THE BREADFRUIT TREE STORY: MYTHOLOGICAL TRANSFORMATIONS IN PALAUAN POLITICS

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In February of 1990 Palauans[1] held their seventh plebiscite on whether to approve a Compact of Free Association with the United States--the latest in an eleven-year series of referenda and elections on the national and state levels to establish constitutional systems of government and end the U.S. trusteeship administration of this small Pacific island nation. In early December 1989 one of the first signs that yet another plebiscite would be held was the erection of two political campaign billboards on the main streets of the capital city of Koror.[2] During previous plebiscites the roadsides of Koror were peppered with brightly painted billboards, outward images of the deep political divisions in Palau. In the tense, at times violent Palauan political conflicts of the 1980s, the battles of the billboards provided one arena in which confrontation could be depersonalized, the disagreements contained to attempts to persuade voters through striking images of what Palau is or should be. Opposing sides appropriated Palauan cultural histories, legends, and proverbs as each sought to demonstrate its true Palauan identity deeply rooted in the past in a visual art form derived from the ubiquitous Palau storyboards, which were themselves derived from the carved end gables and interior beams of *bai* (chiefly and community meetinghouses)--symbol of the Palauan polity.[3]

In Palau the deadly serious game of politics is itself a high art form, bringing the canons of chiefly expression into the village at large. What in the past was alluded to in mnemonic *bai* beam carvings, to be decoded by chiefly explicators, is now in public view for all to see and interpret for themselves. The messages of most signs are clear but at

Pacific Studies, Vol. 15, No. 4--December 1992

times require a viewer to be educated in the histories and traditions of Palau to appreciate the multilayered communications so prized by the chiefs, to be able to catch all the subtle nuances of geographical reference, personal and political play. Some signs support alternate interpretations, inviting the viewer to see a position in a new light, taking the burden of statement from the artist and giving it to the viewer. At the metalevel of communication the message may directly contradict the overt image, depending upon the orientation and knowledge of the receiver, following centuries-old practices of chiefly *kelulau* (secret coded political communications).

Palauan history is the history of transformation, of re-creation out of the structure and essence of the past. The physical world, the cosmological sequences of worlds--even the gods themselves--are created out of their precursors. Rather than the endless "begats" of the biblical Genesis, the Palauan creation story is a series of transformations, of the incorporation of change through the structures of the past. People turn to the past to validate position and power, incorporating signs such as the *bai* gable to stand for the new constitutional government, a radically different structure. Chiefly past and constitutional present do coexist, most often working together but at times in confrontation. In this small community, politics may become highly charged, yet the outward norm of harmonious relations must be maintained. Multilayered visual and oral communications, subject to alternate interpretations, remain one of the safer ways to express opposition.

From the wealth of Palau's political imagery I have chosen to focus on the *bai* and its transformation. Once architectural container and symbol of the body politic--the chiefly council--and focus of the village's artistic expression and iconographic representation, the *bai* has today become a disembodied icon, with images of its distinctive gable now used at all levels to represent Palau, and more specifically, Palauan government. I further trace the artistic progression that directly links the *bai* and the billboards: from *bai* gable and interior beam carvings, to storyboards, to paintings, to painted billboards. From the hundreds of stories and histories once preserved on the *bai* beams, I have chosen the one, the Breadfruit Tree Story, that figures prominantly in *bai* gable carvings both past and present and is ubiquitous on storyboards produced for tourists, billboards, and contemporary paintings. The story condenses the mythological history and transformation of the goddess of the current world. By tracing the transformations of one of Palau's key symbols, the Breadfruit Tree, as well as transformations of the media of artistic expression, I will demonstrate that the arts not only reflect polit-

ical and structural transformations of Palauan society but are in themselves active agents through which Palauans negotiate such changes.

Contemporary Palau

About thirteen thousand Palauans today inhabit the predominantly high, andesitic islands of the Palauan archipelago in the westernmost Caroline Islands just north of the equator, due east of Mindanao in the Philippines and north of Irian Jaya. Another five thousand live in the United States and its Pacific territories, drawn overseas by opportunities for higher education or employment. The early population of this culturally homogeneous group[4] has been estimated at twenty to fifty thousand, but contact with Western diseases reduced the population to about four thousand by the beginning of the twentieth century. Today's population is youthful, with 71 percent under the age of thirty years in 1980 (PCAA 1983: table 34).

While its largest island, Babeldaob, is large by Micronesian standards, the land area of the entire Republic of Palau is under five hundred square kilometers--smaller than the island of Moloka'i in Hawai'i. Its importance in global politics during the last decade far surpasses either its land or population size. Palau was the first country to adopt a nuclear-free constitution, and its continuing confrontation with the United States over this and other issues has led to its prominence within Pacific, U.S., and worldwide antinuclear movements. This last remnant of the U.S. Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands, itself the last trust territory in the world, has established a constitutional government but has been unable, despite severe internal and U.S. economic and political pressures, to resolve its future relationship with the United States. Its continual confrontation with the United States, expressed by the worldwide media in "David and Goliath" imagery, has captured international attention.

In 1980, after a series of three referenda, Palauans overwhelmingly adopted a new constitutional form of government strongly influenced by the American model. Executive, legislative, and judicial functions were split into separate branches, with an elected president and vice-president holding national executive power. In the past the autonomous villages had joined together into confederations headed by two paramount chiefs; today one chief of each village (now called "states" of the nation of Palau) joins in a national-level Council of Chiefs, which is mandated to advise the president only on matters of tradition and custom. In practice, however, the power of individual chiefs varies according to the new state constitutions, and many contemporary practices

can still be best understood in the framework of the symbolic and historical relationships between villages and the interconfederation competition between the paramount chieftaincies of Melekeok and Koror. There has also been an overt attempt to embed the present in the past: the legislature is called the Olbiil era Kelulau (House of Whispers)[5] in an evocation of the past's chiefly council houses--in which negotiations were conducted according to strict, private protocols--even though the legislature is the house of elected members, not the meetinghouse for the Council of Chiefs. The national seal is an artistic representation of the gabled front of the meetinghouses of the highest-ranking villages, and a mini-*bai* was used for the inauguration of the first president and first constitutional government.

Mythohistorical Background, or The Birth of Belau

The histories of the time of the gods depict constant transformations, the rebirths of gods during the long period of creation (for fuller texts, see Umetaro 1974; Parmentier 1988; Nero 1987). In Palauan cosmology life developed from the sea, from the mother clam, Kim er a Lukes, who lived in the shallow reef area off Angaur and there gave birth first to the fishes and then to three gods: Tellebuu from whom clans *(kebliil)* were born, Uchererak who ascended into heaven, and finally Chuab. During his lifetime Chuab established the system of Palauan government, naming chiefly titles and councils in the seven villages of the First World, who became known as his children: Ngerchol, Ngurusar, Ngeruikl, Mengellang, Ngermid, Ngersuul, and Ulimang (Society of Historians 1990:12). In his death, according to some, the falling body of Chuab formed the very islands of Palau. Men and women were born of the maggots that consumed his body, coupling and inhabiting the new land. Thus from Chuab came Belau, who in turn was reborn as Dirramellomes (She Who Brought Light to the World), Dilidechuu, Iluochel (the goddess who brought taro, the main starch food), and finally Dirrachedebsungel (Woman of the Chedebsungel Tree).

It is as Dirrachedebsungel that the god/goddess becomes one of the core symbols of contemporary Palau, represented in the Breadfruit Tree Story (Meduu Ribtal). Versions abound, yet the key elements of this moral tale summarized below remain the same.

The Breadfruit Tree Story

An old woman, Dirrachedebsungel, lived alone on the island of Ngibtal after being abandoned by her fellow villagers, who

had decided to move on to a better site. Since Dirrachedebsungel had no husband or children to care for her, she was considered a liability and not told of the move. Luckily she had a special tree growing outside her home, a wondrous breadfruit tree on which grew large, green fruits. So even though she was too old to go work in the taro swamps, she could still obtain starches to cook. But she had no husband or sons living with her to provide her with fish. One of her sons, who was part god, heard of her plight and returned to assist her. He dove under the island until he reached the roots of the tree and made a hole through the main root up into one of the branches. And then from that day forward whenever the waves tossed, fishes came out of the branch for Dirrachedebsungel.

Eventually the people of Ngibtal learned of this magical tree possessed by Dirrachedebsungel, and they were jealous of her good fortune. Why should the women have to slave in the taro patches and the men spend all their time fishing? They went to visit the old woman to share in her bounty. But being greedy, they were not content just to receive the fishes as they came forth from the branch. They cut off the branches and finally the main trunk of the tree to obtain its riches. Then all the waters of the sea flowed through the trunk and flooded the island, which is why today Ngibtal has sunk beneath the seas. If you look carefully off the coast near Ngiwal, you can still today see the remains of the village under the sea.

