while Dilidechuu was in Ngeaur that she began to *meliuch* (meaning “to carve out of”), which was the beginning of mesei making. She was then renamed Iluochel (meaning “already carved open”), referring to her mesei-making activities.

### Iluochel Migration Story

*The following migration story was written in Palauan by Steven Umetaro and translated into English by Julita Tellei of the Palau Resource Institute.*<sup>4</sup>

*Ngeaur*<sup>5</sup>

Iluochel's first mesei in Ngeaur was called Ngerechei (literally, “that of the reef flat”) because she accessed Ngerechei through the reef flat. As she was still very young, she tended her mesei roughly, by *dibsechii*, literally “spearing the soil with a wooden stick and planting as if she were planting on dry land garden.” Hence, the saying “we just do *omesalo-iaur*” means to just do as Iluochel did, a sort of hastily prepared gardening.

3. The legend of Uab appears in “Preserving Traditional Landscape of Palau” in this publication.

4. Steve Umetaro, “Belau: Uchelel Belau er a Uab el me er a Miladeldil (Palau: The Beginning of Palau from Uab to Miladeldil),” Koror: Department of Education, 1974.

5. See “Preserving Traditional Landscape of Palau” in this publication for traditional village names and contemporary names.

*Beliliou*

When she went to the Bkulabeluu of Beliliou, she just *miltechii chochil* (literally, “kicked her foot lopsidedly”) to begin the mesei work, and that is why the mesei at Bkulabeluu are small and narrow. Upon approaching Ngesias Village, though, she was so energized that the lines for the *ulecharo*, *bluu*, and *urars* mesei divisions were well done in straight lines.

When she went to Ngerkeiukl, they snatched her *uosech* fruit, so she cursed them by saying, “Your taro fields will have small corms and you will have such big appetites!”

Then, on approaching Ngedbak, children were playing and she asked them to come and delouse her hair, *melais er a btelul*. After they deloused her hair, she said, “Thank you my children, take this *riaml* (football fruit) and plant it there, as this is good food for children. Let us go to the mountain, where I will fix your mesei.” As they approached the mountain, she kicked the soil with one foot and said, “This is your mesei,” and, taking her walking stick, she beat the side of the mesei and said, “and here is where you get your drinking water!”

While Iluochel was in Beliliou, she gave birth to Mengidabrudkoel and Tellames. They lived in Beliliou while she made mesei in Oreor.

*Oreor*

While in Oreor, she married a man she was not fond of. Hence, she would work in her mesei and take her time gathering leaves for fertilizer, doubling them in amount. Then she would plant even on the *cheliuis* (bordering mounds), even to the adjoining dry land. She kept herself busy so she would not go home early.

*Ngeremlengui*

Cultivating mesei throughout Palau, Iluochel came to Ngeremlengui and made Ngeruuchel. Ngeruuchel was the first mesei where she began applying *omesalo* techniques for mesei cultivation. Mesalo means taking softer soil and piling it to one side, making a hole in the mesei and putting fertilizer in the hole before covering it with the piled-up soil. This is why the mesei is named Ngeruuchel, which literally means “at the beginning.”

### *Irrai*

There is a bathing place for Iluochel located in Beluaruchel at the Ked of Irrai (in the hills of Ordomei in Irrai). The name of the bathing place is “Disechel a Iluochel”<sup>6</sup> (literally, “bathing place for Iluochel”). In Irrai, Iluochel again married someone she was not too fond of. Hence, working in her mesei, she enjoyed taking her time. When she was done, she would go to her bathing place and bathe, drying herself in the sun slowly so she did not have to go home early.

### *Ngchesar*

Iluochel went to Ngeraus in Ngchesar. While there, she worked on the mesei in Iikrel a Rirs, which is a place between Ngeraus and Ngerwikl. The Ngeraus people went with her, so she showed them elements of mesei: she piled the soil to the side and put the leaves as fertilizer in the opening, using the piled-up soil to cover the fertilizer, smoothing the soil, and preparing for planting in a timely manner.

While in Ngeraus, the Rengara Ilulk (the Traditional Men’s Club) were so enchanted with Iluochel they ended up raping her. She was so humiliated that she left, leaving only small dechel and mesei that produced limited yields of brak and kukau, leaving Ngeraus people with limited food supplies. There is a saying in Ngeraus, “*Ngkora omengal Rraus, el sosokod e dikeang*,”<sup>7</sup> meaning, “Like a meal at Ngeraus, just as we are appetized, the food runs out.” A more contemporary use of this saying has evolved to situations where one has not gotten enough of a tasty dish and it is all gone.

Iluochel left Ngeraus to cultivate mesei in Ibleang. The mesei belonged to Iuelenguul lineage. It was the *lkul a dui* (lineage- or clan-owned taro field) of the fifth male title holder of Ngchesar, whose title was Bechab.<sup>8</sup> *Lkul a dui* is the mesei where the taro for the title holder of the lineage or clan is planted by his wife for his consumption and important events of the family, lineage, or clan. It was deemed as a standard mesei for *klechedaol*, the “inter-village feasts” in Ngchesar. It was just a small taro field, but when there were planned feasts for Ngchesar, the people would say, “Go and ask the old women, ‘How are your taro fields? Can the taro fields feed the upcoming feast?’” It was said that when questioned, the old women would respond, “Wait until tomorrow! Wait until tomorrow!”

