CCG Podcast #2: Warp and Weft: Backstrap Weaving in Micronesia

[Intro: Instrumental Medley performed by Avizo**]**

Meg: Welcome to Folklife Today. I'm Meg Nicholas, a Folklife Specialist at the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress. And I'm here today with my colleague from the American Folklife Center, Folklife Specialist Nancy Groce.

Nancy: Hi.

Meg: This is a special episode of our Folklife Today podcast series focusing on the Center's Community Collections Grantees.

Nancy: The community collection grants from the American Folklife Center support contemporary cultural field research within in diverse communities. Through the grant program, the Center offered fellowships to individuals and organizations to work within their communities to produce ethnographic cultural documentation, such as oral history interviews and audio visual recordings of cultural activities from the community perspective.

Meg: Since 2022, the Center has awarded 29 of these grants. As we move into 2025, many of these grantees are working with AFC staff liaisons and archivists to prepare these collections for going public as digital collections available on the library's website. This year, we'll also see a number of public programs showcasing these grantees, their communities, and their finished collections for a celebration we are calling the CCG Year of Engagement.

Nancy: For this first episode, we're joined by Neil Mellen, the director of Habele and Modesta Yangmong, the head researcher Habele's CCG project, *Warp and Weft of Yap's Outer Islands: Backstrap Weaving in Micronesia*. I was excited to serve as a staff liaison for Neil and Modesta. This is entailed finding out more about their project and what they hope to achieve, explaining library paperwork and forms, and also sharing advice about organizing and submitting their fieldwork, which is all done digitally. So let's start at the beginning. First, can you explain to our listeners what a Habele Outer Island Education Fund is and how it came about?

Neil: Thanks, Nancy. Habele is a US-based nonprofit that was established by myself and other former Peace Corps volunteers who lived and worked in Micronesia and who wanted to remain engaged with the communities that they served in after their Peace Corps service.

The word *habele* is a Ulithian word. Ulithian is one of many languages used in Micronesia, and *habele* means "to be," but it also has a symbolic meaning. In that way, it means "to

make it be" or to accomplish a vision or a dream. And Habale was established in 2006. And to this day, nearly all of those who donate, volunteer, or support us outside of Micronesia are either former US Peace Corps volunteers or other Americans who have spent time and worked in Micronesia.

Meg: So how did you come to learn about the Community Collections Grant Program? Did you follow AFC at the time, see it advertised on the website, or did you come across it somewhere else?

Neil Mellen: Well, thanks, Meg. We actually came across it through Grants.gov, which is a federal website that lists grant offerings, but certainly it was a very unique opportunity. As context, nearly all of the money for Habele's work comes from individual donors. And over the years, there've been precious few grants, grant offerings that really matched the unique way that Habele works with our focus on sort of community-stated needs. So, to put it another way, there's often a big gap between what a grant program is intended to do and what a community and the beneficiaries are specifically needing or seeking. But with this program, what the program aimed to do, what the people on the ground in the villages and the islands wanted to do, this was this was a great thing because it was an incredible match. It was a confluence, really, opportunity and it worked really well for us and that was wonderful to see such a great alignment of what we wanted to do and frankly how we wanted to do it and then to get not only support, but also so much expertise as we pursued it.

Nancy: So what was this some of your challenges in organizing and in conducting the research for this project?

Neil Mellen: Well, any project in Micronesia or any of the freely associated states, distance is always a huge challenge, both distance from the mainland, but also the incredible distances within Micronesia, between islands, between states, between communities. Because if you think about the size of Micronesia, it's essentially the same distance as from California to Maine. Just lots of little dots spread out in between. Hundreds of islands and atolls over more than a thousand miles. Each one of these islands has a really unique language, culture, and history. And even today, these people see themselves more in terms of that island or that island grouping affiliation, rather than sort of being a Micronesian. I guess you could say it's like if you met someone from Italy, they wouldn't introduce themselves as an EU citizen. They would introduce themselves as Italian. When it comes to those islands between Yap and Chuuk, the so-called outer islands of Yap or the Remathau, which means "the people of the sea," even that grouping spans over 500 miles and has three distinct languages because each island is so little and so isolated.

