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PALAUAN ORTHOGRAPHY: A FINAL REPORT ON THE DECISIONS OF THE PALAU ORTHOGRAPHY COMMITTEE

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PALAUAN ORTHOGRAPHY

A Final Report on the Decisions of the Palau Orthography Committee

Submittted to: Director of Education
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The Palauan Orthography Committee met at Palau High School, Koror, Palau, from July 24 to August 2, 1972, to decide on standard rules for Palauan spelling. Members of the Palau community who participated on the Committee were Father Felix Yaoch, Francisco Morei, Huan Polloi, Timarong Sisior, Rengulbai Ngeburch, Santos Ngodrii, Hermana Remarui, Hubert Elechuus, Masa-Aki Emesiochl, Masaharu Tmodrang, and Sadang Ngiraecherang. Professor Lewis Josephs and Dr. Helen Wilson, of the University of Hawaii Department of Linguistics and Pacific and Asian Linguistics Institute, served as consultants.

The results of the Orthography Committee's deliberations are summarized below. First, the spelling of Palauan consonants and vowels is discussed, and then various rules pertaining to the spelling of individual Palauan words are presented.

I. Palauan Consonants. The letters used to spell the consonants of Palauan words are as follows: b, t, d, k, ch, s, m, ng, r, and l.

A. The bilabial stop b is always spelled with the same letter, even though the pronunciation of b sometimes sounds like p. Because any variation in the pronunciation of b is predictable and not heard or recognized by most Palauan speakers, it is sufficient to use only the one letter.

Some words containing b as the first (or initial) letter are:

blai	'house'	bngak	'my flower'
bloes	'shot'	bai	'community house'
brer	'raft'	bung	'flower'
btuch	'star'	beot	'easy'
bsibs	'drill'	bilis	'dog'

In the words below, b appears within a word:

tbak	'my spit'	oba	'have, carry'
kbokb	'wall'	rubak	'old man'

And in the words below, b appears at the end of a word:

tub	'spit'	mengedub	'swim'
bab	'above'	chedib	'black ant'

B. The dental stops t and d must be distinguished because the difference between them serves to contrast one word with another. For example, we have the two contrasting words tub 'spit' and dub 'dynamite'.

Some words containing t as the initial letter include:

tmuu	'enter'	tacher	'ten'
tkul	'its edge'	techang	'who?'
truich	'ten'	tuu	'banana'

The letter t occurs within words such as the following:

metitur	'doesn't know'	rektel	'his sickness'
oltobed	'pull out'	tutau	'morning'

And in the words below, t is found at the end of a word:

liluut	'returned'	chelat	'smoked (fish)'
dakt	'fear'	mekelekolt	'cold'

Even though the letter d is pronounced differently (sometimes like English t or th) depending on where it occurs in the word, these differences are often not perceived by Palauan speakers; therefore, the single letter d will suffice in these cases.

The letter d appears word-initially in the following examples:

dmak	'together'	ding	'ear'
dbak	'my dynamite'	dub	'dynamite'
dngod	'tattoo needle'	deel	'nail'

In the words below, the letter d appears within a word or at the end of a word:

medal	'his face'	bad	'stone'
kedeb	'short'	kid	'we'
chedil	'mother'	eanged	'sky'

C. The velar stop k is always spelled with the same letter, although its pronunciation shows some variation. Again, this variation is not thought to be significant by the Palauan speaker.

In the list below, the letter k is found in three different positions -- at the beginning of words, within words, and at the end of words:

klou	'big'	chermek	'my animal'
kmared	'light'	derumk	'thunder'
kilong	'almost'	olekiis	'wake up'
ker	'question'	mekeald	'warm'
brak	'taro'	rekas	'mosquito'

D. The glottal stop ch is really one sound even though it is spelled with a sequence of two letters. It sounds like a "catch' in the throat and can be heard in the following Palauan words:

charm	'animal'	dengchokl	'sit'
chisel	'news of him'	taoch	'channel'
meched	'shallow'	truich	'ten'

Some special comment needs to be made about when and when not to spell words with a ch at the beginning. There are some Palauan words which are pronounced with an initial ch under all circumstances -- that is, regardless of whether they are spoken in isolation from other words or are spoken following some other word within a sentence. For example, words like chad 'person'

and chull 'rain' are pronounced with the ch sound both when spoken in isolation and when preceded by another word in simple sentences like

Ng chad er a Siabal.	'He's Japanese.'
Ng chull.	'It's raining.'

