

# Invisible belongings: Carolinian practices of personhood and space as moral principles

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**Abstract:** Based on field research and published sources, this paper examines Micronesian migration in regards to principles of order and values on their home atolls. For Carolinians, place names and personal names are part of the web of intangible knowledge that can serve to assure certain positions and rights. They unfold the untold facts of gender and hierarchy and can be used as a peephole into social practice. Names and places represent stability and continuity in an otherwise fluid world. Migrants, I argue, can use such shared experiences of their “invisible belongings” to re-create some sense of home and build a community based on versions of these principles and values.

**Keywords:** Micronesia, Carolinians, personhood, identity, invisible belongings

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## Introduction

In this article I explore the relevance of names as identity markers for Carolinian people. If, following Mauss (1938), we assume that personhood and naming are closely related, the question arises how this affects mobility, in this case, migrants’ movements, and their association with places and family (see also Stewart & Strathern 2000:7). Here, I will focus on the Central Carolinian Islands, using historical and contemporary sources as well as my own field research data<sup>1</sup>.

As I learned during my fieldwork in Guam, Saipan, and on Woleai atoll, to

Carolinians, the movement of people in space is at all times a matter of gendered rules of sharing within the larger family. The relatedness of persons affects their choice of places and daily routine and is notably structured into separate, almost parallel worlds. People accept these inhibitions of free movement without reservation as they are more concerned about their status than about the desire to roam around. Individual paths in time and space give evidence of their personal qualities, just as the appearance of a compound, path, garden, or house gives evidence of the taste and diligence

of those who work there. Children’s attitudes reflect on their care-takers just as adult behavior reflects on personal virtue and family bonding. Enacting the rules of respect is paramount to being a respected person. Places become meaningful by being used and worked on; their appearance is the product of its ecological features and human agency. Micronesian author and activist Lino Olopai has also pointed out these values in his 2005 memoir. He told me about his urban upbringing on Americanized Saipan Island and his canoe voyages to Satawal atoll that helped him connect to his ancestors’ way of life (pers. comm., Jan 2005).

Toponyms are referential to the description and expression of experiential realities, they are, in Feld’s words, “deeply linked to the embodied sensation of places” (1996:113). They are anchors of memory as they tell stories of the past as well as of individual travels (roots and routes, as Clifford [1997] coined it); “mapping place into identity, conjoining temporal motion and spatial projection, re-inscribing past into the present, creating biography as itinerary” (Feld 1996:113). Basso has argued that “placenames may be used to summon forth an enormous range of mental and emotional associations – associations of time and space, of



Figure 1: A family home on Woleai, 2004.

Source: All photos by the author.



history and events, of persons and social activities, of oneself and stages in one's life" (1988:103). For Carolinians, toponyms are central to their sense of communality, as Peter, himself a Carolinian, has aptly stated: "If there is a frightening notion that most islanders share, it is the concept of being lost, being out of place, or the inability to make connection with a place" (2004:261). Without the knowledge of names, a person is lost in both physical and social space. Alkire has described place names as a system of Carolinian order (1970:69). The names of larger order are common reference points, such as a canoe house or a taro patch (Alkire 1970:41). He noted that "[t]he term *bwogotai*, which usually means 'of my land' or 'my relatives', may even be extended to include individuals of another island within the same lagoon, but certainly not between islands of different lagoons" (Alkire 1970:7).

Here, I am concerned with these values of the past and argue that they continue to be part of the process of settling as a migrant. While mobility and the adaptation to the hosts' value system have the potential to change the Carolinian concept of person, sense of place, and cultural identity (see Flinn 2000:157), names, codifying practice of identity, constructed as hierarchical relationships, continue to serve as identifying markers of being *refaluwash* (people of the sea, the local term for Carolinians). Today, Carolinian communities are spread throughout Micronesia and into the US (see Hezel 2001:146-14). For example, Marshall has described how "virtual kinship" is created through e-mail and telephone communication among migrants from Namoluk atoll to the US (2004:99). Underlying these and other emerging forms of diasporic and transnational (virtual) kinship are, I argue here, "invisible belongings" that shape what Carolinian migrants carry along (see Kuehling 2012); in a similar fashion as older notions of beauty are integrated into contemporary Roman-Catholic ritual on Pollap (Flinn 2010:141), or as flower garlands are used as manifestations of Carolinian identity on Saipan (Kuehling 2012).