6. Rebechall Takeo Ngirmekur, Historian of Airai State, personal interview by Bureau of Arts & Culture staff, 2008. This interview confirmed the bathing place for Iluochel, which was not mentioned by Umetaro in his book.

7. Robert McKnight and Adalbert Obak, “Proverbs of Palau,” *Journal of American Folklore* 81 (1968): 11.

8. Ngchesar and Ngiwal States Oral History Report, Vol. II, Bureau of Arts & Culture (2001): 6.

Whenever such occasion arose they would repeat the same. Hence, the feasts were never held. There is a proverb from Ngchesar, “*ngkor a mur re Ngchesar*,”<sup>9</sup> meaning “like a feast in Ngchesar.” This alludes to the fact that the feasts were never held, and, as such, the saying now applies to the risk of procrastination.

#### *Ngiwal*

When Iluochel went to Ngermechau in Ngiwal, she again married a man whom she loved very much. Her desire to remain close to her husband made her mesei work hasty and rushed so she could go home to spend time with her husband. The corms of her kukau and brak were said to be very large and tasty. Upon leaving Ngiwal, Iluochel left her *sualo*, taro field basket, in the village of Ngermechau. The *sualo* turned into stone and still remains in Ngermechau as testimony of Iluochel’s migration to the village.

#### *Ngaraard*

When Iluochel went to Ngaraard, she went to Choll. She again married Iechad of the House of Ngerbelang, a man who was originally from Ngcheangel (now Kayangel) but lived in Choll. She loved her husband so much that when she went working on her mesei, she would work hastily and carelessly, trying to rush back to the house to be with her husband. When tending her mesei in Ngerbelang, her drink was *mengur* (coconut). Hence, the *mengur* in Ngerbelang is very sweet. Her protein diet consisted of *rekung* (land crab). Hence, this is why the *rekung* in Ngerbelang are always fatty and tasty at all times. The mesei working stick for Iluochel was a piece of bamboo. Hence, bamboo in Ngerbelang is very strong.

Iluochel also went to make mesei on the other side of Choll in Ngaraard. Still, she wanted so much to spend time with her husband that she would hastily and carelessly work away to complete her work and return to her husband. Yet her mesei continued to be healthy, with very good taro roots. She continued her routine of tending her mesei and returning home hastily to her husband until, one day, while she was walking on the road, members of the local women’s club of Ngerbelang managed to pull out some of her pubic hairs. She was so mad and offended that she laid a curse on the village by saying, “I shall kick the water source to the west side

9. McKnight and Obak, 10.



of the village and the village shall have lots of weeds all the time!”<sup>10</sup> It seems that today such are still the conditions that remain in Choll, as the water source is in Keiukl (the west side) of the village and the grass grows back within three days of clearing.

#### *Ngarchelong*

The last mesei she made was in Ngarchelong. The name of the mesei was Ngerekei. When she finished making this mesei, she buried her *ngarek* (taro scraper) in the mesei, hence the name “Ngerekei.”

#### *Ngerekei Taro Field*

While Iluochel was in Ngarchelong, she cultivated her mesei in Ollei and named it Ngerekei. When Iluochel was in Ollei she again married someone she did not care for. When she went to her taro field, she would take her time gathering leaves for fertilizer and fixing the soil deliberately and slowly, ensuring she would not go home so early. This is why Ngarchelong mesei have to be well tended, utilizing *omesalo* technique and using a lot of leaves and grass fertilizers to result in quality taro corms, unlike the mesei in Choll and other places that can be fixed hastily, even carelessly, and yet still yield good taro. It is believed that the Ngerekei mesei is sacred, so it should be well tended all the time and should never be neglected. Walking past Ngerekei mesei, one must remain silent and not make noise.

The women who own the Ngerekei taro fields say that the actual place name of the taro field is Idelbechong; because Iluochel’s taro scraper was broken there, they renamed it Ngerekei, the name being derived from “ngarek.” There is a rock in the taro field against which Iluochel’s *ngarek* was broken; the mesei cultivators stay away from this rock.

#### *The First Feast in Palau*

Iluochel was in Ollei when her husband Olungiis came to visit. While there, she began preparing for the marriage feast, so they went to get taro from Ngeaur and bring it to Ollei for the feast. After the feast, there were leftover *kukau* (purple taro corms) in Ollei, and they turned to stone; hence, one can still see the leftover *kukau* from Iluochel’s *mur* (feast). This was the first *mur* in Palau.



10. Ikrederasirs Yuri Iderbei, personal interview by Bureau of Arts & Culture staff, translated by Palau Resource Institute, 2008.

③ Tangible symbol of Kukau el Bad at lungel, Ollei. © Sylvia Kloulubak

*Kukau el Bad—Stone Taro*

The Kukau el Bad (literally, “Stone Taro”) story is as follows. Iungel was the sentry of the place called Delbirt to the north. There is a place called Iungel el Oraterruul, a place for making fishing gear. This place was so named as it was the place to cut the plants used to make *ruul* (a type of fishing gear) for fishing in the old days. The place called Orraterruul is where over twenty rock icons stand while some are also on the ground and are referred to as Kukau el Bad. They are the kukau, taro of Belau, and the biggest of them all are said to be kukau from Ngcheangel and Ngeaur. Some people say they were remnants of the kukau brought for the feast of Iluochel.

