

“Deep in their hearts they still wanna come back” – Sonsorolese people in motion and the implications on culture and identity

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Abstract: The island of Sonsorol, one of the Southwest Islands of the Palauan archipelago, is located about 340 kilometers south of the main Palauan islands in western Micronesia. Its unique culture and language, which the islanders have developed far away from the rest of Palau, set them apart from the main Palauan population, since they are linguistically and culturally related to the people from the outer islands of Yap and the Caroline Islands. At the same time, their isolated location leads to heavy migration to other Pacific Islands such as Saipan, Hawai'i or even to the US mainland. In the past, the people of the Southwest Islands already set out for other island groups with their outrigger boats, but today this happens with a different motivation and in larger numbers. However, despite large spatial distance, their transnational family networks retain their importance even when the Sonsorolese chain migration movements lead to cultural and social transformations both on the home island and in the Sonsorolese communities in the diaspora, which also have an impact on their identity. To preserve their cultural heritage in the context of migration and globalization, cultural revitalisation projects play a significant role in people's lives.

Keywords: Palau, Sonsorol, Southwest Islands, migration, mobility, identity

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Introduction

In the Pacific region, every second Pacific Islander lives far from her or his home islands (Mückler 2006: 64) and more people of islander descent were born in host countries than in the home islands (Lee 2009: 29). The same applies to the people of the Southwest Islands of Palau, who have found a home in the US mainland in much larger numbers than on their islands of origin.

What are the reasons for this out-migration? What does this development mean for those who emigrate, but also for those who remain in their island home? What effects does this have on their sense of belonging as well as on their immaterial and material culture?

To explore these questions, this paper will first introduce the remote island of Sonsorol within the Palauan archipelago and the living conditions on the island. Then the different factors that lead to migration and the destinations people choose as their new home as well as the transnational networks of kin will be examined. The significance of the island

of Sonsorol as a return myth is then presented. Subsequently, the impact of migration on my interlocutors' identity and language will be discussed. In addition to this, current projects within the community to revitalize their culture are also described, and finally a look at the future of Sonsorolese migration and its effects will be undertaken.

To study the impact of migration on the identity of Sonsorolese people, I first went to Micronesia in 2004/2005 for a year of field research, followed by stays with Sonsorolese migrants on the West Coast of the US the following year (see also Walda-Mandel 2016).

In order to understand the special dynamics of their migration, I followed the traces of the Sonsorolese emigrants to their individual destinations and thus included different locations in my research as part of a multi-sited ethnography (Walda-Mandel 2017a: 90). As a cultural anthropologist my main method was participant observation, which included living with

the Sonsorolese people for a full year, sharing their lives and interviewing them.¹

Since this first field research, I have been in constant contact and exchange with the people of Sonsorol. This article is therefore based on my own field research results and hundreds of interviews with Sonsorolese people on Sonsorol, in the community of Southwest Islanders in Eang, Saipan, Guam as well as Portland and Salem, US, (that found their way into my publication, see Walda-Mandel 2016) as well as follow-up personal communication with them since then. In this context, special mention should be made of the former Governor of Sonsorol State, Laura I. Miles, who welcomed me into her family with open arms during my one-year research stay. She was my main interlocutor during my fieldwork and answered numerous questions in order to trace an up-to-date picture of the island and its inhabitants as well as their migration movements today.



Figure 1: Southwest Islands in the Palauan archipelago.

The Southwest Islands of Palau: Life on Sonsorol Island

The Palauan archipelago consists of 241 coral and volcanic islands and is divided into 16 administrative states, where in 2022 18,233 people reside (Palau population 2022).

Sonsorol is an island so small in area that it is not shown on most maps - like a pinprick in the Pacific. Together with the other low-lying coral islets Pulo Anna, Merir and the uninhabited Fanna, it constitutes one of the 16 states of Palau. The Southwest Islands also include Hatohebei (also called Tobi) and Helen Reef, which together form Hatohebei State. Politically, all Southwest Islands belong to the Republic of Palau, which has been independent since 1994. Previously, Palau was under Spanish, German, Japanese and finally US rule. Nevertheless, the presidential Republic of Palau is still heavily dependent on the US in some areas, for example, Palau's foreign and defence policy and they support Palau economically.

