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Author(s): William A. Lessa
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WILLIAM A. LESSA

THE DECREASING POWER OF MYTH ON ULITHI

ON ULITHI, a Micronesian atoll in the Carolinian archipelago, mythology has always exercised an obvious part in maintaining rituals and supporting traditional values.[1] It has "explained" the locus of supernatural power and provided a basis for tapping such power. Moreover, it has justified the political order by giving it a sacred rationale expressed in dramatic actions associated with gods, tricksters, and ancestral ghosts. In the economic and technological spheres it has explained the origin of various taboos.

In recent years, through contact with the outside world, the efficacy of Ulithian mythology has become rapidly diminished and altered to the extent that many rituals are no longer performed at all, while others are carried on perfunctorily or secularly. Thus, an elaborate kind of fish-making magic, formerly performed annually at the demand of the king,[2] has been completely abandoned, due in part to the fact that the sacred narrative that lent it the support of the past has become a tale known only to a few old people. Already having had the seeds of religious disbelief implanted in them during the German and Japanese administrations of the present century, the natives found it difficult to maintain traditional fish-magic practices that depended on a belief in a sea spirit who rewarded a woman for having pleased him by giving him her skirt. The myth authenticated the ritual and provided its course of action, but when the myth lost acceptance it seemed useless to carry on its lengthy and risky ceremonial reenactment to ensure abundant fish for the atoll. Another myth once gave support to an important kind of palm leaf divination, asserting that the art had been taught to mortals by a group of spirits arriving in a large canoe. These spirits, together with the god of oracles, are no longer given credence and their names are almost forgotten, with the result that, despite the central place it used to hold until recently in the lives of the natives, the magical ritual has disappeared. Limiting ourselves, as we have done, to myths that support rituals, it is possible to cite another instance, this time involving the ritualistic use of sting-ray figurines of the patron god of navigators. These images used to be regarded with considerable awe by men at sea, who felt that they protected them from storms and misdirection. Knowledge of the great myth depicting the birth and power of the god is now held by few people, and even they feel no urge to implement its implications. A final example concerns the mythological origin of certain ritual prohibitions pertaining to canoe-building and navigation, which originated with certain terrestrial gods whose parents had exiled themselves from the sky world. Until recently, these prohibitions had continued to be in effect, even among Christians, but now they have virtually disappeared. Some awe still surrounds the names of the deities, but no one fears their wrath should their taboos not be maintained.[3]

I do not mean to imply that the dissolution of the old rituals and the social system they helped to support is a simple consequence of the weakening of myths. After all, nowhere are myths prime movers. Rather, in loosely symbolic form they express the prevailing systems, structures, ideals, sentiments, and beliefs of the society that harbors them. They move as the culture moves.

Yet it is possible to trace social change through myths. It is possible to view them as instruments of more fundamental forces operative in a changing culture. They are not mere mirrors that reflect events without participating in them; instead, even though they are creatures of social forces, they are capable of exerting active influence and being influenced in return.

On Ulithi the primary movers in altering the traditional order of things have been westernization in general and Christianization in particular. Acculturation has undermined myth only to the extent that change has already penetrated into the economic, political, cognitive, ideational, and other aspects of native life.

If myths, then, are both indicators and instruments of change, it should be possible to select one and trace its waning influence in the maintenance of the old order. Specifically, we can select a Ulithian myth dealing with a certain turtle ritual and study its relationship to the political and religious institutions that were involved in the ritual. The altered import of the story parallels that of social change on the atoll.