The magical Breadfruit Tree is the most popular cultural image in Palau, and it has come today to stand for Palau and the wealth of its natural resources. In 1910 a depiction of the Breadfruit Tree Story decorated the gable of one of the Koror community houses, which was photographed and published in the German Südsee Expedition account (see Figure 1). Renditions of the story today decorate official community structures such as the gable of the Civic Center in Koror, a modern architectural interpretation of a traditional *bai*. The Breadfruit Tree Story is one of the most commonly chosen themes for storyboards carved for visitors from abroad as a souvenir of their visit to Palau, and it has decorated storyboards officially given by the Republic of Palau to U.S. officials.

In a way the Breadfruit Tree is an unlikely "key symbol" (Ortner 1974), since in itself breadfruit is little valued, taro and fish being the quintessential female starch and male protein foods required for a proper meal. However, the story is visually striking and readily accessi-

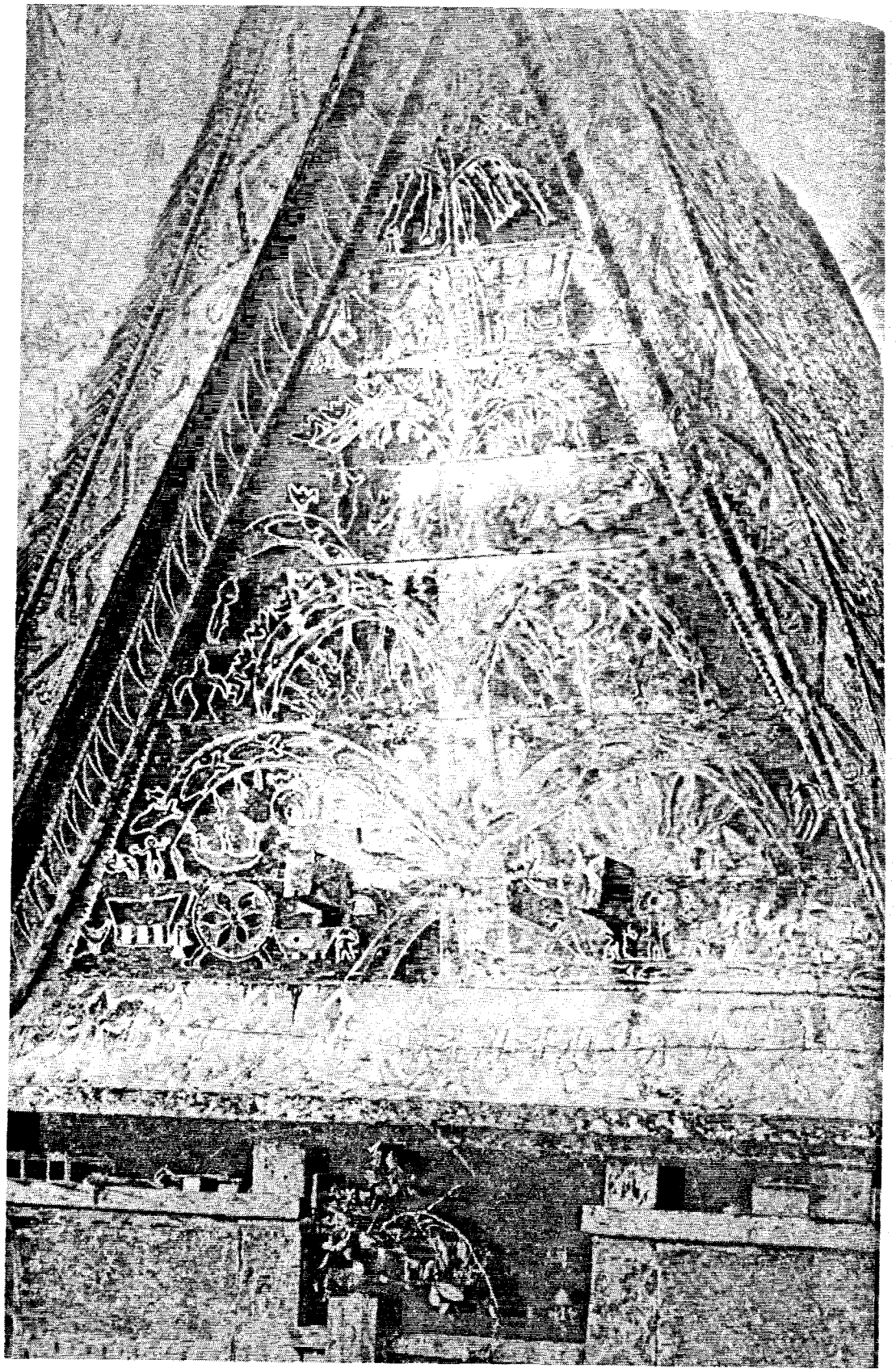


FIGURE 1. **South gable of Bai er a Dngeronger, depicting the mythohistorical Breadfruit Tree, Koror, 1909.** (From Krämer 1917: plate 5)

ble to those ignorant of Palauan traditions. It magically incorporates both female and male productivity, and the easily comprehended summary of the story carries the important moral injunctions to care for the elderly and not be too greedy, The reason that Dirrachedebsungel *does* stand for Palau--specifically the Palauan polity--is further coded in history and legend. Cultural knowledge is required to make the additional transformation.

The Story of Milad

> And while the island of Ngibtal was sinking, Dirrachedebsungel crossed over to Ngerchebukl and lived under a *bkau* tree, so she became Dirrauchulabkau (Woman from Under the Bkau).
>
> While called Dirrauchulabkau, the woman gained the favor of the seven messengers of the gods. They asked her to cook rabbitfish for them while they completed their assignment from the gods to find who was responsible for stealing the eye of the gods' watchman. When the messengers returned Dirrauchulabkau gave them their baskets of food, and they departed. When they opened the baskets they were at first angry to find only taro, then pleased when they opened the taro to find that the rabbitfish had been tenderly cooked inside. Thus the messengers of the gods vowed to save the old woman when the world was flooded in retribution for the theft. They returned and instructed the woman to build a raft to save herself when the waters rose.
>
> After the waters receded, they returned again to find the woman but found that the raft had overturned and the woman drowned, so they went to beg assistance from the gods to bring the woman back to life. When she came back to life she then became Milad (She Who Was Dead).
>
> Milad is the founding goddess of the Second World of Palau. She gave birth to the stone representations of the four leading villages of today's polity: the eldest son, Ngeremlengui, followed by the son Melekeok, the daughter Aimeliik, and finally the youngest son, Oreor (in English, spelled Koror).

Thus Dirrachedebsungel, the woman of the Breadfruit Tree Story, is in fact an earlier form of Milad, the founding goddess of the contemporary World of Milad, and thus signifies Palau. Today many younger

Palauans do not yet know the connections of the Breadfruit Tree Story with Milad. In the past the histories were known by the male and female elders, who drew upon them to make particular points or admonitions. Only the parts of the story relevant to the issue at hand might be told--the histories were not told as one long, complete tale, as one overall text. In the oral histories the stories exist as discrete units, some as small moral tales known by the general public, others as more serious clan and village histories controlled and told only by the proper ranking elders who alone knew all their interconnections.[6] Stories were associated with villages, and village histories as well as significant new events would be recorded in the *bai* carvings, the new becoming in turn sedimented onto the past through existing media and structures (see Parmentier 1985a, 1988).

A true innovation or incorporation from abroad, such as the architecture of the Palauan *bai,* which radically differs from all other Carolinian community house constructions, became Palauan by being embedded in the past through founding legends. During normal times, and even in the presence of cataclysmic change, people hold strongly to the symbolic and structural bases by which they understand their lives and the events impinging on them. By far the most common way to incorporate current events is through structures of the past (Sahlins 1981a). Only when the changes are too great to be contained within the existing structure may there be both a structural and corresponding symbolic transformation.

The histories given above capture one such symbolic transformation, so great that it is coded as a shift between worlds--the first, the World of Chuab, governed by the seven village "sons" of the gods, and the second, the World of Milad, governed by the four village "children" of Milad. Yet not all structural transformations or symbolic mediations are accepted (see Nero 1989:140 for one apparent failed attempt at symbolic transformation in Palau). And there may be a considerable time lag between structural change and symbolic interpretation. Although the villages of Ngeremlengui, Melekeok, Aimeliik, and Koror had clearly replaced Chuab's villages in political importance by 1783, as they were described in a book by shipwrecked Englishmen who spent three months there building a new boat (Keate 1803), it appears that the history of the goddess Milad was not told to the British then or during a later expedition (1791). Yet by the 1860s, all foreign visitors who compiled written accounts recorded the history of Milad and her village children. It appears that in this case the' ideological explanation followed the new political structure, a true "invention of tradition" (Hobs-

bawm and Ranger 1983) to validate the power of the strong new consolidated villages.

A structural change thus became part of the cosmological cycle, through a new hegemonic tradition that encompassed the transformed political relationships, which in turn was incorporated into Palauan world cycles. In the past 150 years this tradition has become the accepted norm into which all new events and structures are subsumed. Even the radically different political relationships established by the 1980 Constitution of the Republic of Palau have not yet displaced the World of Milad in which intervillage relationships are still symbolically framed.