Another version of a related story goes that when there is an increase of *uek* (purple swamp hen [*Porphyrio porphyria*]), which eat raw kukau in the mesei and deplete the harvest, or when there are diseased taro plants wrecking mesei in Ollei, the old women of Ollei will harvest a taro, one each from their mesei, and bring it to the Iungel.<sup>11</sup> Eating the roasted kukau and *ulechouch*, roasted coconuts, they keep a vigil to appease the gods. They make their offerings while sitting amid the Kukau el Bad, offering their prayers for fruitful and bountiful taro fields. When such offerings are made for a period of time, the *uek* disappear, as do taro diseases.

*Ngot er a Iluochel—Iluochel’s Mortar*

During the Japanese time in Palau, when Hijikata was in Palau, he wrote that there used to be a large flat slab of stone in Mengellang, which used to be referred to as “Ngot er a Iluochel” (the flat mortar of the goddess Iluochel).<sup>12</sup> There are also very old women in Ngarchelong who remember that such a flat rock was located in Mengellang, but after World War II, the rock went missing, and no one seems to remember the location of the rock even today.

11. Orakidil Bieb Sato and Bedul Sato Remoket, personal interview by Bureau of Arts & Culture staff, translated by Palau Resource Institute, 2010.

12. Hisakatsu Hijikata, *Myths and Legends of Palau*, edited by Dr. Endo Hisashi, Sasakawa Peace Foundation, 1996: 15.





*Bedengel a Iluochel—Iluochel's Remains*

When Iluochel died, there was a symbol of her body left over on the Iungel of Ollei. This body of Iluochel is located on the edge of a place near the Kukau el Bad.

## SOCIO-CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE OF MESEI AND KUKAU

*Chesols* (chant)

*Ditek el Dung er Uchob*  
*Meng ng ditek el dung er Uchob el kngiluu*  
*Er olngechel, El me mengedii er a chimak;*  
*E otengeli er a Ulecharo, E orolii er a Bluu,*  
*E orolii er a Uleboel, E a obels a ngourang ma renguk a mlengiulii...ang.*<sup>13</sup>

(Oh my healthy taro plant which I gathered from afar and brought close to my heart; With my hands, I clustered it to my side; and delivered it in the *Ulecharo*; and guided it into the *Bluu*, then spread it through the *Uleboel*; then the unfortunate taro blight snatched it away from me! My heart, my spirit have been obliterated from life.)

Mesei have always been valuable property for family, lineage, and clan. Traditionally, mesei were and are owned by *kebliil* (clans) and divided among families and lineages in the clans for use to grow foods for members as well as for *mur* (feasts) and *klechedaol* (inter-village festivals). Such value was accorded to mesei that they could only be transferred as *chelbechiil* (settlement for wife's services) and for *ududir a rengalek* (children's money) during *cheldech duch* (settlement after a death of a spouse). Mesei could also be transferred as *ulsiungel* to someone who provided valuable services to family members of a clan. Hence the proverb, "A Meselch a di ua a deruchellel a Udoud er a Kerresel a Reng,"<sup>14</sup> which means, "Mesei possess the same value as the precious Palauan money."

The Palauan oral history migration movement of mesei is deeply

13. Ebil Kldil era Teblang Ongelakel Kuroda of Mengellakl, Ngarchelong, personal interview, Palau Resource Institute, April 2014.

14. The Palau Society of Historians, "Rechuodel," Vol. II, Division of Cultural Affairs, Ministry of Community & Cultural Affairs (1996): 5.

rooted in the cultural heritage. Kukau (purple taro corm) is claimed to have originated in Southeast Asia and to have been dispersed to Oceania through the island of New Guinea many centuries ago. The crop has evolved as the cultures of the Pacific region peoples have evolved and has acquired considerable socio-cultural, natural, and economic importance for the Pacific peoples. Among the food crops in Palau, the reverence and prestige attached to taro play a highly significant role in cultural ceremonies, mitigation of environmental elements, and economic well-being of the people. The cultural significance of kukau as a prestigious food is derived from both its value as the only food stock to go with fish and the manner in which it was cultivated.

#### *Naming of Dung*



*Dung* is another name for the taro plant. When a new dung is found and made public, one can be sure it has perhaps been with the finder for some time, a year or two at least. Most likely, she has grown it, observed it, cooked it, and tasted it. She has taken the suckers and increased her plants while observing, perhaps in the mesei, semi-wetland, and dry land. This enables her to identify the different characteristics of the new plant, such as the color of the stalks from the root of the plant to the base below the leaf, colors of the *kliul* (the inside center of the leaves), the edges of the leaves, and how the suckers come out: do they stick to the corm, or the base of the plant? Or do they shoot out, away from the mother plant? Does it tend to have more suckers or less? How long does it take to mature and be ready to harvest?

Once harvested, she will again take note of the corm and its shape. Is it more roundish, oblong, or lopsided? When cooked, does it tend to break open on its roundish side, and do the skins roll out or not? Is it a strong taro or mushy? How does it taste compared to other taro? What color is the cooked kukau: purple, yellowish, white, gray, or something else? All characteristics of the dung are observed.