### Names: One of a kind

Carolinian naming principles point to a concept of the person as a unique entity, connected to the world in partial



Figure 2: Women sharing food with their menfolk, Woleai 2004.

relations (Strathern 2004). Linguistic research on the proto-oceanic words for 'person' show that the concept (*\*tau*) includes spirits and the notion of being emplaced (*\*kai[n]*) (see Pawley 1985:98). Names are not inherited but individually composed and they are the standard form of address (unlike in many other areas in Oceania such as Pohnpei, Lieber 1990:92).

As persons and their places are conceived as a unity, names are central to identify one's position in social and physical space (Kawai 1987:121; Moral 2001; J. B. Thomas 1980). The importance of local names did not escape the German colonial officers who regulated the principles of naming and orthography, prioritizing the continuation of pre-existing names (Anonymous 1903:453-454). Personal names, for persons and places, appear as a stable element in the otherwise fluid and adaptable world of Carolinians. Due to their uniqueness, and because they are regarded as valuable knowledge, names are keys to history and power, as I was told on Woleai; and thus part of the 'invisible belongings' that Carolinian migrants carry along.

M. J. Fox was involved in the de-colonizing process of the curriculum in Yap State (1999). In that context, she conducted many meetings with local elders of both sexes within Woleai atoll to develop a "culturally relevant curriculum" (1999:20) between July 1996 and August 1998. The lists of relevant topics that she has published in appendices begin with "respect for persons (chiefs, elders, guests, clan, family, each other)", next is "respect for places (land/island, sea, lagoon, living area,

high places, house front, men's house, front part of the men's house, others' places, land property/family land, to stay in one's own area, sacred and scary places" (1999:247).

I hold that the order of this listing was carefully structured by the elders, reflecting on the similarly ranked order of persons and places. To respect an island, and the ocean, can be translated as an overall attitude of care and conservation, the adherence to the rules and ethics and the acceptance of the existing hierarchy. This includes the general rule of staying in one's own area and not to bother others without good reason. The ranked pattern of named persons and places is brought to life by the islanders' practice, their embodied experience, and their gendered personalities and relations. Fox has observed that to Carolinians, "respect" is "a set of prescribed actions" (1999:226) rather than a personal feeling (*ibid.*).

The invisible connections between people, places, spirits, animals, plants, and the ubiquitous breeze that connects them all combine to a world view that is not restricted to a specific space but rather a flexible set of identity markers.<sup>2</sup> Ingold proposed the notion of "sentient ecology" to "capture the kind of knowledge people have of their environments (2000:25). If we follow Ingold's (2000:232) definition of mapping as "the re-enactment, in narrative gesture, of the experience of moving from place to place within a region", names are the narrative key to maps that enable individuals to position themselves, and others, in the limited space of their atolls. Such mapping is important for morally valued behavior,





Figure 3: Families having their evening bath in their respective beach zones, Woleai 2004.

and every individual continually updates a gendered, age-specific mental map of people and their places as well as the paths that lead to them.

### Place: the world of atolls

On the atolls, everyday practice requires knowledge of the hierarchies of persons and places. There is an invisible grid of rank that distinguishes the compounds, based on the relative position of the owner clan, resident clan, and the seniority of the lineage within the clan. The ranking order of place deserves attention because it prescribes spatial movement, the perception of the environment, and the sense of place in various ways. When staying at places of others, a visitor needs to show respect (*gassorou*) by taking up little space, stooping with a hand behind one's back (*gebbarog*), and never walking past the front of persons who sit on the ground (Lessa 1950:45). The physical environment of Carolinian atolls is divided into named zones. These areas are distinguished by their appearance and value. Place names are based on particular characteristics, events, or people, associated sometime in the past with the location (Alkire 1970:56). Names that I was told include past events (e.g., 'cutting a turtle'), personal history ('people washed to the beach', 'head rest place of chief' etc.), orientation in space (e.g., 'look over the lagoon'), the character of persons (e.g., 'to do something well with hands'), landmarks (e.g., 'under the Lel-tree'), the presence of spirits or persons (e.g., 'where Yaot is in the ground'), esoteric/navigational knowledge (Maailap/the star Altair), or points of secret measurements in canoe

making (Maluwelmeng, pers. comm.; 2002: 102).