According to the myth, three brothers lived in different villages on the island of Yap. They had a sister named Melehau, who left them and went to Ulithi Atoll. There she lived on the island of Losiep. She did not like it there, so she built a fire to see which way the smoke went. It went to the island of Mangejang, and she followed it to that island and went to live there. She did not like Mangejang, either, so she built another fire. The smoke wafted to the island of Mogmog, and she went there to live. She liked the island and remained on it, giving birth to a child named Iongolap. She told him that he and she were the chiefs of Yap and that when he went there, he would find that all the temples belonged to them. She told him that he should pray to the spirits to bring an abundance of plant foods and fish to Ulithi. Iongolap told the people of Ulithi that whenever they went anywhere and saw turtles, they should take them to him and his mother on Mogmog. After that he went to Yap and prayed for Ulithi.[4]

Admittedly, this story has a fragmentary and not entirely consistent character. It seems to have originated on nearby Yap. However, from published reports about the western Carolines, as well as my own researches, we know a good deal about Iongolap. He is traditionally involved in the tribute relationship between Yap and the many islands to the east that have been part of its empire. Thus, another myth told on Ulithi concerns Bagau, who lived on Yap but left in a fit of madness. She strewed sand on the sea, and Ulithi was created from the grains. She gave birth to Iongolap on Ulitihi and then returned to Yap, but before doing so she instructed the people to take annual offerings of oil, sails, and mats to her son, Iongolap. This myth sanctions the religious offerings that have been required in the past by the people of Gagil district on Yap.[5] Another myth has Iongolap already living on Yap with his sister, Filtei. Filtei left Yap in anger because the people were killing turtles and giving her only the flippers. She created Ulithi out of sand and lived on the island of Mogmog. Iongolap came to her one day and told her that all the turtles killed by the people of Ulithi henceforth belonged to her.[6]

The significance of these myths is that they sanction the obligation that Ulithians feel towards Iongolap or his family. These obligations involve, among other things, the giving of turtles. A locale on Mogmog, called the Rolang, is sacred to Iongolap, and offerings may be brought to him there when they are not taken to Yap. The Rolang has a political significance as well as a religious one. On it there once stood the atoll-wide council house, where the king was formally invested. In the last century the

building was razed by a typhoon and never rebuilt, but investitures continued to be held in the open on the site of the great house.

In order to understand the intimate association between the turtle ritual and the political system, some remarks concerning the latter are necessary. The king of the atoll is normally the old king's next brother or the eldest son of the former king's eldest sister. He comes from the Lamathakh lineage, which dominates one of the two districts into which the island of Mogmog is divided. The other district is under the control of a chief from another lineage called Lamrui, which controls the other half of the island. This chief holds second place in the atoll-wide hierarchy of chiefs. All others, including the district chiefs of other islands, are ranked below these two in a descending pattern of authority. The king is the recognized political head of the atoll. He has certain prerogatives, among which are the right to receive certain kinds of gifts. These are mostly in the form of food and are called *maler tamol.* They include breadfruit, mountain apples, coconuts, and fish. The rationale behind the presentation of these gifts to the king is based on the mythological association between Mogmog and Iongolap. The king acts as an intermediary for Iongolap, receiving gifts in his name. Among these gifts are turtles, all of which rightfully belong to Iongolap or his mother and therefore to the king, since he is his surrogate. Turtles are caught mostly in the native months of *ermas* and *thomor,* corresponding approximately to May and June. This is when they most commonly lay their eggs. But occasionally they are caught at other times of the year, and the ritual is followed even then, thus distinguishing it from other gift offerings made to the king, which are annual and not continuous. In short, all turtles are sent to Mogmog at any time, whereas breadfruit, mountain apples, coconuts, and even fish are presented only once a year as "first fruits."

A description of the turtle ritual will illustrate its political and religious nature, providing us at the same time with a base from which to analyze recent departures from the traditional procedures. When the people of Falalop, or any of the islands under its political jurisdiction, catch green turtles (*Chelonia mydas*),[7] they first assemble them on the beach and later load them on their sailing outriggers and proceed to Mogmog, the place where the king resides. En route to the island the men in the canoes perform the *hamath,* an obscene dance associated with whales and menstrual rites, and used as a means of public criticism. The women on the beach do the same dance. On reaching Mogmog, the men take the huge turtles to the Rolong, the sacred area mentioned above. The king kills the turtles, but before doing so he offers a prayer to Iongolap, the *tuthup bwol,* or "ancestor of the turtles," beseeching him to refrain from harming him: "I will kill these turtles. I am sorry I will kill these turtles. Do not kill me for killing the turtles." He addresses a similar prayer to the reptiles. The second ranking chief of the atoll also addresses a quiet prayer to Iongolap, but not to the turtles. The king then kills the reptiles by clubbing their heads with a stick of hard wood from the *Pemphis acidula* tree. A man selected at random by the chief from his own lineage cuts a slit in the throat of each turtle and pulls out the intestines, a separate basket being used as a receptacle for each. The slits are plugged up with coconut fiber and the reptiles are towed to the beach, where dried coconut leaves are placed over them and set afire. This is done to roast them slightly and make the carving of the meat easier. The carapaces and plastrons cannot avoid being scorched, but these dorsal and ventral portions of the bony case have no value. The chelonians are then hauled back to the Rolong.