Once the finder is ready to share, she does so with close relatives and friends. Usually, women do not want their names associated with taro plants, so they recommend a place name where the dung was found or physical appearance of the new taro.





*Lkul a dui* is the foundation for the title of the lineage or clan *mesei* where *kukau* for the clan titleholder is cultivated by his wife for her husband’s daily consumption. *Lkul a dui mesei* do not get passed on, but remain in the clan. Typically, each clan or lineage in Palau has a *lkul a dui*. The Palauan *omeluchel* system, cultural practice of reciprocal food and services exchange for money and other resources, is a strong practice that has potential implications for clan resources to “float away” (*obechakl*). Ensuring that there is a lineage-or clan-owned taro field ensures availability of taro for the title holder so that he does not eat off the resources (foods) from his in-laws. Such practice could potentially be another way for money and resources to flow from his clan to his wife’s clan. An important identification of a *lkul a dui* taro field is a big, round basalt rock that is put in the middle of the field. The significance is that the title holder must be a strong, firm, and responsible leader.



### *Values of Mesei Cultivation*

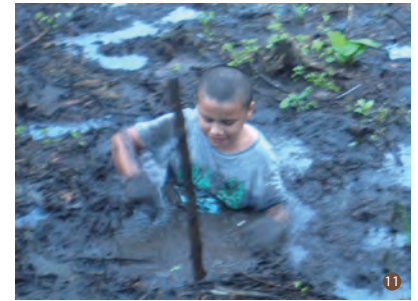
Many important Palauan values are required in the development of *mesei* cultivation systems. Before formal schools were introduced,

7 Ngesuas is a place in Ngchesechang Village of Airai. There was a land clearing including *mesei* and this taro plant was first seen there; hence, it is Ngesuas dung. This female and male taro plant, which is identified by the color of stalks, has strong corms, is resistant to taro blight, and is a favorite of *uek* (purple swamp hen). Ngesuas taro plants at Eleu Mesei in Iyebukel, Koror. © Sylvia Kloulubak

210 8 *Lkul a dui* er a Tmetbab of Ngerkesoal, Koror. © Simeon Adelbai

9 *Lkul a dui* er a Etei of Mengellakl, Ngarchelong. © Faustina K. Rehuher-Marugg

mesei cultivation work was the school for female children and very young boys, the same way fishing and heavy building work were the training grounds for male children. Important values required for the art of taro field cultivation were planning and management, faithfulness, hard work, industriousness, perseverance, obedience, love, care, and common sense. These were highly regarded and guarded values as they were the values families desired to instill in their children.



Children and young women helped in the cultivation work of their mothers' mesei as they learned and were prepared for young adulthood and marriage. Sharing of information, history, proverbs, genealogies, stories, songs, humor, and characterizations of villages and village news were part of the mesei cultivation activities. Such were and still are the values that underscored the often acknowledged and quoted ancient Palauan proverb “a mesei a delal a telid,”<sup>15</sup> meaning “a taro field is the mother of life.” In recent years, there are those who refrain from using this proverb as they contend that only God, a deity (*chelid*), the creator, could be afforded the title of being the “mother of our breath/life.” However, the usage of the phrase “mother of our breath” is as a metaphor to express intensively the importance and the vital manner in which mesei were and still are valued today.

15. McKnight and Obak, 9.

10 Young boys helping mother on mesei chores. © Faustina K. Rehuher-Marugg

12 Mother teaching children to do mesei work. © Faustina K. Rehuher-Marugg

11 Young boy helping mother on taro cultivation. © Faustina K. Rehuher-Marugg

13 Children helping and learning mesei chores. © Faustina K. Rehuher-Marugg



A number of other colorful Palauan proverbs illustrate the essential nature of mesei to the Palaun people, such as the following:

- *A Mesei a uchul a deled*<sup>16</sup> means “Mesei is the base of our stomach.” The stomach is where food settles in to make one feel full. This is another way of expressing the vital importance of mesei as the essence of our lives and our livelihood. Elders relate the proverb to the mesei known as lkul a dui.
- *A Mesei a uchul a teloched*<sup>17</sup> means “Mesei is the base of our meal.” “Telooch” is the chewed food that is softened and ready to be swallowed. This is the root word of “teloched,” an inclusive plural emphasizing that, collectively, mesei are places where taro is grown for basic sustenance of members of families, clans, and communities.
- *A chochid a mekleched*<sup>18</sup> means “Our feet are our mesei.” This is what a person exclaims when she walks into a place where meals are served and one can partake of the meal. It can also be applied to resources and goods. It means your feet can be a source of food and resources for you. In contemporary Palau, this proverb is used and understood by many people.
- *A ilecha di telulechoid er a mesei*<sup>19</sup> means “It is only gossip of the mesei.” There are still those stories that can only be told in the mesei (woman to woman) and nowhere else, which is where this saying comes from. It is a reference to something neither serious nor important, warranting immediate dismissal.

