

The Tie that Binds: Diplomatic Relations with Austronesian Countries

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Taiwan currently has 22 diplomatic allies, six of which, accounting for one quarter of the total, are in the Pacific region. Where these Pacific region diplomatic allies are concerned, in addition to the usual consideration of international and economic factors, Taiwan shares some cultural-linguistic affiliations. The tongues of Taiwan's indigenous Austronesian language speakers and those of the greater Pacific region belong to the same language family and the peoples share many cultural similarities. The respective experiences of our countries in facing modernization and decolonization can serve as mutual points of reference. If we can devise substantive foreign policy based on an understanding of Austronesian culture, focusing on our cultural affinity, it should be possible to further solidify our friendship.

Based on the author's experience conducting fieldwork in Palau, a significant change in the locals' perception of Taiwanese occurred between an initial visit in early 2002 and a subsequent visit in 2007 to 2008. The change is attributable to Taiwan's efforts in this period. Taiwan's Agricultural Technical Mission, which had already laid down deep roots over twenty years, succeeded in developing varieties of vegetables that could be cultivated in the local climate and thereby reduce reliance on American imports. On the medical front, Shin Kong Hospital, in collaboration with Belau National Hospital, regularly send emergency medical teams of doctors and nurses to Palau to carry out pro bono medical treatment and to help establish standard

operating procedures for local emergency medical departments.

With a surge in international volunteerism in recent years, Taiwanese youth with professional skill sets have volunteered abroad through the International Cooperation and Development Fund (ICDF) to meet particular local needs. For example, volunteers with backgrounds in environmental protection have helped Palau to establish a system for tour guide certification, and set up educational programs to promote ecotourism. In Palau, an island nation with a fragile ecosystem, this work has resonated strongly with the populace.

In addition to these successes, if Taiwan wishes to secure even stronger friendships with Pacific island nations, it must build on the foundation of Austronesian cultural commonalities. Two examples stood out as particular successes in the past few years. First, a Taiwanese volunteer with considerable experience in the cultivation of taro collaborated with a local museum to hold a taro cultural festival and to conduct fieldwork on traditional Palauan methods of taro cultivation and preparation, which led to an educational campaign. Concurrently, the Agricultural Technical Mission worked to bring some varieties of taro back from the brink of extinction. All of this work combined culture with agricultural and technical expertise to simultaneously preserve biodiversity and cultural tradition, earning great local approval.

In addition to the agricultural undertakings, Taiwan's Council of Indigenous Peoples also sent pottery artist Hua Heng-ming of the Paiwan tribe to Palau to instruct locals in the art of pottery-making from selection of clay to firing techniques. The Palauans were one of the few peoples in Micronesia with a pottery tradition; however, their traditional method was lost around 1910 when the craft was forbidden under Japanese colonialism. When a group of Palauans visited the Taiwan Indigenous Peoples' Cultural Park and saw the pottery of the Paiwan tribe, they were struck by a sense of loss; the pottery exchange came as a result of this moment. The Palauans were also impressed that Taiwan sent an Austronesian as its pottery emissary.

Palau remains close to both its former colonizer Japan and the United States. Japan and the U.S. each has volunteers and academic teams engaged in local cultural and ecological studies. The Japanese embassy has employed Japanese anthropologists to assist the Belau National Museum in curating an exhibition on Japanese-era Palau. In addition to providing a historical depiction of the era, Japan's effort also serves to remind Palauans of the heritage of Japanese rule and to redefine the implications of decolonization. On the other hand, after taking up the administration of Palauan trusteeship, the United States systematically fostered Palau's transition to independent sovereign nationhood. Major credit for the study of and preservation of records related to Palau's culture, geography, environment, ecology, and languages goes to American scholars, who have earned the praise of the local people.

Although Taiwan and Palau share little modern history, Taiwan has already mounted

a significant effort to establish its presence; Taiwan's substantive assistance in agriculture and medicine has already reaped fruit. Building on the basis of Austronesian cultural understanding, we can more effectively help locals preserve their cultures, restore valuable traditions, and assert cultural self-identity. Our Austronesian cultural roots could be the tie that binds Taiwan and Austronesian nations together as each seeks to advance its own national dignity and ethnic integrity. The Austronesian heritage may become Taiwan's critical advantage in future diplomatic endeavors for alliance with Pacific island nations. **BT**

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