

Kapetal Wa is the process of announcing arrival, providing symbolic gifts, and initiating community decision-making in the Outer Islands. Kapetal Wa is overseen by traditional leaders who facilitate distribution of gifts and the establishment of consensus within long standing and strictly defined expectations. Kapetal Wa is particularly important for foreign visitors, serving to help integrate outside aims with the community's own systems of understanding, support and participation.

Longstanding systems of tribute, exchange and redistribution underpin the traditional social political, and economic organization in the Western and Central Caroline Islands.¹ Also termed the “Outer Islands” or “Neighboring Islands,” this archipelago of scattered mostly lowing lying coral atolls is home to a distinctive cultural and linguistic grouping. The region extends across outlying portions of present-day Yap and Chuuk States.

The *Sawei* system, vibrant until the period of Japanese occupation, permitted free movement between islands and allowed for requests and expectation of assistance in the wake of natural disasters.² It covered an area stretching from Ulithi in the west to Namonuito in the east. For small populations on remote islands with limited resources it offered a structured exchange of surplus for scarcity.³ The basic tenants of the far-reaching *Sawei* system were mirrored in similar exchange, collaboration and distributive practices at lower regional, atoll, and even intra-island levels.⁴

Essential to these practices is the role of meetings and the development of consensus. There is a long precedent of general meetings, in which the entire adult population of an island gathers to discuss and consider issues facing the community. Resultant decisions or agreements tend to be unanimous.⁵ The role of chiefs in this context did not include the right to adjudicate and it was not within their domain to provide novel or unusual solutions. Instead, they were to respond to events and situations in “patterned ways” and “initiate and supervise at the proper time those responses which are well known among the inhabitants.”⁶ This included overseeing distribution or allocation of resources produced by the community itself as well as those provided to it.

¹ Alkire WH. *Lamotrek Atoll and Inter-Island Socioeconomic Ties*. Reissued with changes ed 1989. Prospect Heights Ill: Waveland Press; 1965, page 113; and Lessa William A. *Ulithi: A Micronesian Design for Living*. New York: Holt Rinehart and Winston; 1966, pages 35-39

² Alkire WH. *An Introduction to the Peoples and Cultures of Micronesia*. 2d ed. Menlo Park Calif: Cummings Pub; 1977; pages 50-51

³ Ibid Alkire, 1965, page 113

⁴ Lessa WA. *Ulithi: A Micronesian Design for Living*. New York: Holt Rinehart and Winston; 1966, pages 35-39, pages 23 and 38 and Alkire, William, “Systems of Measurement on Woleai Atoll, Caroline Islands,” *Anthropos*, 1970 I Bd. 65, H. 1./2. (1970), pages 1-73

⁵ Ibid Alkire, 1965 pages 36-38

⁶ Ibid Alkire, 1965, pages 68-71

Though the broader *Sawei* exchange atrophied under pressures of the Japanese occupation, the fundamentals of local leaders facilitating consensus and community investment through meetings persists at the atoll, island and village level today. Introduction of representative democracy and the market cash economy did not bring the “disorganization or reorganization” many predicted; rather the new conditions were “integrated” into the “framework of the old organization.”⁷

To this day, when a vessel arrives at, or returns to, an island, one of its occupants is tasked with proceeding directly to the Men’s House and providing an account of the craft, the occupants’ intentions, and any new or relevant news. The term *Kapetal Wa* translates as the “story of the canoe.”⁸ At this point the visitor, if arriving from off-island, traditionally shares with the men who are taking the *Kapetal Wa* small but symbolic gifts, such as betelnut or cigarettes. This reflects the core of the larger *Sawei* exchange model. Specifically, visitors offer those items or resources which are either absent, uncommon, highly sought or strongly needed on the receiving island. The items are presented to the whichever man at the canoe house ranks highest in the traditional lineage order. Even resident islanders who are returning from time away engage in *Kapetal Wa* upon the arrival on-island.

