

Micronesian Ghosts and The Limits of Functional Analysis

By

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The geographic focus of this paper is officially designated as Truk District, Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands, East Caroline Islands. It consists of several coral atolls scattered about a complex atoll (see Map A). It is this complex atoll that is designated as Truk, although there is no specific island of that name, Truk being the English rendition of the Trukese word "chuk," meaning mountain. As of 1971, the district population stood at 29,334, giving Truk District the largest population in American-controlled Micronesia (Dept. of State, 1972, p. 216).

Several closely related dialects belonging to a subgroup of the Malayo-Polynesian languages are spoken in the district, with the dialect of Truk Atoll serving as the lingua franca. In turn, the Trukese are linked culturally and linguistically with the rest of Micronesia with the exception of the Polynesian outliers, Nukuoro and Kapingamarangi Atolls.

Although Truk was discovered as early as 1565 by the Spaniard Alonso de Arellano, overall contacts were hostile and the Trukese were largely avoided by traders and whalers (Krämer, 1932, pp. 1-21). One captain left this record of his reception in Truk:

... more and more natives slunk on board... the intention of the savages to rob my ship and kill my crew became ever clearer... [Following a battle]. The islanders themselves are treacherous, degenerate beings. Trade with these people seemed useless to me. So I decided only to get fresh water, an act energetically resisted by the inhabitants (Tetens, 1958, pp. 90-1).

Although Spain had long claimed Micronesia, the Truk Islands were not brought under European control until 1903, four years after the German purchase of Spain's Micronesian colonies, this after her defeat in the Spanish-American War. Considering the Trukese penchant for

violence, the German take-over was a model of decorum. Thomas Gladwin writes:

Upon entering this strife-torn area, one of their first orders probably set a new record in administrative naïveté: they simply told the Trukese to turn in their guns and to cease making war. However, this was apparently all that was required of a people who had created for themselves an intolerable condition which they did not know how to stop. They turned in their guns . . . and ceased to make war. . . . This episode . . . set a pattern for the acceptance of administrative action. . . . The Trukese feel that the ultimate responsibility for law and order rests with the foreign administration (Gladwin & Sarason, 1953, p 41).

The Germans lost their Micronesian possessions as a result of World War I, to be replaced by the Japanese, who in their turn gave way to the Americans following World War II.

Aboriginal Trukese religion was left undisturbed until the later part of the Spanish era. The American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (commonly known as the Boston Missionary Society) had early become established in the Hawaiian Islands and then extended its work to Micronesia. In 1873 these Protestant missionaries made their appearance in the southern part of Truk District (the Mortlock Islands) and six years later had established a foothold in Truk Atoll (Crawford & Crawford, 1967, pp. 215-6). Soon thereafter Trukese was set to print and the New Testament translated into the local dialect. Despite Spain's being a Catholic country, the Catholic faith was not introduced until late in the German period. These missionaries, German Capuchins, came in 1911.

Again the Trukese failed to exhibit their rumored ferocity, and Gladwin ties this to their fear of malevolent spirits:

A major factor in the ready acceptance of the new religion was the belief that a good practicing Christian should have little to fear from the ghosts which are such a source of anxiety to the Trukese. Unfortunately this did not prove to be entirely true, for the fear of ghosts and to a lesser degree of sorcery remains a very active force (1953, p. 44).

Be that as it may, Christianization has been total, and the Naval government was to report early in its administration of the Trust Territory that there were no religions other than Christianity in Truk District (Dept. of Navy, 1949, pp. 48-65). An important emphasis of mission work in Truk and other parts of Micronesia has long been the developing of mission schools. If one judges success in terms of literacy, both religious and governmental educational efforts have been highly re-

warded, for the majority of Trukese can read and write Trukese, the elders know Japanese, and many of the post-World War II generation are literate in English.

Hence one can say that in consideration of the full success of pacification and of missionary effort, this added to the spread of literacy, conditions have been optimum for the inculcation of the basic tenets of Christianity. Yet many Trukese still adhere to the belief that after death the individual is survived by two souls, one good and one bad. American anthropologists have tended to approach this duality in a functional-psychological frame of reference, and the limitations inherent in this approach are the major concerns of this paper.