On the other hand, there are some words which have an initial ch when spoken in isolation but lose this glottal stop when preceded by another word. For example, words like oles 'knife' and omes 'see' sound as if they begin with ch when spoken in isolation, but the initial ch disappears in simple sentences like

Ng oles.	'It's a knife.'
Ak mla omes er ngii.	'I've seen him.'

As the Palauan spelling of the words under discussion indicates, a word is always spelled with initial ch if the glottal stop pronunciation is maintained within sentences; on the other hand, if no initial glottal stop is pronounced when a word appears in a sentence, then no initial ch is ever included in the spelling.

E. The fricative s sounds as if it is somewhere between the s of English "see" and the sh of English "she". It appears in all positions in the word, as in the following examples:

sils	'sun'	mesilek	'wash'
sers	'garden'	mengiis	'dig'

F. Palauan has two nasal consonants -- m and ng. The bilabial nasal m can appear anywhere in words, as in the following:

mad	'face'	omoes	'shoot'
melai	'take'	blim	'your house'

The velar nasal ng is actually a single sound, even though two letters are used to spell it. It shows some variation in

pronunciation, but often this is not recognized by Palauan speakers. Note the example words below:

iungs	'island'	ngduul	'clam'
merangd	'(a kind of) coral'	ngriil	'place near beach'
sengsongd	'stick'	mengat	'smoke (fish, etc.)'
ngau	'fire'	stoang	'store'
ngor	'mouth'	mochung	'about to go'
ngklem	'your name'		

There are some words in which it is permissible to use n in the spelling instead of ng. These include words or names of foreign origin, such as nas 'eggplant', nijuu 'twenty', and John.

Special mention needs to be made about when and when not to spell ng at the end of one and the same word. There are many Palauan words which end in a, o, or u when pronounced within a sentence but which have a word-final ng when spoken in isolation or at the end of a sentence. This common rule of Palauan pronunciation is illustrated in the sentences below, where the words menga(ng) 'eat' and mo(ng) 'go' are spelled in two different ways:

(a) Ak mo mengang.	'I'm going to eat (it).'
(b) Ak mo menga er a ngikel.	'I'm going to eat the fish.'
(a) Ng mong.	'He's going.'
(b) Ng mo er a skuul.	'He's going to school.'

The rule for spelling words of this kind is as follows: if we hear and pronounce ng at the end of a word, as in the (a) sentences above, we also spell ng; if, however, no ng is pronounced or heard, as in the (b) sentences above, it is omitted from the spelling.

In addition to the above, there are many Palauan words which are always pronounced with a final ng, even within sentences. Words of this type, which of course are always spelled with word-final ng, include native Palauan words like bung 'flower', bang 'goatfish', ding 'ear', reng 'heart', and chedeng 'shark', and borrowed words like hong 'book' and blatong 'plate'.

G. The lateral consonant l appears in all positions in words, as in the following:

lius	'coconut'	melai	'take'
luut	'return'	rael	'road'

H. The flap consonant r appears in all positions, as in the following examples:

rakt	'sickness'	beras	'rice'
rekas	'mosquito'	kar	'medicine'

I. The consonants l and r can appear double and are spelled as ll and rr, respectively. As we might expect, the sequences ll and rr are longer than the single consonants. These double consonants are illustrated by the following words:

llel	'its leaf'	rrom	'liquor'
kall	'food'	kerrkar	'tree'

II. Palauan Vowels. The letters used to spell the vowels of Palauan are i, u, e, o, and a.

A. The high vowels i and u occur in the following Palauan words:

Words with i		Words with u	
sils	'sun'	btuch	'star'
kim	'large clam'	bung	'flower'

chisel	'news of him'	keruk	'my medicine'
metik	'find'	subelek	'my homework'

Note that the use of the letters y and w for i and u, respectively, has been discontinued.

B. The mid vowels are e and o. While the letter o has only one pronunciation, e has two different pronunciations. The letter e represents the "eh" sound found in Palauan ked 'hill' as well as the weaker, somewhat indistinct "uh" sound found in the first syllable of chedil 'mother'. The fact that the letter e has two different pronunciations should not be a source of difficulty to the Palauan reader, who will automatically know when to pronounce the letter e as "eh" and when to pronounce it as "uh".

