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Yap, the Pacific island Japan has almost forgotten

Former Japanese colony celebrates its history and culture on Yap Day

An atmosphere of excitement and nervousness rose with the early morning sun on the Micronesian island of Yap.

It is March 1 and the smell of hibiscus drifts through the *tibnaw* huts. Entire families sit on dried palm fronds, as all ages prepare to perform on behalf of their village in front of the still-powerful tribal chiefs.

Among the dense junglescape, colorful skirts are being woven out of pandanus leaves, while turmeric and coconut oils are applied to the uncovered skin of the young and the old, creating a sheen that turns almost golden under the bright sunlight.

Yap Day is the day when Yapese tell their tales of centuries past through dance and chant-like song, a tradition called *churu* that has been passed down over generations and, more than on any other island in the Pacific, preserved authentically to this day.

The mantra that accompanies this strain of Yapese philosophy is “wisdom in a basket,” a reference to the woven baskets that both men and women carry. The baskets are not only for their belongings, but are a reminder that their culture is built on the flora, fauna and water that surrounds them and that their own strength as a nation is defined by the maintenance of that culture.

Crucially, the people of Yap aren’t performing for tourists; the government here recorded just 4,000 annual visitors between 2010 and 2017. Rather, Yapese people continue their traditions to venerate their roots and their natural surroundings.

A century ago, Yap was on a different path. Germany had bought Spanish Micronesia — and by extension, Yap — in 1899 from Spain for a value of \$4.5 million, adding the islands to its protectorate of German New Guinea. By World War I, Germany also had control of the modern-day Marshall Islands, Palau, Nauru, the Northern Mariana Islands and part of Papua New Guinea.



(<https://www.japantimes.co.jp/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/p12-poole-yap-b-20180526.jpg>)

In 1902, the Empire of Japan and the British Empire signed the Anglo-Japanese Alliance to resist Russian expansion. In doing so, the two countries agreed to support the other in the event of a war involving multiple powers.

So, in 1914, Japan responded to Britain's declaration of war on Germany and its allies by offering its help in return for Germany's Pacific possessions. Within months of Japan declaring war on Germany, it seized almost all of its Pacific islands.

With the war concluded, the establishment of the Treaty of Versailles by the League of Nations — the world's first intergovernmental organization created to pursue world peace — saw Germany stripped of much of its land, including that of its protectorates and colonies.

Faced with a choice about the status of Germany's Pacific protectorates, the League of Nations decided to give all Pacific islands north of the equator (except Hawaii) to the Empire of Japan, a decision based on Britain's promise to Japan and signed into law under the League of Nation's South Pacific Mandate of 1919.

The population of Japanese in Micronesia exploded. The number living on Yap jumped from 97 to nearly 2,000 within a few years, on an island of only 7,000. The four future states of the Federated States of Micronesia (including Chuuk, Pohnpei and Kosrae) were home to around 100,000 Japanese by 1945.

Today, Yap is home to just two, the result of mass repatriation after World War II. And, while Japanese were still common visitors in the 1980s and 90s, fewer than 300 a year make it out here now, according to Su Mitsue Yasui, the Japanese owner of Nature's Way Dive Shop in Yap's capital, Colonia.

"Until July 1997, we had three flights coming from Guam and Palau," she says. "That was the time we had good access from Japan. But then some smart ones decided 'money money money,'" she laments in reference to the Asian Financial Crisis of that year. Gordon Bethune, CEO of Continental Airlines cut all routes that were not making a profit, and Yap, situated halfway between the nation of Palau and U.S. territory of Guam, lost its connection to Japan. Though flights between Guam and Yap have since been reinstated, Yap's tourist numbers remain staggeringly low.

Yasui moved to Yap in 1990 from Hiroshima. "That's why I'm a little strange," she says. "I'm not like other Japanese, because I'm a *hibakusha* (survivor of the 1945 atomic bombing). My father was in the city right after the bomb, he had a right to get support from the government, but he refused."



(<https://www.japantimes.co.jp/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/p12-poole-yap-e-20180526.jpg>)

Yasui has built a career as a diving instructor. “In winter there were not many jobs, so I usually took long vacations outside of Japan. I was studying in Palau and found one book written by Seiko Ouchi about an old man who built a canoe to take six crew from Yap to the Bonin Islands (Ogasawara Islands).”