Contingent on the visitors’ news or intentions, their report may precipitate the calling of a village or community meeting. In this case, the basics of the initial report and tribute are repeated once participants arrive at the Mens’ House. Again, some sort of symbolic gift is extended to the chief, or his representative, who is facilitating the meeting, and these are distributed to participants. If the aim of the meeting is to establish consensus on a challenging topic, or solicit the community’s support and participation in a significant effort, this seriousness will be signaled by the relative importance or perceived value of items offered.

Spanish Jesuit missionaries were the first foreigners to grasp the importance of these interrelated symbolic gifts, community meetings and the establishment of consensus through chiefs’ facilitation. Arriving on Ulithi Atoll in May of 1731, the Fathers had learned of the Western Caroline Islands from the crew of an Outer Island canoe, which had set out from Woleai, but lost its way and drifted to the Philippines. Based on extensive interviews with these wayward Woleians, they headed south from Guam to

⁷ Ibid Alkire, 1965, pages 162-163

⁸ Mellen Neil J Hancock John A, Ulithian-English Dictionary: An Introductory Descriptive Dictionary for Ulithian Speaking School Children and Native English Speakers. Columbia S.C: Habel Outer Island Education Fund; 2010. See also Alkire, William, “Systems of Measurement on Woleai Atoll, Caroline Islands,” *Anthropos*, 1970 Bd. 65, H. 1./2. (1970), pages 1-73; see footnote 3, page 5

Ulithi, already understanding they must provide “some small gifts” in order that chiefs and their people “will receive them with kindness.”⁹ Upon arrival, Victor Walter, S.J. wrote the first recorded account detailing the larger context of *Sawei* practices and noted in the future iron would be, for missionaries, the most appropriate and effective gift.¹⁰

By the early 1900s German authorities had developed a more nuanced account of these processes. The published findings of the Hamburg South Seas Expedition indicated that *Sawei*, and the system's channeling of gifts toward Yap Proper, were “not a question of pure tribute but rather of an exchange, the initiative coming from the [Outer] islands.”¹¹

Throughout the Japanese era (1914-45), civil authorities utilized traditional leaders, and their own understanding of local political organization, to implement or support Japanese aims in developing and governing the islands.¹² This was common in outlying areas, where officials lacked a permanent presence. Over decades, this may have impacted the communities’ -and the chiefs own- perceptions of the exercise of lineage-based authority. Such a shift is hinted in evolving descriptions of outer island culture in post-war ethnographic accounts. These often portrayed a more direct and unilateral role for chiefly decision-making.¹³ Though more in-depth, such accounts were also crafted at a time when US authorities themselves made use of traditional leaders to communicate and engage with the community.

There is room for debate about the relative accuracy of early and later accounts of chiefly decision-making, and the impact of intervening and contemporaneous events on both accounts and the institutions themselves.¹⁴ What is clear and consistent is the persistent importance of community meetings as a forum for decision making and the establishment of consensus in the Outer Islands.

⁹ “Preparations for Fr. Cantova's expedition to the Carolines, 1728 and 1730,” Document 1730 A3, “Opinion of Fr. Juan Antonio de Cantova,” dated December 2, 1728, English translation in Lévesque Rodrigue. *History of Micronesia: A Source of Documents*, Vol. 13: Failure at Ulithi Atoll, 1727-1746, Gatineau: Lévesque Publications; 1999.

¹⁰ “Letter from Rev. Fr. Victor Walter of the Society of Jesus, from the Upper German Province, missionary in the Caroline Islands, to Rev. Fr. Bernard Schmiz, missionary from the lower Rhine Province, of the same Society, written in Falalep [sic], a Caroline Island,” Document 1731 A1, “Father Cantova's expedition to the Carolines (continued),” dated May 10, 1731, English translation, Ibid Lévesque, 1999

¹¹ Lévesque Rodrigue. *History of Micronesia: A Source of Documents*, Vol. 40 The Hamburg South Seas Expedition, Part II, Gatineau: Lévesque Publications; 1999. Page 385

