

Succession of the Traditional Chant in Belau

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○ Research background

The traditional chant serves as an ethnic epic and historical book in nonliterate societies. Oral traditions have been passed along from prehistoric times until the present as part of the “oral culture” [Ong 1991]. In recent years, in light of globalization, the oral tradition of the chant has disappeared in some rural areas, against a background of a decline in mother languages and the impact of foreign culture. This critical phase for intangible cultural assets such as traditional chants and dances has been taken seriously by UNESCO. In 2003, at their thirty-second general meeting, the “Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Culture Heritage” was adopted. The problem of the decline in intangible cultural assets has subsequently been recognized around the world.



[Photo1] Interview scene
(Babeldaob Island, Ngaraard State)



[Photo2] Informant
(Koror Island, Koror State)

○ Research purpose and aim

The traditional chant is a valuable piece of cultural heritage. This research explores the traditional chants of Belau, Micronesia, where people still chant and strive to pass the chants on to the next generation. The main objective of this fieldwork is to analyze how people maintain their culture of traditional chants given the various social changes that

have taken place in Belau. Specifically, the succession of lyrics, namely, how the lyrics of traditional chants are passed along, is investigated. My analysis examines how the succession of lyrics changed between (1) Ruler time and (2) Post-independence.

(1) Ruler time: 1891–1994 (Spain, German, Japan, US)

(2) Post-independence: 1994–2011

○ Fieldwork results and achievements

The fieldwork was carried out in the Republic of Belau from January to March 2011. The method of investigation was the interview. To examine (1) Ruler time, I interviewed historians (16 people from each state) who work for the Belau national government as history tellers in order to retain oral traditional knowledge. To examine (2) Post-independence, I interviewed 20 people, ranging in age from twenties to nineties, both men and women. The fieldwork results are discussed below.

(1) Ruler time

The results of the interview clarified that the traditional method of passing on lyrics involved secret teaching that depended on the following rules: Rule 1: Individual guidance. When people pass on the lyrics of a traditional chant, individual guidance must always be given. It is usually parents or grandparents who teach their children or grandchildren. Rule 2: Same clan, same village. The teacher and student must belong to the same clan or the same village. They can not pass along lyrics to other clan members or village members as such traditional knowledge is considered property to be safeguarded within each village. Yamaguchi reports that it is primarily high-ranking clan members who can pass along the lyrics of traditional chants and who can chant to the public [Yamaguchi 1990, Abels 2008], that is, the succession of the traditional chant was considered a noble practice.

(2) Post-independence

According to this survey, it is clear that the aforementioned rules no longer fully apply to the modern way of passing along lyrics. Post-independence, people embraced a new way of passing lyrics along. Interviews with 20 people regarding their experience with passing along the lyrics of traditional chants revealed that there were now various ways that varied among individuals. One interviewee had learned lyrics from different clan members, and some had learned them in a village that they did not belong to. Most interviewees had learned them from several people. Thus, there are clear differences between the traditional and modern methods of passing along lyrics.

○ Implications and impacts on future research

This field work revealed that people have shifted their traditional way of passing along lyrics to a modern way in which the teachings are no longer secret. Future research is needed to examine the social background from the ruler time to the present in Belau in order to understand why the people changed their way of passing along lyrics and to explore the affects on the culture of the traditional chant. A detailed historical verification of the social background

during ruler time is also needed to determine the impact of foreign culture on Belauan culture, and to observe the cultural policy of the government of Belau from the 1960s to the present to examine how people keep or redefine their traditional chant culture.



[Photo3] Chanting scene
(Babeldaob Island, Aimellik State)



[Photo4] Southern tip of Belau
(Angaur Island, Angaur State)

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