

Micronesia, Guam, Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands; the Fed. States of Micronesia (Yap, Chuuk, Pohnpei, Kosrae); Palau, Marshals

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Entry tags: Cenotaph, Micronesia, Religious Place, Oceanic Religions, Religious Group, shrines, ancestor veneration, Animist

Pre-WWII traditional island religions.



Date Range: 1700 CE - 1945 CE

Region: Melanesia, Micronesia, and Polynesia

Region tags: Oceania, Melanesia, Micronesia, Polynesia

Melanesia, Micronesia, and Polynesia

Status of Participants:

✓ Elite ✓ Religious Specialists ✓ Non-elite (common people, general populace)

General Variables

Sources and Excavations

Print Sources

Print sources used for understanding this subject:

- Source 1: Jay Dobbin, *Summoning the Powers Beyond: Traditional Religions of Micronesia*
- Source 2: Ward Goodenough, *Under Heaven's Brow: Pre-Christian Religious Traditions in Chuuk*

Online Sources

Online sources used for understanding this subject:

- Source 1 URL: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/310497146_The_Religion_of_Pohnpei_Traditional_Religions_in_Micronesia
- Source 2 URL: <https://pacificaffairs.ubc.ca/book-reviews/summoning-the-powers-beyond-traditional-religions-in-micronesia-by-jay-dobbin-with-francis-x-hezel/>
- Source 3 URL: https://www.academia.edu/9395810/Book_Review_of_Summoning_the_Powers_Beyond_Traditional_Religions_of_Micronesia

Has this place been the focus of excavation (pre-modern, illicit, or scientific):

Answer 'Yes' for each period or type of excavation.

– Yes

↳ Type of excavation:
– Scientific

Notes: Various archaeological "digs" especially at Nan Madol in Pohnpei, Latte stone villages in Guam and Northern Mariana Islands; in Yap, Palau. Various ethnographic and historical studies.

Topographical Context

Is the place associated with a feature in the landscape

- Tree, grove, or forest
- Water source
- Cave

Does the place involve human-made features besides structure:

Other features might be ground clearing, terracing, other modifications of the local environment.

– Yes



Type of feature

- Mound
- Leveling of ground
- Terracing
- Clearing
- Other [specify]: A large basalt stone city and temple at Nan Madol, Pohnpei. Stone city in Kosrae. Latte Stone structures in Guam and Northern Mariana Islands

Is the place situated in an urban or significantly urbanized area:

– No

Is the place situated in a rural setting:

– Yes



Are there settlements in close proximity to the place:

– Yes



Are there routes of travel in close proximity to the place:

– No

– No

Notes: The routes of travel were traditional open ocean navigation.

Is the place situated far removed from non-religious places of habitation:

– No

Structures Present

Are there structures or features present:

Instructions: Answer once for each structure/feature or group that can be differentiated.

– Yes

↳ A single structure

– No

↳ A group of structures:

– Yes

↳ Are they part of a single design/construction stage:

– Yes

Notes: The basalt city of Nan Madol is a single design structure. The Latte Stone structures in Guam and the Northern Mariana Islands are various structures/homes in the ancient villages. There were/are some shrines in the neighbor islands in the Federate States of Micronesia, example shrines to the deified ancestor Marespa in Ulithi and nearby attols.

↳ Is it part of a larger place/sanctuary:

– No

↳ What is the function of the structure/feature or group:

Answer "Yes" once for each distinct function

– Worship

↳ Worship:

– Communal

Reasons for Creation/Construction/Consecration

Is the place used for the worship of/communication with non-human supernatural beings:

– Yes

↳ Dedicated to a supernatural being:

–Yes [specify]: Especiall the shrines are didicated to a specific ancestor or nature spirit.

↳ Dedicated to more than one supernatural being:

–Yes [specify]: dedicated to ancestors; deified ancestors; nature spirits or gods; dedicated to kings or high chiefs.

Is the place used for the worship of a semi-divine human being:

– Yes

↳ Is it a cenotaph:

– Yes

↳ Does it commemorate a family/clan/group:

– Yes

Is the place used for the worship of non-divine ancestors:

– Yes

↳ Is it a cenotaph:

– Yes

↳ Body present:

– Yes

Notes: The ancestor's bones maybe interred. Ancient CHamoru kept the skull of the clan ancestor in the rafters of the house; carried them into battle.

↳ Does it commemorate a family/clan/group:

– Yes

Was the place commissioned/built by an official political entity:

A political entity is a local power structure that leverages a workforce.

– Yes

↳ Specify

– King or emperor

– Religious specialists affiliated with political entity

– Private individual

– Other [specify]: Nan Madol was built under the king. Shrines were built by religious specialists or individuals.