So of course that makes logistics transportation a huge challenge, especially if you want to get a sense of how it's done in different places so you can identify these important nuances and just differences. There were also obviously, you know, challenges with technology, but what we found is the folks at AFC were just incredible. And I think all, we learned so much, and that was really great. um And then you know there are some nuances or aspects of weaving that maybe in traditional culture might not be something you talk about a mixed company or around certain people. And so, you know, trying to balance a desire to tell the story with - with what's prudent and appropriate and respectful. But certainly, you know, we got a lot of support in terms of how to approach that understanding again from AFC staff.

Meg: That sounds like a really difficult mix of, sort of, interpersonal and logistical and cultural difficulties that sort of all come together to make the perfect difficult project, but ultimately something that's um going to be very meaningful and important to get across.

Neil Mellen: Yeah.

Meg: And it sounds like, you know, that community buy-in was really a necessary part of – we know it's a necessary part of *all* of the CCG projects, and especially for this one when you're when you're talking about moving amongst islanded communities. So what was that community response like for this project?

Neil Mellen: Modesta, I think you're the best person to articulate that.

Nancy: How did you decide who to interview, Modesta?

Modesta: The response was excitement, their excitement and pride. I think a lot of women, especially the older women, may have been startled that there was an interest from outside our island in what they did and what they valued. It means a lot when others see and recognize and feel the things that you know yourself are really important.

Meg: Did you run up against anybody when you were sort of explaining this project that they were, um you mentioned that they were sort of startled. Were they a little hesitant at first to talk to you?

Modesta: Yes, kind of. They're, um – because they don't understand. I have to sit down with them and explain everything that will be beneficial for us if we do this project. So when they understand they're really into it, they really are happy to, to do the answers.

Nancy: You did the interviews mostly in Ulithian, but I know some of them were also in Woleaian and in Satawalese, and you provided translations, which is great. But did you know at the time that the library had so little holdings that we were just delighted to get interviews in languages that we don't have very much materials on here at the Library of Congress?

Modesta: No, this is like, ah – I was startled also, like, wow! How much the library were really like looking at our project, how you guys are doing now. I was like, “oh wow, it's something good that we did” and, and yeah. I was not really expecting that you guys will be interviewing us, would like to interview us and all the stuff.

Neil: Yeah, if I could just add, so there's about 500 miles from Ulithi Atoll all the way to Satawal in the east. And in each little island or atoll, the language spoken is slightly changed one to the next. So it's, so it's a linguistic continuum, I guess. But the differences are big enough that it is categorized, they are categorized into three distinct languages. And those islands that are the biggest in each of the three groups, it's – give the *name* to Ulithian, Woleaian, and Satawalese. And they are not well-documented languages. In fact, Habale was the first one to even produce a dictionary in Ulithian. And there are, there were some academic dictionaries, or one for Woleaian. And in our lifetime, someone finally wrote a Satawalese one. But one of the things that is maybe extra special, besides the fact that they're significantly under-documented languages, is that with migration into Yap and then Guam and off to the mainland of the United States, what's happening is these three languages are essentially collapsing into one. And you hear it when you are on Yap or if you go to Guam or Hawaii and you, maybe a Satawalese will marry someone from Fais or someone from Lamotrek will marry someone from Eauripik.

And you hear the little kids are starting to put them together. And they're -- so addressing the fact that they're so deeply under documented now, this was incredibly important and exciting so that - And I think to some degree, that the women, especially the older ones in these interviews were aware of that that's going on. Because you'll hear it's the older folks who will, ah, you know, and scold the little kid. “You're pronouncing that wrong.” you know “We're not from over there. We're from over here.” you know why “Why would you say it like that?”

