

STEPHANIE WALDA-MANDEL

# “There is no place like home”

Migration and  
Cultural Identity  
of the Sonsorolese, Micronesia

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JÜRG WASSMANN





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Father and son on the way to Sonsorol  
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# 1 Introduction

A key reason for social upheavals and for public discussions about human co-operation can be found in the fact that some people decide not to stay in the place they were born. It seems as if, when it comes to fear of foreign infiltration, anti-Semitism, xenophobia, or cultural differences in a country, in the media prevails the unuttered presumption that migration – often caused by displacement, war and economic deprivation – is an abnormal issue. According to that view, migration challenges residence societies, since it ignores national borders and the organization principles, which they are able to establish. A commonly voiced cliché in this context is: “Things will go from bad to worse and everything gets more and more chaotic.” Many people see the orderly structure of nations on the brink of the abyss. However, it is a fact that mankind has always been migrating – perhaps continuous movement is *the* feature of the Homo sapiens. They originated in Africa, and less than 75,000 years ago began to leave the continent to spread over the whole world. The second fact is, that national borders prevailed not until the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Obviously, it is opposite to the preconception: Mankind has always been migrating (even though slowly), and only the relatively young development of self-contained nations got in its way, so that social upheavals of this kind occurred at a later stage.

Based on those considerations, human migration is a fundamental issue in the social sciences. It does not matter which came first – the chicken or the egg. The aspects for the individual, who goes abroad, lives in a foreign country with a different language, wondering where he belongs to, are of vital importance for the self-perception and the self-awareness of the individual, as well as for the perception by others. These issues are fundamental, since identity reference points (where do I belong to versus to as part of what group do I see the other one) are a relevant element of social structures. This also shows in the intense interdisciplinary identity discourse of the last decade. In this context, Bauman talks about an “era of identity” (Bauman 2001: 129).

My interest in identity issues was my main motivation to carry out ethnological research on this phenomenon. Already in my master thesis “Stabilität im Wandel: Identität von Samoanern in der neuseeländischen Migration” (Stability in Transition: Identity of Samoans Migrating to New Zealand) (Walda 2003) I have dealt with the issue of migration and identity. Some of the theoretical aspects I would like to take up now and develop them further on the basis of my own fieldwork. In this context, Sonsorol Island in Micronesia represents an ideal research subject to analyze the relation of migration and identity. The issues covered in this book represent in the course of globalization a contribution to the worldwide migration debate. Furthermore, the subjects dealt with – socialization in Micronesia, individuality, the significance of places, home, and material culture, for example – are relevant for the scientific discipline of Pacific Studies in dealing with today’s societies of the Pacific Islands in social, historical and political manners.

My research is part of the interdisciplinary project “Person, Space and Memory in the Contemporary Pacific. The Experience of New Worlds” under the leadership of Prof. Dr. Jürg Wassmann and has been funded by the Volkswagen-Stiftung. The project’s focus is on the analysis of tradition and change of local concepts of person and place in the Pacific region.

The identity construction in the case of the Sonsorolese is very much linked with their increasing migration. Taking the example of the Sonsorolese helps to understand global phenomena such as foreign influences, handling alternative lifestyles, networks across great distances through new means of communication, development of transnational cultures as well as consequences of migration for the emigrants and the ones left behind on their home island. However, also other accompanying factors such as discrimination of immigrants by people from the dominant residence societies need to be analyzed. Looking at the status of the Sonsorolese in the Republic of Palau today, they represent a minority, who used to be discriminated against in the past, even when politically they have always been Palauan citizens.

In this analysis, it is important not to see the Sonsorolese as victims of the current globalization processes, since this is neither in accordance with the facts, nor does it represent their self-image. When people leave their familiar environment, this always results in something new in their chosen home: “Particularly significant here is the claim that displacement necessarily creates placements, or novel forms of localization and

positioning” (Wassmann and Keck 2007: 3). Addressing the culture of a small Micronesian island also helps to question Western concepts of home and identity and not consider them universally valid.

Even when in this book Sonsorol is embedded in a bigger political, social and historical frame and the colonial history as well as the traditional culture is dealt with, in the center is still the analysis of current issues in relation to migration and identity. Therefore, this analysis will not give a comprehensive overview over Sonsorolese traditions and language, since it would be beyond my scope here. Instead, I will carve out historical and linguistic details when they are beneficial for the question of Sonsorolese identity in the migratory context.

Today, at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century not less than every second Pacific Islander lives outside of his or her home island (Mückler 2006: 64). Sonsorol is no exception, since by now, far more Sonsorolese live in migration than on their island of origin.