Were the Structures built by specific groups of people:

– Yes

↳ Groups:

– Men

– Specialized labourers/craftspeople

– Other [specify]: The cutting and transport of the large stones required strong men and massive community support.

Was the place thought to have originated as the result of divine intervention:

– No

Was the place created to mark or commemorate the birthplace of a supernatural or human being:

– Yes

↳ Specify

– Birthplace of divine or semi-divine human(s)

Notes: Pohnpei means "upon a stone altar;" the whole island was/is believed to be a sacred place. the shrines are dedicated to apotheosized ancestors or nature gods/spirits.

Was the place created as the result of an event:

– No

Was the creation of the place sponsored by an external financial/material donation:

– No

Was the establishment of the place motivated by:

–Other [specify]: All of the above. Structures were for thanksgiving; expectation of good luck; an expression of devotion.

Was the place built specifically for housing scriptures/sacred texts:

– No

Design and Material Remains

Overall Structure

Is the place made up of multiple built structures:

– Yes

↳ Are any of the structures attached to or associated with a landscape feature:

– Yes

↳ Are any of the structures attached to other structures:

– No

↳ Is there a hierarchy among the structures:

– No

Is monumental architecture present:

Monumental architecture is defined here as a built structure that surpasses average human proportions and in general is larger and more complex than is necessary to fulfill the structure's utilitarian function(s). Examples of monumental architecture include Mesopotamian Ziggurats, Egyptian Pyramids, Greek and Roman temples, Mesoamerican Pyramids, North American and Aegean burial mounds, etc.

– Yes

Notes: in the Northern Mariana Islands, on Tinian island, there is a Latte stone structure that is about 20 feet high. Nan Madol is a large temple, palace, city structure.

↳ In the average place, what percentage of area is taken up by built monuments:

– I don't know

Notes: Each place is different, making this question difficult to answer.

↳ Footprint of largest single religious monument, square meters:

Please add dimensions in the comments, if known.

– I don't know

Notes: Each place is different, making this difficult to answer.

↳ Height of largest single religious monument, meters:

– I don't know

Notes: Nan Madol is a relatively large structure. The Latte Stone structure on Tinian is some 20 feet tall.

↳ Size of average monument, square meters:

– I don't know

↳ Height of average monument, meters:

– I don't know

Is the structure/feature made out of natural materials:

Answer [Yes] for each material type

– Yes

↳ Stone

– Yes

↳ Is this material sourced locally:

– Yes

Notes: The Stone "money" on Yap was sourced in Palau and transported to Yap by dragging the huge stones by open ocean canoes. The Marian latte stones are made of limestone from the respective island. The basalt for Nan Madol was most likely sourced from the other side of Pohnpei where the cliffs have basalt pillars that could be excavated from the cliff face.

Is the structure/feature made out of human-made materials

– Yes [specify]: The meeting houses and the relatively small shrines are built from worked timber.

Decoration

Is decoration present:

– Yes

↳ Is decoration part of the building (permanent):

– Yes

↳ On the outside:

– Yes

↳ On the inside:

– Yes

↳ Is decoration attached to the building, i.e. movable reliefs or tapestries

– No

↳ Is the decoration figural:

A figural representation is defined here as one that contains the depiction of discernible human, anthropomorphic, animal, or zoomorphic forms. In general, it differentiates between animate and inanimate beings, as well as between narrative compositions and still life, landscapes, abstraction, etc. Answer [Yes] for each type of figure depicted

– Yes

↳ Are there gods depicted:

– Yes

↳ Are there other supernatural beings depicted:

– Yes

Notes: These may appear to be a shark; the shark is an image for a war god.

↳ Are there humans depicted:

– Yes

↳ Are there animals depicted:

– Yes

Notes: Figures are especially prominent on the Bai or meeting houses on Palau. the "money bird" is depicted on the Palauan Bai. Petroglyphs are found in caves on Guam and other islands depicting humans/chiefs, stars, other figures.

↳ Are there animal-human hybrids depicted:

– No

↳ Is the decoration non-figural:

– Yes

↳ Is it geometric/abstract

– Yes

Notes: yes, sometimes abstract/geometric designs are used.

↳ Is the decoration hidden or restricted from view:

– No

↳ Are there statues present:

– No

↳ Are there reliefs present:

A relief as opposed to sculpture carved on the round is a work of sculpture in which the figures project from a background support, generally a flat surface. Reliefs can be carved out of stone, clay, or a similar material.

– No

Notes: no, or not any more; erosion may have removed ancient reliefs. it is difficult to say.

↳ Are there paintings present:

– Yes

↳ Are they panel paintings [movable]:

– No

↳ Are they wall paintings:

– Yes

↳ Type

– Other [specify]: Drawings/paintings on the side of the Palaun Bai.

