

THE INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT OF THE ARTS OF OCEANIA:

WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO MICRONESIA

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Introduction

This paper focuses on the artistic continuities and revivals of contemporary Micronesia, with some comparisons drawn from other parts of Oceania. Illustrations are mainly drawn from the range of cultural centers in Palau: from traditional bai clubhouses, through revivals and museums, to the commercial, Polynesian Cultural Center-like institution found presently only on Ponape.

The forms and functions of these institutions are described, with a focus on: (1) their place in the contemporary array of institutions, and (2) their relationships of maintenance and promotion to other associated art forms. From these and other examples we conclude that there are three main ideological attitudes towards the arts: (1) tradition and continuity, retaining the arts in their functioning social contexts, (2) preservation of the arts in museums and like contexts, and (3) the commercialization of old and new arts. These attitudes are not considered to be a temporal sequence: all co-exist and may be present to different degrees in the types of institutional centers discussed. It is also to be noted that the three attitudes are somewhat in conflict, and that the first--tradition and continuity--provides the basis for resistance to both museumification and commercialization. However, modern communications and institutional experiences have raised the degree of self-consciousness such that even the traditional functional context of the arts is coming to be seen in an increasingly "touristic" manner, as a kind of museumification. On the other hand, the promoters of commercialism often claim that this is the only viable means of preserving culture and the arts, though the new institutional settings may in themselves be destructive to tradition and continuity of meaning.

Traditional and Contemporary
Cultural Centers of Micronesia

Centers of community ritual, political, and artistic activities were almost universal in the traditional cultures of Oceania, and have often been labeled "men's houses"--such as tambarans in the Sepik areas, long houses in Asmat, and marae in Polynesia.

In Palau, Western Micronesia, the meeting houses are called bai. These bai served both as the major expressions of the material arts in most villages and as primary locations for other artistic activities--dancing, narratives, and the making of crafts--as well as serving as secular centers for both men and women. This section of our paper will discuss the continuum of existing bai from the most traditional--both in artistic expression and institutional context--through the institutional and artistic modifications of the last few decades, to the most recent forms or equivalents which are permeated and motivated by non-traditional cultural values, such as musemification and commercialism.

Traditional Bai in the Modern Setting: Palau

Traditional bai were erected, maintained, and used by men's associations of a socio-political character. These were the meeting houses of a series of clubs which existed in geographic and functional complementarity to one another (Jernigan 1973, McKnight 1978). Several months of the year, the clubhouses were taken over by corollary women's clubs. These houses were built on raised stone platforms with pitched thatched roofs. The most spectacular artistic expressions were the painted relief carvings on the huge gables on either end of the bai, the corners of the exterior, and along interior roof beams. As these bai lasted some years and took a tremendous amount of labor and materials to build, the builders usually worked for years on construction, and only in later life became master builders or architects. Thus, each master builder might design and produce only five to seven bai in his lifetime (Robinson 1978). Traditionally, construction of the bai was supported by another community beaten in warfare, or by reciprocal arrangements among the clubs.

Under previous colonial administrations beginning with the Germans, the clubs were repressed and their functions transferred to other, introduced institutions. Most of the older bai have been destroyed by wars or the elements; few have been rebuilt in the traditional form of architecture. It is important to note that the story content of the painted relief carvings found on the interior beams of bai used to be both traditional and contemporary to the construction of the bai, incorporating both the past and the present. However, those paintings found in recreated bai only illustrate the past. By now, only one 19th century bai remains, serving its traditional purpose as a community meeting house.

In New Zealand, the Maori equivalent is the marae, which consists of a building and meeting ground, both of which are tapu (taboo, sacred). Most of the marae have been built in the past 100 years for sub-tribal functions. Others, in the past 60 years, like those we shall see for Micronesia, have been erected for tourist and commercial purposes.

Less ornate meeting centers were common throughout the Caroline Islands. Some of these are still constructed for their traditional non-commercial purposes, even when the Carolinians migrate to form a community on another island, such as in Saipan.

Today, dances and other cultural activities occur more frequently in other institutional settings, such as churches or schools. Although clubhouses may be used for their traditional socio-political purposes, the new pan-Palauan political institutions, such as the Palau legislature, have their own non-traditional buildings. Some of the focus of political events has shifted to the new institutions and buildings.

In 1976 a new club bai was built in Koror, Palau, by a Koror young men's club. At first this was the most functionally traditional of a group of new community centers in Koror, although the architecture was changed, with concrete walls and floor and a bar for contemporary parties. This bai was used for Palauan gathering in Koror, with both modern and traditional chanting and dancing. Since 1978, however, it has served a dual function as it is also used as one of the most popular nightclubs for modern music and dancing.