Sonsorol, which is 1.6 square kilometers in size, is also called "Dongosaro" by the inhabitants, which translates "a place where strong currents prevail" and lies

approximately 340 kilometers away from the main archipelago of Palau, which is equivalent to a 22-hour boat ride. Sonsorol is quite isolated and only visited by ship every few months. In addition, it is characterized by heavy out-migration of its inhabitants: According to the Sonsorolese people, 150 years ago, 900 people lived on the island. This number has now shrunk to 30 people in Sonsorol State and 44 in Hatohebei State (Republic of Palau Census 2021). Connell (1983: 14) describes the drastic population decline on Sonsorol as follows: In 1946, the population numbered 172, in 1954 it numbered 136, in 1958 it was down to 82, in 1963 there were 75 people and in 1973 it was 56. The 2001 statistical yearbook of Palau counts 79 inhabitants in 1980, 42 in 1986, 61 in 1990, and 80 in 1995 (Republic of Palau 2002: 15). In 2001, there were 39 inhabitants on Sonsorol (Republic of Palau 2002: 21). This population decline led to the following conjecture: "The population profiles of all the southwest islands suggests they are no longer viable" (Connell & Lea 1998: 59). This prophecy has not yet come true, and the government officials are trying to make life on

Sonsorol more pleasant: In 2021, an intranet connection was installed at the Sonsorol Elementary School and the Pulo Anna Elementary School, as well as the Hatohebei Elementary School to use within the schools for their different educational programs, however, they are not connected to the worldwide internet. To stay in touch with people on the main islands, the Sonsorolese use radio communication once a day.

At the moment, 17 adults and three smaller children live at Sonsorol Island. Three teachers are responsible for the different subjects for the seven school-age children (Pedro 2022, personal communication, May 2nd, 2022). However, there is no medical doctor on any of the Southwest Islands, but a nurse has been on Sonsorol since 2018. The people use rainwater for drinking water and electricity can be generated by solar panels since the year 2000. The people live on imported food such as rice, which is brought to the island by boat, and on fishing. The municipal and state governments introduced a road and grounds maintenance as well as a coconut beetle control program on Sonsorol and employed the locals. The islanders moreover sell salted fish and coconut crabs and produce coconut syrup (Miles 2017: 22).

Push and pull factors for Sonsorolese out-migration

Like in many other Pacific communities, mobility has always been part of Southwest Islanders' culture. They set out in their outrigger boats to trade with other islands or to maintain social relationships. According to some elderly Sonsorolese men, the spirit of adventure and *rite de passage* also often played a role for young men in these ventures. However, today, in the "age of migration" (Castles and Miller 2020), people from the small islands are drawn in much larger numbers to much more distant destinations. A strong driving force for migration is the pursuit of higher education since there is no secondary school on any of the Southwest Islands. Some of the main reasons for their migration are also often referred to as the four E's: "Education, Employment, Entertainment, Excitement" (Marshall 2004a: 34), since many Sonsorolese people called themselves adventurous and open to new things. In this context,

they also see emigration as a personal challenge.

However, it is not only the school-age children who have to leave the Southwest Islands, the elderly are often forced to do so as well, since there is no biomedical care and traditional medicine is only partially embedded in the cultural memory:

“I was hoping that as our generation retires, some of us would migrate back to the islands. There have been a couple in the past 10 years, but they are never permanent. The main cause of this as I see is the poor health. Most of our population have some kind of chronic illness at our older age and have relied on the Western medical system to sustain our health. The longest duration of stay on the islands is one school year. The majority of the population return back to Koror every summertime: students for health checkup; teachers for training; families to replenish living supplies and other necessities” (Miles, personal communication, May 2nd, 2022).

An obstacle to living on the island in the long term is also the transport situation: To access the island, Sonsorol State has to charter a boat that is visiting the islands only about four times a year to bring supplies.