↳ Paintings representing the gods worshipped at the place:

– Yes

Notes: these images may appear to be fish, birds etc. They are symbolic or mythological reference to god or spirits or ancestors.

↳ Paintings representing mythological narratives:

– Yes

↳ Paintings representing human/historical narratives:

– Yes

Notes: Palauan Bai depict parts of myths or legends.

↳ Are there mosaics present:

– No

↳ Are there inscriptions as part of the decoration:

– No

Iconography

Are there distinct features in the places iconography:

– No

Beliefs and Practices

Funerary Associations

Is this place a tomb/burial:

– Yes

Notes: Many time human remains are found under the Latte Stone structures and in and near Nan Madol.

Is this a place for the worship of the dead:

– No

Notes: The dearly departed were not worshiped per se, but venerated. They were also consulted for purposes of fishing, hunting, military protection, navigation, to cure illness, possession by ancestor spirits was fairly common.

Is this a place for treatment of the corpse:

– No

Are co-sacrifices present in tomb/burial:

Co-sacrifices are animal/human sacrifices prompted by the death of the primary occupant of the tomb/burial.

– No

Are grave goods present:

– Field doesn't know

Are formal burials present:

– Yes

↳ As cenotaphs:

– Yes

↳ In cemetery:

– No

↳ Family tomb/crypt:

– No

↳ Domestic context:

Interred beneath floors of house, or in areas of domestic activity

– Yes

Supernatural Beings

Is a supreme high god is present:

– Yes

↳ Are they anthropomorphic:

– Yes

↳ Are they sky deity:

– Yes

Notes: or ocean deity or Island or reef deity or spirit.

↳ Are they chthonic (underworld)

– Yes

Notes: yes, usually under the ocean deities.

↳ Are they fused with king/kingship role (king = high god)

– Yes

Notes: Yes, for Nan Madol. On the atolls the spirits are usually not connected to the high chiefs. Religious specialists or mediums in trance learn about the lore of the gods; bring it back to the community and gain prominence by doing so.

↳ Are they the monarch is seen as a manifestation or emanation of the high god:

– No

↳ Are they kin relation to elites:

– Yes

Notes: The ancestral spirits usually come from ruling clans.

↳ Are they other type of loyalty or connection to elites:

– Yes

↳ Are they unquestionably good:

– No

Notes: There is usually a fairly common fear that when taboos are broken the community or individuals will be punished.

Does the supreme high god communicate with the living at this place:

– Yes

↳ In waking, everyday life:

– No

↳ In dreams:

– Yes

Notes: Sometimes; Possession is more common though.

↳ In trance possession:

– Yes

↳ Through divination practices:

– Yes

Notes: Divination was/is common in Chuuk; there is some evidence that the Chinese Yijing (Book of Changes) numerology influenced Chuuk divination. Fortune telling was also done by shaman-like religious leaders.

↳ Only through religious specialists:

– No

Notes: Specialists and non-specialists maybe possessed by spirits.

↳ Only through monarch:

– No

Supernatural Interactions

Is supernatural monitoring present:

– Yes

↳ Supernatural monitoring of norm adherence:

– Yes

Notes: Individuals and the community must follow, practice, and adhere to the taboos or punishment (illness; famine, lack of fish or violent storms) would follow.

↳ Supernatural beings care about or expect offerings:

– Yes

↳ Libations:
– Yes [specify]: tuba, coconut palm juice--fermented or not was offered; sakau (kava kava) offered on Pohnpei.

↳ Offerings of food:
– Yes [specify]: Fish, breadfruit

↳ Animal sacrifice:
– Yes [specify]: Fish maybe offered

↳ Human sacrifice:
– No

↳ Sacred objects:
– No

↳ Daily life objects:
– Yes [specify]: flowers, palm or fern fronds, stones, wood carvings.

↳ Supernatural beings care about or expect proper ritual observance:
– Yes
Notes: Dances and seasonal calendar rites are present in most of the communities.

↳ Supernatural beings care about or expect performance of rituals:
– Yes

↳ Supernatural beings care about or expect maintenance of the place:
– Yes

↳ Supernatural beings care about or expect personal hygiene:
– Yes
Notes: especially the exclusion of menstruating women.

↳ Supernatural beings care about honoring oaths:
– Yes
Notes: especially for the high chiefs, village leaders.

Ritual and Performance

Sacrifices, Offerings, and Maintenance

Are sacrifices performed at this place:

– No

Notes: only simple offerings of fish, flowers, fern/palm fronds, stones, carved objects, shells.