Community Center Bai

In contrast, the Trust-Territory constructed Civic Center bai in Palau is used for totally American-influenced activities. Except for a painted gable reminiscent of the bai and its roof line, the architecture is predominantly American--a cement block structure with interior stage. Similarly, the elders' center in Kolonia, Yap, is American built and supported. Traditional activities, crafts and dancing, may also be found within.

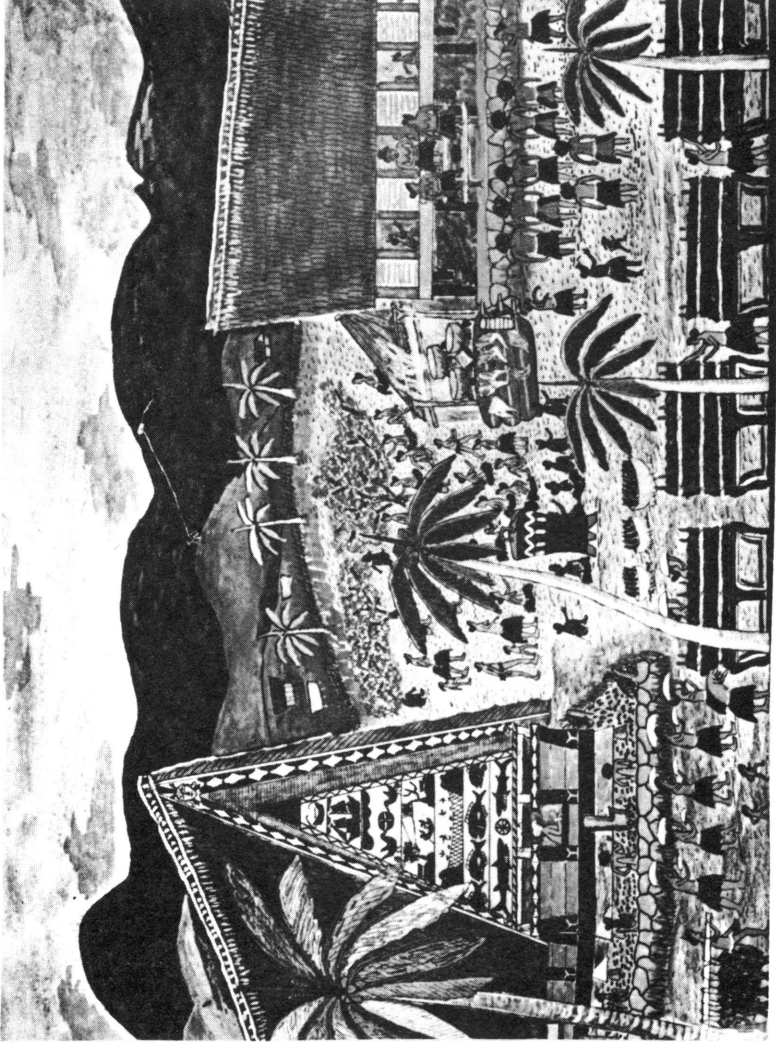
In these community center bai, both the architecture and activities which take place there reflect considerable American influence. This cultural influence is also reflected in the values which have led the Micronesians to erect buildings which last longer and which are easier to build. Erosion of the clubs' support by wage labor constraints, and availability of new construction materials, are other major factors.

Re-creation of Traditional Cultural Centers

Somewhat the reverse of the above type of institution are the increasing number of cases where the local population attempts to re-create in almost exact detail cultural-community centers whose forms have been lost. At Melekeok, Palau, the people are now clearing ground for the construction, or re-creation, of the Melekeok double-gabled bai, of which style there is no extant representative. The form is traditional, and it is hoped that it will create an atmosphere for both traditional and modern activities



"Storyboard" painted low relief, the most popular commercial art form in Palau today. This art form was developed during the Japanese colonial period from the traditional painted low relief carvings on beams of the bai-houses. This example shows a traditional tale of a canoe being upset by a giant crocodile, with a schematic painted bai-house front on the right.



Watercolor painting by Charlie Gibbons, the best known "ethnic" artist in Palau. This portrays an idealized traditional village scene. Note the clear depiction of a bai-house on the left, with its traditionally painted low relief carvings on the frontal beams.

and arts. However, the motivations behind it are not traditional: there is a self-conscious attempt to re-create history or preserve an ethnic past, as indicated by the fact that major funding for the project comes from the U.S. sponsored Office of Aging and from the Palau Historical and Cultural Preservation Commission. Until destroyed by a typhoon, in Koror there was a modified double-bai which served as a pan-Palauan cultural center and which contained a museum within its partially enclosed interior.