To outsiders Sonsorol seems to be one of the last paradises on earth and is also described as one by some of my informants. However, even on this remote island one can feel the impact of globalization and social change and “the end of insularity” (Nero 1997). One of these consequences is the increasing number of Sonsorolese leaving their island and as a first step moving to one of Palau’s main islands to settle down in the village of Echang. The name “Echang” has the Palauan spelling, where the “ch” is pronounced as a glottal stop. It results from closure and then sudden opening of the vocal folds. An alternative spelling is “Eang.”

The migration to Palau’s center is only the first step, which is followed by others to Saipan, Guam, Chuuk, Hawai’i or the USA mainland. Within Micronesia, the people from the Palauan archipelago (including the Sonsorolese) were the first who left their home in big numbers (Hezel 2013b: 5). Today, the Sonsorolese community is located in many different places. Geographic mobility has always been part of the Sonsorolese culture, since they have often visited other islands with their outrigger canoes. Nowadays, this happens on a larger scale. However, the question arises why the tiny, idyllic appearing home islands for many people are “beautiful but not places to live” (Bedford 1980: 57)?

The decision to leave their home has a huge impact on the ones staying at home as well as on the emigrants. In what way do the islanders preserve their traditional island culture with a decreasing population?



Which challenges are the Sonsorolese facing in an increasingly globalized and connected world?

The Sonsorolese have never limited their attention on their island life only. The children after graduating from elementary school on Sonsorol are supposed to attend secondary school on one of Palau's bigger islands or even further away, since there is no high school on Sonsorol. The pursuit of good education is an important catalyst for migration. Furthermore, there is neither a doctor nor a nurse on the island, and the traditional healing techniques are hardly used any more.

Today, Sonsorolese are found in Hawaiian shopping centers, in Saipanese libraries, Guamanian fast food restaurants, as well as in accounting offices in Portland. For the immigrants the challenges are even bigger than for the ones staying on the depopulating island. Without the protecting safety network of the extended family, they need to learn how to organize their new life in the residence society.

Like on some other Micronesian islands, the Sonsorolese underwent a rapid change in regard to their culture and society and had to face the enormous social and political challenges of globalization. They all of a sudden got confronted with a Western lifestyle and new consumption concepts. Instead of family and clan ownership, for example, individual property has gained more importance, and wisdom of the older population is in some cases replaced by Western education of the younger people. In the Pacific Islands, the growing hopes and dreams can lead to disappointment when they do not get fulfilled, and sometimes they manifest in social problems, such as alcoholism, when people see no prospects in their home. In this context of emerging needs and their non-fulfillment, Mückler (2009a: 236) talks about serious identity crises the people on the Oceanic islands need to cope with sometimes.

The main question discussed here is how external conditions in the form of migration and social change influence the cultural identity of the Sonsorolese. What constitutes Sonsorolese identity, and how is it passed to their children raised in migration? Do links to the home community lead to a multidimensional identity? Are the emigrated Sonsorolese emotionally and socially only attached to their island of origin or also rooted in the residence society? What does it mean to be a minority in the context of identity building? How much do they adapt to the circumstances in the residence societies? How does the time abroad reflect in their attitude to life when they return? And for how long is the residence society a foreign place for the Sonsorolese?

Wherever I met Sonsorolese people, I always felt their deep connection with their home island – whether it is based on own lived memories or it manifests on an emotional level in the stories of parents and grandparents or other relatives. It is important for me to let the Sonsorolese express their motifs and hopes and let them speak in their own words about Sonsorolese identity. This way, we are getting a mosaic of many different perspectives on the issue, which result in an entity, which does justice to the individuals and their different experiences on the island and abroad. I have decided to portray their opinions by using direct, original quotes instead of letting them disappear in a continuous text, even when the informants are mostly anonymized to protect them.

Besides fieldwork, theoretical reflections are needed to help analyze the empirical findings in regards to similarities in the migration movements. On this account, I am dealing with the relevant key concepts for the topic area of migration and identity to apply them to my fieldwork experiences.

Why now this book about the Sonsorolese and their migration activities? My fieldwork intends to fill an empirical gap in the research activities in the Micronesian region. There is no general work dealing fundamentally with the people of the Southwest Islands, let alone Sonsorol. All we have is a linguistic study of the Sonsorolese language written by Arthur Capell (1969) based on his notes from the year 1948. About the island Hatohobei (in the following referred to as “Tobi”), which also belongs to the Southwest Islands, there are comprehensive scientific publications, many of them published by the cultural anthropologist Peter Black. There are also numerous publications about the majority population of Palau. In the following, the term “Palauan” is used for this majority population who has a different language and culture than the people from the Southwest Islands (including Sonsorol), which distinguishes the Palauans from them. Politically, the Sonsorolese belong to Palaus, however, they are culturally different. In this book, the term “Palauan” is used neither for people from Sonsorol nor Tobi state. It is used only for the inhabitants of all other Palauan Islands.