Another reason for migration that plays an increasingly important role is climate change accompanied by sea level raising, exacerbating high tide flooding, coastal erosion and storm surge (Miles et al. 2020: 5). Even when, at this point in time, the climate crisis is not yet a reason for migration away from Sonsorol, the former Governor of Sonsorol State, Laura I. Miles, describes her concerns about the changing conditions in the Southwest Islands due to climate change in alarming words:

“Obviously, my most concerns are unpredictable and extreme weather conditions. I’m concerned about the people there being so far away from everything. I’m also concerned about the erosion on the islands which will cause changes which damage resources and may even ruin the nature of the island and who knows what else” (Miles, personal communication, May 2nd 2022).

Nevertheless, she does not predict a complete abandonment of the entire island population as a result of climate change:



Figure 2: Catching coconut crabs on Fanna (Sonsorol in the background).

“It [climate change] may be a good reason [to leave the island], but I don’t think people will migrate out completely. First of all, it is our home island, our identity. In practically, people living on the islands are mostly employees for the state government. Their jobs keep them

there” (Miles, personal communication, May 2nd, 2022).

However, there are many indicators to show how Palau already suffers from the effects of climate change (Miles et al. 2020: 5). Prolonged drought is a particular problem in the Southwest



Figure 3: Hilary Raichy Jonas prepares fresh fish for the family (Sonsorol).



Figure 4: Kids relaxing on Sonsorol.

Islands, where the inhabitants depend on rain as their only source of drinking water. The ongoing sea level rise is also a major threat to these low-lying islands and the people's livelihood will likely develop into another push-factor leading to further out-migration in the long term.

Migration destinations of Sonsorolese people

The first step away from their island leads the Sonsorolese emigrants to the small village of Eang, in the southwestern end of Palau (seven kilometers away from the urban center Koror) where about 450 Southwest Islanders (Miles, personal communication, May 2nd 2022) have formed a close-knit village community. In 2005, there were still only about 300 villagers in Eang (Walda-Mandel 2017b: 139).



Figure 5: Laura I. Miles, former Governor of Sonsorol.

Another destination of the Sonsorolese is the island of Saipan, which can be reached by plane and belongs to the Northern Marianas, and also Guam, which is the largest island of Micronesia and US territory. Some move even further away to the cities of Portland and Salem (Oregon) in the US mainland, or even to Hawai'i, although few choose the latter as their new home due to the high costs of living. For a few years now, states like Oklahoma, Virginia, Florida, and Nebraska have been added to the list of destinations (Miles, personal communication, June 8th, 2022).

Sonsorolese set out at all for a destination as distant as the US mainland because Palau, along with the Marshall Islands and the Federated States of Micronesia, was one of the former member states of the Trust Territory to sign the Compact of Free Association in 1993. This treaty allows residents of member states to move freely between their homeland and the US (Connell and Lea 2002: 74).

Originally, out-migration of Sonsorolese people began in the 1960s when young Sonsorolese migrated to the US mainland primarily for higher education. In 1967, Dolores Carlos migrated to Oregon as one of the first Sonsorolese to pursue vocational training as a certified nurse. As a result, numerous other Sonsorolese family members followed her in the course of "chain migration" (MacDonald and MacDonald 1964: 82) to Oregon, as she provided her kin with a first point of contact and support in finding housing and work, so they could fall

back on the structures and networks she had established. Being the source of security and encouragement in the context of migration Dolores Carlos can be referred to as a "pioneer settler" (Ravuvu 2002: 93).

Today, most of the young people migrating to the US do so primarily for employment purposes. Sonsorolese take up employment in a turkey factory in Iowa, others secure jobs in the hospitality industry, and work in restaurants in Florida and Nebraska. The US mainland is currently home to some 50 Sonsorolese adults plus their children, about whom no precise information is currently available. In 2021 only three Southwest Islanders moved to the US (Miles, personal communication, May 2nd, 2022), which might be due to the pandemic situation.

Transnational networks of kin

Migration always represents a profound biographical break, since you leave behind everything you know and everything that makes you who you are. The situation of the Sonsorolese migrants in their new homes is therefore characterised by an interplay of adaptation on the one, and sticking to the familiar on the other hand. However, their example clearly shows that spatial distance from their place of origin does not go hand in hand with detachment from their home island and their family ties since Sonsorolese emigrants form strong transnational networks with their kin. No matter how long ago they emigrated, all my interview partners showed a very strong sense of perceiving Sonsorol as their home and place of belonging. Kin send each other parcels, visit each other, take part in important celebrations, religious ceremonies, funerals, weddings, family reunions or sport competitions, so that a permanent flow of material and immaterial culture in form of food, clothes, money, but also ideas, songs, dances etc. can be observed between both sides. In addition to this, most of them use social media, such as Facebook to stay in touch, send photos and engage in livestreaming. Through this intensive contact, migrants often provide a window to the rest of the world for those at home – this way they have a strong impact on each other's lives.