So I think that getting those high quality recordings and the meticulous translation that Regina helped as well, that Modesta led, was really, really important. And it's a real snapshot of a moment in time that's going to be, you know, only so long before those languages at best are just one, and at worst are not spoken.

Meg: So it sounds like the project was really kind of, in addition to documenting this tradition of this weaving, also documenting sort of that moment in time, that linguistic combination of these languages. And you mentioned that there they're very similar. You know, my tribe also has a language that our dialect is very similar to another tribe that has, you know, it’s the same language family. A lot of the words are very similar. And you can see the connection between the words, but the words themselves are slightly different. It can be a challenge sometimes to hop from one dialect to the other. Did you experience that?

Modesta: Yes.

Meg: I mean, ah you know, Modesta, as you were doing this work, were you able to communicate or did you have to bring in somebody who spoke each of these different dialects?

Modesta: No, we were able to communicate, but the difference is a big difference. We have to really think in what they were saying, the word they were saying, to really come up with a real meaning of the word. Because further out from Ulithi, up to, um, the islands going up? Farther out is more kind of difficult for us to understand, especially Satawalese, because they're more like in the [Japanese?] language. We understand, but there's a little, or more difficult to understand compared to Fais, Woleaian, and all those islands closer to us. Satawal is farther out from...

Nancy: And you're talking about very traditional lavalava weaving, too, so there must be some older words and terms that are not in everyday speech.

Modesta: Yes, yes.

Neil Mellen: Yeah, we actually had to, we found old British documents about weaving in order to identify what some of the words would even be, because the West, and Nancy you had helped with this, in the West, some of these tools for weaving -- It's so mechanized that no one would know or remember or necessarily think of the term, but there is an English term for various parts and aspects of the process um to the extent that there are some foundational similarities to all sorts of weaving. So that was an extra English challenge that we didn't anticipate.

Meg: Is that – I wonder if there's a connection between that work that you had to do and when you said that Habele was the first one to even create a dictionary in these languages anyway – was that similar to how you went about creating that dictionary?

Neil: Well, we were the first ones to publish a dictionary in Ulithian. There was a dictionary in Woleaian, and eventually we found there was a short dictionary in Satawalese. But that particular Ulithian dictionary was an outgrowth of when I was a volunteer, and I just wrote down every word I could hear, and learn it, but then I worked with other volunteers as well as Ulithians to expand and improve it. um But certainly there are interesting cases of words that maybe once were commonplace English words but are not, and certainly in terms of the material culture, ah things like weaving and carving and building. In which there, there are terms, but perhaps only anthropologists would use them today.

Meg: Well, the Warp and Weft CCG project has the distinction of being the very first of the Community Collections Grants to have your work go online. I understand that there was a

lot of publicity there in Micronesia when that happened. So could you talk a little bit about the press coverage that came around when that went public?

Neil Mellen: Well, I think if I can parallel what Modesta was saying earlier, I think it was a lot like what happened at the village level. There was a lot of surprise and excitement and then pride, the idea that, you know, not only is there interest from the outside, but from such an esteemed, reputable entity - the Library of Congress and its American Folklife Center. I think there's something really validating when you have a passion or something that is definingly important to you that other folks from afar recognize and value that. And I think there was also just a sense that, wow, the Library of Congress in the United States, you know, that they're these people in D.C., they're even aware of all these tiny little, little islands out in the middle of the Pacific. So I think, you know, um the idea that attention and interest was being brought to the islands, and not just to the islands, but to something that is such a point of pride and defining part of the culture. I think there was a lot of excitement. So we were able to, there is one newspaper in Micronesia, there are a number of kind of podcasts or state newsletters or other things like that. And certainly there's what we call the coconut wireless word of mouth as that came out. So that was, we got a lot of interest in that, which is really exciting. As well as among the migrant community in the US, some of whom were participants but many others further afield, seeing that something that they took a lot of pride in and that they identified so deeply with back home was getting attention and notoriety.