Ouchi was one of the few Japanese to spend time in Yap after World War II. Japanese relations with the locals had been fraught during the Japanese administration, as Yapese felt their rulers were frequently culturally insensitive to their traditions. Following World War II, diplomatic ties between Japan and Yap didn’t resume until 1988.

Ouchi wrote two books about the island, “The Story of Yap” (1985) and “The Old Man’s First Voyage” (1989), the latter documenting the epic Yap to Ogasawara canoe voyage in 1986 that inspired Yasui to first visit the island.

“There is only one other old Japanese (permanently) here.” says Yasui. “His name is

Watanabe and he came here in 1978. He’s been here 40 years and is married. He raised six boys, all grown up, and is now retired at 75 years old. The rest are three Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers, and one who has personally extended for half a year to work in the hospital as a computer specialist.”

Small numbers then, but at Yap Day, the year’s biggest festival, Japan is well represented. One of the guests of honor is Ryoichi Horie, Japan’s ambassador to the Federated States of Micronesia. At Yap Memorial Hospital, Horie hosted a ceremony with Gov. Tony Ganngiyan to give three grassroots grants totaling \$255,802 to the Department of Education, the Department of Health Services and the Environmental Protection Agency.

This year, Yap Day marked its 50th anniversary and took place over three days. The event was created by tribal chiefs to protect and pass down the traditions of Yap, from its world-famous Rai stone money to its songs, dances, canoe building skills and sports.

Japanese influence, then, is not readily apparent, but neither is it insignificant. The Japanese banned tattoos, so abundant in other Pacific cultures, in the 1920s, and they are noticeably absent from the topless men and women in Yap.

Japan also promoted intermarriage. Ben Tomihara, the son of a Japanese mother and Yapese father recalled growing up as an outsider in Yap in the 1950s.

“When I was at school they would make fun of me,” he says when I meet him at his house in Colonia. “At that time there were not many mixed people, only my family and the Alexander family who were Russian and Yapese. Only two.”

Tomihara’s siblings went to school in Japan and eventually connected with their relatives in Okinawa, where his mother, Yoshiko Tomihara was born. Yoshiko, however was well-established on Yap, having opened the island’s first tempura restaurant after the war.

“(The Japanese) brought vegetables like *kankon* (water spinach), because we didn’t have vegetables,” Tomihara says. “They also brought *sakura* (cherry) trees here for medicine,” adds his daughter Emiko. “The leaves help if you cut yourself. The next day it will heal.”

Yasui too has spotted a few local traits still lingering from Japan’s rule of the island. “Yapese people are respectful, polite people. Very polite, they never litter, they respect the owners of the house. It’s fundamental to their culture,” she says.

And it’s their ancient culture, exemplified by all that Yap Day portrays, that convinces her to remain, the last Japanese woman on Yap. “The Yapese spirit made me stay,” she says. “The guardian spirits of Yap and the guardian spirits of Japan, all of them are crying about how this world has changed. But here in Yap they might say, OK, you delayed it!”



(<https://www.japantimes.co.jp/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/p12-poole-yap-a-20180526.jpg>)

From Japan, Yap can be accessed via Guam. United Airlines currently flies once a week between Guam and Yap.



Lunch and dinner menus offer flavors of Oita

(<https://www.japantimes.co.jp/life/2018/05/24/travel/lunch-dinner-menus-offer-flavors-oita/>)

Through June 30, Yokohama Bay Sheraton Hotel and Towers is presenting a variety of unique dishes made with ingredients sourced from the Kyushu region, particularly Oita Prefecture, at three of i...



Scuba diving in Japan: Beneath the sea, a paradise of color and life

(<https://www.japantimes.co.jp/life/2018/05/18/travel/scuba-diving-japan-beneath-sea-paradise-color-life/>)

A carpet of sand stretches into the distance below me. As clear and still as the water, the light seems muted, creating a peaceful, subdued scene. Surrounding each rocky feature are small oases ...



Survive summer heat with cold noodle dishes

(<https://www.japantimes.co.jp/life/2018/05/17/travel/survive-summer-heat-cold-noodle-dishes/>)

The Chinese restaurant Kei-Ka-En at the Royal Park Hotel in Nihonbashi is offering two kinds of delectable cold noodles just right for summer — gomoku (five items) cold noodles an...