Nostalgia and the return myth

It is striking how, with increasing temporal and spatial distance from their island, the attitude of Sonsorolese emigrants increases to nostalgically transfigure and romanticise their home island. Sonsorol becomes the myth of an ideal island world, a stress-free environment, which has an identity-forming effect and combines images and memories of the island into an overall picture with positive connotations. The closer one is – geographically speaking – to the island, the more one is naturally involved in the challenges there and the more difficult it is to romanticise an abstract ideal. However, this longing or nostalgia is not only found among the expatriates themselves, but also for those who did not grow up there and know the island only from the stories of their relatives or from short visits: “In fact, transnational actors do not need to have been born in the ‘homeland’ to identify strongly with the country of origin of their parents or grandparents, and to participate in diasporic transactions” (Francis 2009: 203).

This ideal is closely linked to the myth of return (Lee 2009: 27), the realisation of which usually does not work out in practice. Often, emigration takes on a permanent character by building a life in a foreign country with marriage, investments, obligations etc. Living conditions on the home island also often make it difficult to return and for those who return, it is not always an easy process (see also Connell 2009a), since personalities and problem-solving strategies can change through the process of migration. For example, at college in the US mainland, Sonsorolese students often experience an open dispute culture. However, this is commonly an undesirable social behaviour on the small islands, since openly dealing with conflicts on a small island can put the whole group at risk. It is proper for younger people to be silent when older people speak, even when they disagree. If return migrants then show a discursive behaviour they can be perceived as a disruptive factor in an otherwise smooth island life. However, it is not only the migrants who have changed, often also the home island has gone through changes while they were gone.

Especially for those who grew up in migration, returning to the Southwest Islands is sometimes fraught with



Figure 6: Palauan first born ceremony in the Southwest Islanders community in Eang.

difficulties. In migration, they clearly define themselves as Sonsorolese, even if they were born in the US. However, when they visit Sonsorol Island, they often lack some of the cultural and linguistic abilities, so that they sometimes get into awkward situations and are mocked by other islanders in a playful way.

However, not many people are migrating back to the Southwest Islands for good.

The same pattern applies to Eang: In the past ten years, no Southwest Islanders have moved back from their migration destinations to Eang on a permanent basis. However, they do return for special occasions, such as family reunions. Yet, the Covid-19 pandemic has affected these temporary visits, so that since the outbreak of the pandemic in 2020, hardly any Southwest Islanders have come back to Eang to participate in such festivities.

Culture, identity and language in the context of out-migration

Collective identity is usually created

through shared ancestry, history and culture (Hall 1990: 223). Despite increasing mobility, people retain a fundamental need to belong to a community. In addition to this sense of belonging, the basic prerequisite for a sense of identity² is social acceptance. Members of a cultural community share certain identity markers, which are also dynamic and can therefore be subject to change.

In the course of migration, cultural practices become increasingly dispersed and Sonsorolese culture is also lived in the new homes as much as possible.

On Sonsorol, detailed knowledge of fishing techniques or navigation were important male identity markers every man used to know in the past. For young men today (especially the ones who migrated), these identity markers are less valid, and they often lack detailed knowledge. Such social transformations are observed in Micronesia in general and can negatively affect the self-esteem of young men (Rubinstein 1992: 67). However, there

Source: Victoria Nestor.



Figure 7: Master carver Samu Bemar teaching canoe building (Eang).

are certain identity markers that still play an important role for all Sonsorolese today: family ties and showing respect (especially towards elders), as well as some basic cultural knowledge. In the past, it was also very specific knowledge (local healing techniques, chants, dances, customs, craftsmanship, fishing techniques, navigation skills and ideologies about seeing the world etc.) and Sonsorolese language abilities. However, these have been subject to change due to migration: “Moreover, that both their home societies and diasporas change constantly in response to internal and external challenges and developments. As well, in this context, kinship ties and indigenous political, religious and economic values undergo significant consideration” (Keck & Schieder 2015: 125).