For this study, I evaluated all the literature available on Sonsorol, even when it is mostly short articles where the island is only mentioned. Also in the context of migration to the USA, there are significantly less publications about immigrating Micronesians than, for example, about immigrating Chinese or Japanese people.

The Sonsorolese community is very suitable for the study of migration and identity, since it is very small. Its size allowed me direct access to almost all its members. I had the great opportunity to talk to respected traditional leaders like the chief of Sonsorol as well as leaders of the modern political system, like the governor and former governor of Sonsorol and the former president of Palau, Kuniwo Nakamura. The older generation is heard in this study as well as the younger people who are often striving for Western education ideals. According to the inhabitants, the large number of emigrating Sonsorolese represents a threat for the indigenous island culture and language, so that in their eyes, this development makes this analysis even more important. Due to the former colonial powers, Spain, Germany, Japan and the USA, there are many different linguistic influences, particularly from the USA, which together with the Palauan language weaken the Sonsorolese language. However, there are also other threats for the Sonsorolese people that worry them. For example, the rising sea level due to the progressing global warming endangers the small, remote island directly.

The discipline of cultural anthropology is very useful to comprehend these threats as well as identity issues and other topics in societies, since its classical qualitative methods help understanding the processes and structures in small-scale communities.

To analyze Sonsorolese migration and identity, in the following second chapter I introduce Sonsorol as part of the Palauan archipelago. I will also discuss the historical and colonial context and its impact on Sonsorol. Then I describe the methods applied and my role as an anthropologist in the Sonsorolese community. The third chapter provides an overview of the main migration destinations of the Sonsorolese. Here I begin with the village Echang in Palau to then follow the tracks of the Sonsorolese via Guam and Saipan to the USA mainland. This way, we move away further and further away from Sonsorol. The fourth chapter then illustrates the theoretical framework of the Sonsorolese identity construction by presenting different ways of identity attribution in form of cultural, collective and ethnic identity. The fifth chapter widens the theoretical background with the explanation of key terms from migration studies, such as transnationalism, diaspora, nation, home and belonging. To address these issues in the Sonsorolese example, in chapter six the traditional Sonsorolese identity markers are introduced, which today have more or less significance in Sonsorolese life. Chapter seven then deals with the background and the causes for Sonsorolese migration and

examines everyday life of the Sonsorolese in the different residence societies. Here, chain migration, ties with the home community, return migration and identity-defining spheres of life such as church, sports and food, for example, play an important role. The next chapter then describes the challenges for the Sonsorolese identity in the context of migration, particularly with regard to their language and education. I will also go into detail on the possible loss of the Sonsorolese culture and the people's battle against this development. The last chapter then describes the self-perception of the Sonsorolese and the impact that the people in the residence societies have on it. At the end, we find a summary where all these aspects are merged and where I will provide a glimpse in the future of the Sonsorolese community on the island and far away from home.



I am a person of this world, but specifically from Sonsorol.  
As long as you know your language and culture,  
it defines your behavior and attitude.  
(Sonsorolese woman)

## 2 “Do You Know Paradise Island?” Sonsorol and Its Integration in the Palauan Archipelago

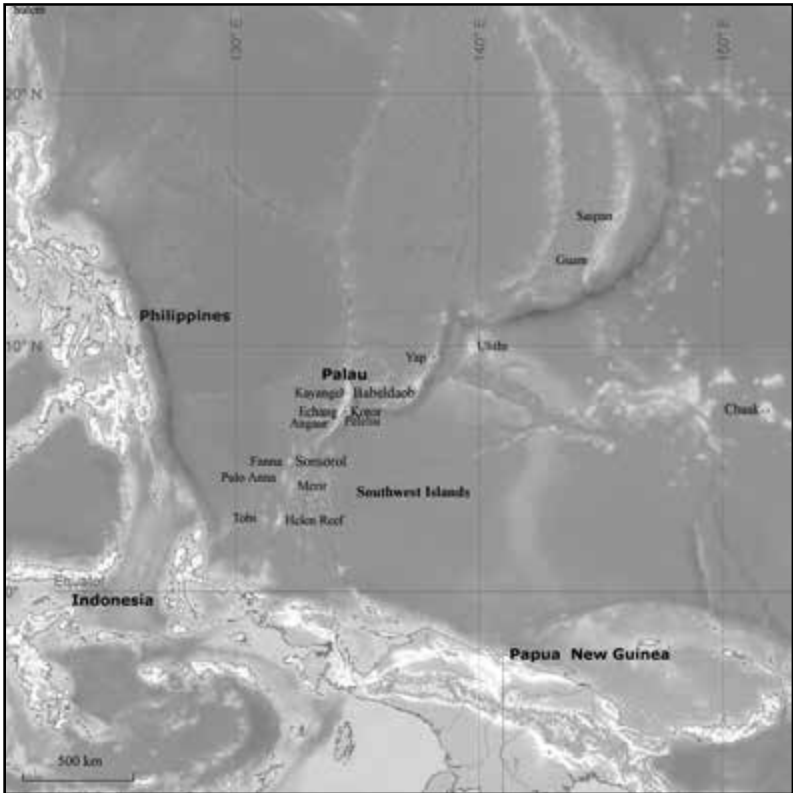
With the term “Paradise Island” referring to the US TV show “Fantasy Island” a young female Sonsorolese answered, when I asked her to describe her home island Sonsorol. However, before Sonsorolese people colorfully tell us about their attachment to their island, I would like to introduce Sonsorol Island as the originating island of the Sonsorolese people.