The *Bai* as Aesthetic Locus, as Symbol of Palau

Community house, council of chiefs, chants, and histories *(bai, klobak, chesols,* and *cheldecheduch)*--these are the core concepts, physically grounded in the meetinghouse, that cluster in any Palauan discussion of the essential Palauan way.[7] Lacking any generic label for something so basic, Palauans have adopted and transformed a Japanese word, adding *siukang* to their Palauan lexicon as the new "Palauan" word that today incorporates both custom and tradition. Like the borrowed word, Palauan customs selectively incorporate elements that have been added throughout the centuries. But as the initial listing of core concepts indicates, the essential symbol of custom and tradition, handed down from the past to the present, was the community house, the *bai* (Figure 2). The *bai* represented the polity--art, architecture, and political expression were inextricably interwoven. In the past the *bai* was the place of meeting and decision making, and the aesthetic locus (Maquet 1971) of the community. The chiefly councils and village clubs met in the *bai,* which were ranked and decorated according to the status of the village and the village council or club so housed (see Jernigan 1973 for a complete typology of *bai*).

The main village *bai* was the storehouse of the histories of the village, graphically represented in the low-relief carved paintings that covered the boards of the two peaked gables, one at each end of the thatch-roofed structure, and the interior beams (see Figure 5). The placement of decorative motifs on the *bai* followed a strict grammar, and Jernigan reports that it was common for *bai* artists to select the Breadfruit Tree Story for presentation on the gable, as the triangular shape of the tree provided an elegant artistic solution to fillingthe triangular area of the gable panel, which would otherwise be broken by a stacked series of

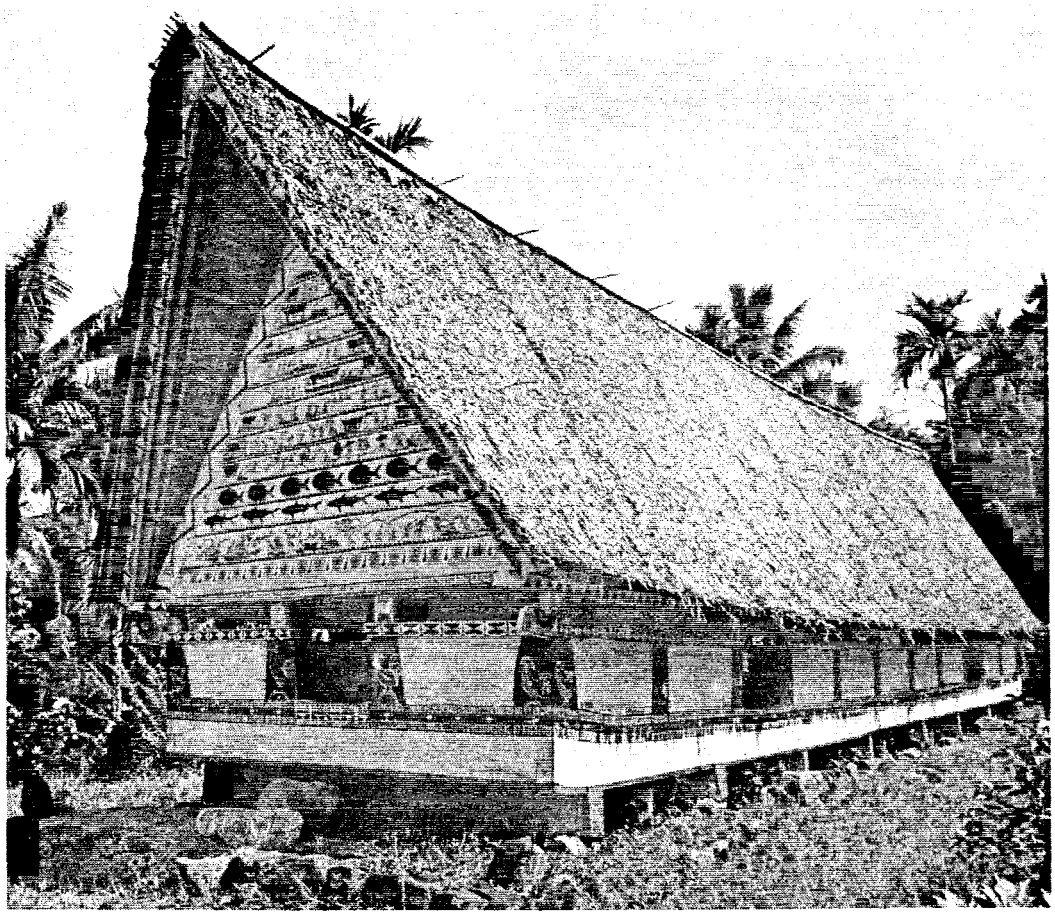


FIGURE 2. **Bai er a Airai, 1991.** (Photo by Karen L. Nero)

story beams (1973:115). The low-relief painted carvings served as mnemonic devices for the chiefly explanations, which might vary both by the storyteller and by the situation to which it was addressed (Kesolei 1971:13). Key images of the history of the village and its interrelationships with its friends and enemies were recorded and retold by the chiefs and elders who alone could decode the past and interpret its meaning.

While the Palauan *bai* and its decorative motifs clearly predate European influence,[8] the early meetinghouses were apparently little decorated, for they were not remarked upon by the shipwrecked British captain Henry Wilson and his men in 1783. The drawings made by Wilson's draftsman, Devis, greatly impressed the Palauans (Keate 1803: 69), as did the efficiency of metal tools. When the sailors departed they left behind what metal tools they could spare, sparking a flourishing of Palauan art and architecture. The next European visitors to Palau, a British expedition that arrived in 1791, described the splendid new

Koror *bai* that had been built since Wilson's departure. Comparison of the slightly Europeanized illustrations of this *bai* (Hockin 1803: plates opposite pp. 20-21 of the supplement) with present-day *bai* demonstrates that the placement of the main icons (chicken, the god of construction, money symbols, money god) and proportions of the *bai* have remained constant to this day.

During the next century artistic production continued to flourish, centered in the *bai,* which embodied both history and power. In 1910 German ethnographers Augustin and Elizabeth Krämer described eighty-five major *bai* in Palau and recorded more than two hundred historical stories and the locations in which each was depicted on *bai* throughout Palau. An analysis of the spatial representation of the stories indicates that *bai* carvings depicted not only village victories, but also stories ridiculing that village's enemies as well. The history of artistic confrontation is long established in Palau.

Destruction of community property--*bai* and war canoes--was more important to victory than numbers of warriors killed or captured during the nineteenth-century wars between Melekeok and Koror. These wars culminated in the 1882 destruction of fourteen of Melekeok's *bai* by a British man-of-war that was drawn into the fray. By the mid-twentieth century nearly all the ornately decorated men's houses had been destroyed by either typhoon or war--local Palauan wars or World War II.

Nothing captures the changes in the systems of government and the increasing individuation of Palauan society better than the changes in the construction and utilization of the *bai.* The thatch-roofed, hardwood *bai* contained the representations of local history. The *bai* was the focal point of the chiefly institution, the sacred and respected place where the chiefs met and from which all community decisions were promulgated and justice handed down. The production and matrix of activities surrounding the *bai* supported and reflected the community structure and the hierarchical ranking of the community, culminating in the status of the chiefs. The chiefs' *bai* was the most elaborately decorated, and its construction governed by complex intervillage social relationships.

In 1951 District Anthropologist Homer Barnett proposed that a new community house be built with the assistance of the South Pacific Commission in the capital town of Koror (Barnett 1951). This new community center was a significant departure from past community houses, in that it was to represent all Palauan communities. Hence, rather than the double-ended construction found in the village *bai,* at times dou-

bled in the chiefly double *bai* of the highest-ranking village, the new community center, called Kebtot el Bai (Twin Meetinghouse), was constructed with four gables, one pointing toward each of the four cardinal directions. The Kebtot el Bai was the community center for all of Palau, symbolically represented by the four gables, each associated with one of the four "cornerpost" village children of Milad. Part of the structure was open for meetings, another enclosed as a small museum. The structure was also unusual in that it was not reserved primarily for men but was also a meetinghouse for women's groups and for mixed meetings.

The Kebtot el Bai was destroyed by a typhoon in 1967. But soon after, a new community-wide traditional meetinghouse--the Bai ra Ngesechel ar Cherechar (Palau Museum Meetinghouse)--was constructed; it was dedicated in 1969. The construction of this *bai* more closely followed traditional social practices: it was constructed in Ngeremlengui by the elders of that village, Koror's "older brother," then as tradition dictated disassembled and transported to Koror where it was erected on the museum grounds (a nontraditional site for a *bai*). This *bai* was likened to "a wise old man relating stories of old. It tells you stories about each municipality in Palau district, from the northernmost island of Kayangel to the southernmost island, Tobi" (Sengebau 1969:9). The carvings were a conscious effort by Lorence Otaor, who was to take the highest chiefly Ngirturong title of Ngeremlengui, to record histories from each municipality (now state) on the gable and beams (Sengebau 1969:10-11). Unfortunately the Palau Museum *bai* was destroyed by fire 13 October 1979 (just before the second referendum on the Palau Constitution). (A new, traditionally styled museum *bai* was constructed on the museum grounds in 1991.)

