



**The mother
of our breath**

In the westernmost region of the Caroline Islands of Micronesia lies the Republic of Palau. Palauan traditional farming shows how agriculture, family values and culture are interconnected. Despite these connections, family farms are facing challenges. By joining forces, the small-scale family farms of these islands are standing up for their rights and calling for support for maintaining important (agri)cultural customs.

Robert V. Bishop

Pride, power and income Palauan traditional farms represent a form of agriculture that is strongly family-oriented. In the matrilineal society of Palau, agriculture defines the female sphere of influence and is a source of pride, power, and income for women. The importance of agriculture and women in Palau is illustrated by the Palauan proverb: “The taro patch is the mother of our breath.” In general, women have been the nurturers of the family and providers of food on land, while men have been providers from the sea. Children are expected to help their parents and other elders in their different tasks. Palauan women are referred to as “walking libraries of family food production” – especially in the cultivation of taro, which women have developed and fine-tuned. Female-produced agricultural products together with additional marine and forest products have provided a self-sufficient food system with a built-in safety net against natural and economic disasters, pest intrusion and old age.

In addition to providing food and income, the taro patch serves a number of other purposes in Palauan communities. Exchanging taro and other food plays a role in cultural customs and major family events, such as birth ceremonies and funerals. Family farms are multi-purpose enterprises and this means that they have been buffers at times of disaster and provide a glue for bonding and wealth creation. This “sharing and caring” has had a multiplier effect and actually creates economic and social wealth, even though this wealth creation is not reflected in official statistics. The relationship between farming families and their beneficiaries functions as a “value web”, rather than the often highly touted “value chain”. Every connection in the web is a bond. The goal of each exchange was not profit, but to provide a valued product or service. Family farms in Palau are more than farms owned and operated by families: they are farms with family – rather than corporate – values.

Family farms also act as cultural and social learning centers. Children have learnt about the health-promoting features of plants, about how, when and

where to plant different crops and about the sacredness of food. They also learn about taboos and customs, the core values that empower and enable Palauan culture, birth control, reciprocity, the role of the family and each family member – and much more. As such, the family farm has not only been a way to keep youth engaged in and knowledgeable on agriculture, it has in many ways been the forum for inter-generational communication.

A changing landscape Traditionally, Palau was self-sufficient in food at the household, community, and national levels. By contrast, today imported foods constitute at least 90% of the average household diet. To break this dependency, Palau needs to (re)develop locally produced goods and services. Yet

Traditional taro systems

The predominant agricultural activity in Palau is production for family sustenance: the main crops are taro, cassava, sweet potato, banana and coconut. As in many other parts of Oceania, Palauan traditional agriculture features a multi-story agroforestry system in which trees provide a protective canopy for the intensive production of 40 to 50 plant varieties. An invaluable aspect of this system – culturally, socially and economically – is the taro patch. Patches of taro, the major food staple in Palau, slightly resemble rice paddies, where dykes and pathways encase a wetland. The soil is turned over and enriched with large quantities of green manure. An analysis done in Palau shows that, when comparing the value of production to labour, cash and non-cash inputs into different crops, the taro patch is the most productive system.



“Harvest the taro when it is ripe”: traditional knowledge on disease prevention on a poster.

Photo: Robert Bishop

a political neglect of agriculture and people’s reluctance to buy from multiple small farms, as well as the devaluation of traditional foods, such as taro, have all caused traditional family farming to lose ground.

Although colonial governments have attempted to turn agriculture into a commercial and male-dominated enterprise, agriculture generally remains a “female” vocation in contemporary Palau. At the moment, large commercially oriented farms, traditional farms and “hybrid” farms exist side by side. Most of the large commercial farms are managed by foreigners, using foreign labour, with the profit leaving Palau. In hybrid farms women commonly grow traditional crops for their own consumption and exchange as well as for the market. They increasingly employ male Asian farm workers. Agriculture in Palau appears to be entering a phase where crops are produced for subsistence and for sale in a typical dual-economy mode, but maintaining production of traditional crops is of importance to both social activities and subsistence.