Sonsorol (as well as the rest of Palau) has been exposed to strong influences from the Catholic mission, as well as from the various foreign dominations (Spain, Germany, Japan and the US). In the 1900s, Christianity was introduced to the Southwest Islands, and as a result the inhabitants all converted to Roman Catholicism, so today there are Catholic churches on Sonsorol, Pulo Anna, and also in Eang. Due to this former impact, some identity-forming elements of their culture are difficult to practice today. According to my interview partners, this applies to traditional tattooing, which was condemned by the missionaries, so

that people pursued this art less and less. According to my interlocutors, the traditional dances were also partly banned by the missionaries as being too erotic, so they were no longer danced by the population and were forgotten over time. Today, there are often not enough people in the islands to do the dances that they still memorize. The situation is similar with traditional healing methods, as these were also banished by the mission and thus no longer passed on from generation to generation in many cases. Since cultural knowledge has been passed down orally and through general practice, the chain of information breaks where knowledge is no longer passed on or practiced due to migration. This break in the chain of knowledge transfer in the context of migration also shows in daily life: In Eang (as well as in the other destinations) most Sonsorolese people are employed and during the day, they usually leave the village to work in the city of Koror. Young Sonsorolese also go to school or community college. In short, there is hardly any time to sit together and pass on traditional myths, stories or even detailed knowledge about traditions, Sonsorolese values and language like in the past:

“We are losing our language. Most of our young population speak English. Respect for siblings and elders is washed out. We have in our culture a certain form of language used to show respect among different gender siblings and

older people. It is not used among our young people. I keep trying to make my own children use the form of language with each other but to no avail. I guess it just doesn’t fit their way of life today. I also think that we have adopted some of the Western culture so that we may have a truly different culture which is neither any of them” (Miles, personal communication, May 2nd, 2022).

The influence of US culture can be seen in different spheres of life away from their island: The official currency in Palau is the US dollar, children wear US school uniforms and are taught with US textbooks, even when they do not reflect the reality of their lives. Even the television channels that can be received on Palau’s main islands are dominated by US channels. Thus, through television and social media, and through reports from expatriates who have returned, US style of dress, language, and music have found their way into many Sonsorolese homes.

At the same time, Sonsorolese culture is also becoming more and more permeated by Palauan customs and traditions. This is evident, for example, when Sonsorolese move to Eang, and realize how the first-born ceremony has entered the Sonsorolese community. This custom, which is originally Palauan, celebrates the mother after the birth of her first child. After giving birth, she receives very hot herbal baths and then appears in front of the crowd, rubbed with curcuma (turmeric

powder) and festively decorated. In this way, she is celebrated by the family as a productive member of her lineage. When Sonsorolese women leave their island and form partnerships with Palauans in migration, from which children are born, they sometimes adopt this Palauan tradition.

The way Sonsorolese are treated when they migrate impacts on their identity and self-image. The Southwest Islanders are seen as a minority by the Palauans and were discriminated for decades in the past, even though the relationship between the inhabitants of the main islands and the Southwest Islands has improved greatly in the last 30 years. The reason for the unequal treatment was the Southwest Islands' own language and culture, which has nothing in common with the main islands of Palau. Southwest Islanders also experience competition for land and jobs when they settle on the main islands.

The situation of the Sonsorolese as a more or less latently discriminated minority in the past can be traced back to events in 1904/05. At that time, a severe typhoon had destroyed parts of the Southwest Islands, and the then Ibedul (the High Chief of Koror) officially allowed them to settle in Echol and later in Eang. Since then, Palauans have repeatedly tried to dispute this donation of land, but court decisions have always granted it to the Southwest Islanders. In 1998, this conflict escalated and Palauans stood in front of the Eang village entrance with signs saying: "No more typhoon - Go home!" (see also Loscalzo 2006: 72-76). These incidents reminded the Sonsorolese in the past that they were not seen as a part of Palau after migrating to Eang: "In my opinion, at that time, these words hit to the heart of the Southwest Islanders, reminding them how they arrived in Palau and that they were still very much considered to be non-Palauan outsiders" (Tibbetts 2002: 70).

