

UNESCO-ACCU Expert Meeting on Community Involvement in the Safeguarding  
Intangible Cultural Heritage: Toward the Implementation of the UNESCO's  
2003 Convention  
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by Faustina K. Rehuher  
Republic of Palau

## **Background**

The Palau archipelago of one atoll, four major islands, and about 20,000 people makes up a small island state located in the western corner of the north Pacific. The population was placed at a very conservative figure of 40-50,000 in the mid 1880s, but due to introduced diseases, the population drastically dropped to about 3,000 at the beginning of 1900s.

Having been a Spanish, German and Japanese colony, Palau became part of the first and only strategic United Nations Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands (TTPI) in 1947 under the administering authority of the United States. With the overwhelming ratification of a constitution by the island people in July 1980, the Republic of Palau came into being as a semi self-governing territory (still a trust territory) subject to the authority of the High Commissioner of the TTPI. Since November 1980, separate legislative and executive offices have been popularly elected every four years, making up a presidential form of government. After the ratification of the Compact of Free Association agreement with the United States in 1993, the Republic of Palau declared its independence and regained its sovereignty in 1994.

The Constitution of the Republic of Palau is clear on the role of the traditional system in the democratic form of government as well as statutes and regulations.

### National Constitution

- Preamble – to preserve and enhance our traditional heritage
- Article V – recognizing traditional leaders and traditional law
- Article VIII, Section 6 – Council of Chiefs advise the President

### Statutory Law

19 PNC (Palau National Code) Chapter 1 – Historical and Cultural Preservation Board protects tangible and intangible cultural property from destruction or misuse and the establishment of the Belau National Museum Board of Trustees to oversee the National Museum.

22 PNC Chapter 1 – Ministry of Education shall publish textbooks on all aspects of Palauan life – history and culture

34 PNC Chapter 2 – Medical licensing not required for traditional remedies or practicing traditional healing arts

### Executive Orders

EO 139 – Establishing National Economic Council coordinating authority of traditional leaders in economic development.

EO (Executive Order) 189 – recognizes that “Palau’s culture is intricately united with the surrounding environment

EQPB (Environmental Quality Protection Board) – has authority to regulate water, septic, solid waste, public water, construction, earthmoving, pesticide, air pollution involving “traditional conservation areas” and “land policies, land uses under traditional Palauan law”.

Note: The law that establishes “The Promotion and Protection of Traditional Knowledge and Expressions of Culture” is still under review in Palau’s National Congress, *Olbiil Era Kelulau*.

Palau’s Copyright Law became effective in November 2003.

#### I. Uses of terminologies: Communities, Groups and Individuals

Long before UN Conventions or even UN system itself came into force, traditional societies already had their own systems of ICH in place in terms of recording, preserving, promoting, transferring of knowledge and skills, performing and other means of ensuring that ICH is maintained and transferred to the next generation.

In Palau each village might have five to seven hamlets depending on the size of a village. Each hamlet is a community and also the whole village is a community. The Traditional Council Chiefs and the Women counter part leaders, the Matriarchs, of the village/community all have roles and therefore make up the community. In Palau, gender plays a major component of any community. The roles of men and women balance a society.

Within a community then are organizations of age-graded groups of men and women. These groups’ ages range from 13 to 30 for youth, and mid-age from over 30 to 50 yrs then older generation after that. Individuals move up as they advance in age. The roles are defined by the groups and the chiefs are informed and give their approval. The same process applies for women. The organizations have names. Individuals within a group have their own right representing their clans, lineages and families. So, in a way, an individual’s responsibility is to look after his /her hamlets, clan’s, lineage’s and family’s interests and to make sure that a certain ritual (a specialty) of her clan is not lost.

Overall, from an individual to a group to a community—from the bottom up or top down approach to ICH; everyone has a role to play in a group, in a community.

## II. Inventorying and Safeguarding

By defining, inventorying and safeguarding ICH, Palau's approach is implementation of various forms of ICH. For example, in 1998, Palau National Council of Traditional Chiefs, *Rubekul Belau*, initiated, planned and organized the 1<sup>st</sup> Micronesian Traditional Leaders Conference and it has been held every two years ever since. Issues of language in the schools; uses of traditional system of conservation measures, and others have been some of the agendas.

Another example is the Women Leaders, *Mechesil Belau*. They have held their conference for over ten years now as of this year. They are strong advocates of not just traditional and cultural matters but also of modern aspects of the society.

In terms of ICH, women are very active in the preservation and promotion of Palau's culture and arts through holding conferences, gatherings, festivals and documentation through films.

## III. Community Development

ICH must be a major component in any type of community development at all levels. Today's world of globalization mandates that each community defines and safeguards their ICH through various activities—programs and projects to ensure continuity, promotion and enhancement.

For the Pacific Islands, the Festival of Pacific Arts that began in 1972 in Fiji has grown to involve governments at regional, national and community levels. In 2004, the 9<sup>th</sup> Festival of Arts was hosted by Palau. The benefits that derived from the Festival were: development of culture and arts infrastructures, education and schools involvement, artists' associations, farmers, fishermen and overall consciousness of ICH were acknowledged and re-strengthened. Networks among artists throughout the Pacific and the world who participated in the Festival helped to establish ties for future cooperation.

Palau holds an annual fair/festival, *Olechotel Belau*, a way for villages, groups and individuals to do their share.

- Performances are refined and perfected to the artists' liking.
- Painters, carvers and weavers gain recognition as well as make money
- Culinary artists share age old traditions of ingredients and different types of dishes
- Storytelling, traditional games and sports come alive.
- Many other types of ICH

In conclusion, ICH at all levels is not just implemented once a year through festivals and other gatherings, it becomes a practice of a community, groups and individuals daily as part of development; hence the economics of culture and the arts. If the stakeholders benefit from their own creativity, they are encouraged to produce, create, promote and safeguard their ICH; hence the uniqueness and beauty of the world.