Some Palauan words containing e are listed below:

sers	'garden'	mesilek	'wash'
ngklel	'his name'	kekedeb	'short'
chelii	'yesterday'	chelat	'smoked (fish)'
kmared	'light'	telub	'spat'
lmangel	'cry'	seleseb	'burned'
mengelebed	'hit'	delangeb	'covered'

N.B.: When a word ends in a sequence of two consonants, this cluster of consonants is often followed by a short "uh" sound. Because this sound is automatically added after two consonants and is therefore predictable, it does not need to be indicated by an e in the spelling. Thus, there is no spelled final e at the end of the following words:

bsibs	'drill'	merangd	'(a kind of) coral'
kbokb	'wall'	melecholb	'bathe'
mekeald	'warm'	ralm	'water'
dengchokl	'sit'	diall	'ship'

The letter o is observed in the following words:

ngor	'mouth'	olluut	'return, give back'
oles	'knife'	melecholb	'bathe'
omengur	'have dinner'	sosebii	'burns it'

C. The low vowel a appears in the following Palauan words:

chad	'person'	ngak	'I, me'
melat	'smoke (fish)'	klalo	'thing'

D. Vowel Alternation. In looking at related forms of a word--for example, mad 'face' and medal 'his face'--you will often notice a change in the vowel. This kind of vowel alternation is very common in Palauan; as the examples below show, the vowel change should be indicated in the spelling:

"Simple" form		"Possessed" form	
bsibs	'drill'	bsebsek	'my drill'
chur	'laughter'	cherik	'my laughter'
sers	'garden'	sersek	'my garden'
ngor	'mouth'	ngerek	'my mouth'
kar	'medicine'	keruk	'my medicine'

Often, two vowels reduce to one in related forms of a word; in these cases, too, the spelling should reflect the difference in pronunciation, as in the following:

"Simple" form		"Possessed" form	
bail	'clothes'	bilek	'my clothes'
tekoi	'word'	tekingek	'my word'
boes	'gun'	bosek	'my gun'
rael	'road'	rolek	'my road'

E. Long Vowels. All the vowels of Palauan except a can occur long. These long vowels are spelled simply by doubling the letter--i.e., we have ii, uu, ee, and oo. Words with long vowels are given below:

diil	'stomach'	deel	'nail'
ngii	'he, she, it'	kmeed	'near'
buuch	'betel nut'	dekool	'cigarette'
ngduul	'clam'	sekool	'playful'

The difference between regular (or short) vowels and long vowels is important, because it can serve as the only distinguishing feature between two words. Note, for example, the pairs of words buch 'spouse' vs. buuch 'betel nut' and bechil 'my spouse' vs. bechiil 'married'.

F. Vowel Clusters. Palauan vowels can occur in various combinations or clusters. The following words contain clusters of two vowels:

eanged	'sky'	suobel	'homework'
eolt	'wind'	bail	'clothing'
iedel	'mango'	rois	'mountain'
iungs	'island'	buil	'moon'
eungel	'under it'	chui	'hair'
oach	'leg'	blai	'house'
uel	'turtle'	tekoi	'word'
uingel	'tooth'	sechelei	'friend'
soal	'his desire'	diak	'isn't'
chaus	'lime'	lius	'coconut'
ngau	'fire'	diall	'ship'
kleu	'young coconut'	rael	'road'
udoud	'money'	boes	'gun'
klou	'big'	taoch	'channel'
sueleb	'noon'	diong	'stream'

Palauan words containing clusters of three or more vowels include the following:

chuieuii	'reads it'	mechiuaiu	'sleep'
kiiesii	'digs it'	euid	'seven'
kiuetii	'cuts it'	eai	'eight'

We must give special attention to the problem of when and when not to spell a word with a final vowel cluster ei. There are many Palauan words which end in e when pronounced within a

sentence but which take a word-final i when spoken in isolation or at the end of a sentence. The sentences below, which contain me(i) 'come' and che(i) 'fishing', illustrate this variation in pronunciation:

(a) A Droteo a mei.	'Droteo is coming.'
(b) A Droteo a me er a blik.	'Droteo is coming to my house.'
(a) Ng mo er a chei.	'He's going fishing.'
(b) Ng mo er a che er a klukuk.	'He's going fishing tomorrow.'

The rule of spelling involved here is similar to that observed for word-final ng on page 5: in other words, if word-final i is pronounced and heard, as in the (a) sentences above, it is also spelled; if, on the other hand, no i is pronounced or heard, as in the (b) sentences, it is not included in the spelling.

III. Further Rules of Palauan Spelling. Most of the spelling rules described in this section concern the proper spelling of individual words and phrases. Often, the decision to spell something as a separate word is based on a grammatical analysis of the item in question. Such grammatical analysis allows us to identify or isolate one and the same word as it appears in different, though related, constructions. The following rules apply to the spelling of separate words.