## RULES AND PROCEDURES OF MESEI

There are rules and procedures for mesei work. Some are more general and others are specialized knowledge and skills possessed by a few and passed down from generation to generation. Where one should begin working in her mesei is determined by where the sun rises. How to approach her mesei to begin work is carefully determined according to the position of the mesei and with which corner of a mesei division is to begin. Planting season for others requires following the cycle of the moon or the ocean tides. Paying

16. Dirrengechel Sariang Timulch, personal interview, Meyuns, Koror, 20 August, 2014.

17. Ibid.

18. This is a popular and well-known proverb that can be said to be in the public domain.

19. This is a popular and well-known proverb that can be said to be in the public domain.

attention to restrictions of the day and night activities before plantings is important as well. It is important to follow certain procedures that apply when working in the mesei itself.

There are women who possess the knowledge to plant taro for bountiful harvest and apply it to their mesei work. Specialized knowledge to minimize destruction of taro by the uek and taro diseases is supposedly possessed by certain women while there are others who are said to have ability to ward off black magic or destructive work from the mesei. Knowledge, practices, expressions, and indigenous skills of farmers are derived from many years of experience. Women learn through observation and practical experiences through family members and elders in the community.

Knowledge of lunar cycles served as the basis for fishing, farming, building, and other cultural practices, e.g., when breadfruit trees are in season, sea urchins are *melaok*, abundant and rich. Indigenous/traditional knowledge of taro field cultivation determines farmers' decisions and the methods they practice. Traditional knowledge and capabilities are the potential basis for sustainable taro field development. Rural communities have a very good understanding of their resources and often are adept at experimenting and adapting to changes over time. Such is the reason taro field cultivation has weathered the test of time in spite of the influence of four strong colonizing countries as well as globalization in recent years.

Traditionally, as a prestige crop, kukau was served at funerals of high-ranking clan title holders. It was the crop of choice for royalty, gift-giving, and traditional feasting (*mur*). It was also used for fulfillment of social obligations and exchange systems such as *ngader*, marriage ceremony food exchanges, *cheldecheduch*, marriage settlement after death of a spouse, *ocheraol* (house buying customs), and even tending to special visitors. Carefully prepared kukau are part of the service etiquette expected of the service provider.



*Diaches*<sup>20</sup> is a practice carried out during a funeral of a high-ranking chief of only the *kebekuul* titles. “Kebekuul” is a term used collectively for the top four ranking chiefs of a village. The fifth to the tenth titles are referred to collectively as *teleuechel dui*, each of which has a connection to one of the four *kebekuul*. Upon the death of a *kebekuul* title holder, a *diaches* is made up of choice taro plants harvested by an *ochell* (senior female family member closest to the deceased), from the *lkul a dui mesei* of the affected clan. At least two to four mature and choice *kukau* with stalks and leaves intact are cleaned, have their corms scraped, and are then tied together and anointed with turmeric oil and placed in a designated part of the *olbed* (stone platform). They symbolize the heart and soul of the deceased.

Preparation for burial requires the taking of the title ceremony, after which time the *diaches* is removed from its place by a designated close female relative dressed appropriately with a mat and wearing her hair down. She carries the *diaches* on her head (*meluchel*), and a designated male family member ceremonially removes the *diaches* and brings it back to its original place on the *olbed*. Positioned in a certain way, the *diaches* remains there until the third day of the mourning period, at which time the *kukau* are cooked and served to the mourning relatives. The *dait*, taro plants, from the *diaches* are then taken and planted in the *lkul a dui mesei*.

The preparation of *diaches* is another practice which elucidates the value of *kukau* as a prestige food and a valuable commodity and ties it to the deceased holder of one of the *kebekuul* titles in the village. In contemporary Palau, few people are familiar with the *diaches* practice and fewer people practice it.



20. The Palau Society of Historians, “Rechuodel” Vol II, 33-34.

<sup>14</sup> High-ranking women of Koror attending a ceremonial feast for a high chief title-bearing ceremony being served specially prepared *belsiich*, pounded taro. © Belau National Museum

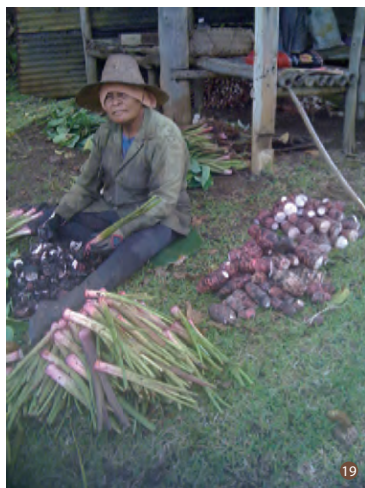
<sup>15</sup> Women bringing carefully prepared taro for a special occasion in 1908. © Museum fuer Voelkerkunde Hamburg

<sup>16</sup> Sketch of a *diaches* as it is ceremonially taken from the woman who was designated to handle the *diaches* for the deceased title holder. © Bureau of Arts and Culture



## SOCIO-ECONOMIC SIGNIFICANCE

Mesei and kukau are valuable to the social and economic well-being and development of a community. Traditionally, the economics of mesei relied fully on hard work and diligence of clan women and *buchelsechal*, spouses of senior male members of the clans. The wives tended the mesei diligently, ensuring to provide the best crop for senior matriarchs of the family's lineage and clans and for important events. In turn, the traditional exchange system dictated that wealth would flow from a woman's husband's family to her family and clan. Meanwhile, women's valuables, *toluk* (turtle shells), are exchanged between women only, a practice that still exists today.