Nancy: So the project funding has ended, the grant has ended, but I'm curious whether the work that you started will be continued or you're going to do more interviews about lavalava weaving or other aspects of traditional culture.

Neil: Well, certainly every single woman in the outer island is a weaver. Because it is the defining garment of those islands. It is a part of growing up, learning how to weave and to make the garment and all the cultural context associated with it. One of the things that we have – and this ties back to the online efforts to bring awareness to this, which you all did so much work on and that we complemented with some of our own work – involved a lot of interest and increased awareness on the part of the migrants. And when you have a cultural practice that's so defining, but that at any given time, if that link between a mother or aunts and the daughter or niece is broken, then the practice is, you know, one generation away from being gone. Though certainly there is ongoing work to use this and perhaps new more additional content to help sustain the interest and enthusiasm among the migrant population, because there's about half of all citizens of the Federated States of Micronesia owing to the Compact of Free Association are in the US for work or education or, you know, family and health care and things like that.

And so this is a great way to reach out to that audience and and help them because they can't walk across the village to another older woman and ask her a question, but they they have all these resources now where they can they can learn more. And I think that that's going to be particularly significant with the second and third generation of women who are in the US in terms of their interest and in in learning, sustaining, and identifying with that those cultural practices.

Nancy: And Modesta, what do you think about this?

Modesta: Good, something good, something that our teenagers and our young ones will be able to have something, that they'll look for it, when they can find it and they can maybe somewhat oh be able to learn because there are a lot, a lot of us are outside or outside now. And now it's in the library where they might find it to - to learn about their culture that they've been away from. I'm sure people born in the US, it will be something that they'll read about, learn about their culture back home.

Meg: Did you notice any large differences in patterns that were being done, you know, maybe materials or styles that were being utilized, from island to island?

Modesta: We've been using the same patterns because we're all together. And though different islands, but we're closer. We travel from island to island where we share the knowledge that we have because we come up with a design. You tend to hold it for yourself, like, know for your family only. But, you know, we are all related in the Ulithi atoll. So they they share with their relatives the knowledge or whatever design they come up with.

Meg: So it wasn't specific to, to you know, like you'll only see this on this one island.

Modesta: It's the same pattern, everybody knows they do something.

Neil Mellen: Well, Modesta, can you maybe mention like the machi or the ta'ab on different, you know, maybe like the ta'ab from Woleai is going to be different than the ta'ab on Lamotrek. I mean, there – there – maybe there are some sub subtle differences or nuances.

Modesta: Yeah, different – of the ta'ab? At the ends? Each island has their own ta'ab. That's what we call the designs at the end. That's what you're talking about, Neil? Is that what you're referring to, the ta'ab?

Neil Mellen: Yes.

Modesta: Yes, each family, I think, have their own designs. And they share with their daughters and within the family. But as, I think, you know, when people get married to

different families, they tend to share what they know from their, from their own families. So that's how... We have different designs of Ta'ab, from Satawalese all the way down to Ulithi.

Meg: So what is, um for somebody who's not as familiar with this style of weaving who might be listening, what is, can you explain what Taub is?

Modesta: That was some designs that they, yeah how do you say, Neil?

Neil Mellen: You might say it's like the bookends, if you will. It's towards the end of the garment, there's an area that could be very practical in how it just ends. The women have made it a place where you can really indulge in a little bit, little bit more unique expression and design. And so being a primarily matrilineal culture, it invites the fact that the extended family could, could use this as a place to do the sort of flourishes and, and unique practices. I mean, I guess you could think of it as like in a very old text when the monk who was writing the copy and he was doing all these little pictures in the sides or things like that. He could insert himself in it in a way that was unique and interesting.

Nancy: Modesta, can you talk a little bit about why lava lava cloth is important? It's more than just wearing it, isn't it? It's used for gifts and for formal...

Modesta: Yeah. Our money. It's, um, it's something that you, besides wearing, you use for peacemaking. You use for buying lamps. You use for funerals. You use for, um, you know when you, when your son likes to marry somebody else, you use that to go and give to the family so you can get the daughter for your son's wife.