Being at one's home compound, or at a closely related place, gives a person the right to walk around freely, to check the kitchen area for leftovers, to use the well and the beach that belongs to the compound, to enter the house for a nap, in short, to feel at home. It also means that one is treated according to age and gender; a woman may be asked to assist with domestic chores while a man may be asked to provide woodwork or move a heavy object. Feeling at home includes a constant awareness of cross-sex-siblings' movements, to avoid touching their belongings and to stay away from them if possible.

All land and lagoon areas (as well as fishing spots in the ocean) belong to one of the ranked matrilineal clans and are nominally controlled by its elders and, ultimately, by the clan chief. In this way, Carolinians live in a gendered, stratified space, where multiply linked relatedness is realized in individual efforts to activate the social options. The complexity of links is organized in hierarchies of named units, of both persons and places, as on Ifaluk, where "[a] hierarchy of rank runs through the whole society. In it each individual has a place; and standards of good behavior require each to show by his conduct that he 'knows his place'. This involves not only deference towards superiors, but a certain lordliness toward inferiors not in informal contacts, but on occasions of state" (Burrows & Spiro 1953:179).

The relative status of a clan is based on the time of settlement on the island (Moral 1998:61; Burrows & Spiro 1953:184). The amount of land

under the control of a clan is a second determining factor (Alkire 1970:60; Metzgar 2008:393). Each clan has a specific role in the political life, in line with, or stemming from, the ranking order of clans (Alkire 1965:32; 1970; Flinn 1992:47; Metzgar 2008:80, 302).

Flexibility is created by adoption of babies. When a woman adopts her brother's child, a frequent form of 'sharing children', he or she may assume his biological father's clan identity (see Marshall 1983:211). Most children are adopted and mostly live with their new family, frequently visiting their birth family and performing at the ceremonies of both families if possible.<sup>3</sup> The role that they assume during celebrations of birth, puberty, and the rituals of death alludes to their family relations, but activities are the only clue to kinship as this is not a topic of open discussion and as everyday activities are usually carried out within the adopted family.

The matrilineage, hence, is not the normal residential unit as adoption mixes up relations of descent. While matrilocal residence is the norm, with most women living under the watchful eye of their mother, lineages are often spread over the entire islet and even further. Lineages are not named but the name of the compound of residence is used as reference. Every person belongs to the maternal compound, and most people are also attached to their adoptive mother's compound. They feel equally at home at the father's and/or adoptive father's place. This sense of belonging to places is indicating their relative rank and their set of relatives more than a genealogy based on descent (based on author's fieldnotes).

Land is divided into male and female zones that partly remain stable (canoe house, taro patch) and partly are created when the need arises (parties for visitors, female celebrations, care for sick relatives). Rules of brother-sister avoidance encourage men to spend their time in the company of other men, in a canoe house, or off shore in a boat. Women are expected to stay near their compound areas, keeping the children nearby for constant supervision and monitoring. When a woman notices a brother approaching on the same path, she will simply sit down at the side and wait until he has passed by. As Waterson has remarked for Eastern Indonesia, "the predominant theme

is not separation and opposition, but rather the complementarity of male and female and their bringing together in fertile fusion" (1993:225).

Women spend most of the time in their compound and their attached beach strips, in the taro gardens, or between these places. Some areas near the beach are restricted for men at special occasions. When giving birth, or celebrating the first menstruation of a girl, women temporarily move into a small and often rather shabby hut in the beach area. Great amounts of food are prepared and the men bring a large quantity of fish to be cooked and distributed there. These female zones can be entered by men, e.g., when they bring fish or pick up cooked food, but men are expected not to stay around.