Today the community-constructed meetinghouses have been replaced by modern cement and tin-roofed structures built on the old stone platforms. Although other villages attend the ritual openings and contribute token offerings, the major cost of construction is borne by state budgets (which are largely subsidized by U.S. government transfers). Only one village *bai* in the traditional wood and thatch-roofed style remains (see Figure 2 above). Today the sacred, male-oriented village *bai (bai el beluu)* have given way to more secular community meetinghouses. Whereas in the past the chiefly *bai* was reserved for meetings of the highest male council, today there is but one village *bai,* which serves as a meetinghouse for the entire community, often the men and women together in one building (albeit spatially separated).

There are a number of new community *bai.* The Palau Civic Center is a large, modern structure dominated by its large *bai*-like gable depict-

ing the story of the Breadfruit Tree. A modern clubhouse *bai,* the Bai er a Metal, was built in the mid-1970s to house the Koror young men's club Ngarametal. This large, double-gabled cement structure with thatched roof was built by Koror assisted by its allied villages, as it would have been in the past. It lacked interior gables, but the Koror histories were painted along ceiling beams of the inner cement walls. Like its predecessors it was not a chiefly but a young men's club *bai,* and it served the contemporary community not only as a meetinghouse for conventions but also as the place of evening relaxation--a place to dance or to hold the latest subset of the *ocheraol,* a "house party" to which young couples invite their friends to come and contribute sums of money for the construction of their new home. The more recently built Bai er a Melengel in Airai State and the Ngerkebesang Bai in Koror are modern cement structures modeled on the high-gabled form of the traditional *bai,* the former fully painted with motifs placed according to the *bai* grammar.

The *Bai* Today: National Icon, Individual Expression

Since the *bai* was the seat of chiefly power and the repository of local history, a study of the changes in the aesthetic locus over the years provides a study of changes in political power relationships and concepts of the ownership of history. Today, with the two exceptions of the Airai village *bai* and the museum meetinghouse, the traditional *bai* do not physically exist. Yet the *bai* gable has been taken over as the symbol of the Palauan polity. It is found on the national seal and on the seals of all governmental organizations and units (Figure 3). The *bai* has moved from being a symbol of the local community to one that stands for the nation of Palau and the essence of "being Palauan."

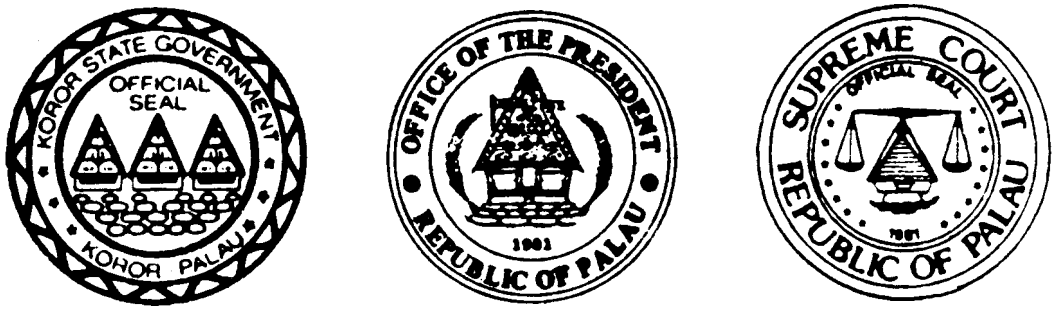


FIGURE 3. **Bai icon incorporated in government seals: (l-r) Koror State, Office of the President, and Supreme Court.**

In the past *bai* gables and beams depicted contemporary events of the community--the arrival of foreigners on their sailing ships or World War II planes--as well as histories. In contrast, both the Airai *bai* and the Belau National Museum[8] Bai ra Ngesechel ar Cherechar studiously avoid any non-Palauan incorporations and depict only events in Palau prior to the arrival of Captain Wilson. Only the stone pathways outside the Airai *bai* are allowed to carry more recent (1783) history--they are set in the shape of Captain Wilson's compass. The present is no longer incorporated, but the past is reified. There has been a contraction of both contemporary and traditional/mythical story-keeping through the medium of gable and beam carvings.

At the same time the artistic efforts of the community and use of histories and legends have shifted from a community orientation to that of the individual. Small, portable storyboards derived from the *bai* beam carvings are made by individual carvers for sale. In the past individual carvers would be renowned, their work decorating the most important community properties--the *bai,* the gods' houses, and the war canoes. Today individual carvers are well known, but for the most part they create individual pieces for their personal profit on commission or for sale to outsiders. The full chiefly histories are not known by the young carvers, and only a few public stories that form the smallest units of the full history are preserved in very condensed form on the modern storyboards. There are set motifs (the most common is the *bai* gable) and about thirty to fifty standard tales are represented in the commercial storyboards. Today individuals, and institutions of the new constitutional government, as well as chiefs, may interpret the past and the present. The trend in art as well as architecture is toward the individual rather than the community.

But storyboards continue to symbolize Palauan history and traditions from the past, as well as contemporary political messages and taunts. They will be given to a departing friend and visiting dignitaries, much as they were given to Semper in 1871 and the Krämers in 1910. In 1986, when U.S. Secretary of State George Schultz visited Palau, the carvers at Belau National Museum made two boards that the president of the Republic of Palau presented to him, each containing stories of symbolic import to Palau and messages concerning Palau's relationship to the United States. The first, The Double Cave of Oikuul, concerns two men, each living in caves, who specialized in making toddy and fish paste, respectively, and who each produced a surplus they discarded. Finally they realized their caves were separated only by a thin wall, which they scraped through so they could share (Krämer 1929: legend 142). The second, The Story of the Little Pied Cormorant and the Cat-

tle Egret Birds, teaches the moral "Control yourself, and just get enough to eat. Do not overdo it" (Kesolei 1975:3).

The construction of new *bai* and the appearance of the *bai* gable on government seals demonstrates the continued power of the *bai* as an aesthetic locus and symbol of the community. But, for the most part, the definition of community has shifted from the local to the national level. Once the locus of iconographic representation, today the traditional *bai* does not exist as a physical representation of the village's chiefly council on the stone platforms that incorporated the stone signs from the past. Rather, the *bai* is itself reduced to being an icon--the condensed sign of Palauan nationhood; and the *bai logo* of the national government today represents the constitutional government, not the house of the chiefs.

In his studies of Ngeremlengui, Milad's eldest son, Parmentier has argued that the sign tokens of the highest-ranking hierarchical terms have today disappeared from the context of social action, whether it be the house foundations or graves that previously validated the hierarchical ranking of the village cornerpost houses and their titleholders, or the village's *bai,* sacred stones, or traditional Palauan monies. Removed from the field of action, the hierarchy is thereby "frozen" or preserved from change, moved to a position of safety, becoming a "sign of history" but no longer a "sign in history" (Parmentier 1985b:147).

However, in Koror and throughout Palau today, the chiefly hierarchy and its signs and rankings remain in active process of transformation and substantiation (see Nero 1987). The paramount chief, the Ibedul, is the constitutionally mandated head of the State of Koror; the male chiefly council is the collective executive. The Ibedul has been a leader of the opposition to the Compact of Free Association with the United States. Following long-established traditions of politically motivated arson, one of the three orchestrated acts of violence over the compact issue in the summer of 1987 was the fiery destruction of the Koror young men's clubhouse, Bai er a Metal (Figure 4). Thus in Koror the *bai* and chiefly institutions continue to act as "signs in history," not removed to positions of symbolic safety and inaction.

From *Bai* Beam to Storyboard, to Paintings and Campaign Billboards: The Art of Opposition

Japanese anthropologist Hisakatsu Hidikata is generally credited with introducing to Palau the concept of storyboards, where the low-relief painted carvings of the *bai* beams are copied onto small, portable boards offered for sale as handicraft souvenirs (Figures 5 and 6). In fact, the initial concept was Palauan, for Semper records that when he left