Then, I want to place Sonsorol geographically, politically and culturally in the archipelago Palau and describe Palau both in its current and in its historical dimension. There will be also room for Palau’s colonial history, since the colonial powers and the Christian mission caused changes that still influence today’s Palau and by this also the identity perceptions of today’s Sonsorolese.

### Dongosaro: Sonsorol

The Palauan archipelago consists of four groups of islands called Babeldaob, Peleliu, Angaur, Kayangel Atoll and the Southwest Islands. Sonsorol State is one of Palau’s 16 administration units that are called “states” within Palau. These units are comparable to the 16 federal states in Germany. Sonsorol State comprises of four low islands that are named Fanna, Sonsorol, Pulo Anna and Merir, seen from north to south. Traditionally and also officially within Sonsorol State the respective islands are named Fanna, Dongosaro, Purr and Meilieli (Watson, Pedro

and Ierago 2002: unpagged) or also Puro and Melieli (Constitution of the State of Sonsorol 1983: Article XI, Section 1). In this book, I will use the names that you find also in the Constitution of the State of Sonsorol and in the literature: Fanna, Sonsorol, Pulo Anna and Merir. Within the administration unit of Sonsorol State, Fanna and Sonsorol combined constitute the Sonsorol Islands.



Map 2.1: Location of Sonsorol Island

Together with the neighboring state Hatohobei, also called Tobi, which consists of Tobi Island and the uninhabited atoll Helen Reef, the islands of Sonsorol state are the Southwest Islands. Besides Helen Reef they are all coral islands that arise three to six meters above sea level. Helen Reef, is

also called "Hotsari Hie" in the Tobian language, which means "Reef of clam." During my residence on Tobi, there were only nine people and on Helen Reef only a few rangers, who lived there to protect the so-called "bird island."

In literature these remote Southwest Islands are also called outer islands. They consist of a number of low reef flats resulting from a shift of the Pacific plate. The Southwest Islands are located about 300 kilometers southwest of Angaur, an island that marks the south end of the Palauan main islands. Lessa calls the Southwest Islands also the "westernmost Carolines" and emphasizes their inner cohesion by marriage and by filling up each other's population after it got decimated by typhoons, famine or raids by inhabitants from Papua New Guinea or Indonesia (Lessa 1978: 233). The Southwest Islands are situated closer to Indonesia than to Palau's urban center Koror and are regarded as some of the most isolated islands in the Pacific. All islands belonging to Sonsorol and Tobi state suffer from a decrease in population that increases every year. According to this development, during my stay on Pulo Anna there were 16 people on the island. In the year 1970, there were only 19 people on Pulo Anna, out of which nine inhabitants were ten years old or even younger, two were over 70 years old (Boucher 1971: 31). Connell (1983: 14) describes the drastic population decline on Sonsorol as follows: 1946 172 inhabitants, 1954 136 inhabitants, 1958 82 inhabitants, 1963 75 inhabitants, 1973 56 inhabitants. The Statistical Yearbook 2001 of Palau numbers 1980 79 inhabitants, 1986 42, 1990 61 and 1995 80 (Republic of Palau: 2001: 15). In the year 2001, Sonsorol had 39 inhabitants (Republic of Palau 2002: 21).

Merir was considered as almost deserted in 1954: "[...] the island is dying, at least as far as the present generations are concerned. [...] The women are too old to cultivate taro in any quantity and the men cannot keep the coconut groves cleared" (Osborne 1966: 49). However, a development as on Merir is rare:

Total depopulation such as this is an extremely rare event in the contemporary Pacific; on many other small islands in the Pacific the prediction of extinction has long preceded the event. Yet the pattern of decline in small outer island communities is well exemplified in Tobi, Merir, Sonsorol, and Pulo Anna, as the movement to Koror continues (Connell and Lea 1998: 58).



