

Catastrophe on Peleliu: Islanders' memories of the Pacific War

The American invasion of Peleliu in September 1944 was one of the bloodiest and hardest-fought battles of the Pacific War. The 11,000 Japanese defenders dug over 500 caves into the island's mountains and forced U.S. forces to spend 73 days blasting them out. In the end, only 300 Japanese survived and the island lay shattered and burned. The 850 native inhabitants had been evacuated before the fighting, but were devastated to find upon their return that their homeland had been churned into a wasteland.

Stephen C. Murray

Japanese and American perspectives on the Pacific War and the Peleliu campaign have been recounted exhaustively, but the calamity the war visited on the *'ad ra Beliliou*, the people of Peleliu - eviction from their homeland, their struggle to survive the war, their efforts to rebuild and their painful postwar memories - has largely been ignored. My research in 2002-03 thus sought to document the experiences of the generation of Peleliu residents who survived the war, and to understand how they remember that era and interpret its historical meanings.

To do so one must first appreciate that the people of Peleliu conceive of history differently from Japanese and Americans, and use different methods to retain and transmit it. Second, because land is such a vital element in the culture, people's conceptions of land and the ways it was affected by the war provide the primary framework through which they structure their memories of war and consider its aftermath. Their memories contrast markedly with those brought to the island today by tourists from the two former belligerents.

Peleliu is one of the traditional political divisions of the Palau archipelago, which lies in the Pacific Ocean just north of the equator and 550 miles east of the Philippines. Palau is a sovereign nation that in 1994 signed a 50-year compact of free association with the U.S. Sixty years after the invasion, evidence of the conflict on Peleliu remains more visible than on any comparable site in the Central Pacific. Today's 575 residents are clustered in a single village (an equal number live in Palau's urban centre, Koror), and to an outsider's eye the rest of the island appears to be largely unused. Beneath the re-grown forests dotted with small gardens and taro paddies lie guns, fortifications, caves filled with weaponry (and in some, the unburied dead), and tons of unexploded ordnance. It is this seemingly 'pristine' quality of the battlefield that draws history-minded travellers.

History and land

In the kin-based society of Palau, knowledge of the past centres on histories of families and clans, especially on how they came to hold power or own certain lands. These histories are kept very private, and stories maintained by other kin groups are granted respect. People accept that differing, competing versions of stories are tenuous, designed to promote the interests of the group holding the story. Although Palau is now a fully literate society, these stories continue to be transmitted orally, while more public tales may be related in song, dance, chants, or the visual arts. Kin relations are organized around con-

trol of land, the scarcest and most valuable resource on any island. Kin groups are identified with particular parcels, most of which are still held communally, all of which are named and have stories behind them: how they were acquired and who lived on them. One's identity and history are inextricably connected to place, to land, and to the tales of that land. The landscape itself serves as the repository of a group's history, through its named parcels and beaches, landmarks, and *olang'*. These are natural or man-made features - stones, trees, stone burial platforms, a garden - that serve as mnemonic devices to recall important stories. It's not surprising, then, that the war memories of the *'ad ra Beliliou* are strongly coloured by their perspectives on what happened to their lands as productive resources, as the foundation of their social organization, and as bearer of their past.

War and survival

For most of the 30 years that Japan ruled Palau and Micronesia (1914-44), its interest in the colony was the exploitation of local resources. But as war approached, Japan made the fateful decision to locate Palau's main airfield on Peleliu. Authorities uprooted two of the island's five villages and seized their lands for the facility. Two other villages accepted these refugees, whose way of life had so abruptly been wrenched from them. Clans gave home sites and garden plots to the newcomers, and everybody made awkward accommodation amidst this unprecedented misfortune.

Nobody anticipated the same fate would befall the whole island, but as American air attacks mounted in intensity in mid-1944, the entire population of Peleliu was evacuated. They were taken in by the people of Ngarard, a village on a large island to the north that escaped invasion. For the next 12 months the *'ad ra Beliliou* hid in the jungles to escape American air patrols that attacked all visible targets; gardening, gathering, and fishing at night kept them one step ahead of starvation. Some trekked to other villages seeking relatives and food. This dark year is remembered as a phantasmagoria of fear, hunger, illness, and occasional sudden death, made all the worse by the uncertainty over what had happened to their homeland in battle.