A more famous and complete case is the recreation of the Gogodala Cultural Center in the Fly River area of New Guinea. As reported by Crawford (1975), this is a re-erection of a traditional men's house, the last of which had been destroyed due to missionary activities forty years previously. Though built mainly with local labor, Crawford used the nationally-owned resources of power saws, bulldozers, and outboard motors in the construction. The center has provided the setting and psychological stimulus for the revival of many traditional arts and ceremonies that had not been performed for more than a generation. It is important to note that the center is also a contemporary functioning center, providing the setting for current community activities such as gambling, drinking, and the showing of Kung Fu movies (Schiefflin 1978) as well as revival of the traditional arts and cultural history lessons for the community's children. The revived portable arts, originally created out of "ethnic pride," are now finding their way into the commercial art markets, and dealers are beginning to influence the forms and selection of which items in the new/old inventories are produced. The men's house, therefore, also became a center for the display and sale of commercial arts.

Museum Bai

More overtly "modern" attitudes are being expressed in the specifically museum meeting-houses that are being erected in Micronesia, and the parallel usage of the forms of the haus tambaran in the Sepik area for museums and tourist centers (Gigibori 1976). These museum buildings are also paralleled by similarly "modern" attitudes towards art and artistic productions in the Western mold. In other words, the whole art-museum complex is solidly ensconced in the consciousness and activities of many Micronesians of the 1970s. Much of the impetus for these museums is Western, either directly, as in the case of the Palau Museum which was originally directed by an American woman, or through acculturated individuals. Pensile Lawrence, instigator and director of the Ponape Museum, has worked directly with a number of colonial anthropologists. The Palau Museum bai is constructed adjacent to the Museum; it is traditional both in architectural style and in the content of the relief-carved interior beam paintings which are "traditional"--in a self-conscious way--portraying no recent events or details of construction. Even though influenced by Western ideals and "frozen" in a traditional state for museum visitors, the museum bai may be spontaneously used

by local people for meetings. The Yap Museum is also constructed in a "traditional" style, and may be utilized by the Yapese for their daily activities: for example, women may sit under the eaves and prepare pandanus for weaving, or children visit during their lunch break from the adjacent elementary school. However, a traditional Yapese men's house would not be used in such a manner.

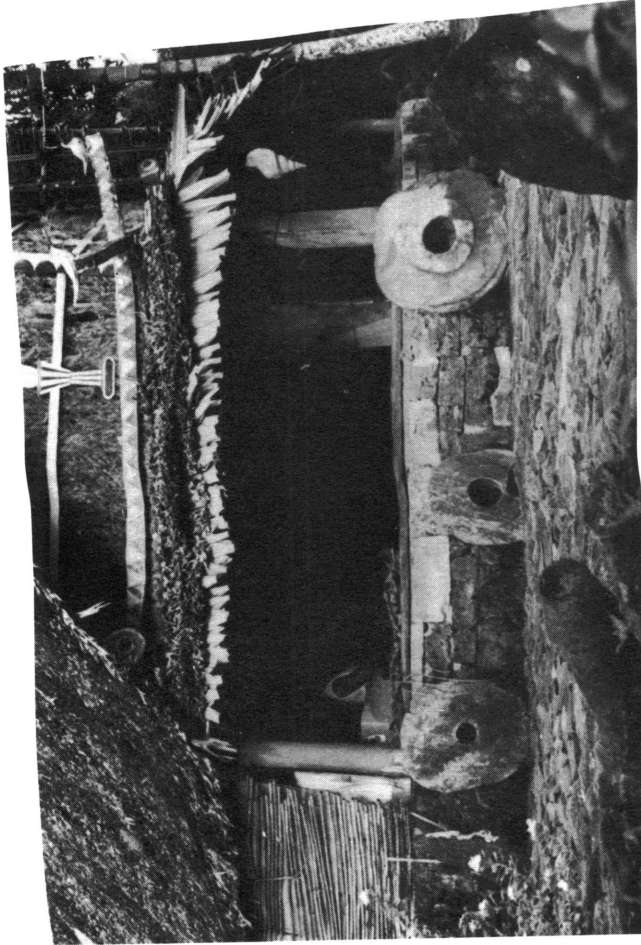
An increasing number of Micronesians are actively supporting museums and the reconstruction of traditional meeting centers, in an effort to retain those arts and crafts which still exist. There is a continuing effort to found a museum in the Marshall Islands by the local women of Majuro. However, at times the filling of the museums is another problem, as this entails removing the objects from their social context and meaning, something which Micronesians and other Pacific Islanders resist to this day (Guiart 1978).