During my visit on Merir there were only two brothers living there who were also not planning on leaving the island. The development of the Southwest Islands precludes the one in the rest of Palau. Thus, there was a population increase recorded in Palau in 1980 to 1986, while the population of the Southwest islands decreased continuously: “The population profiles of all the southwest islands suggest they are no longer viable” (Connell and Lea 1998: 59). This assessment from the year 1998 could not be confirmed, because even when there is a population decline, there are still people living on these islands making a life there. All in all, in 1994 it was assumed that there are 70 people living in the Southwest Islands, 100 in Echang and 50 in the migration communities outside of Palau, so that the total number of Southwest Islanders was about 220 (Republic of Palau 1994: 1). Today, in 2016 there are currently living 20 people on Sonsorol, 3 on Pulo Anna (after 19 people just moved to Koror for summer programs coming back in a few months) and 5 on Merir. Indeed, today there are living less people in the islands, but therefore a lot more in Echang and in the migration communities.



Plate 2.1: Hunting on Fanna (Sonsorol in the background)

When I am using the term Sonsorol in the following, I am referring only to the island of Sonsorol, since Fanna Island, which belongs to Sonsorol is uninhabited today.

There are only two houses on Fanna and it is only peripheral for my research. Fanna measures in the west-east direction 0.6 kilometers and in the north-south direction 0.81 kilometers. As the furthest north island of Sonsorol State it is situated about two kilometers north of Sonsorol and is visited by the inhabitants of Sonsorol to catch coconut crabs and to hunt sea birds. They used to use traditional canoes for the trip, today they take the motorboat through the channel called *nipatat*, which means as much as “between” in English. When people go from Sonsorol to Fanna or take the opposite route, one calls that *hadai rap* in Sonsorolese (Palau Society of Historians 2002: 41). Here the expression *hadai rap* is put together by the word *dai* (journey) and *rap* (big). Originally *hadai rap* describes the custom to give food to the people from Sonsorol who are not related to the Fanna people and have no land there as a welcoming gesture on their first visit. This favor will be returned by the Sonsorolese family when guests from Fanna are coming to visit.



Plate 2.2: Sonsorolese flag

Within Palau the 16 states have their own flags, one of which is Sonsorol State's showing a canoe in front of a blue background and four stars. The blue background symbolizes the ocean and shows the strong bond of the

Sonsorolese with the ocean that gives them food and connects them with the different islands. Closely linked to that is the canoe, a vehicle that is used to travel between the islands. It emphasizes the great mobility of the people that they have always had. The four stars stand for the four islands that form Sonsorol State: Sonsorol, Fanna, Pulo Anna, and Merir. At the same time, from the beginning the stars have served the island inhabitants as a source for orientation at night and have helped them reaching their destination when traveling with their outrigger canoes.

In the indigenous language of the Sonsorolese, Sonsorol is called *Dongosaro*, which means “place where strong currents prevail” – a fitting name as I found out on my strenuous long trip to Sonsorol, which took 22 hours. It is not harmless to get to Sonsorol, since you have to climb from the big ship to the small dinghy that takes you to the island, even with the strong currents.



Plate 2.3: Arrival on Sonsorol

Approaching the low islands by boat, one recognizes from far the hybrid mix of leaf thatched roofs and house walls made of corrugated iron. Reaching the island early in the morning one sees young men climbing palm trees to harvest coconuts and to produce the popular fermented juice

from the flower sheaths of the coconut trees, the locals call *tuba*. Younger children in their school uniforms, looking like the ones from the USA with a white shirt and black pants, are walking to the elementary school of the island. Here a male and a female teacher are teaching, getting paid by the government. A school day usually lasts from eight in the morning until two in the afternoon. Meanwhile, the adults are keeping the paths and water tanks clean, which serve to catch rainwater – the only water supply for drinking, washing and cooking on the island. They get paid for these jobs by Sonsorol State. Indeed, one still finds old wells from colonial times. However, they are not used by the inhabitants any more. If it does not rain over a longer period of time the residents are getting a little anxious, since water scarcity impends. Sonsorol and Helen Reef are also not protected against typhoons and high waves (Republic of Palau 1994: 3).

Connection with the rest of the world is established via a short wave radio that connects the Sonsorolese with the Sonsorol State Office that is situated in Meyuns on one of Palau’s main islands. Since December 2009, there also has existed an internet connection, which the residents use to stay in touch with their family members, who have spread in Micronesia and the United States.

However, most of the Sonsorolese living in their home island do not miss the rest of the world as much as one would think they do. The ones living on Sonsorol love their island and the life they have there.

A day on Sonsorol is very relaxed. According to the young Sonsorolese, they enjoy learning from the older ones how to catch and cook fish, turtles and coconut crabs. They weave baskets the traditional way, and one of the young men has learned from the older ones how to carve a canoe and works on it every single minute. At night, they sit by the beach and tell stories. From the village resounds softly Raichy’s guitar and mixes with the sound of the ocean. However, suddenly Nick’s stereo pervades the atmosphere. It is Sonsorolese songs, which some Sonsorolese released as a CD and that now with the help of solar power find their way to the Sonsorolese stereos. Once again island life mixes with modern technology.