The succour they received from other communities in Palau is not forgotten. The women of Peleliu still perform a dance in which they name and thank the villages that aided their kin. Before departing Ngarard in 1945 the refugees erected a stone *olang'* to commemorate their bond, one maintained and taught to the young through periodic great feasts hosted alternately by the two villages.

When they returned to Peleliu in early 1946, the islanders were stunned by what they encountered: uniformly they describe desolation, an island of glaring

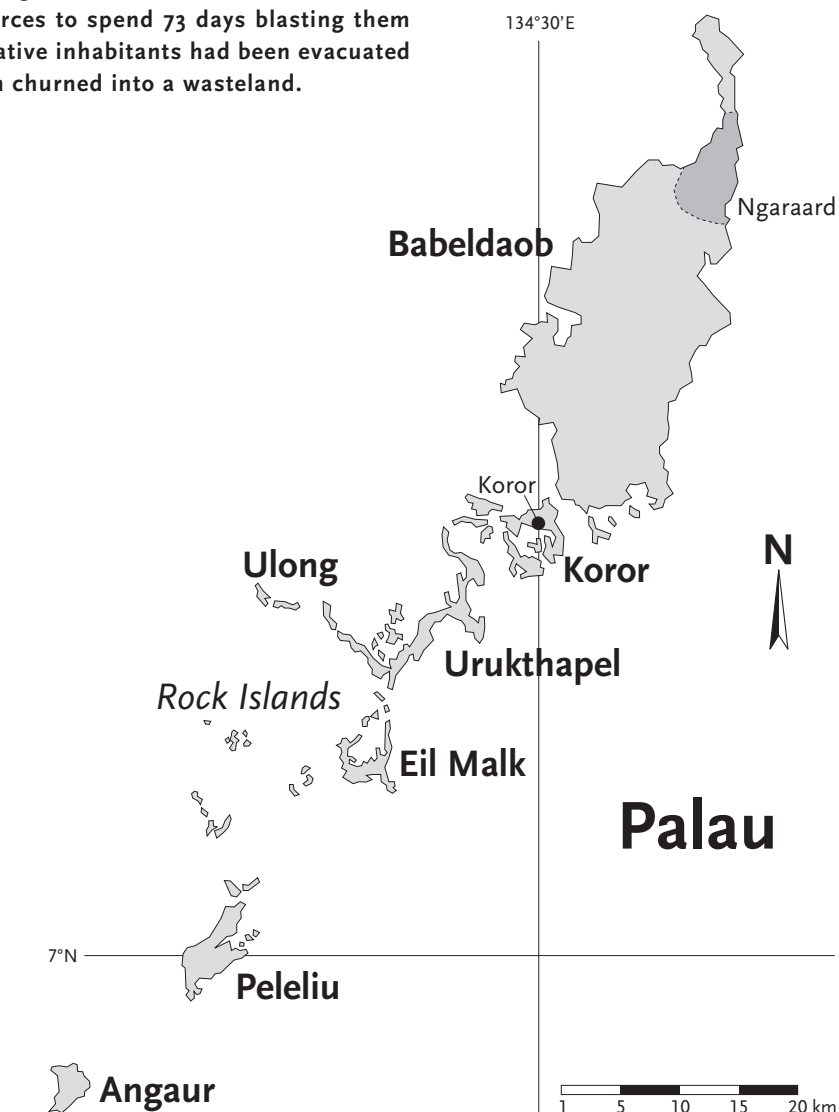
white coral deforested by fire and explosives, so barren and altered by military construction that many refused to believe it was truly their island. 'We cried and cried' one woman recalls. Their five villages and nearly all the tangible reminders of their former lives - homes, council houses, burial platforms, *olang'*, piers, farms, even parcel boundary markers - had been demolished. Within the caves in the mountains lay thousands of unburied Japanese, whose spirits, Palauans believed, could harm the living. With so much of Peleliu's past residing in the human and natural landscapes, their destruction meant that the war was not just one more stratum of history laid down on the previous 3,000 years' worth. Instead, it abraded much of the history that had come before; it obliterated everything except what survivors carried in their memories.