A man from the king's lineage removes the head of the first turtle and gives it to

the king, who may keep it for himself or share it with any relatives or friends whom he chooses. Then two men from the Lamathakh (king's) lineage begin to carve out the meat on one side of the reptile while two men from the Lamrui do the same on the other half. They use sharp knives and begin by making a hole under each flipper. The meat and eggs are drawn out of the holes and deposited in four receptacles. Each pair of men tries to outdo the other in extracting the contents of the bony case, and what they accumulate belongs to their lineage, to be disposed of in a manner described further on. The four flippers are then divided according to a formal plan. The proximal portions are "given" to the people of certain islands outside the Ulithian group: Fais, Ngulu, the Woleai, and Yap. Apparently, those people who are from Fais but living on Ulithi actually receive a portion; but the portions of the flippers assigned to the other islands are retained by the king, to give to his friends or relatives, or to eat himself if there is not much. The distal portions of the flippers are given to a certain lineage (unascertained).

Falalop is not left without some reward for its part in catching and delivering the turtles. First a gift of meat and eggs is given to the men who came over in the "turtle canoes," or *wal wol*. This is equally divided according to individual. Second, there is a more formal gift given to the chiefs of the Lipipi and Hachlau lineages, which have highest rank, respectively, over each of the two villages on Falalop. They are given the blood of the turtle, which has been collected in coconut shells, and they are given the carapace with the meat and fat that clings to it. The carapace is useless but the flesh is prized and divided equally. In addition, these chiefs receive some of the proximal flippers.

The reader may be wondering how a single turtle, however large, can supply so many people. In point of fact, if only one reptile is caught, the division is meager, but usually many are obtained at one time. This involves an interesting procedure. The second, fourth, sixth and other even-numbered chelonians are butchered and distributed according to the above rite, but the third, fifth, seventh, and other odd-numbered ones are the object of a competitive sport. The two leading chiefs of Mogmog select a pair of men from each of their districts to enter a free-for-all competition to extract the meat and eggs. They must be agile and strong. Whatever they come up with is given to their districts. However, the flippers remain behind, to be allocated strictly according to the ritual for the first two turtles.

By custom, Falalop is not alone in sending turtles to Mogmog; so do all other islands, regardless of where the turtle may have been caught. The mythological warrant for this has already been referred to in the story of Melehau, who here is the mother of Iongolap. This also fits in with the tale about Filtei, allegedly Iongolap's sister. But one senses, and is told, that Falalop has a special obligation in this respect, the explanation being given in an account which is purportedly historical—if one can make such a distinction.

Stated briefly, we begin with a war won by Losiep island against Mogmog. The people of the latter island decided to retaliate by giving the king's daughter to the chief of the former. The plot was devious. The girl was to be such a model wife that she would put her husband to shame by her superior virtues. When the chief of Losiep detected that he was losing face, he decided to outvie his enemies by deluging them with gifts—turtles. He decreed that all turtles caught by the people under his authority must be turned over to Mogmog.[8] By way of explanation, it should be pointed out that Losiep became uninhabited early in the present century, and the people moved

to Falalop, establishing the village of Wililekh, headed by the Hachlau lineage. Howsoever we may choose to accept both the mythical and allegedly historical accounts, the fact remains that turtles must indeed be brought to Mogmog, and that Falalop has a special obligation to do so.