Nancy: So for ceremonies, to mark formal occasions, you would exchange lava lava.

Modesta: Yeah. Yes. It's very important in our ah culture. Lavalava is something that's very important in our culture. We have to have lavalava. Lavalava. You have to, it's something you have to teach your daughters. They must know. It's something that you must know how to make it. It's very important in our culture. It's like when you don't have lavalava, you have no money, when you have no money, you can't buy stuff like that.

Meg: It's central to everything then.

Modesta: But this money, now that we're having money, so it's a little kind of changed. Changed. It's changed because of money. Money, the money – I think they'll grab the money rather than lavalava.

Nancy: But traditionally lavalava would be what you'd need to to to ah cement relationships and make arrangements and deals and ceremonies.

Modesta: Yes.

Meg: Is there generally a certain amount that you would need to make sure that you had? I saw the pictures in the collection, so I know the rough ah dimensions width-wise, but I imagine you're wanting enough material to be able to utilize for whatever you need it for.

Modesta: Yes, we need to maybe at least have 10 to 20 lavalavas you know in order for you to go and, yes, buy land, give this family to give you land, or give this family to give you the daughter for your sons, or for a funeral. Usually we, we donate, each member of our families, they will donate the lavalava until we have that certain amount.

Nancy: And a lot of this is discussed in the interviews that are now at the Library of Congress.

Modesta: Yes.

Meg: So, Modesta, one of the things I think that was very useful, particularly for the second and third cohorts of the Community Collections Grants, was to learn from that first cohort about, you know, the lessons learned from doing this kind of work. What recommendations do you have for other folks who might want to conduct similar documentation projects within their own communities? Anything that you learned doing this work that you would like to share?

Modesta: Yeah, in our islands, we don't just go out and do things. We talk, we meet and listen. So everyone in the islands or the village understands what may be happening and what it may be – why it may be happening and how it could happen. And that really helped when I finally sat down with the women, they yeah really understand what, the what, and the how, and the why. And they really felt part of what I was asking them, what we were doing, something important, great and important.

Meg: I mean, I think that that's a lesson that everybody seems to have learned is to make sure that you have that connection to the community. Because if you don't... I mean, that's the whole reason for this project, isn't it? You're you're having the community decide what is important.

Modesta: Yes. They need to understand and know what's going on.

Nancy: And we're delighted and honored that your interviews are here at the Library of Congress and that you've decided and allowed us into your communities and to share your stories. So thank you so much for doing such a terrific job with this project.

Modesta: Thank you.

Neil Mellen: Well, I think we're just really grateful. I think the match between what the community wanted to do and valued and the grant itself was exceptional. And I think that

it's also worth noting that Micronesia, Palau and the Marshalls, as Freely Associated States - on paper, they should have eligibility for virtually every domestic federal grant. But the reality is, is a lot of federal agencies don't realize that. And when we reached out to Library of Congress, we got a “Oh, we can do this” response. And when we've reached out to other federal agencies, sometimes in the past, there has been some confusion about what the Freely Associated States are or some unwillingness or more of an attitude of “you prove to us that this place is eligible for grants” instead of a “let's make it work” attitude of the sort that we got from the Folklife Center. And that was that was thrilling.

Meg: I think that everybody at the Library was excited about having the opportunity to be involved in something like this.

Well, once again, I want to thank both of you, Neil and Modesta, for joining us. Thank you also to my colleague Nancy Groce for joining as the co-host for this episode. I also want to make sure that I do a special shout out to our sound engineers, John Fenn and Jon Gold and all of the colleagues here at the Library of Congress who are involved in the making and producing of these podcasts.

[**Outro music:** Instrumental medley, performed by Avizo]

Meg: The music you heard on the intro and outro of this episode is an instrumental medley performed by the Houston-based band Avizo, recorded as part of the documentation for the CCG project Sonidos de Houston: Documenting the City’s Chicano Music Scene