The following is a résumé of Ward Goodenough's discussion of souls and ghosts on Truk. The Trukese believe in two souls, one good, one bad. The good is manifested in one's reflection, and the bad in his shadow. The good can wander about in dreams; its loss or destruction can cause death. The character and conduct of the living has nothing to do with their souls after death. However, the good soul can play a beneficial role. Says Goodenough:

A good soul may . . . possess someone and thereby prepare to become a spirit active in human affairs. The living must be careful to give the spirit what it asks for in way in perfume, gifts, and pleasurable entertainment. In return, the spirit will provide the living with food, teach them new lore, and generally look after their health and welfare (1963, pp. 132-4).

The spirit medium can terminate this relationship by eating preserved breadfruit, whose smell and taste are repugnant to spirits. If the spirit possesses no one, it goes to the sky world. Essentially, this is the same information presented much earlier by the German Capuchin, Laurentius Bolling (1927, pp. 13-25).

However, Gladwin points out that spirit possession is so rare in Truk today that data on it are rather inadequate (1953, p. 166). Thus it can be said that the institutionalized beneficial aspects of the dual soul are drawing to a close. Yet Trukese oral traditions reveal that these benevolent spirits can be looked to for support in addition to their activities via spirit mediums.

According to Trukese informants on Guam, Saipan, Ponape, and Truk Islands from whom I collected over the past several years (1962-64, 1970-71) there are many oral traditions that attest to the existence of helpful ancestral ghosts. Appendix A contains abstracts of specific tales which will serve to illustrate this point, that while the institution of

spirit medium is indeed on the decline, such a religious functionary is not always necessary in order for a Trukese to receive the support of departed kin.

Item 1 celebrates a female ghost who still today jealously guards her kin's fishing grounds. In Item 2 the ghost of a murdered man returns to his home island, helps his younger brother to avenge the murder, and then makes it possible for the younger brother to make a happy marriage. Item 3 presents the ghost of the dead mother who settles a dispute and awards land to the dutiful son. Item 4 tells of a man murdered by his wife's rejected lovers, whose ghost appears to his wife and family and makes certain they will be cared for by his family. Tales of this sort are common and informants agree that while some of these tales are fictitious the spirits of the dead can and do at times aid the living.

Despite the evidence of a continued belief in benevolent ancestral spirits, American theoretical interest has been more concerned with the leading role played by the "bad" soul in Trukese everyday life and associated folklore. Gladwin is not very clear on this point, for while he records the omnipresence of ghosts in Trukese society and the fear the natives have concerning them, he nevertheless states: "The bad soul is what is usually referred to as the ghost, and remains indefinitely as a vague but not serious threat" (1953, pp. 65-6, 166).

Judging from my own field work, I would hold that Ward Goodenough better represents the actual situation:

As for the bad soul, after death it becomes a malevolent ghost. . . . But what is there about ghosts that makes them so frightening? They feed on the good souls of the living and on human bodies, living or dead. By "biting" or "devouring" people, they cause sickness and death. Most illnesses are diagnosed as due to the "bite" of malevolent spirits, among which the ghosts of the dead are prominently numbered (1963, pp. 134-5).

A Trukese student who lived with me on Guam was especially afraid of these ghosts. He told of being attacked in his sleep by the ghost of a departed uncle, who was resentful that his nephew had not returned from school on Ponape Island to be present at the uncle's deathbed. Only the prompt ministrations of a native healer kept the patient from dying; and as it was, he was sick two weeks. When this student received disturbing letters from his sisters, telling of family misfortunes and sickness and pressing him to return home to his family duties, he often responded by having nightmares in which ghosts threatened him. That these experiences were menacing was evident in his great relief upon

being awakened and his oft-stated belief that if a person were not awakened from a nightmare he might die.

As already mentioned, Trukese folklore is replete with malevolent spirits. Some frequent certain water holes, beaches, islets, parts of islands, or bays. Some afflict people because of adultery; others punish eaters of tabooed foods; many are motivated by sheer hostility towards humans. But all such ghosts share one common characteristic: a voracious and cannibalistic appetite. Sometimes they eat only the good soul; at other times they devour the eyes and liver. Either way these ghostly attacks can be deadly. These malevolent beings range from the bad souls of the recently buried to unidentified ghosts felt by some Trukese to be the spirits of long dead and forgotten people.