During my stays in December 2004 and February 2005 there were 15 people on the 1.36 km<sup>2</sup> island of Sonsorol. One reaches the island only through the so-called channel, an opening in the reef, that only experienced boaters know and use. The actual settlement on Sonsorol is found on the middle of the west coast. There is a slightly elevated path that leads straight through the settlement and three different pathways that run from the West to the East coast. Circling the entire island by foot in about an hour, one

walks the path called *Yarai Fari Yalower*. In the island’s interior, there is densely grown mixed forest. On the island and around it, there lives a huge variety of sea birds, fruit bats, different sea turtles such as green turtles and hawksbill turtles.

Sonsorol runs in north-south direction with a length of 1.8 kilometers and a width of 0.88 kilometers (Bureau of Arts and Culture 2004: 4). On the islands is a Catholic church named Santa Maria Pillar as well as an Elementary School established in 1972. For the children there is a school kitchen that serves lunch every day. The children are taught from grade one to eight the subjects of science, mathematics, Palauan, Sonsorolese and gardening. In 2003, there were three computers installed, which they can use. Furthermore, there is a library and also a cemetery on the island. The islanders use an outhouse, and they shower behind a wooden wall with rainwater that you catch beforehand with the help of a bucket from a water tank.



Plate 2.4: Children on Sonsorol

Further, there is the Sonsorol State Office established in 1958 and a dispensary from the year 1972 that provides the inhabitants with the essentials. However, there is no nurse or doctor on the island.

The inhabitants are in touch with the Sonsorol State Office in Meyuns on the main islands several times a day by radio. The Sonsorolese day is usually divided by the activities described above: The children are going to school, the adults establish radio contact with the office in Meyuns, clean, work around the house and go fishing. Together with the older islanders they prepare food and attend church daily.

Since the year 2000 Sonsorol has a photovoltaic system, with the help of which the people use the sunlight to generate electricity to run stereos, refrigerators and fans. Nevertheless, they deal with technical problems, also because there is no regular maintenance. Fans are particularly necessary in those houses that are not thatched with bundles of leaves, but where the roofs consist of corrugated iron. Corrugated iron creates intense heat, however, in Micronesia it is often used for reasons of prestige.

Sonsorol is a mainly maritime culture, and in contrast to former times, farming does not play a huge role in their lives. This has to do with a change of lifestyle and a changed consumer behavior. Over and above, Sonsorol's ground is described by the residents as relatively infertile. For instance, it is a challenge to do horticulture on the island, since the salt water in the ground makes it impossible for many plants to grow there. In addition to that, the ground is very sandy and therefore barren. In former times, the dwellers were growing bananas, taro, breadfruit and papaya. Today, however, one can barely speak of pure subsistence on Sonsorol, since the people still catch fish and seafood and keep a few pigs and chicken, but they are also very dependent on the irregular food supplies that come with a ship called *Atoll Way*, which belongs to Tobi State. Since 1999, the Sonsorolese are getting to their home island this way after their own two ships were not seaworthy any more (Bureau of Arts and Culture 2004: 4). Most of the Micronesians growing up today, only know the self-sufficient way of life, characterized by subsistence, from narratives by their ancestors:

[...] young people have little memory of a time when self-reliance was the norm, trade took place largely within localized island cultures, and imported food was almost unknown. Today, as much as 90 percent of all food in the Marshall Islands and more than half in the other Compact states is imported (Connell and Lea 1998: 86).

With this development, living and food conditions within Micronesia have changed. While in the past, natural disasters and food shortages made the

islanders' lives difficult, it is nowadays the civilization diseases of the so-called "first world," like heart diseases, high blood pressure and type-II-diabetes (Carucci 2002: 185). The people on Sonsorol have themselves sent by ship from Koror polished white rice, canned meat, sugar and white flour products. These instant food products and canned food come mostly from the USA and East Asia. When these products are all used, then it sometimes happens that the people living on the island are telling by radio that they are out of food. As a reaction to this "food shortage" the governor of Sonsorol, Laura Ierago Miles said that the islanders are surrounded by food. The islanders are handling these modern foods in a manner that is increasingly consumerist and partly unhealthy and that is based more and more on our western lifestyle. At the same time the traditional fishing gets neglected to a large extent. It would be helpful if the islanders combined traditional and imported foods in their food preparation: "Outer island residents, who blend imported foods with nutrient-rich local products and who prepare foods in traditional ways, are typically less affected by diet-related health problems" (Carucci 2002: 185). The problem lies in the fact that for islanders imported products seem to have a high emotional value, since they are rarer, not always available and thus a desirable specialty. At the same time, covering the need for food with imported groceries, the old fishing techniques and traditional food preparation get sidelined, since they are used and practiced less. By this means, the people evolve more and more away from their traditional way of living and Western ideals are getting more into the focus of the islanders' needs.