- 17, 18 Women guarding displays of women's valuables at the 2010 Mechesil Belau, Palau Women's Conference. *Toluk*, Palauan women's money, is used in exchange for food and services provided by wives of men of the family, lineage, and clan. Woman displaying her *toluk* and other Palauan women's valuables such as tools for preparing taro for consumption: *ai* (pounder) and miniature *ngot* (mortar) for pounding taro. © Faustina K. Rehuher-Marugg
- 19 Woman preparing her taro corms and plants for sale at the market. © Faustina K. Rehuher-Marugg
- 20 Taro corms and plants prepared for sale at the market. © Sylvia Kloulubak



### *Omeluchel System*

The Palauan *omeluchel* system is the traditional reciprocal exchange of foods and services between the family and clan of a married woman and her relatives and the family and clan of her husband and his relatives. It is the foundation of the traditional Palauan society.



Taro cultivation work is hard physical work. What helps women maintain their *mesei* is the usual age-old *omengerakl* (organized cooperative work). Self-imposed schedules are made that they all adhere to in order to help themselves till their *mesei*. It is hard work and is a spiritual experience at best.

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- 21 Poster of the First Annual Taro Festival in Palau, 2011, indicating the growing renaissance of *mesei* cultivation by women as well as growing governmental support as part of cultural revival, economics, and preservation of healthy practices and food security. © Kiblas Soaladaob
  - 22 Another manifestation of renaissance of *mesei* cultivation in Palau that even shows in cake decoration by young women for special occasions. © Phila R.R.M. Ymesei
  - 23 Postage stamps unveiled commemorating the importance of taro and *mesei* cultivation during the First Palau Taro Festival in Palau in 2011. Painting showing *mesei* divisions as well as various taro varieties. © Samuel Adelbai
  - 24 Showing already packed taro in baskets ready for customary exchange or for sale. This is a typical practice using biodegradable packing materials of woven coconut leaves and fibers to pack uncooked taro. © Faustina K. Rehuher-Marugg





## SOCIO-NATURAL SIGNIFICANCE OF MESEI

*Rebetii*

*O Soilong om dung el dait e kel kngikl el ngara meselch er a mengellakl/  
Omko ko chesiuch e ke ririid er a Imadelbai e songe e ak di longelung  
Klengelau er a demok mengechiku melai er kau;  
E ngeral a ulemeob er kid el dim lo le cha ngemeled  
Ma dorael a desa soad e do suud a delemeledii...ang.<sup>21</sup>*

(O Soilong, if you were my healthy taro plant, I would have planted it in the taro field to pacify things, Or if you were my cherished tortoise shell money, which got lost, I would have cried so;

I would have cried and come to you for nourishments! For our creator already put in for us the preciousness of life! Hence as we depart and notice life desires, we can grab the plantings to plant.)

## Physical Development of Mesei

*The Art of Designing Mesei*

Mesei cultivation systems are part of sustainable watershed systems that have provided a natural and acceptable way to maintain ecosystems and diversity. These natural watersheds were undisturbed for centuries except for mesei development. They functioned as natural filtering systems for streams, mangroves, estuaries, reef flats,

21. Ebil Kildil era Teblang Ongelakel Kuroda of Mengellakl, personal interview, Pulau Resource Institute, April 2014.

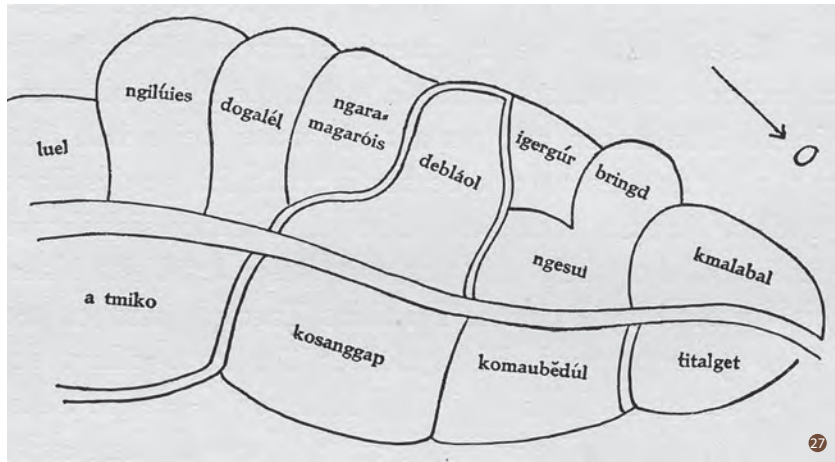
25 *Omengerakl*, a process through which women till each other's mesei by hand. © Faustina K. Rehuher-Marugg



and near-shore marine environments, resulting in a pristine marine environment until recent decades. These healthy ecosystems have provided sustainable natural habitats for fresh water shrimp, fish, lizards, reptiles, birds, and animals as well as insects and other plants.