The American forces provided the returnees with quonset huts and food in a new settlement, gestures much appreciated after the year of hardship. But the Americans abandoned the airbase in 1947, leaving the people to fend for themselves on an island whose fishing grounds had lost productivity and whose meager soil had been paved over, poisoned, and washed away. Gardening was confined to taro swamps, and fish were less plentiful than before the war.

Postwar memories

Much of postwar life on Peleliu is comprehended in residents' vexations over land tenure systems disrupted by colonialism and war. Japan and the succeeding U.S. administration both claimed half of Peleliu as government land. The U.S. effort to relinquish this land to the public was done in a manner blamed for creating endless disputes among clans, lineages, and individuals. This Gordian knot is slowly being untangled by Western-style Palauan courts that are now the sole source of legal title. People complain that deeply private family histories have to be revealed in public court proceedings to bolster land claims.

The five ancient villages have never been rebuilt, a source of great distress to the elders as time removes the last people who can remember the way of life and the all-important physical features of the communities. The reasons for delay are many, lack of capital for reconstruction (war reparations from both combatants were niggardly) and despoliation of farmlands commonly cited. But residents acknowledge that the underlying explanation is the risk of building a home without secure title to land. Every *'ad ra Beliliou* still identifies himself as coming from one of the five villages, whose sites are proudly shown on the map given to tourists. Chiefly titles continue to be passed down, and oral histories and parcel names are taught to the young. The way of life of the 1930s is gone forever: Palau's is a monetized,



globalized economy today. Yet only the actual return to place will provide the opportunity to renew ties to the one site each person considers his true home, the repository of his family's history, and source of his identity.

After the United States opened Micronesia to tourism in the 1960s, Peleliu quickly attracted Japanese veterans and bereaved families, who were particularly anxious to cremate the thousands of remains in the caves. The island also became a magnet for right-wing nationalists, who erected a Shinto shrine and monuments praising their fallen heroes. Ever sensitive to matters affecting families, the islanders express great sympathy toward those who lost kin there. Nonetheless, off and on since the late 1960s they have prohibited the collection of remains out of fear that once all had been taken away, Japanese tourism, and the vital income it produced, would stop. When Japanese Diet officials pressed to reverse the prohibition, the magistrate Saburo seized the chance to voice Peleliu's resentment at the cavalier treatment its citizens had endured from the two nations that had so afflicted them. In fluent Japanese he demanded, 'Did you Japanese and Americans get an invitation from us to come fight on our island of Peleliu? You destroyed everything and then went away and left us with nothing'.

Few Americans reach Peleliu today, and many of those who do, particularly veterans and their families, share with their Japanese counterparts a sense of personal quest. Other tourists have succumbed to our prurient fascination with

war, curious about a site where its scars remain so evident, an island once deemed worthy of great sacrifice but now insignificant to 'history'. The native inhabitants and what the war meant to them are superfluous to these pilgrimages, an attitude the islanders are well aware of: 'We're invisible to outsiders', one chief put it.

Japan and the United States have raised monuments honouring their dead and declaring commitments to peace. The *'ad ra Beliliou* describe them as the *olang'* of the foreigners, stones that encode their memories of the war, their versions of the past. The islanders respect those memories and grasp well their essence - what the Imperial Army and the U.S. Marines did to each other, and to Peleliu, in the autumn of 1944. Travellers to the island, by contrast, understand little of what happened to the native population engulfed by that catastrophe. Addressing the ignorance of such visitors, another chief, Obakle'ol, noted that 'they are only here for a short time'. This gentle, considerate comment reveals Palauans' particular conception of history and its transmission. He was saying this: 'To be understood, our histories depend on the prior creation of personal relations because the stories are private, about our families and our lives. They can only be shared with, and become meaningful to, those who have learned who we are and have grown to care about us'. <

Stephen C. Murray
Department of Anthropology
University of California at Santa Barbara
stevemurray1966@yahoo.com