Men spend most of their time in the canoe houses (unless they are harvesting palm-toddy) or in a boat. The men's daily rounds, at 6 am, noon, and 6 pm, when the palm toddy is collected by virtually all men who are allowed to cut toddy, are kept with an intense punctuality, in Alkire's words, "the one task each man will complete each day, save when on his death bed" (1965:88). At these times the women mostly remain around the compound, sitting and waiting for their brothers to bring their share of non-alcoholic toddy. The fermented toddy is consumed in the canoe house and women are not supposed to drink it at all (Damm & Sarfert 1935:47).

Each of these canoe houses has a personal name. These names often refer to winds, or to something that can be seen when sitting there, e.g., "watch the canoes approaching", "house in the wind", or "look over the lagoon". Building such a large house was a secret art of specialists (Alkire 1970:17; LeBar 1963:68; Metzgar 2008:200). The strip of land between the canoe house and the beach is occupied by the men's drinking circle setup, some logs or a free space with basic sitting facilities. The canoe house area extends further into the lagoon, to a passage for canoes in the reef. An overgrown spot of sacred land under a coconut tree nearby may be used for rituals. These large houses are called *fal*-, or *ut* – with various specifying additions and some regional variations. They are used as sleeping place for unmarried men and men under sexual restrictions, as a place to host visiting men, and as shelter for the canoes. The clan who builds



Figure 4: Women spending the afternoon with various chores and moments of leisure, Woleai 2004.

it uses it for meetings and, formerly, for rituals involving spirits, healing, sorcery, and weather magic (Kubary 1889:51; Metzgar 2008:176; Schlesier 1953:98; Yalfaleyal 1997). While in the past there were special men's houses for the purposes of magic and the teaching of secret knowledge, conversion to Christianity has led to a general decline of magic and to the exclusive maintenance of canoe houses. These houses are only used by men and children, but women are allowed on the land-facing side when explicitly invited by the chief (Damm & Sarfert 1935:124-125; Damm 1938:79-80). Women can only enter during special rituals, such as at *shuufeliuw*, i.e., the appointment of a new chief (based on author's fieldnotes).

Men usually spend most of their time at the canoe houses, making ropes, repairing nets, carving, building and maintaining fish traps, canoes, and looms, or observing the sea and the sky (see Burrows & Spiro 1953:318). In the past, they also produced wooden boxes for fishing tackle, decorated bamboo containers, and large bowls for ceremonial food presentations and other carvings (see Krämer 1937:239), but these arts are not practiced any more. Hambruch characterized male endeavors as "active but slow" (Damm & Sarfert 1935:27). My male informants insisted that this was an outsider's view and that they were rather on "stand-by mode", ready to jump into action when necessary, and constantly alert in watching the coastline (Alkire 1965:95).

Inside the canoe house, the communal fishing net of the village is stored. It nominally belongs to the chief who rules

the canoe house and its surrounding area (Burrows & Spiro 1953: 146, 166; author's fieldnotes). When a new net needs to be made, a ten-by-ten section of the net is given to the canoe house by each compound. These pieces are joined together to be kept there and used by the men. Distributions of fish follow these house units in an egalitarian way, as those places that have contributed will receive a share of fish, whenever the net is used (Damm & Sarfert 1935:115). The kinship and connectedness with the place, symbolized by each segment of the net, is memorized together with the other compounds that have contributed. Those fishing nets hence become a legitimizing tool for questions of land rights and family relations – invisible to any Western researcher but a good example of the stability, flexibility and the veiling of actual relationships. As these nets do not last for more than 10-15 years, the re-evaluation of distribution patterns for fish caught with nets occurs in these intervals.

In Carolinian songs and stories, names of islands, canoe houses, sea space, and persons carry sentiment and implicitly situate the performer in social space. Burrows' substantial collection of songs from Ifaluk (1963) shows that, unlike in some other areas of Oceania, topogenies (see J.J. Fox 1997) are rare (unless they have not been recorded). The songs about persons are still practiced, composed, and memorized, in spite of the changes in lifestyle. As a principle, only women compose songs (Alkire 1991:384). They are, with a different melody, sung over dead bodies (Maluwelmeng 2002:26; Damm





Figure 5: A meeting inside the canoe house, Woleai 2004.