It has been necessary to provide a background for the essential purpose of this article, which is to connect myth with cultural change. From here on my presentation will be anecdotal.

On 14 June 1960, the very day I had arrived on my third field trip to Ulithi, I learned that some turtles—fifteen, to be exact—had been assembled on the beach at Falalop, where I was temporarily staying. The next morning, never having seen a sea turtle on land, I went to the beach to satisfy my curiosity, only to discover that almost all the reptiles had been loaded in canoes and were about to be taken to Mogmog. My interest aroused, for at that time, despite two previous visits to the atoll in 1947 and 1948 I knew nothing whatesoever regarding the ritual, I decided to accompany the several outriggers that were sailing with their still-thrashing cargoes of turtles. On reaching Mogmog I discovered that some turtles had already arrived and were being scorched. Soon some men with turtles began to arrive from the island of Fassarai, too. In the midst of the welcome being accorded me by old friends, I did not witness the killing of the turtles and had to make a sudden departure when the large canoe in which I had arrived returned to Falalop. But the man in charge of the fire had briefly informed me that this was the renewal of an old custom suspended because of the extinction of a certain type of official, and that moreover, only one person, acting on that spot, could perform the butchering.

Bit by bit I ascertained that the reason I had not seen any turtles on Ulithi during nine months I had previously lived there was that the ritual had been terminated for religious reasons. About the year 1940—the date is uncertain—a man named Rolmei had become king of the atoll. For some reason, he was not installed according to the usual rite, which involved the presentation of a special type of loincloth and invocations both to the great celestial god, Ialulwe, and the great underworld deity, Solal. He was a pagan, and at that time Christianity had not made great inroads. But on account of the lacuna, he felt unauthorized to partake in the ritual killing of the turtles, so he stopped the practice.

His successor, Wegelemar, even though he had become a Christian at least nominally, likewise feared the displeasure of Iongolap. He, too, fretted over his failure to be installed according to the old religious procedure. As a consequence the turtle ritual remained completely suspended.[9]

But when Wegelemar died in 1953, some of the leading chiefs on Mogmog, all of whom by now were believing Christians, decided to defy the threat of punishment by Iongolap. They wanted to prevent the wastage of turtles. Already, on the island of Fassarai, the people had occasionally violated custom during Wegelemar's time and secretly eaten turtles. Even though their customary tribute to Mogmog had been quasi-voluntary, when Wegelemar learned of their acts he imposed a strict taboo against leaving the island, even to fish, on all of those involved in the delict. After some months of this, the culprits sent the king a gift of loincloths, mats, turmeric, and other valuables, and the taboo was lifted.

In its current form, the turtle ritual has no religious meaning but does preserve some of its political significance. It continues to recognize that Falalop and other islands whose people catch turtles must take them to Mogmog for butchering and dis-

tribution at the Rolang site. Much of the form of the ritual remains, except for the dances, but alterations in the details reflect the weakened authority of Mogmog. Lineages do not participate in the formal way in which they used to, and much of the meat, fat, and eggs is given to other islands as if it were their right.

The ritual retains some of its emotional characteristics but is on the way to becoming only an economic rite. The people's taste for the meat will eventually supersede political considerations.

The altered nature of the ritual reflects the altered pattern of political authority that is emerging in Ulithi. Until the death of Wegelemar in 1953, each new king had come from the Fasilus lineage (or the predecessor lineage, Lamathakh, that it supplanted). Wegelemar's successor should have been Harongocheum, an elderly man of the Fasilus lineage. But Harongocheum demurred, probably because of his lack of drive and unwillingness to assume responsibility, especially towards the American authorities with whom occasionally he would have to deal. The next man in line, Malefich, also declined the position, so for the first time in remembered history the old men who had informally assembled to select a new head went outside the traditional kin group. Amusingly, when the principals involved in the deliberations were on their way to Falalop from Mogmog to communicate their decision to the Trust Territory Administration via the radio facilities of the Coast Guard station on the former island, Malefich had a change of heart and offered to accept the kingship. The already named king willingly withdrew. But Malefich exerts only political responsibilities.[10] The ritualistic aspects of his office—such as remain—are carried out by the aforementioned Harongocheum, who is content with this nonpolitical role. Despite all these changes, the right to kill the turtles remains completely in the hands of this chief. This is borne out by the fact that about three weeks after the performance of the ritual that I had partially witnessed soon after my arrival, some people from the island of Asor came to Mogmog with a chelonian they had captured on the island of Pig. Old Harongocheum was notified and immediately made the long journey to Mogmog from his home on Fassarai in order to fulfill his role. Later, on two separate occasions when a turtle was brought to Mogmog, the chief was unable to make the trip because of an injury that he had sustained in the meantime. One of the reptiles escaped after lying on its back for several days, and the other was mercifully released to return to the sea.