However, it is the ghosts of the newly dead that arouse the greatest fear. Such spirits can also appear as animals, and they are believed at times to assume the form of a kind of plover, commonly referred to as the "ghost" bird. It is said that a plover possessed by a ghost has a peculiar cry; and Trukese youngsters when encountering one of these birds on the beach will ask it respectfully if it is the ghost of some recently deceased. The plover by nature nods its head and cries; and if it should happen to indulge in this customary behavior when the question is put to it, the children are put into precipitate flight. Doubtless this belief is reinforced by well-known tales of huge and cannibalistic plovers which go about decimating islands until some sly hero disposes of them (Items 5 and 6).

To be attacked ("bitten") by a hostile ghost is not necessarily fatal. Usually a native "doctor" is called in; the patient is diagnosed; and steps are taken to exorcise the spirit, prepare a bolus for the patient, or otherwise correct the situation which is angering the spirits of the dead.

There is one spirit which the Trukese fear above all others, and that is the ghost of a woman who has died in childbirth. These revenants are vengeful towards all, and especially so toward their husbands. When a woman dies in labor, the husband departs for his kinfolk (the Trukese are largely matrilocal) and stays there until the woman is safely buried. One tale tells of taking the body of a woman who died under these conditions, abandoning it on a deserted islet, and of the horrible fate of the innocent stranger who came upon the corpse and its attendant ghost. Most tales pertaining to ghosts of women dying in childbirth are of this type, and give no reason for the ghost's malevolent and cannibalistic behavior. Item 7 is a standard variant. Item 8 is unusual, for it clearly points up that the husband is punished for going away and leaving his

wife to face childbirth alone.

Enough has been written to indicate that the Trukese have retained a lively and varied belief in souls and ghosts. A point of theoretical interest has been raised, in that while the concept of the dual soul is still viable, the Trukese have abandoned in large part the beneficial aspects of this belief: i.e., that the good soul can choose to keep in contact with his kin through a medium and in return for certain attentions, act as their benefactor. Conversely (and unfortunately for Trukese peace of mind) the beliefs in the machinations of man's spiritual worst half show little sign of becoming moribund.

American ethnographers have attempted to explain this conundrum by use of conflict models owing much to Freudian psychology and latent functionalism. According to these analysts, the average Trukese would appear a bundle of repressed aggressions seeking culturally acceptable expression. Marc Swartz is of the opinion that although wife-beating is common on Truk, this hostility-satisfying practice is so hedged about with restrictions congruent with a matrilocal society that the husband needs added release. This he seeks by "sweethearting," an adulterous liaison in which the passions are allowed violent expression, both in the sex act itself and in the practice of scratching or burning (with a cigarette) one's brand on the beloved. Moreover, Swartz proposes that the adulterer further vents his repressed aggressions in the process of cuckolding his lover's husband (1958, pp. 467-86).

On the other hand Seymour Sarason does not feel that Trukese society offers any easy outlet for pent-up hostilities. He writes: ". . . Trukese outward passivity is a kind of learned defense against strong aggressive tendencies. In fact, one might say that perhaps one of the most crucial problems which faces the Trukese is that of the expression of aggression (Gladwin & Sarason, 1953, p. 227).

In a similar vein, Gladwin extends his discussion of displaced aggression to include malevolent spirits:

Generalizing from their restrained behavior toward relatives, the Trukese find the expression of direct and overt aggression in any situation difficult. The undercurrent of hostility we have noted to be present in most interpersonal relations, however, shows itself indirectly in gossip, the belief in sorcery, and vengeful ghosts always ready to "eat" a living victim and make him ill (1953, p. 289).

It is Goodenough, however, using his own field work plus the Gladwin-Sarason material, who is most direct in his functionalistic inter-

pretation of Trukese beliefs in ghosts:

Always, therefore, when someone dies, his kinsmen hope against hope that maybe his good soul will provide the support they so much desire. . . . At the same time, the suppressed hatred of the living for their elders finds release and expression in their belief about the bad soul (1963, p. 131).