However, these hardships and the discrimination they had to face seems to lie in the past now. Miles explains the changes for the better in the relationship between Southwest Islanders and Palauans as follows:

"We are more accepted than we were in the past, with the presence of other nationalities who are obviously more different (Chinese, Japanese, Filipinos



Figure 8: Samu Bemar healing Mark Nestor's broken arm (Eang).

etc.). I guess we have become more Palauan-like. I believe it is also a change of attitude on our part, too. We have changed our attitudes, the way we dress and carry ourselves; we have learned the Palauan language; our youth are actively participating in youth activities and others; all these I believe are some of the contributing factors to change. There are also intermarriages, which bring families together and create more familiarity and familial connections. I'm sure there are other contributing behavioral factors. You know, we live in a global world even while living on this small island nation" (Miles, personal communication, May 2nd, 2022).

Revitalization of the Sonsorolese language and cultural heritage

Sonsorolese identity and culture face many challenges on the island of origin as well as in the different migration destinations. These effects are already being felt in the community of Southwest Islanders in Eang:

"Just by the fact that we do not live on our home island in itself is a big cause of loss of our culture, because we do not use the language that relates to the unique environment and the activities unique to that environment which is the island. What little I learn while I'm here, I forget too soon because I do not use it again. There is no maintenance of what I learn. For example, I learned to chant two years ago. Today, I cannot even remember how to begin. When I read the survey of Krämer [Augustin Krämer: Ergebnisse der Südsee-Expedition] made in the early 1900's I see the big

loss in our culture" (Miles, personal communication, May 2nd, 2022).

When it comes to other cultural practices such as traditional tattooing, young Sonsorolese today no longer get any traditional tattoos, as Pacific Islanders from Samoa or Hawai'i often do to wear a part of their homeland on their skin – also in the diaspora.

Nevertheless, the Sonsorolese are fundamentally interested in their cultural heritage today:

"I've seen t-shirts with tattoo designs and catchy slogans or words. They like using our language because it seems to be a challenge to them. Many young people were interested in the weaving classes and the canoe building project. They enjoy doing the dances and the chants. I think it gives them a feeling of uniqueness, connecting them to their true identity that seems to be elusive" (Miles, personal communication, May 2nd, 2022).

In addition to cultural practices, the Sonsorolese language poses even greater obstacles for those no longer living on the island, which also has to do with the fact that the Sonsorolese language is a purely oral language without written fixation. The children of Sonsorolese growing up in the US diaspora often no longer automatically learn the language of their parents in everyday life. However, my interviews show that they are still very interested in the language. To nourish this enthusiasm for one's own language and culture, cultural practitioners established a few projects to keep the Sonsorolese cultural heritage alive.

For example, the Sonsorol State Women's Association (SSWA) in

Source: Stephanie Walda-Mandel.



Figure 9: Meeting of the Young Historians of Sonsorol State (Eang).

2016 wrote an illustrated storybook of traditional Sonsorolese children's stories (including audio files) in an effort to preserve the traditional Sonsorolese storytelling as well as the language. They were supported in this by The Young Historians of Sonsorol State or "Wonoula lei Hatnapa ri Faruya", a youth organisation founded in 2014 by Sonsorolese students from the Palau Community College (PCC) realizing being raised not on Sonsorol, but in Koror, they were displaced from the island's culture. The group grew to 18 members ranging from 16 to 35 years old. One of their main goals is to collect and preserve the history, culture, custom, and heritage of Sonsorol State for the youth and future generation and create programs that teach the traditions, customs, and history (Miles & Nestor 2017: 22). The SSWA also have held basic basket weaving classes for kids and adults in the community. Parallel to this there is Thafaas (Sonsorol Men's Association) which taught Sonsorolese traditional canoe carving. This was videotaped for preservation of the craft and the language as well. The recordings help to document and preserve the knowledge for future generations as well as for the ones living in the diaspora. The Sonsorolese community also has a Sonsorolese Bible translation project, which is ongoing and is also an effort for language preservation. Another project is the ethnography effort by a PhD Student at SOAS, University