Today, the residents receive by ship rice, which is basically a staple food for the people, coffee, tea, sweets, ramen (an Asian convenience food based on dried noodles) as well as canned fish and meat. Toilet paper, school supplies, kerosene, tobacco and medicine also constitute an important part of these deliveries. Joyfully the adults are receiving the beer delivery that entails, that the first days after the arrival of the ship the people drink and celebrate sometimes until the alcohol supplies are used up. The delivered and caught foods are prepared at stoves that are fired with kerosene. When guests are announcing their arrival on Sonsorol by radio, the children on the island are so excited that one cannot even think of school lessons according to plan. The adults prepare many different dishes and they open coconuts so that the visitors can drink the juice. Even in dry months with only little rain these fruits give the inhabitants minerals and vitamins. Skillful climbers get the green coconuts from the trees so that fresh coconut juice is always available. The locals also drink the

fermented juice of the coconut blossoms (the *tuba*) that can contain alcohol, depending on the extent of fermentation. Children particularly like the sweet *tuba* (without any alcohol). The production of *tuba* requires cultural knowledge and agility, as the young men need to climb the coconut trees twice a day to cut the tip of a palm tree blossom with a knife and to carve into the shaft. By this means, one receives juice that is collected with the help of a little pipe and a bottle. Traditionally, every man has his own tree to use for *tuba* production. On Pulo Anna the women also apply themselves to *tuba* production and to fishing, since there are not enough men on the island.

As a product for the European market the coconut gained importance at the end of the whaling era. It was a new resource basis in the production of lotions and ointments. Later then, copra, the dried flesh of the coconut, got exported and processed in the importing country (Carucci 2002: 186). Copra is economically interesting, because it is possible to gain coconut oil from it, that one can use in margarine as well as in the cosmetic production. From the proceeds of the extracted copra the people in the past got some money to spend in a little store on Sonsorol to buy things for their daily needs that were brought to the island by ship. Though nowadays, the islanders neither sell copra nor does the little store exist anymore.

The geographically isolated location allowed the residents over a period of centuries to maintain their Sonsorolese way of life without huge impact from the outside – a situation that has strongly changed during the last few decades. Today, Sonsorolese have only fragmentary information of former traditions that are partly composed of Western publications about the Hamburg South Seas Expedition (1908-1910) and similar documents. One reason for the loss of their traditional knowledge, according to some Sonsorolese, is the influence of the Catholic Mission and of the colonial powers. I will go into more detail on this topic in the course of this book.

The geographic isolation is accompanied by the fact that people in the past supported each other in their subsistence activities. This for the survival necessary behavior one still finds today in the intensely pronounced cohesion of the members of the Sonsorolese community, wherever its members live.

Generally, the Palauans from the main islands distance themselves strongly from the Sonsorolese and the other Southwest Islanders and the distance between the Southwest Islands and the main islands of Palau is also called a “cultural and linguistic gap” (Intoh 2008: 334). The island of



Sonsorol only becomes of real interest for the Palauans when it comes to Palau's spatial extent and the affiliated fishery zone, so their economic interests become reinforced. By incorporating the remote Southwest Islands, the fishery zone expands considerably:

With the exception of Papua New Guinea, all the states in the region are extremely small, in both population and land area, although some countries have large Exclusive Economic Zones. Economic and political jurisdiction over vast ocean areas has increased the economic and strategic significance of the region (Connell and Lea 2002: 70).

All in all, it can be said that today the island despite the relatively great remoteness changes due to influence from outside. It begins with little things that have consequences for the island population, as of nowadays the inhabitants ofonsorol chew betelnuts (Palauan *elaus*), which their relatives from Echang often bring when they are visiting. One chews the endosperm of the seed of the Areca-catechu-palm (Palauan *buuch*), the leaf of the Piper-betle-plant (Palauan *kebui*) and lime (Palauan *aus*) (Marshall 2004c: 201). In Palau, the betelnut has just about the importance of having tea or coffee in the Western world and stands for a friendly and peaceful atmosphere and good social relationships. Over and above, it supports social activities, gives zest for life and counteracts boredom. It triggers wellbeing and – if one leaves off the tobacco – the quid of the nut stimulates the central nervous system in such a way that a slightly euphoric mood sets in. In addition to that, it reduces the feeling of hunger and thirst. At the same time, it can lead to increased salivation and the betelnut can make you feel diaphoretic (Marshall 2004c: 201). Further, the saliva and then the teeth of the chewer discolor red by the chemical reaction of betelnut, lime and leaves. The problem for the Sonsorolese is that betelnuts do not grow on Sonsorol, so that the dependence of the people living on Sonsorol on the main islands increases. The actual Palauan tradition of chewing betelnuts also brings fruit flies to the island that can destroy the local fruits, which besides fish are a local food source. Furthermore, the chewing of the nut can set off asthma attacks or at least can make them worse, and it is suspected to cause cancer in the mouth region (Marshall 2004c: 216). On Sonsorol and in Echang, the consumption of betelnuts often goes hand in hand with the consumption of alcohol, which can be called “social drinking,” where you sit together with your family members and tell stories until the stock is all gone.