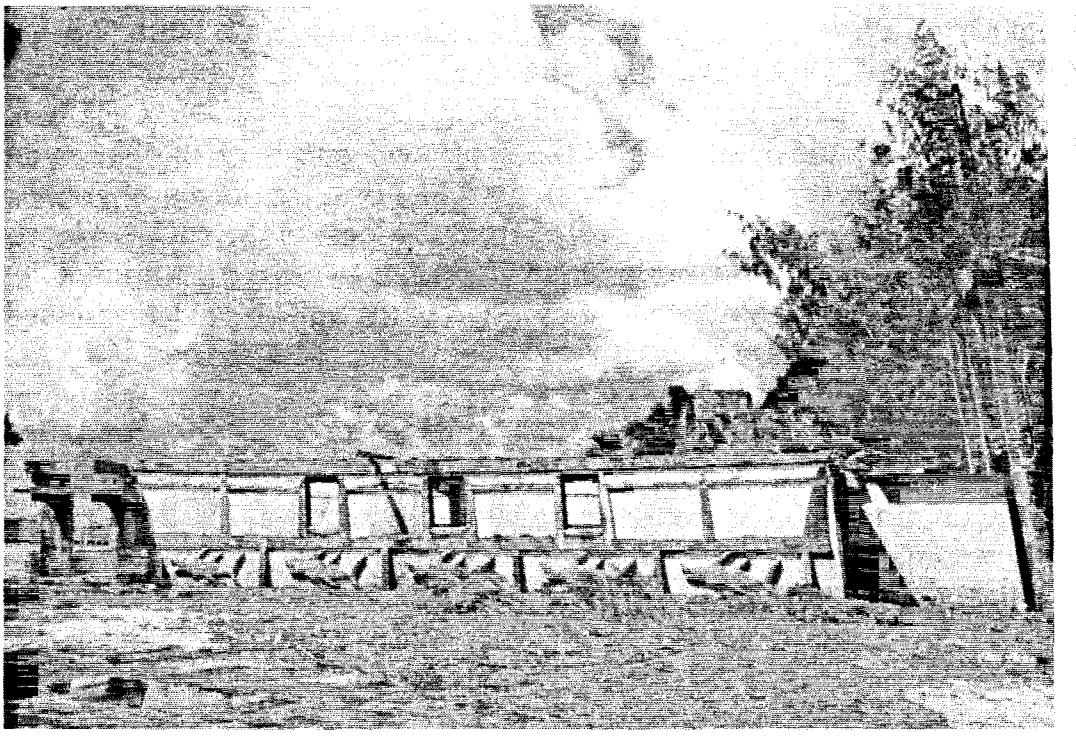


FIGURE 4. **Shell of Bai er a Metal, Koror, 1988.** (Photo by Karen L. Nero)

Palau in 1862, his friend and host Rechululd gave him beams that had literally been sawn from the *bai* in the community of Ngebuked where Semper had resided ([1873] 1982:280-281). In 1910, when German ethnographers Augustin and Elizabeth Krämer departed Koror, a special board was carved for them depicting the Dngeronger young men's club *bai* in which they had lived (see Figure 1)--complete with their table and pet dog (Krämer 1929).

Today the Palauan storyboard is ubiquitous--it is carved by men and even women, and offered for sale to the increasing numbers of tourists visiting the island, who are charmed by both the carvings and the stories that accompany them. The number of stories presented, however, has contracted; of the hundreds of stories of the past carved on *bai* beams, perhaps only thirty are frequently carved on storyboards today, with small photocopied summaries affixed to the back of the board (Lockhart 1985).

As Rechucher Charlie Gibbons of Koror aged and no longer carved storyboards, he moved to the medium of watercolors and became internationally famous as a painter of traditional Palauan scenes. The traditional *bai* figure prominently in his village scenes (Figure 7), representing the past that Palauans and their visitors dream about; the *bai* have

also been the subject of a series of oil paintings by contemporary Palauan artist Johnny "Itaru" Kishigawa.

It was an easy artistic transition from storyboards and paintings to the political campaign billboards that have adorned Koror streets during the political campaigns of the last two decades. Since 1975 Palauans have voted in no fewer than four referenda to establish a national constitution (including the Federated States of Micronesia Constitution rejected by Palau) and seven plebiscites on a Compact of Free Association with the United States. Each campaign has generated scores of political billboards.

In addition to establishing a form of government strongly modeled after that of the United States and incorporating individualistic fundamental rights, the Palau Constitution also set strong nuclear-free provisions, a two hundred-mile archipelagic-based territorial limit, and prohibition against the use of eminent domain for the benefit of a foreign entity. After a century of colonial domination by successive Spanish, German, Japanese, and American administrations, the new republic drew a strong line against outside interference and control in Palauan affairs. As the Constitution was being written and ratified, Palau at the same time was negotiating with the United States to achieve a new political status and terminate its U.N. trusteeship. A Compact of Free Association was negotiated, but the United States holds that the compact agreement cannot exist unless Palauans waive their Constitution's nuclear-free provision (to do so requires a 75 percent vote), on the grounds U.S. defense obligations to Palau could not be fulfilled without such waiver.

While the internal membership of "yes" and "no" factions has fluctuated, in each of the seven compact plebiscites active "yes" and "no" camps have used visual symbols of the Palauan past to evoke contemporary images of what being a Palauan should mean. Visions of the future under the two scenarios differ strikingly and serve as the counterpoint in the intense political campaigns of compact ratification. The most simplistic statement of the contrast, to which the visual media are sometimes reduced, is between an idyllic, independent, self-sufficient Palau and one overrun by U.S. military war games. The visual images of the "no" side often incorporate icons drawn from the *bai* or draw upon Palauan proverbs, in contrast with the images of the "yes" side in which Palau is depicted as wealthy and forward-moving because of its association with the United States. Or the "yes" side might emphasize its Palauan heritage through the image of a Palauan seated on a stone platform, the repository of history.

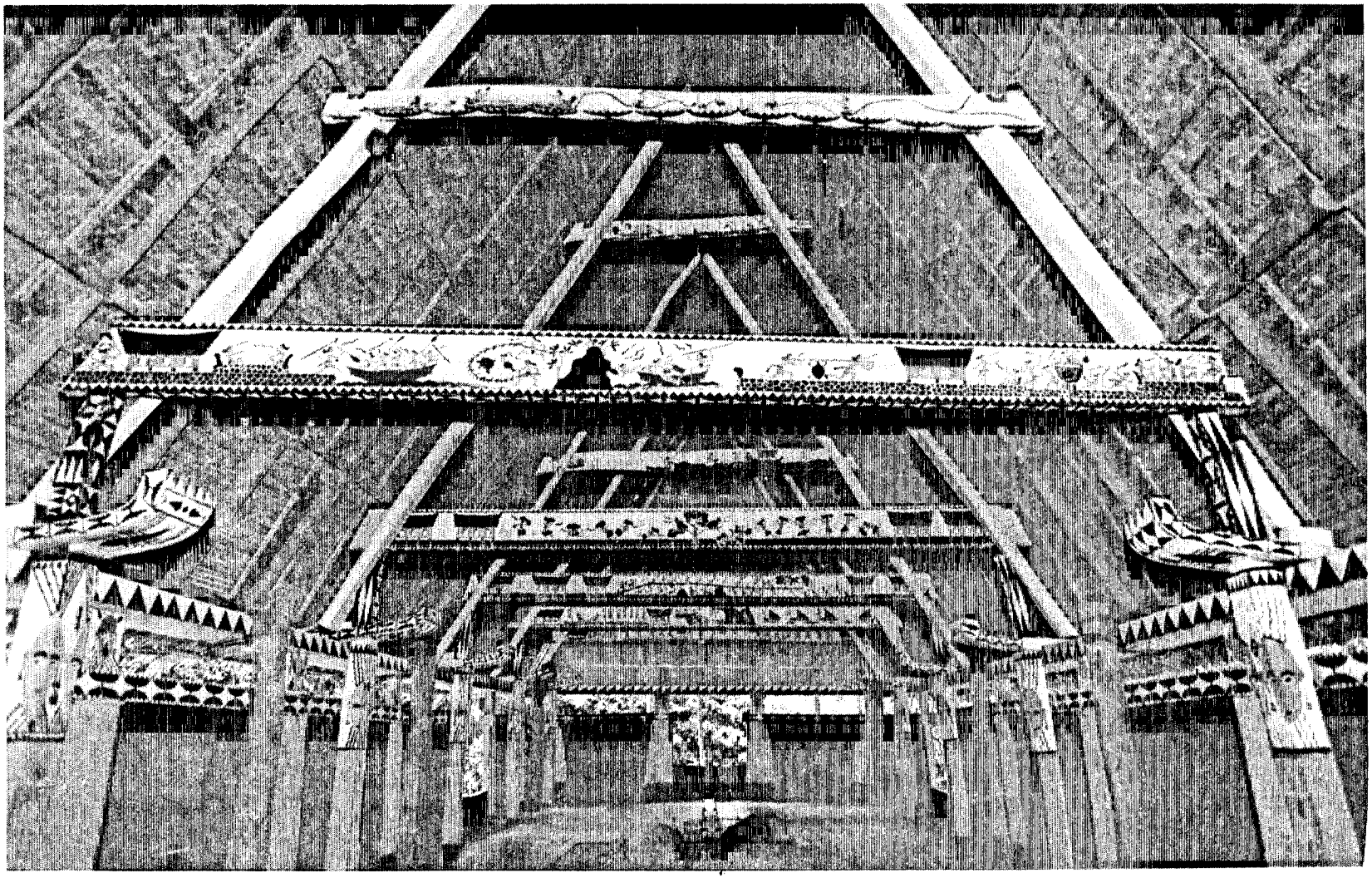


FIGURE 5. **Interior of Bai er a Airai, crossbeams, 1991.** *(Photo by Karen L. Nero)*