In other parts of Oceania, the museumification process is growing fast, for instance in Tahiti, where there are two brand new museums. The first, The Museum of Tahiti and Her Islands, is a general museum of history, ecology and ethnography; the second is the new Gauguin Museum which celebrates the life of the famous European artist in Polynesia, and the works of other "high" artists in the area.

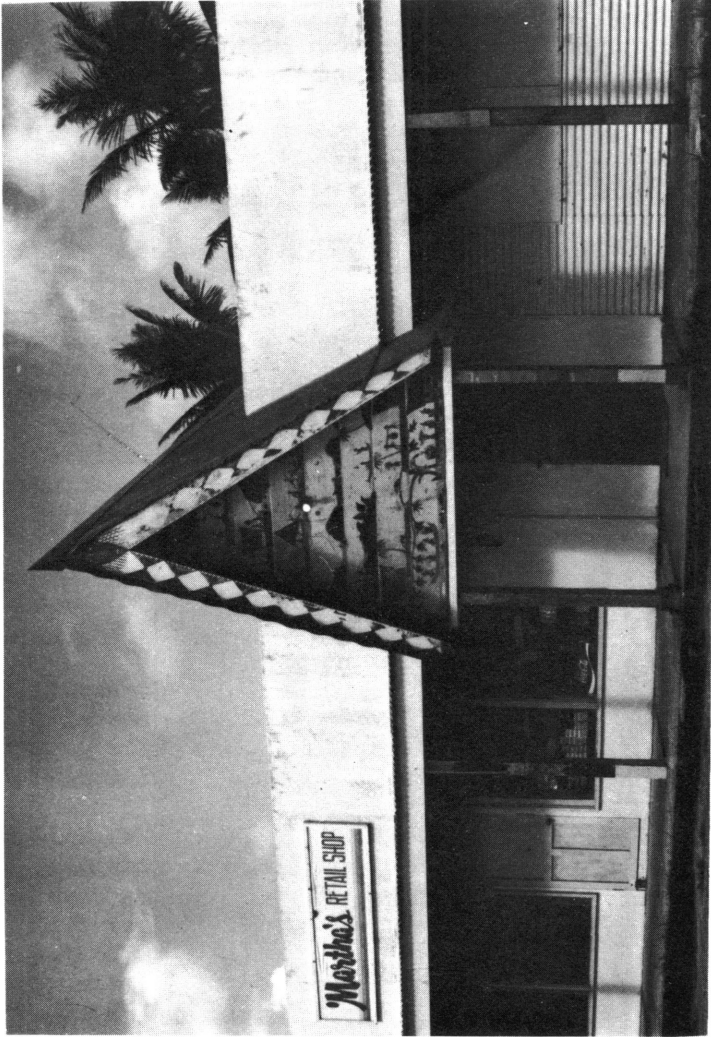
The Sale of Ethnicity

Full-scale commercialization of the local cultures and arts has only recently come to Micronesia, modeled quite consciously on the famous Polynesian Cultural Center in Hawaii. Such tourist-oriented centers are both efforts to cash in on "exotic" cultures, and to "preserve" living traditions (Stanton 1977). The Nett Cultural Center on Ponape was begun by a Ponapean entrepreneur on the P.C.C. model, although it is now run cooperatively by the village performers. In eight "local style" houses different traditional activities are "displayed" while the elders try to teach members of the younger generation to counteract the massive effects of acculturation. The aspects of life which are on view (at \$5 a head) include singing, dancing, craft production, food preparation, and a sakau ceremony--and, of course, many items are sold as souvenirs.

Paralleling this institutional sale of ethnicity is the commercialization of some of the traditional art forms. The most famous of these in Micronesia are the "storyboards" of Palau which are derived from the carved and painted stories on the beams of the old bai. This new form was first encouraged by a Japanese artist, Hijikata, prior to the Second World War, and has now developed into a major form of commercial art. The content is usually studiedly "traditional," whereas, as we have seen above, the traditional gables and painted beams used to include scenes absolutely current to the peoples' lives.



The Yap Museum, constructed in traditional style. Note the traditional Yapese "stone money" in front; the woman under the eaves is preparing pandanus leaves for weaving, an everyday activity not specifically related to the modern functions of the museum.



A Palauan-owned store on Saipan is decorated with a bai-motif gable, a sign of Palauan identity in the predominantly Carolinean and Chamorro community.