A like assessment of the Micronesian fear of ghosts, also couched in the language of latent functionalism and neo-Freudianism, was made by Melford Spiro in his study of Ifaluk Atoll. He writes:

. . . the belief in their existence allows the individual to displace his other aggressions onto the alus, since all the hatred and hostility which is denied expression in interpersonal relationships can be directed against these evil ghosts. . . . If there were no alus and the people repressed their aggressions, the society, as well as individual personalities, would disintegrate (1958, pp. 91, 393).

At first glance the Trukese situation seems akin to that of Ifaluk, but a closer appraisal shows them to be quite disparate. Ifaluk Atoll is small, isolated, with only sporadic opportunity for contact outside the local population. Truk Atoll is large, populous, and contact between the many islands is regular, with a great deal of visiting among inter-island kin groups. Too, whereas Spiro states that opportunities for aggression are few, the Trukese from contact to the present have been prone to violence. If the health of the individual and society depend on the expression of hostility, then Trukese society should be sound, with no need for recourse to Freudian displacement mechanisms.

History finds the Trukese guilty of aggression on several levels: toward foreigners, other islands, clans, and even related lineages. Feuds, murders, and sorcery are commonplace.

In tracing the turbulent political history of one of the Truk Islands, Goodenough describes how a certain Wunnunö gained the chieftainship from a close relative:

One evening, Mwaatejinyk was eating with his lineage mates. . . . Wunnunö . . . and his wife's brother . . . sneaked up on them. . . . Wunnunö carefully pushed his rifle through the loose thatch wall. . . . His gun missed fire. . . . While Wunnunö stood fumbling with his rifle, Passegeni pulled him out of the way, took aim with his own rifle and struck Mwaatejinyk in the chest, killing him instantly (1961, pp. 155-8).

After thus becoming chief, Wunnunö evened a score with another group of his kin by enticing them into his lineage house for a friendly talk and there ambushing them.

In my contacts with the Trukese over the past fifteen years, I have not found them docile. Many young Trukese carry knuckledusters of twisted cord studded with sharks' teeth, or perhaps the barbed, six-inch bone from a sting ray's tail. Knives and stabbings are common, especially around bars. When attending the inter-island congress held on Moen in 1963, I found brawls to be common occurrences when Trukese politicians convene, and this same troublesome proclivity abounds among Trukese college students. Hence it would seem reasonable to assert that the Trukese have not lost that obstreperousness they have long been famous for. The quarrelsome Trukese and the peaceful Ifaluks hardly emerge as comparable entities in psychocultural analyses of the function of fear of the dead.

Goodenough's final assessment is this:

By displacing their feelings onto those of their kinsmen who are safely dead, by giving separate targets to their positive and negative orientations . . . they are able to act out their emotions and at the same time live productive and constructive lives. As long as their way of life, however much changed by outside influences, continues to generate these emotional conflicts in Truk's people, we may expect this belief in the dual nature of the soul to persist, along with such of the associated practices as missionaries and governmental authorities will tolerate (1963, p. 140).

Such a statement seems grounded in a kind of functionalism long associated with British social anthropology and overlaid with a modified Freudianism almost endemic in American culture-personality studies. The assumption is that man's reaction to stress is hostility and that viable cultures must provide culturally acceptable ways of channeling this aggression. Once the hostility-provoking stimuli are removed, the displacement mechanism will also disappear.

A major flaw in this approach is that much depends on whether or not the ethnographer is sympathetic to this kind of cultural analysis. Many are not. This narrowness of interpretation and lack of theoretical consistency have made post-World War II data on Micronesian supernaturalism uneven in quality and contradictory. Another drawback is that few recent investigators have made religion their focus. Rather, it has been a subject peripheral to the anthropologist's major theoretical interest or perhaps but a small part of a general ethnographic study. In a survey of post-World War II ethnographies I have found fear of the dead documented for nearly all Micronesian societies. The data range from cursory statements to the more extensive functional analyses of fear of spirits on Truk and Ifaluk. This lack of depth in the study of

the religious aspect of culture has special irony in the case of the Trukese, for as a graduate student Goodenough went to Truk as part of a scientific expedition. His specific focus was to be Trukese religion. However, he soon redirected his efforts and expended the greater part of his energies on the intricacies of social structure (Murdock, 1961, pp. 5-8).