Are there self-sacrifices present:

– No

Are material offerings present:

– Yes

↳ Are material offerings mandatory:

– Yes

↳ Are material offerings composed of valuable objects:

– No

↳ Are material offerings composed of daily-life objects:

– Yes

↳ Are material offerings interred at this place (in caches):

– No

Is maintenance of the place performed:

– Yes

↳ Is it required:

– No

↳ Is there cleansing (for the maintenance):

– Yes

↳ Are there periodic repairs/reconstructions:

– Yes

Notes: usually tied to seasonal rites or after storms for the wooden shrines.

↳ Is the maintenance performed by permanent staff:

– No

Notes: These are clan practices; there is no staff per se.

Pilgrimage and Festivals

Are pilgrimages present:

– No

Is this place a venue for feasting:

– Yes

↳ Is feasting connected to the worship/sacrifices performed at this place:

– Yes

↳ Is feasting sponsored by the same entity that built/maintains the place:

– Yes

↳ Priests

– No

↳ Local elites

– Yes

Notes: Sometimes the community members are also expected to provide food for the feasts.

↳ Private contributions

– Yes

Notes: As noted above individuals maybe expected to make contributions.

↳ Does feasting occur in a specific location within the place:

– No

Notes: The feasts are typically held in the village. at or near a grave sight.

Are festivals present:

– Yes

↳ Frequency of festivals

–specify: festival are based on the seasonal calendar.

↳ Do all members of the society participate in the festival(s):

–All members

–Elites

–Non-elites

–Only locals

↳ Are festivals a defining element in the construction/decoration of the place:

– No

Notes: festivals usually held in the Villages.

↳ On average, how many participants gather at this place:

– number: the whole village.

↳ Is feasting part of the festival(s):

– Yes

↳ Is food consumption limited to certain members of the population:

– Elites

– Non-elites

Notes: Everyone is fed.

Divination and Healing

Is divination present:

– Yes

↳ Divination by examination of the exta:

Animals remains, internal organs, answer this question and subsequent question once for each species

– No

↳ Divination through human communication:

– Yes

↳ Is a human being the vehicle for the oracle:

– Yes

↳ Is a human being the interpreter of the oracle:

– Yes

↳ Are the oracle interpreters of a specified sex/gender:

– No

↳ Are the oracle interpreters of a specified ethnicity:

– Yes

Notes: They are members of the clan/village.

↳ Are the oracle interpreters of a specified class:

– No

↳ Is sex-deprivation required:

– No

↳ Are intoxicants required:

– No

Notes: intoxicants are not required. Sometimes a large amount of betel nut maybe chewed in the Western islands. On in the Eastern islands, Pohnpei, Kapingamarangi, or Kosrae, where sakau (kava kava) is present it maybe used to enter trance.

↳ Physical ordeal required:

– No

↳ Divination through animal-behavior:

– No

↳ Divination through non-living material:

– Other [specify in comments]

Notes: In Chuuk divination is completed by tying palm fronds, and counting the knots. The numerology is connected to the Yijing.

Is healing present/practiced at this place:

– Yes

↳ Incubation

– No

↳ Healing magic

– Yes

↳ Cleansing

– Yes

Notes: to repair broken taboos.

↳ Offerings of models of body parts:

– No

↳ Expiation

– Yes

Notes: to repair broken taboos.

Do rituals occur at this place:

Rituals are visibly enacted behaviors by one or more people for the purposes of religious observance.

– Yes

↳ Do large-scale rituals take place:

– No

↳ Do small-scale rituals take place:

– Yes

↳ On average how many participants are present in large-scale rituals:

– specify: the whole village

↳ How often do these rituals take place:

– specify: Rites are based on the seasonal calendar.

↳ Are there orthodoxy checks:

– No

↳ Are there orthopraxy checks:

– No

↳ Are there synchronic practices:

– Yes

↳ Are there intoxicants used during the ritual:

– Yes

Notes: Betel nut in the East, especially Yap and Palau. Sakau in Pohnpei.

Institutions and Scriptures

Religious Specialists

Are religious specialists present/in charge of this place:

Religious specialists are individuals whose primary duties within a population group are not concerned with subsistence or craft production but the maintenance of the religious landscape and culture of the group.

– No

Does this place incorporate a living space for religious specialists:

– No

Is this place used for the training of religious specialists:

– No

Are there formal institutions for the maintenance of the place:

Institutions that are authorized by the religious community or political leaders

– No

Bureaucracy

Is there a formal bureaucracy present at this place:

A bureaucracy consists of a hierarchical system of accounting and rule maintenance primarily concerned with material wealth.

– No

Does this place control economic resources (land, goods, tools):

– No

Public Works

Does this place serve as a location for services to the community:

– No

Writing/Scriptures

Is non-religious writing stored at this place:

Economic documents, records etc.

– No

Are there scriptures associated with this place:

– No

Bibliography

General References

Reference: Ward Hunt Goodenough. *Under Heaven's Brow*. American Philosophical Society. isbn: 9780871692467.

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