Another formal ethnic art that has grown out of the storyboard tradition is watercolor painting, best exemplified by the works of Charlie Gibbons. This resembles a kind of "art primitif" that uses Western technique to show historical scenes of "ethnic content."

Conclusions

In conclusion, we wish to discuss the cultural attitudes which lie behind the institutions and arts which we have described. It is obvious that attitudes of commercialization, museumification, and the self-conscious preservation and display of ethnicity--which originated in the West--now pervade much of Micronesia, and indeed Oceania as a whole (cf. MacCannell 1976).

The integral relationship of traditional arts with ritual and social institutions is still strong in some areas, even though these institutions are inevitably "flavored" or threatened by alien attitudes. One of the most striking cases recently witnessed by Graburn was the personal collection of Maori arts shown at Rawkawa marae by Maui Pomare, the leader of one of the Maori sub-tribes. This collection of sacred, ritual and heirloom objects has been in his family's possession for centuries. The collection includes carved figures, clubs, axes, ceremonial fishhooks, and feather cloaks; one of the pieces was brought to New Zealand in the original Maori immigration. Each object, though beautiful by any standards, has its own history and "genealogy" of owners: the collection formed a mnemonic history of the hapu (descent group), rank, marriages, and claims to rights of Manui's ancestors and sub-tribe. The display was given to a group of anthropologists and art historians visiting his marae for the weekend--at the end of which many of us were moved to wish that all such objects could be returned to the people and families whose lives they order and represent.

Similarly in Tonga, huge tapa sheets are still made for ceremonial exchange, marriage gifts, markers of rank, etc., alongside the more commercial tapa arts (Kooijman 1979). It is the traditional objects of similar significance which are still in use that the present Micronesians will not give up to museums.

The preservation and production of art objects for traditional purposes is now paralleled, if not overtaken, by their preservation and re-creation for contexts and purposes outside the original social setting, notably for museums. The relationship between the objects and the audience is thereby de-personalized even if the objects are better physically preserved. Hence the relationship between the maker and the appreciator/audience is also de-personalized, independent of on-going social ties. That an increasing number of the people of Micronesia are swayed to hold these attitudes tells us that their whole life is becoming more "Westernized" and their attachments to art objects more "single-stranded."

The new museums of Palau, Ponape, Tahiti, and elsewhere in the Pacific contain two kinds of objects:

(A) A few remaining "traditional" objects which are being saved from physical oblivion by being housed in alien institutions, such as the important chief's mat in the Ponape Museum. This artefact comes from the family of the curator, and might not otherwise be assigned to a museum.

(B) Re-creations and models of traditional items which, like some of the museums themselves, are specially constructed with traditional forms, such as the model chief's canoe in the Ponape Museum, or the huge Marquesan canoe now at the Tahiti Museum.

These objects, like the bai-like forms of the museums which house some of them, exemplify the modern attitude of reverence for the past as past (MacCannell 1976, Block 1977) and mark for their cultures the sense of historical change rather than being contemporary expressions in themselves.

The commercialism, exemplified by the P.C.C.-modeled institutions and the storyboards already discussed, has also permeated most of the contemporary production of tourist arts and crafts which are on sale almost everywhere. This trend allows for a greater degree of individual creativity which is valued by the Micronesian artists. The production of contemporary crafts for tourists contains both elements of livelihood and the self-consciousness of ethnicity in an increasingly mixed-up world. For example, women of Yap weave pandanus baby baskets for use locally and for sale in the handicraft cooperative. The production of handicrafts is sponsored by commercially-minded islanders who make them, as well as by entrepreneurs, local prisons (in Palau), cooperatives, and Community Action Agencies.

The integration of "ethnicity," commercialism, and the new cultural identity of modern Micronesia is taking a number of forms. For instance, a Palauan-owned store in Saipan is decorated with a bai-motif gable, sign of Palauan identity among the predominantly Carolinean and Chamorro community.

The arts and traditions of many Fourth World peoples are marked by the appearance of traditional forms in new contexts: certain forms, themes, color schemes, and stereotyped content are now selected and used as markers on all sorts of local institutions. The functions and the rest of the forms of these institutions are in no way traditional (Graburn 1976, 1979). Thus the Micronesians are struggling to develop a meaningful identity and set of cultural expressions while they are also trying to take their place as an independent people amongst the many other new nations of the modern world.

¹This paper is jointly written, but most data comes from Nero's field research in Micronesia, 1976, 1977, 1978 and 1979-80. The paper was originally delivered at the Kroeber Anthropological Association Berkeley Meetings, 6 May 1978.

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