On highly acculturated Kusaie Island and in the Marshall Islands the dead are still respected for their ability to cause misfortune, sickness, and death (Lewis, 1949, pp. 60-1; Spoehr, 1949, p. 244). A similar situation, but to a greater degree, is also reported from Ponape (Fischer, 1957, pp. 219-27). In addition to the Trukese sources already cited, a recent dissertation on Trukese native medicine includes throughout a great deal of data on the malevolent powers of the dead (Mahoney, 1969). Other data comes from Ifaluk and Ulithi Atolls (Burrows & Spiro, 1957, pp. 213-18; Lessa, 1950, pp. 14-21) and Palau and Yap Islands (Barnett, 1949, pp. 217-27; Schneider, 1957, pp. 791-800). Even in the culturally transformed Mariana Islands with their centuries of contact and Christianity, the natives believe strongly in the malevolent powers of the spirits of their pagan ancestors (Spoehr, 1954, pp. 201-07).

The depth in time of these beliefs and associated practices is easily checked by turning to the work of that indefatigable collator of ethnographic information, Sir James Frazer. In his famous study of ancestor worship, Frazer produced a fat volume on Micronesia, laden with data extracted from early reports on the wide-spread existence of the respect for and fear of the spirits of the dead (1924, pp. 49, 86, 117, 151, 169, 232, 281).

Certainly such limited analyses as those of Goodenough and Spiro fail to account for the continued belief in the powers of the departed all over Micronesia. Whether one is dealing with highly traditional Yap or almost completely acculturated Guam, sternly Protestant Kusaie or shallowly Christianized Palau, similar tales and similar beliefs emerge concerning the activities of ghosts and spirits. This does not square with the Goodenough hypothesis that with a change in Trukese social structure and a lessening of stress, that hatred of the dead will cease to be culturally functional and will disappear.

Nor does the displaced aggression model fare any better from a comparative viewpoint. Despite Micronesian-wide similarities in beliefs concerning the dead there are wide discrepancies as to just how aggressive Micronesians are. While the Trukese and Ifaluks are seen as aggressive, the nearby Ulithians are presented as a peaceful people with little

conflict (Lessa & Spiegelman, 1955, pp. 297-9). Other favorable verdicts are passed on Ponapeans, Marshallese and Palauans (Bascom, 1965, p. 16; Spoehr, 1949, p. 90; Barnett, 1960, p. 17). However, it has been my experience that Palauans can be every bit as aggressive as the Trukese.

Then there is the matter of the Trukese concept of the duality of the soul. To those of Freudian persuasion, it can be interpreted as a classic example of ambivalence and worked easily into a displaced aggression approach. But neither Kubary (1880, pp. 258-60) nor Girschner (1912, pp. 191-4) mentioned this belief in their early reports. Nor does Frazer give any inkling in his study of Micronesian ancestor worship of a belief in multiple souls. Rather, it was Father Bollig who first presented this duality (1927, pp. 13-25), and Christianity antedated Bollig by a quarter of a century.