& Sarfert 1935:270). Some people believe, however, that their importance is declining because of the attraction of Western music (of foreign and local making). Metzgar has confirmed that there is “a very rich body of folklore, some of which is restricted to chiefs, lineage heads, and *rong* practitioners” (2008:146).

Every few years during typhoon season, violent gales and torrential rains destroy the agricultural and horticultural efforts of the women, eroding the soil on footpaths and in the residential areas, flooding the taro swamps with salt water, felling shrubs and trees, and wrecking the buildings and flower gardens. An adaptation to this contested space is embedded in the islanders’ sense of place. As it is based on memory, relationships, practice, and knowledge, individuals can reconstruct the layout of invisible boundaries that divide land and sea between them. This sense of place can survive the physical destruction of all resources and a displacement of its inhabitants because of their mental mapping and their successful system of decision-making. Once the landmarks and boundaries are re-established, gendered, emplaced practice takes over and ensures survival.

The following example from Woleai Atoll will show how this system operates. In World War II, small Falalop islet became a victim of international politics. In 1944, the islanders were displaced and 7,000 Japanese soldiers were stationed there.<sup>4</sup> American bombing cut Woleai from new supplies so that most Japanese died on Falalop. Their conditions during the sixteen months on Falalop were

characterized by Peattie as “living hell” (2000:305). In spite of their efforts to plant vegetables most of them died of starvation and infections while hoping for a ship to bring food and medicine. Too late, submarines broke the blockade – after the surrender, only 1,600 Japanese were evacuated by the Americans (Peattie 2000:306).

When the islanders could return home, they faced a wasteland: the soil was bare or covered in concrete, almost all the trees were gone and the main taro swamp was partly covered by a runway. The islanders knew that no food could be grown for a couple of years. To them, their islet had turned into *welielango* (a big pile of rocks outside in the sea), not only because the place was just as barren but also because it resembled a traditional maritime graveyard, where the bodies decay but the stones that are used to sink them remain in place. The few Japanese vegetable gardens were ready for harvest and in the bunkers, so I was told, they found food that the Japanese had left behind. So, for four and a half years the islanders lived on fish, rice and canned provisions until the land was re-cultivated and yielded the first crops again. Chief Mairal recalled that

“The chiefs looked around the island, they believed that we can survive, that we have food and they made a party, they called it Falalop (Woleai) day, on May 9, and we celebrated. Like thanksgiving” (pers. comm., June 2004).

In short, island space, though totally bare of its previous landmarks and spotted with new structures and bomb

craters, was returned into island places without significant conflicts.<sup>5</sup> The joint effort of the islanders and their helpers built up two dimensions of their place. Their mental maps had to be unfolded on the islet, re-establishing the main patterns (compounds, villages, areas of clan land). As beaches, reefs and the coastline in general had remained relatively unaltered by the events of WW II, inland areas could be reconstructed according to their relative positions. Thanks to the chiefs’ ultimate control over clan land, these ‘hard boundaries’ were re-installed without difficulty. Alkire also comments on the “close approximation of the pre-war condition” (1970:65n).

More generally, pre-war practice, such as gardening, picking of flowers and medical plants, and collecting fruits and firewood, had led to a detailed knowledge of the terrain in their small areas, as individuals worked on their plots of land – in the taro swamps, near the compounds, and in dry inland areas. In some places, especially in the center of the islet, however, user rights had to be modified to cater for the needs of all families and to compensate for the loss of a large swamp area that had become the runway. Other new features, like those bomb craters that could be turned into taro patches, were taken into consideration as well to provide a fair distribution.

The fluidity of kinship relations and the tendency to veil one’s range of options until they are activated in public is in line with the use of place names as a code for kinship. These names are markers of memory as they transcend death and devastation. Chief Mairal, a child at that time, recalled this process of re-naming the land in a conversation with me:

“If the lands were attached, they went to see them in different family groups and stood around ‘and this is maybe that land – *they called the name* -, and maybe that land – *they called the name* – maybe our boundary is here’ [laughs]; they did like that. Also in the taro patch: if these two or three different families came and looked around for boundaries, and they did not agree, they said ‘maybe that person there or that person there will know’ and they go and call [him or her] to come and to estimate the boundaries” (Chief Mairal, June 2004, emphasis added).