The taro patch ladies and other traditional agriculturists, organic and “natural” farmers, supporters of traditional foods, the “health conscious” and others have expressed concerns about the effects of commercial agriculture on people’s health and the environment. This is not a total rejection of all non-traditional approaches, but rather a very selective adoption and adap-

tation of the elements which are compatible to family values. The changes in Palauan agriculture reflect not a dichotomy between “traditional” versus “modern”, but rather show a difference in orientation: is a farm “profit-oriented” or “family-oriented”? Is it focused on sales, or on services? Elements of commercialism can exist in harmony with traditional values; yet unbridled commercialisation will render the “family” in farming meaningless. Family, culture and agriculture are intrinsically linked. Since the taro patch is “the mother of our breath,” on the day that the last Palauan women goes to the last taro patch for the last time, Palau’s culture will have surely breathed its last breath.

Increased interaction Farmers have joined hands to rescue the valuable contributions of family farming. Some state governments implement programmes incorporating family farming and agro-ecology through favourable leases, trainings and infrastructure development, for instance. In addition, the joint Ministry of Health and private sector initiative “Healthy Foods” is resulting in greater demand for organic, traditional, “natural”, nutritious and safe food. Nonetheless, farmers lament that government programmes, including environmental programmes, marginalise family farming and assign agriculture low among its priorities. Calls to intensify

family farms reveal an ignorance of the reality that most of the farms are already intensified, that all areas of the farm already have a purpose. In most cases there is no way to squeeze in more without resulting in a loss of the many functionalities of the farm.

In contrast to the dominant calls for commercialisation and intensification, farmer organisations have started to implement initiatives to support family farmers. Palau has three main farmer organisations, which fight for the survival of their traditions. At the Palau Taiwan Farmers' Association (PTFA) and the Organisation for Industrial, Spiritual and Cultural Advancement (OISCA), we believe that preservation of traditional forms of agriculture is crucial for the preservation of Palau's culture. The Palau Organic Growers Association (POGA) is looking to "preserve the best and adopt the new". In all three organisations, women hold, or have held, officer positions. PTFA is composed of mostly women, while OISCA and POGA have around 40% and 30% women members respectively.

The organisations supply services and improve access to existing services, including markets and value-adding processes. Educational events and demonstration gardens serve the farmers, but also help link producers to the rest of the community. We are lobbying for support structures that enable interaction between different actors. The organisations help showcase effective farming practices and try to build a strong positive image of family farmers and their products. By promoting traditional dishes through calendars or building farmer-chef alliances, traditional products and family values are popularised within society at large.

Revitalising family farming PTFA is now trying to establish a multi-purpose and multi-functional site called "The Meeting Place". It is anticipated that it will act as type of regional food hub,

offering more than the existing local markets. It will enable family farmers to deal directly with consumers and attract wholesale agents, attract foreign visitors and local consumers, provide a venue for training and building relationships between farmers, chefs and consumers, function as an order-processing and -assembling center, and serve as a cultural reinforcement and magnet.

The Meeting Place can also strengthen capacities to develop strategic action plans for import substitution and linkages to the tourist market. Tourism is the fastest growing economic sector in Palau, but for tourism to be sustainable and sustaining, it needs to be supported by local food production so the tourist dollars are recirculated within Palau. A support mechanism like this can strengthen the value web and enhance recovery efforts after disasters, such as destructive typhoons, as it links producers with areas most in need.

Our experiences in Palau also teach us how traditional practices in family farms can strengthen cultural identity, build solidarity among farms, and assign greater value to traditional ethics. Revitalising and enhancing traditional practices is a learning opportunity that has practical implications for climate change mitigation and building resilience to disasters and crises. Finally, family farming needs to be made more attractive for future generations, using social marketing and the media to counter the ongoing devaluation of family farmers. Rather than framing farming as a last resort for the uneducated and unemployable, we need to promote family farming as a noble vocation.

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A basket weaving demonstration organised by PTFA was the first of a series of monthly market educational activities. Photo: Robert Bishop