A. The relational word er, which has a wide range of English equivalents such as "in, at, to, from, out of, of, because of, etc.", is always spelled as a separate word. Furthermore, the word a, which precedes all verbs and nouns (but not

pronouns or demonstratives), should be spelled as a separate word. Observe the following sentences:

(a) Ak mo er a skuul.	'I'm going to school.'
(b) Ke mo er ker?	'Where are you going?'
(c) Ak milsuub er a blik.	'I was studying at home.'
(d) Ak mesuub a tekoi er a Merikel.	'I'm studying English.'
(e) Ak merael er a klukuk.	'I'm leaving tomorrow.'
(f) Ng hong er a Droteo.	'It's Droteo's book.'
(g) Ng hong er ngii.	'It's his book.'
(h) A Droteo a milil er tiang.	'Droteo's playing here.'

The word er is not pronounced identically in all the examples above. If the preceding word ends in a vowel, as in (a), (b), and (d), the e of er is dropped: thus, for example, the three words mo er a of (a) are pronounced as if they were written mora. On the other hand, if the preceding word ends in a consonant, as in (c), (e), (f), (g), and (h), the vowel of er is retained in the pronunciation.

In certain cases, we know from the grammatical structure that we have a sequence of the form er + a + noun, even though the a is not pronounced at all. The following expressions fall into this category:

er a chelii	'yesterday'
er a chelechang	'now, today'
er a Belau	'in/of Palau'

The word er is spelled as a separate word in the following special expressions:

ngar er ngii	'there is'
mla er ngii	'there was'
mo er ngii	'there will be'
mochu er ngii	'there is about to be'

In the first two expressions in the list above, we find the very common Palauan verbs ngar 'is (located)' and mla 'was (located)'. These verbs also appear in sentences like the following, where they are spelled as separate words:

(a) A Droteo a ngar er a stoang.	'Droteo's at the store.'
(b) A John a mla er a Guam.	'John was in Guam.'
(c) A Droteo ng ngar er ker?	'Where is Droteo?'
(d) A Toki ng mla er ker?	'Where was Toki?'

B. Plurals with RE. In order to show that a noun refers to more than one human being, we attach re to the beginning of that noun. For example, while chad 'person' refers to one human being, rechad 'people' refers to two or more. Other examples of this contrast include ngalek 'child'--rengalek 'children', sensei 'teacher'--resensei 'teachers', and sechelik 'my friend'--resechelik 'my friends'. Some sentences containing plural words like rechad 'people' are now given:

(a) Ak ulerrenges er a rengalek.	'I was listening to the children.'
(b) Ng delmerab er a resensei.	'It's the teachers' room.'
(c) A relluich el chad a mlad.	'Twenty people died.'
(d) Ak milsterir a reua Toki.	'I saw Toki and her friends.'

C. The word el is used in many kinds of constructions to relate one word to another. Some of the most common usages are illustrated below:

1. With demonstratives, which are used to point out people, animals, or things:

tia el klalo	'this thing'	se el hong	'that book'
tirka el chad	'these people'	aika el charm	'those animals'

In all of the examples above, we do not pronounce the e of el because a vowel-final word precedes. Nevertheless, the word is still spelled el.

2. With numbers, which occur in many different series, depending on what is being counted:

ta el chad	'one person'
chimo el kluk	'one dollar'
eru el klok	'two o'clock'
teruo el oluches	'one pencil'
truich me a ta el chad	'eleven people'
dart el kluk	'one hundred dollars'
euid el klok	'seven o'clock'
truich el oluches	'ten pencils'

In some of the examples above, the e of el is not pronounced, while in others it is. It is always spelled the same way, however.

3. With various kinds of modifiers, which describe or qualify some other word:

chelecha el sils	'today's weather'
mekelekolt el ralm	'cold water'
bek el tutau	'every morning'
mekngit el chad	'bad person'
ungil el chad	'good person'

In the above expressions, the modifying or qualifying word precedes the modified word. As we might expect, the e of el is not pronounced when it follows a vowel-final word; the e is pronounced, however, after a consonant-final word. If the word preceding el ends in an l, as in the case of ungil el chad

'good person', then el is completely omitted from the pronunciation. In writing, however, the word el is always spelled out.

4. With various types of complex constructions:

dirrek el sensei	'is also a teacher'
blechoel el mesuub	'always studies'
di telkib el udoud	'only a little money'
di kea el sensei	'is no longer a teacher'
mo merek el mesuub	'finish studying'
omuchel el mesuub	'begin studying'
omengur el oba a taod	'eat with a fork'
mo el obengkel a Toki	'go with Toki'

Again, the correct pronunciation of el in the examples above can be easily predicted.

D. Palauan has several sets of pronouns, which are short words referring to various persons such as "I, you, he, they, etc." Some Palauan pronouns are spelled as separate words, while others are not. A brief summary is given below.