In sum, the underlying political



principles of seniority and matrilineal descent in a ranked clan system help to avoid both wasteful neglect and resource exploitation by organizing the tasks in a consensus-based form of discourse in which chiefs come to a decision that most people support. While flexible systems of integration, fusion and fission within the wider region are required for coping with typhoons, disease, and conflict, certain stable factors mirror Carolinian identity:

- The use of names for orientation in time and space
- A grid of dualisms: inside/outside, back/front, low/high, female/male (see Alkire 1970:66, 70, 1972; Alkire & Fujimura 1990:75; Feinberg 1988)
- The practice of this dualism and of social relations by following the rules of respect, in spatial movement and language as well as in relationships (Douglass 1998:138)
- Fish and fishing, especially in the world of men (see Lieber 1994; Maluweleng 2002)
- The gardening of food and flowers, and the raising of children as female fields of qualification and stability

These “invisible belongings” fit into any suitcase and pass any customs; they allow Carolinians to bond and re-create family ties based on shared spaces and constructed ancestry.

### Mobility: Linking the dots

Alkire writes that “(t)he world of the Woleaians is made up of numerous small dots of land scattered about a vast ocean. Survival, to a certain extent, depends on maintaining contact between these discrete units (1970: 71)”. So far, the focus of this paper has been on atoll life, but for Carolinian men, movement on the ocean has always been the most important side of their lives. Fishing, trading, visiting, exploring, and returning home to a good meal were as important as the option to load the family and flee the atoll when a typhoon has destroyed all the foliage and crops (see Flinn 1992:31; for eye witness accounts on typhoons see, e.g., Born & Fritz 1907; M. J. Fox 1999:91).

The navigators know their paths across the open sea, using individually named units and the movement of the stars as references. While the sets of names differ between the various schools of navigation, the principles are similar



Figure 6: Typhoon damage on Woleai, 2004.

(Alkire 1970:46; 1980). In Woleaian, the fundamental distinction between land and sea is a central metaphor, because the term for ‘in’ differs according to the sphere referred to. “In the house”, or “in the taro patch”, for example, are expressed with the prefix *ni-*, while the prefix *le-* is used to refer to the maritime world, as in “in the canoe”, or “in the ocean”. The vernacular also alludes to a metaphorical link between the land and the sea, as clan land is called “our canoe” (Chief Mairal, pers. comm., 2004).

The transmission of spatial knowledge of the sea is an individual affair, where male students are chosen according to their clan affiliation, intelligence, and personal conduct. Metzgar explains the system of inheritance of such restricted knowledge based on clan affiliation and personal conduct:

“The *taurong* looks at his children and adopted children and observes

their behavior. Who gives him fish and tobacco? Which of their wives sends him food? Those who give most receive most” (2008:149).

To sum up, place names and personal names are part of the web of intangible knowledge that can serve to assure certain positions and rights. They unfold the untold facts of gender and hierarchy and can be used as a peephole into social practice. For Carolinians, whether on their home atolls or in urban settings, names and places represent stability and continuity in an otherwise fluid world. These values and principles of old might be in conflict with the messages of the market economy, but in creative ways, migrants use their shared ontologies to build new identities as Carolinians by unpacking some of their “invisible belongings” to re-create some sense of home and build a community.



Figure 7: A canoe from Woleai, 2004.



## Endnotes

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<sup>2</sup> I have discussed the relevance of the breeze in a previous article (Kuehling 2012). Dernbach mentions the option of Mortlockese to name a child after the initials of a spirit (2005:315).

<sup>3</sup> See Alkire (1965:54, 142); Carroll (1970); Douglass (1998); Flinn (1992:64); Lessa (1966:94); Maluweleng (2002:18).

<sup>4</sup> Local elders estimate that there were about 300 adults on Falalop, half the current population. According to Burrows & Spiro's informant 'Tom', 375 people came to Ifaluk during WW II (1953:51).

<sup>5</sup> Some of the debris from WW II was removed after a while. Americans helped to clear the explosives but the bodies were retrieved much later by the Japanese who also left a memorial plate. Burrows & Spiro mention a U.S. coast guard detachment on Falalop (Woleai) (1953:2).

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