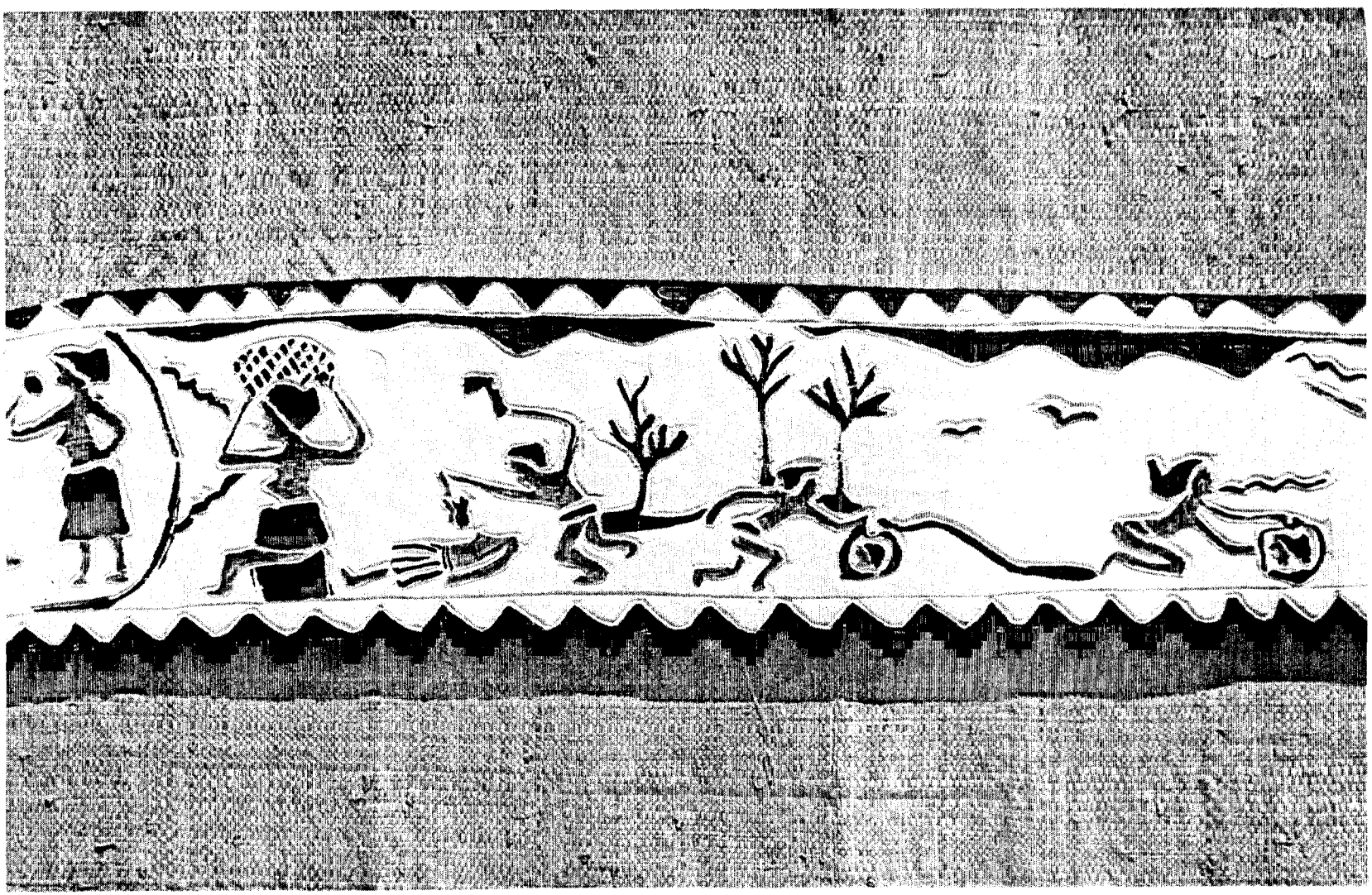


FIGURE 6. **Storyboard modeled on traditional crossbeams, ca. 1980; Ngirturong Lorence Otaor, carver.** (From the collection of Karen L. Nero)

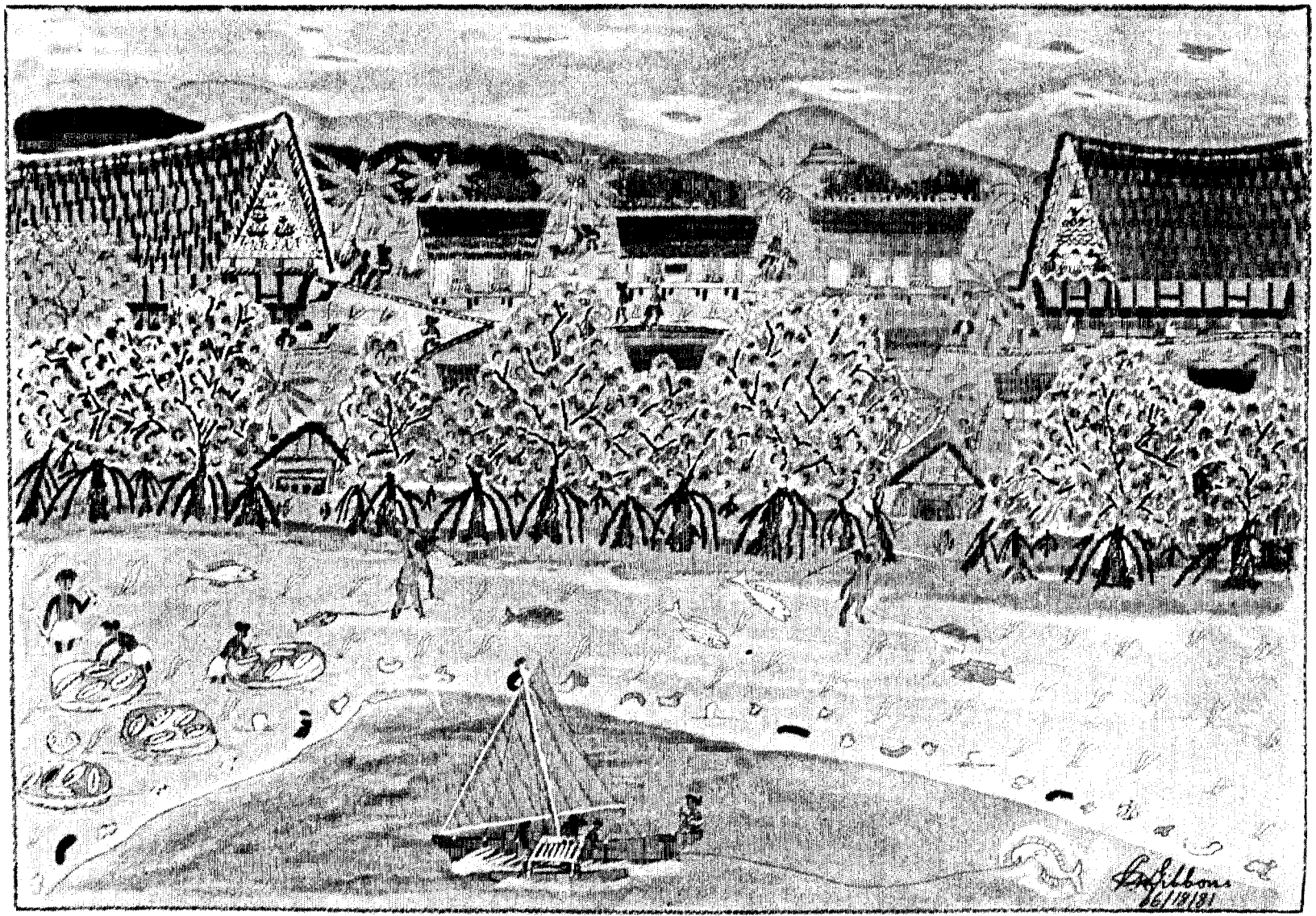


FIGURE 7. **Watercolor by Rechucher Charlie Gibbons, traditional village with *bai*, 1981.** *(From the collection of* Karen L. Nero)