Another circumstance that worries the Sonsorolese is the rising sea level caused by the global climate change. Some of them fear the sinking of the Southwest Islands within the next 20 years, so that they would lose the source and foundation of their identity. The cause for this lies in the global warming that already hits the Pacific Islands hard (Connell 2015). Many scientists attribute this to the combustion of fossil fuels and to the emission of carbon dioxide by the industrial nations (Ruddiman 2010; Vallis 2012; Weart 2003). This causes the so-called greenhouse effect and the associated global warming, which in turn leads to a climate change, the melting of the polar ice caps and sea level rise (Lockwood 2004: 30). The consequences of this sea level rise will lead to a catastrophe for the lower islands like Sonsorol as well as for many atolls:

Although not all researchers agree on the precise causes, consequences, and magnitude of global warming, most concur that rising sea levels are threatening the very existence of many low-lying atoll societies only a few meters above sea level (Lockwood 2004: 30).

A separation from their sites would constitute a severe rupture in Pacific Islanders' lives (Steiner 2015: 149). The threat of rising sea levels is therefore a fact that worries many Sonsorolese. The people have a feeling of helplessness when the conversation turns to that subject. Only a few express themselves as explicitly as this young Sonsorolese who lives in Echang:

I just saw that natural disaster, that tidal wave in Southeast Asia. I don't wanna stay in Sonsorol, too. I mean, if I was on Sonsorol and I heard about that, the next trip I pack my whole family and leave, cause imagine, that's a huge continent and it killed like thousands of people. I wouldn't live there. So my judgment is, in ten years they'll be gone. There will nobody be there. They'll live here [in Echang] (young Sonsorolese).

Most of the Sonsorolese feel closely connected with the victims of the tsunami in 2004 in Southeast Asia. Regardless of their own financial situation, they collected money for the victims of this natural disaster and their thoughts were with them. Their sympathy can be attributed to the fact that they find themselves on their little island in an equally fragile situation. How endangered Sonsorol actually is, showed again in 2011 when another tsunami first hit Japan and then threatened the islands of Micronesia.

When one visits Sonsorol today, one gets the impression that there are only fragments of the traditional forms of leadership left. Too much has the tradition mixed with the Western forms of government; and as often, the more dominant system prevails. This is also observed by the Sonsorolese: “They all agreed that the old type of leadership has changed and is dying” (Nestor 1998: 2). It is not only the ones who remain at home, but also the migrated Sonsorolese who deal intensively with the future of their island and the question who is in charge of it and who should govern it: “I still concern, because even though I’m out here [in the USA] I still have a lot of people back there, that I hope, their life will be ok, you now. So yes, I concern who they put in office” (older Sonsorolese woman). Many perceive Sonsorol as an island without any leadership: “One thing I also kind of see, what we really lack is leadership. [...] It seems that they just pick somebody and they don’t chose somebody that can be their leader or something” (older Sonsorolese woman). For this unsatisfying leadership situation some blame the fact that some Sonsorolese vote according to the principle of kinship ties for a person that is not always the most qualified for the position: “They just want somebody that they like. They don’t think about what somebody can do” (older Sonsorolese woman).

The expatriate Sonsorolese express themselves very positively about their home island. Often they emphasize how pleasant it feels for them that they do not have to worry about financial issues, even when today on Sonsorol one does not get by without money, as a young Sonsorolese who lives in Portland describes it:

We can plant our own food and we can fish our meat [on Sonsorol]. But in Echang or here [in the USA] we owe money, we need money there. But even in Sonsorol we need money to buy rice, but it’s not like here (young Sonsorolese woman).

However, the remoteness and Sonsorol’s poor accessibility cause problems. The former Palauan President Kuniwo Nakamura in his own words provided \$ 3,000,000.00 to build airports in Sonsorol, Pulo Anna and Tobi. Though before he could finish this project his period of office was over and his successor Thomas Remengesau finally used the money for other projects, like improving the streets on one of the main islands. The former president of Palau regrets that his successor cannot offer the people from the Southwest Islands safe trips as well. In his eyes, the *Atoll*