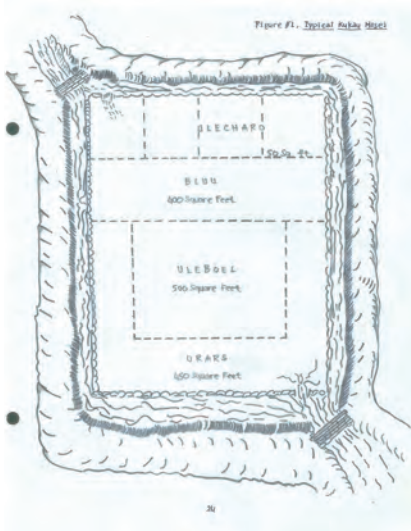


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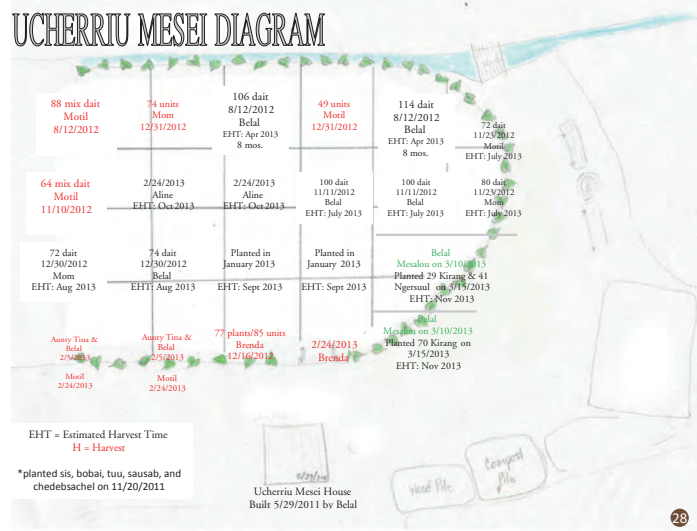


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*Uleboel*, *bluu*, *ulecharo*, and *urars* are various components of *mesei*. More current practices utilize only the square-shaped *bluu*, small and large, although one could probably still find a few traditionalists who maintain the traditional types of divisions. *Orak* is another *mesei* division, although not indicated. It is said that typically *orak* was only found in high clans' taro patches as they used to have very large taro patches. It takes four *bluu*, or squares, to make one *orak*.



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26 Omouachel, large ditch or water way that is a source of irrigation for Mersak mesei in Mengellakl in Ngarchelong, Palau. © Faustina K. Rehuher-Marugg

27 Mesei designed by Dr. Augustin Krämer, Results of the South Seas Expedition 1908-1910 Vol. III Ethnography © Museum fuer Voelkerkunde Hamburg

28 Design from the 1960s and a modern design of a particular mesei according to how water flows from omouachel (large ditch or waterway) to bong (small water ways surrounding mesei) to kllaeb (small waterpath systems). © Belau National Museum (left) and Motil Timarong (right)

*Cheliuis* –A large *cheliuis* (soil embankment) typically acts as a boundary as well as a barrier to keep the floods and high waters from getting into the mesei. Between the mesei and the large *cheliuis* is a smaller soil mound or small *cheliuis* that is part of the mesei water irrigation system. A *cheliuis* may be opened to let water in or out depending on the weather conditions and need to balance the irrigation of the mesei.

Depending on the contour, shape, and size of the taro field, lines will be made to identify *ulecharo*, *urars*, *bluu*, *uleboel*, and *orak*. Once these divisions are delineated, *kllaeb* (literally, “small waterpath systems”) dividing the various *mesei* sections are made for ease of regular mesei management and irrigation. As such, *kllaeb* are crucial for the life of mesei.

Other typical features of mesei systems are sturdy bridges, smaller bridges, as needed over the waterways or streams and small huts for shelter, resting, work tools, and cooking. Once mesei are made or re-cultivated, the rest of the work becomes routine and is never neglected. Mesei are designed to ensure that the flow of water properly follows the contour of the land in order to ensure constant flow of clean and



fresh water into and out of the cultivated mesei. Types of mesei vary from village to village: *Chebulech* mesei are deep and tend to have very soft, watery soil. To till this type of mesei requires special techniques as one sinks up to upper thighs or even to the waist. *Metind a chetemel* mesei refers to mesei with drier and harder soil that tend to be shallower than the former. One can only sink up to the lower waist or upper thighs. *Meched el mesei* are much shallower, up to the knees or below the knees.



Tilling of mesei has somewhat evolved from the old days. There are cultivators today who still apply omesalo techniques; however, fewer cultivators apply this technique. A more popular technique only requires turning the soil, putting in mulching materials, covering the soil, and planting. Another frequently applied technique might be analogous to the old technique first introduced by the mesei goddess Iluochel, the *omesalo-iaur* technique—basically, spearing the soil with a pickaxe-like tool or sharp wood and planting. This only applies to mesei which are not too soft.

There are several steps families in Palau typically follow to convert natural wetlands such as *dechel* and *omeklochel* into mesei. Men help in all the heavy work in the making of or maintenance of mesei such as cutting down and removing large trunks and roots of trees. Once the period of rotting trees and grasses is reached, planting begins.

This is a time to plant *dait*, taro plantings of *Colocasia*. Depending on the variety of dait planted, taro can be harvested in anywhere from seven months to one year. After the first crop, the old people say, “*ng seruchel a mesei*”: this is the time when the soil needs to be turned and another crop is planted again without putting in fertilizer, referred to as *olangebdechel* (the first harvest).