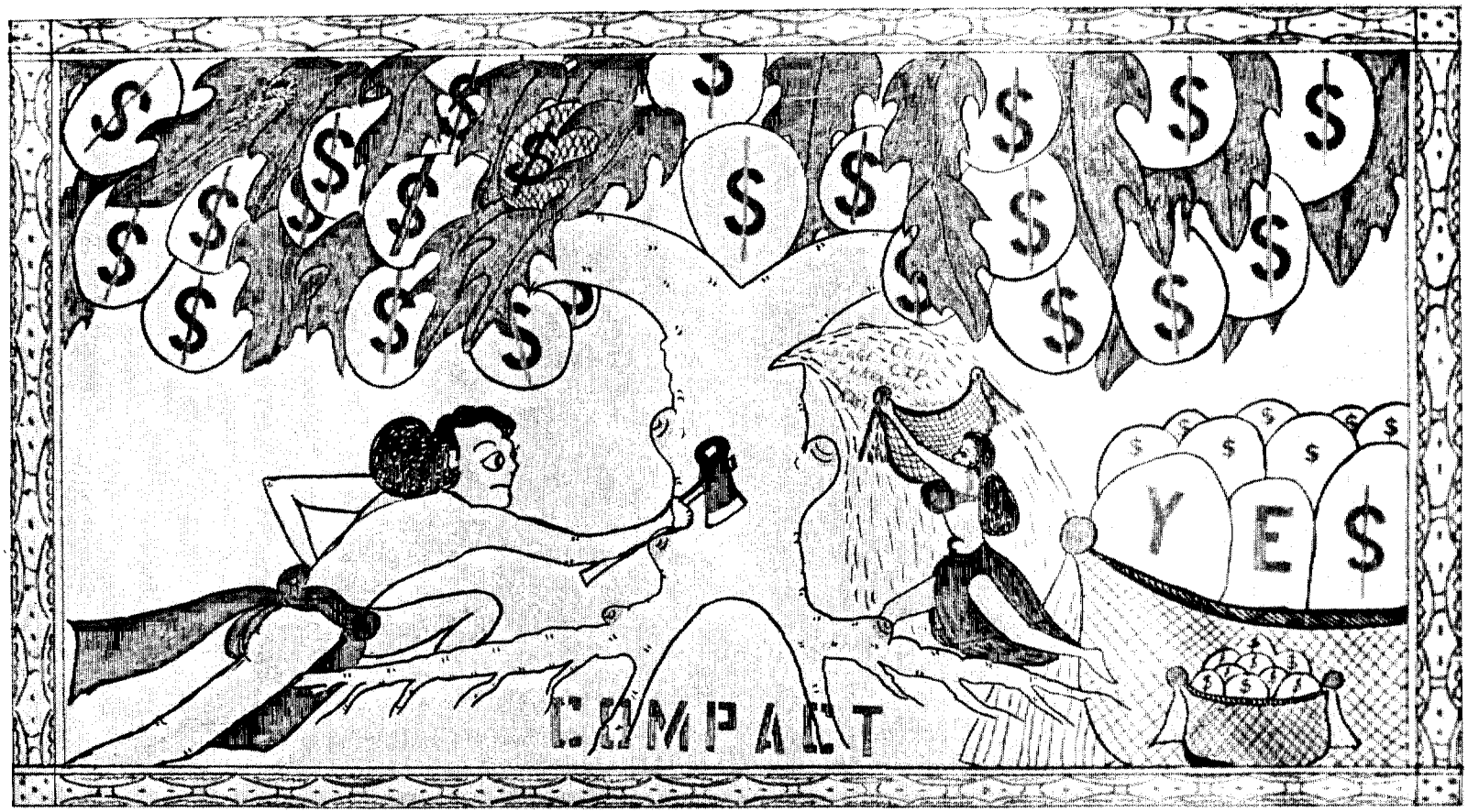


FIGURE 8. **Breadfruit Tree billboard, first plebiscite, 1983.** (Photo by Karen L. Nero)

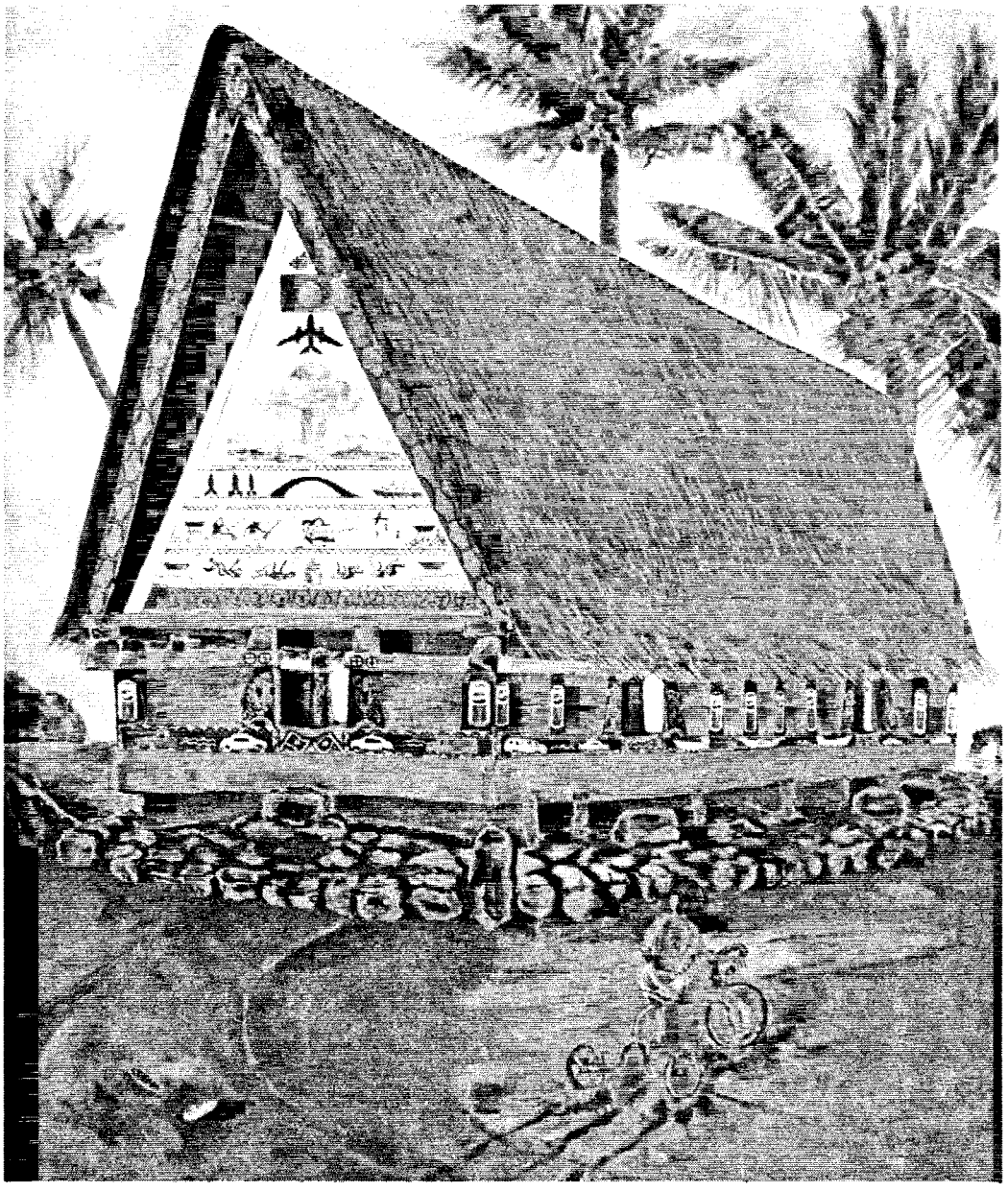


FIGURE 9. **Oil painting by Samuel Adelbai,** ***Medad el Bai: Bo Domes er Ngii el Bai (The*** **Bai** ***of the Future),*** **ca. 1988.** (On display in Belau National Museum, Koror; reproduced courtesy of the museum)

One of the most striking visual images of the 1983 plebiscite campaign was a billboard prominently placed in Koror depicting a modern version of the Breadfruit Tree Story, with a breadfruit tree from which round money bags hung (an iconographic substitution for the round breadfruits), being happily harvested by a Palauan man in traditional loincloth (Figure 8). The images of the past--the Breadfruit Tree, the