1. The non-emphatic subject pronouns ak 'I', ng 'he, she, it', ke 'you', etc. are spelled as separate words, as in

(a) Ke mo er ker?	'Where are you going?'
(b) Ak menguiu er a hong.	'I'm reading the book.'
(c) Te di mililil.	'They just fooled around.'
(d) Ng kmal ungil.	'It's very good.'
(e) Ng diak a udoud.	'There isn't any money.'

2. The pronouns ngak 'I', ngii 'he, she, it', kau 'you', etc., which are used after the relational word er or as emphatic subjects, are also spelled as separate words, as in

(a) Ng hong er ngii.	'It's his book.'
(b) Ak ulemes er kau.	'I saw you.'
(c) Ngak a sensei.	'I'm a teacher.'
(d) Ngii a lilechesii a babier.	'He wrote the letter.'

3. The object pronouns -ak 'I', -ii 'him, her, it', -au 'you', etc. are written as part of the action verb which accompanies them. The hyphen in our notations -ak, -ii, -au, etc. indicates that these pronouns are not independent words but must be attached to the end of other words. Some examples include the following:

chillebedak	'hit me'
chillebedii	'hit him, her, it'
chillebedau	'hit you'
sosebii	'burns it'
milsterir	'saw them'

4. The possessor pronouns are added to nouns to indicate the owner or possessor of something. These possessor pronouns have many forms, even for the same person, of which only a few are illustrated below. These possessor pronouns (underlined) are always attached to the word indicating the thing possessed:

bilek	'my clothing'	mlirir	'their car(s)'
blik	'my house'	sebechel	'his ability'
ngerem	'your mouth'	soam	'your desire'

5. The hypothetical pronouns ku- 'I', lo- 'he, she, it', chomo- 'you', etc. are attached to the beginning of verbs in a large variety of complicated constructions. A few sample sentences containing these hypothetical pronouns (underlined) are given below:

(a) Ng diak kusuub.	'I'm not studying.'
(b) A John a diak loilil.	'John isn't playing.'
(c) A hong a longuiu er ngii a John.	'The book is being read by John.'
(d) Ke mekra a chomoruul a mlai?	'What do you do to make a canoe?'
(e) Ng chetik a Droteo a loilil.	'I don't like Droteo to play.'
(f) Ng soal a kbo kusuub.	'He wants me to study.'

E. Palauan has many word sequences which function to express a single meaning or idea and which often have single English words as their equivalents. Even though we might want to spell these sequences as single words, detailed grammatical analysis leads us to conclude that they actually involve more than one word and should therefore be spelled as in the examples below:

e le ak	'because I...'	el ua se	'(say) that...'
e le ng	'because he...'	ng diak	'isn't'
me a	'and'	ng di kea	'no longer is'
me ak	'so I...'	di mle ngii	'by himself'
me ng	'so he...'	ko er a	'kind of, like'
e ng di	'but'	a leko (ak)	'(I) intended to...'
er se er a	'when'	a lsekum	'if, when'
el kmo	'(say) that...'		

F. Numerous exceptions to all of the Palauan spelling rules given above can be found in two groups of Palauan words. First of all, many Palauan personal names -- for example, Francisco, Polycarp, Hermana, etc. -- are borrowed from other languages and therefore contain sounds which are not native to Palauan. In order to spell these sounds, it is necessary to use non-Palauan letters such as p, f, j, y, and w. Furthermore, the spelling of many native Palauan names -- e.g., Yaoch, Polloi, etc. -- does not conform exactly to the rules presented above. We should not be surprised or disturbed that Palauan personal names show so much deviation from the "standard" rules of Palauan spelling: this is perhaps as it should be, since names are very individual things. Hence, all proper nouns, including place names, will continue to be spelled according to current standard practices.

Second, words of foreign origin -- especially technical terms -- often appear within a Palauan text. Since these words contain sounds which are not native to Palauan, it becomes necessary to use non-Palauan letters in some cases. If the word is borrowed from Japanese and contains no sounds strange to Palauan, it should be possible to spell this word only with Palauan letters, as for basio 'place' and iasai 'vegetables'. If, however, the Japanese word contains sounds which do not occur in Palauan, then it is necessary to use non-Palauan letters such as j, z, and f. Words of this type include daijobu 'all right', sikojo 'airport', futsu 'common, usual', and keizai 'economics'. If the borrowed word comes from English -- for example, government, post office, party, etc. -- it is usually spelled as in English, unless a native Palauan spelling has become commonplace, as in the case of skuul 'school'.