After seven months to one year, depending on taro variety, the *olangebdechel* is harvested. Typically, special people receive

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31 Lkul a dui er a Eteet Clan er Oreor (Koror, Palau). *Mechas* working in *chebulech*, a very deep and watery mesei. Cultivating this type of mesei takes special skills, so new mesei cultivators tend to avoid these. © Grace Yano



olangebdechel. At this time, it is necessary to divide the mesei into the various divisions as dictated by the needs of the family, clan, and community. Depending on the contour, shape, and size of the taro field, lines will be made to identify ulecharo, urars, bluu, ulleboel, and orak. These divisions are delineated with the *kllaeb* (small water path system) dividing the various sections, which are made for ease of regular tending of mesei. Kllaeb are a means for skilled maintenance of mesei and paths of water into and out of the various sections of the mesei by skilled cultivators. Once divided, it is up to the cultivator to *mesalo* (identify) and gather the desired *ramek* (fertilizer), preparing to *omesalo* (dig in soil), put in fertilizer, smooth the soil, and wait for the right time to plant. Gathering of materials and leaves for mulch is also planned before tasks are done. There is special timing to all of these various mesei tasks and functions before planting.<sup>22</sup>

Through observation and experience, girls and women learn from mothers, grandmothers, close relatives, and community people, and are therefore able to continue to cultivate their mesei. However, a Palauan woman also has the opportunity to experiment and develop her own techniques.

### **Transmission, Continuity, and Sustainability**

Taro field cultivation continues to be the domain of Palauan women. Perhaps there was a time in the early 1970s to early 1980s that reduction of mesei farming occurred due to out-migration of young female students to attend off-island schools or training. They returned home with their degrees to hold wage jobs. In their marriageable years, young men and women married, began raising their families, and found themselves becoming part of the traditional exchange system within their families and clans. This propelled many to automatically begin to take part in traditional practices, including mesei cultivation and dry-land gardening. Most women who have been cultivating mesei or those who are starting mesei worked with their mothers and community elders to learn traditional ways of making mesei. Even unmarried women of age find themselves cultivating taro fields. With accessibility to remote villages as a result of the completion of the round-the-island Compact Road in Babeldaob (the big island), resurgence of mesei cultivation is on the rise.

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22. The Palau Society of Historians, "Rechuodel" Vol. II, 5-6.



Several factors in the past two decades appear to contribute not only to transmission of skills but to continuity of taro field farming or mesei making as well as sustainability. A renaissance of Palauan culture due to tourism development and social and political consciousness development has helped cultural revival. The cultural renaissance has contributed to mesei making as well as environmental conservation and preservation. The general wealth of the nation, increasing per capita income, has helped women in taro field development due to increased income. Increased family income as well as easy access to hiring of foreign workers to help in domestic work, gardening, and mesei work will continue to increase mesei making and assure its sustainability.



32 Young professional women who have taken keen interest in *mesei* development and management for cultural preservation, healthy lifestyle, environmental mitigation measures, and income generation. © Brenda Tarimel

33 Community *mesei* workers discussing the day's work and planning for the next time. © Faustina K. Rehuher-Marugg

The past two decades have seen Palau's increased economic development due to vigorous and rapid tourism development, which has rendered Palau a wealthier island nation compared to the 1970s, 1980s, and even early 1990s. As material wealth increases, the health sector in the nation has documented an alarming increase in the prevalence of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) in the nation. Hence, the health sector has increased its NCD reduction campaigns, resulting in health consciousness of the people, and has increased consumption of local foods. Although a firm study has not been conducted, sales of local produce, particularly kukau, brak, and vegetables, are on the rise, and this has created active demand for kukau and brak.

Sustainability of taro field development appears to be assured due to vigorous mesei making by many women and resource owners. The Bureau of Agriculture, the Ministry of Natural Resources, Environment & Tourism, the Palau Community College, Cooperative Research Extension, the Republic of China-Taiwan Technical Mission, and the Palau Community Action Agency have augmented vigorous aspects of research on taro propagation, taro field cultivation, and taro production, along with distribution of plants and provision of technical support to local farmers, thus substantially increasing taro field cultivation and production of types of taro, kukau, and brak.

Technical assistance in various aspects of taro field farming in mesei as well as on dry land has included technical assistance in soil testing, composting, and other processes that facilitate and enhance farming, all positive indicators of sustainability of taro field cultivation in Palau. Training on and facilitation of value-adding for taro corms, stalks, and leaves also add to the increased demands for cultivation and production of taro, not only in mesei but also on dry land.

Besides increased demand for and production of kukau, a notable increased demand for brak and also giant taro is hereby noted as well. It appears that for health reasons, demand for brak consumption is on the rise even for foods for funerals and other customs. Traditionally, this practice was not acceptable before the 1990s.

The formation of the Palau-Taiwan Farmers' Association is a positive force which contributes to sustainability of mesei cultivation and



taro production as it provides marketing support for farmers. Other women's organizations have accelerated ways to help themselves revive, increase, and sustain their taro field cultivation efforts. Discussion of a formation of a Palau-wide Agriculture and Aquaculture Association has already commenced.

The latest efforts that appear to add support to sustainability of taro field cultivation are United Nations grants made available for mesei owners to revive mesei cultivation by utilizing traditional methods. Use of traditional methods of taro field cultivation helps limit use of imported fertilizers and thus ensures reduction of toxic chemicals from flowing into rivers and streams and to marine environments.

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