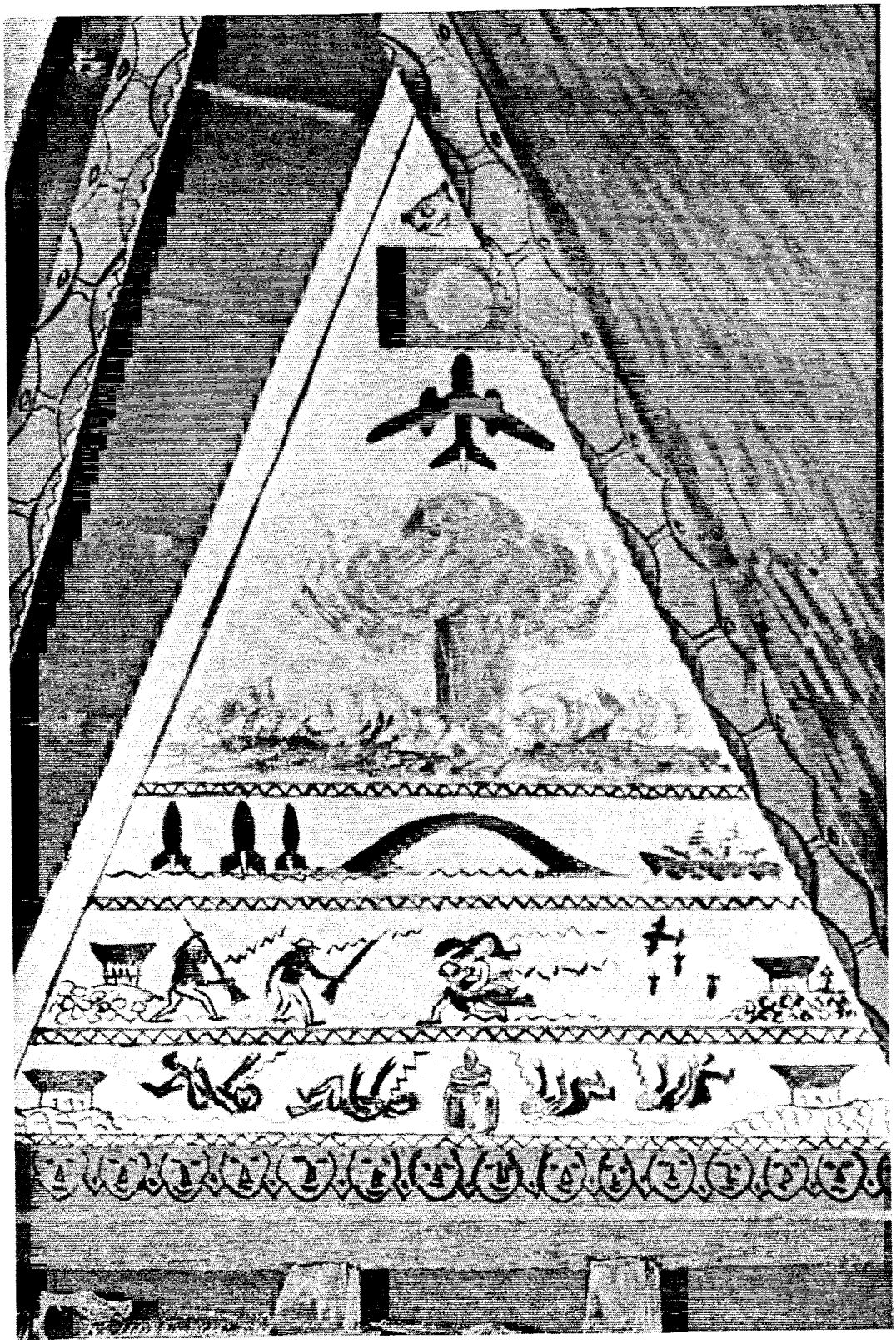


FIGURE 10. **Detail, *Medad el Bai.*** (Reproduced courtesy of Belau National Museum)

man in loincloth (rarely worn in recent decades)--clearly set the Palauan in continuity with his past, although the ever-magical Breadfruit Tree had now sprouted the new, nongendered source of wealth in Palau--the U.S. dollar. The poster clearly supported the "yes" position, implying that great wealth would follow acceptance of the compact. Or did it? A viewer could also ponder an alternate question, whether it was as good to get dollars as to get free breadfruit and fish--as well as the relative "Palauanness" of the choice.

Contemporary artist Samuel Adelbai continues the artistic tradition, He combines painting and political commentary in an art of opposition, making explicit the antinuclear message of compact opponents in his recent oil painting on the *bai* theme, *Medad el Bai: Bo Domes er Ngii el Bai (The* Bai *of the Future)* (Figure 9). At first glance the painting depicts a traditional *bai,* yet a closer look reveals a series of iconographic substitutions of critical import. The chicken has been replaced by Pepsi cans, the god of construction by the Christian Jesus, replete, with graphic crown of thorns. Replacing the outstretched limbs of the Breadfruit Tree of the traditional gable is the spreading mushroom cloud of a nuclear bomb explosion (Figure 10). This painting, which can be viewed inside the Belau National Museum, was offered as part of the Micronesian art exhibit at the United Nations, but was declined by the Trust Territory high commissioner.

Conclusion

Tracing the history of the construction of the Palauan *bai* through the last two centuries is an exercise demonstrating the ways artistic productions reflect changes in society. The elaborate, highest forms of these meetinghouses were once set aside for the powerful chiefly councils. They were once the islands' only painted and decorated buildings, the site of community feasts and dances. The houses and the stone platforms on which they rested were, through their chiefly explicators, once the repositories of history from the past to the present. Their gables and beams then depicted contemporary as well as past events, and often poked fun at a rival through the selection of a story embarrassing to that village.

Although the function of the *bai* as community meetinghouses is retained today, their form and patterns of utilization mirror modern transformations. Today all but two of the *bai* are constructed of modern tin, cement, and wooden materials; they hold meetings of all of the men, women, and children of the village and serve occasionally as dance or movie halls. No longer limited to use by the male chiefly few,

the *bai* reflects modern Palauan society with its emphases upon equality and individual rights, even though the power of males and elders is still evident in seating and speaking patterns within the *bai.*

Yet to treat the artistic productions and performances as simply reflective of transformations in Palauan society is to miss one of the major dynamics of Palauan art today. Billboards were used in the campaigns to persuade voters to vote in a particular way; they have the possibility of being effective persuasive agents because they are just billboards. In any social interaction, the verbal response to an argument generally relates more to the relationships between the two speakers and their families, and to relationships of power between the two, than to any true expression of political leaning, which may be very carefully guarded. This became especially evident as political and economic pressures climaxed in 1987 with the simultaneous murder of the father of the opposition lawyer, arson of the Koror Bai er a Metal, and bombing attack on the home of a Koror female elder. It was not safe to give voice to opposition. Positions were strongly held and unlikely to be changed through verbal exchanges, which were more likely to escalate into altercations. Yet a billboard was there for all to see, to read (or not to read) its possible messages, to combine the metaphors and reach back into the past to make meaning of the proverb or story depicted. The image and metaphors were there for individuals to reflect upon privately, perhaps to see the issues in a slightly different light than before. When it becomes dangerous to say things directly (see especially Hereniko's interview in this volume), artistry may offer a medium, in a field designated as "nonthreatening" and "playful," to say something through images that cannot be put into words.

Of course it's possible that no one's mind was changed by a few billboards--that they only served to lighten otherwise heated campaigns. One never knows. Nevertheless, the histories of the past, as exemplified by the Breadfruit Tree Story, continue to act as frames through which Palauans reinterpret and use their mythological past to achieve and validate contemporary positions of power.

NOTES

1. The Constitution of the Republic of Palau established both Palauan and English variants for the names of the nation and all states. Following national policy, I have used the English term, "Palau," rather than the Palauan, "Belau," except in proper names, to avoid bilingual hybrids such as "Belauan."

2. This article is based upon research conducted in Palau between 1979 and 1989 supported by NIMH Grant #5 T32 MH14640-04 0111 from the Institute for the Study of Social Change, University of California, the Palau Community Action Agency, the Koror

State Government, and the University of California-Irvine through the Robert Gumbiner Fund. I focus upon Koror, the current capital and home of two-thirds of Palau's residents, where I primarily conducted research.

3. There are a number of different types of *bai.* Traditionally, in the center of a town there would be two chiefly *bai* (or three in the most important towns), with separate type names in Palauan. At least one of these would have been ornately decorated with carved gables and beams. These were the chiefly *bai* of the village and its male councils, but the lesser one was also used to house visitors and could be taken over at times by the women for their meetings; hence the gloss "community meetinghouse." In addition, each of the men's clubs had its own *bai,* which might or might not be highly decorated. There were at least two, but more often six, of these for each village. Koror included the center and seven villages, each with chiefly and men's club *bai.*

4. Today Palau includes the states of Techobei and Sonsorol, whose people are culturally and linguistically distinct from Palauans, descended from settlers from the Outer Islands of Yap. Descriptions of the past political and cultural order refer to the islands of Palau proper, whereas the contemporary Palauan polity incorporates the people of these southern islands, many of whom have settled in Koror.

5. This is a particularly telling embedding of a new democratic institution in a chiefly, hierarchic past. The Olbiil era Kelulau is a bicameral house with representation both by state and by population on a one-person, one-vote model. Rather than an open, democratic house of debate and public inquiry, the image evoked of the "House of Whispers" is one of private consultations between high-ranking principals who reach secret agreements, which are encoded in multilayered language.

6. I have earlier likened the stories and their interrelationships to the pieces of Palauan bead money, which at times could be strung into *iek* (necklaces) (Nero 1987:20-21). During the past two decades there have been a number of serious efforts to record and compile the oral histories. Kesolei headed a Palau History Project at the Palau Community Action Agency (PCAA), which published two volumes of legends (Kesolei 1971, 1975) as well as a three-volume study of Palau's history (PCAA 1976-1978). Steve Umetaro of the Department of Education has published a legendary history (1974), and the Palau Division of Cultural Affairs is compiling another three-volume history. In some cases an assumption that there is or should be one overall text of Palauan oral history has led to difficulties of interpretation.

7. I would like to acknowledge insights gained during long and fruitful discussions with DeVerne Reed Smith on the nature, content, order, and clustering of key cultural principles in Palau, the topic of Smith's 1989 research to create a "cultural typology" of Palau for the Palau historic preservation office under the auspices of the Micronesian Endowment for Historic Preservation.

8. The 1783 shipwreck of the *Antelope* under Captain Henry Wilson was the first extended recorded European visit to Palau (Keate 1803). The men spent three months in Palau under the protection of the Ibedul of Koror (and assisting him in his local battles in return) while constructing a ship from the wreckage. Before this small ship, the *Oroolong,* could set sail in 1783, the high chief of Koror insisted that his lieutenant decorate the bow of the small ship with the symbol of Palauan money. This same symbol is found on the Palauan war canoe of Ngchesar State, built in 1979.

9. In 1983 the name of the Palau Museum was officially changed to the Belau National Museum, reflecting pride in local identity and the national Constitution.