In summary, influences from Christianity have militated to remove the fear of punishment should the turtle ritual be performed contrary to traditional religious procedures—specifically, where the man who wields the club has not been invested as king according to pagan custom. The ritual has had and still retains some political significance, reflecting Mogmog's authority; but eventually this will disappear under the impact of foreign political administration and changing political ideologies. Myth alone has not and cannot maintain a system in operation unless it is in turn energized by more basic institutions and beliefs.[11]

NOTES

1. This article is an extension of a paper given before the American Folklore Society in Philadelphia in December 1960.

2. The term "king" is here used because of its long currency among administrators since the time of the Germans. The term "paramount chief" is more accurate.

3. These tales are contained in my publications, *Tales from Ulithi Atoll—A Comparative Study in Oceanic Folklore,* University of California Publications: Folklore Studies, No. 13 (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1961), pp. 27-34, 40-44; and "Divining by Knots in the Carolines," *Journal of the Polynesian Society,* LVIII (Sept. 1959), 189-192, although in this latter publication I present myths

from nearby islands rather than Ulithi itself, my specific tale about knot divination not having yet been published for that atoll. The interested reader will find another publication, "Myth and Blackmail in the Western Carolines," *JPS,* LV (March 1956), 66-74, of interest because it discusses the role of myth in supporting politico-religious rituals that today are rapidly disappearing.

4. I collected this tale on Ulithi in 1960, but have not published it except in the present form.

5. The Bagau myth is published in Hans Damm, *Zentralkarolinen,* 2 Halbband: *Ifaluk, Aurepik, Faraulip, Sorol, Mogemog.* "Ergebnisse der Südsee Expedition, 1908-1910," ed. Georg Thilenius, II, B, IX, 2 (Hamburg: Friederichsen, De Gruyter & Co., 1938).

6. I collected the Filtei story on Ulithi in 1960, but have not published it except in the present form.

7. The native name is *wol.* The hawksbill turtle (*Eretmochelys imbricata*), known to the natives as *hochop,* is highly prized for its carapace but not involved in this ritual, although it does have meaning in connection with a mourning ritual involving the inheritance of land tenure.

8. I collected this tale, whose heroine is nameless, on Ulithi in 1960, but have not published it except as it here appears.

9. Father William J. Walter, a Jesuit missionary in this area, informed me that there was a rumor to the effect that Wegelemar had terminated the catching and eating of turtles because he was a paralytic and could not kill the reptiles. But my informants insist there is no truth to this, and point out, too, that the suspension of the rite had been initiated by a prior king, himself in good health.

10. Actually, he is overshadowed by an aging Mogmog chief not in the kingly lineage but respected for his personal qualities, as well as his political position in heading the second-ranking lineage.

11. Since writing this article, I have learned that at the age of 75, Ifanglemar, the chief mentioned in n. 10, died on 25 May 1961, upon his return from Yap, where he had been hospitalized for tuberculosis of the cervical glands. Inez de Beauclair, who has been conducting research on Yap, told me in a recent conversation that the Yapese attributed his death to his part in allowing the resumption of the turtle ritual without the blessing of the chiefs of their island. In evidence thereof they pointed out that he had been stricken in the neck—the same spot where turtles are clubbed when killed.

University of California
Los Angeles, California