¹² Peattie MR. *Nanyo: The Rise and Fall of Japanese in Micronesia 1885-1945*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press; 1992, pages 62-79; see also more limited use of chiefs in the Western Caroline to distribute supplies in the German era in “Report of Dr. Born in Yap,” 1907, Document, 1907B, Volume 40, Levesque, 1999

¹³ Note discussion of Cantova letter in Lessa, 1966 p 33

¹⁴ Establishment of the State of Yap integrated a “fourth branch” of governance, formally placing public sector funded councils of chiefs on par with the executive, legislative and judiciary branches; see Bird D. Yap Regains Its Sovereignty: The Story of the First Yap State Constitutional Convention. Colonia Yap FM: Betelnut Press; 1994.

More than two hundred years after the arrival of the Jesuits, a US Naval officer stumbled onto the practices and expectations when he first met with a chief and his counselors in a Men's House during the War. He quickly attempted to improvise. "I had come empty handed. Well not quite. I produced a pack of American cigarettes and presented them... he took one for himself and passed the remainder... whatever tension there may have been floated away with the first cloud of smoke. We were all at ease."¹⁵

For centuries, and particularly in the period following the War in the Pacific, it has been recognized that *Kapetal Wa* practices are an important and effective component in advancing social political, and economic projects which originate off-island. *Kapetal Wa* does not merely bridge the gap between an island's community members and those who seek to engage with them; rather these practices are the visible portions of the integration of outside aims with the community's own systems of understanding, supporting and pursuit of shared goals.

Resultantly, *Kapetal Wa* remains a necessary and impactful means of initiating community engagement. The practice is regularly observed by the small number of development organizations and visitors in Western and Central Caroline Islands.¹⁶

The present practice can take the form of items that can be equitably distributed in "shares" among extended family units or individual islanders.¹⁷ Specific examples include bettlenut, cigarettes, alcohol, gum and candies for children, ramen, bags of rice, thread for weaving, cloth for thus and children's skirts, fishhooks, and small knives.¹⁸ Another variation has been the provision of a smaller number of more costly items, such as adze blades, fishing spears or waterproof flashlights, in which case the shares are allocated to mens' houses or villages, rather than family units or individuals. Even more expensive and complicated items, such as emergency responders and locators for use in small boats, have been provided as *Kapetal Wa* by the US Coastguard and Navy.¹⁹

¹⁵ Wees MP and Thornton FB. King-Doctor of Ulithi; the True Story of the Wartime Experiences of Marshall Paul Wees. New York: Macmillan; 1950, pages 19-20

¹⁶ See for example: Annual Report," Habel Outer Island Education Fund, Habel, Columbia, South Carolina 2017, page 7; also "Ulithi Atoll, Federated States of Micronesia (FSM)," Field Trip: Our Family's Journey of Learning and Wonder, <http://svfieldtrip.blogspot.com/2020/01/ulithi-atoll-federated-states-of.html>, January 24, 2020; and Kū Holo Mau: 2007 Voyage for Mau" Hawaiian Voyaging Traditions, https://archive.hokulea.com/holokai/2007/mau_5_satawal.html, April 12, 2007; and "Traditions Holding Tue, Lamotrek Atoll," Suka's Cruising Log, <https://sukascruisinglog.wordpress.com/yap-traditions-holding-true-lamotrek-atoll/>, March, 2010

¹⁷ IBID Alkire 1970, who notes "...in any case these shares are always offered and are a tangible expression of the supra-island ties which link all the outer islands of Yap District." Page 13

¹⁸ Stanley Retogral, interview by author, November 28 and 29, 2022; also Paul Marlul of Ulithi (interviewed November 26) and Santiago Palemai of Faraulep (interviewed November 28)

¹⁹ Ibid Retogral

The value or size of the items provided are not correlated with the scope or impact of the news or request the visitor comes to relay. Rather, there is a connection between the number of visitors arriving on the island and the scale of the *Kapetal Wa* they offer. "Any vessel or canoe... when the ship comes the party that lands will -or *must*- bring something, and they will present themselves and explain the purpose of the visit."²⁰

²⁰ Ibid Retogral