of London and a Sonsorolese BA student from Hilo (Hawai'i) to standardize writing for Sonsorol and Hatohobei. In addition to this, there are annual national cultural events that give opportunities for the younger generation to learn some traditional dances and chants, for example United Nations Day (24 October) or "Olechotel Belau Fair", where all the states and all nationalities in Palau showcase their cultural heritage. This is when Sonsorolese people perform their cultural dances and show or sell handicrafts as well as traditional dishes. Such festivities are an important part of Sonsorolese cultural identity and a sense of belonging to Sonsorol. Often performances of dances and other practices are recorded so that migrants can participate.

In 2005 the Sonsorolese community also had a canoe carving project in Eang as part of the Southwest Islands Community Learning Network for the youth of Eang where a master carver taught them how to build a canoe, and the project was enthusiastically received. Traditional healing is also kept alive in Eang as much as possible. Samu Bemar, a traditional healer, for example, straightened my Sonsorolese brother Mark's broken arm every day after a fracture, prepared an herbal packet and let it act on the arm. This way, no plaster cast was needed, and the arm healed in a very short time without any problems. Mark combined the best of "both worlds" and took advantage

of both conventional medicine and traditional healing by also bringing x-rays from the hospital in Meyuns to the first session with the traditional healer.

Conclusion

Migration has always been a key feature of Sonsorolese identity. However, the biographies of Sonsorolese people today are much more diverse than in the past and developing a Sonsorolese identity growing up away from the island faces numerous challenges – depending, especially on the cultural knowledge of the family and connections to their home island, but also on how Sonsorolese are treated in their migration destinations. Due to the influences to which the Sonsorolese identity is exposed in migratory contexts, people constantly have to renegotiate their identity and Sonsorolese manage to do this through their great flexibility. They often combine the positive aspects of the opportunities that open up for them in their new home with their cultural heritage.

In addition to that they strongly identify with their home island and they continue to interact socially and culturally with their or their ancestors' place of origin. Therefore, Sonsorolese emigrants are not caught between two cultures or have to give up their culture of origin. Instead, they navigate both systems. By flexibly dealing with and synthesising the cultural influences of different sides in the course of their migration, they and their children growing up in migration are able to form and maintain new stable Sonsorolese identities.

For many Pacific Islanders migration is a normality and mobility as well as return visits to the islands are an integral part of their lives (Connell 2009b: 162). However, even though migration has always been part of the everyday life of Sonsorolese people, a much larger dimension is currently emerging. In that context, their transnational family networks retain their extraordinary importance and Sonsorol remains an anchor of their cultural identity in the diaspora.

Even though most Sonsorolese are very comfortable "navigating in two worlds", from the outside, it sometimes seems as if the Sonsorolese culture has been weakened in part. However,

the people have an awareness of these developments and are actively steering against them. Therefore, the importance of their material and immaterial culture is strengthened by numerous revitalisation projects that aim at teaching and preserving their material and immaterial cultural heritage and make it available to future generations and those living in migration. This is particularly evident in the activities of the “Young Historians of Sonsorol State”, an activist group that demonstrates how young people living far from their island of origin are working to preserve and pass on their culture.

The preservation of the Sonsorolese language is more difficult and it has undergone major changes in the last 15 years due to influences from outside Sonsorol. However, the Sonsorolese are counteracting this development successfully through various projects.

Despite all the obstacles, the Sonsorolese see themselves as an active community with agency and not as victims of out-migration and globalisation.

It remains to be seen how future generations of Sonsorolese growing up in the diaspora will deal with these challenges, how they will relate to their cultural heritage and how they will maintain and reproduce their cultural knowledge in the diaspora.

In this context, it will be interesting to re-examine issues pertaining to Sonsorolese culture, language and identity in a few years' time – for the ones in the diaspora as well as those remaining in the home island of Sonsorol.

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Endnotes

¹ Due to the small number of Sonsorolese people on Sonsorol and the migration destinations visited, I had the opportunity to speak with all adult Sonsorolese at the time of my research.

² For a detailed discussion of different identity theories and different types of identity relevant in this context, see Walda-Mandel 2016, chapter 4.

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