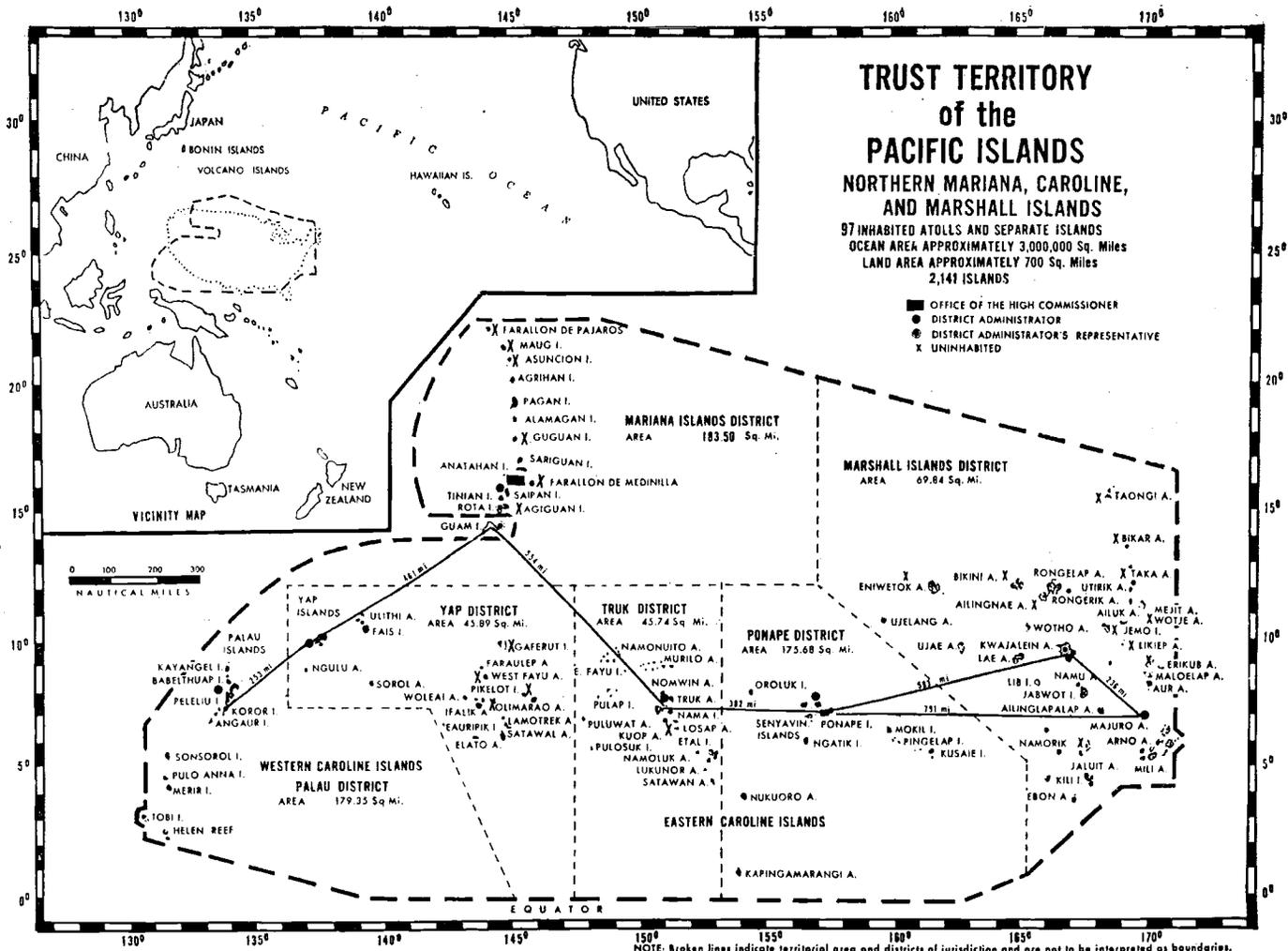
But as yet no one seems to have seriously considered an important question raised by Alexander Spoehr in his report on Marshallese belief:

Two entities are thought to persist after a person dies. One is his *an*, or soul. . . . Today there seems to be some confusion between Christian and native belief as to just what happens to the soul. The second entity is the *jitöb*, or ghost. (This dualism may possibly be a product of culture contact. It needs further investigation (1949, p. 244).

I find but little satisfaction in functional-psychological explanations of Trukese beliefs in malevolent spirits, when it is all too apparent that similar beliefs are found all over Micronesia in varying cultural settings. It would seem just as logical, if not more so, to abjure the supposed beneficial aspects of this belief, concentrate on its dysfunctional aspects, and argue that the Trukese would be immensely better off if they rejected the concept altogether. Yet such an approach would still not answer the question why the belief exists, not only in Truk, but in all Micronesia. The answer seems obvious. Trukese believe in malevolent spirits for the same reason that many Americans still believe in and fear ghosts. It is a part of the past from which present-day Micronesian societies evolved.

Valid psychocultural analyses of Trukese supernaturalism await some important first steps: a broad study of the religions, past and present, of the cultural area of which Truk is a part, the possible effects of the introduction of Christianity and of literacy, and the increase of inter-island contact, to mention a few. As yet such studies await the necessary scholarly interest. When it comes to a broad understanding of the

MAP A
Courtesy U. S. Navy



supernatural, these many islands are still mysterious Micronesia.

APPENDIX 1

1. Losap Atoll

A woman broke fishing taboos by cooking breadfruit for her children before going fishing. Her punishment was to be trapped on the reef and drowned by the rising tide. Her body turned to coral formation. The reef was not her kin group's fishing territory, but she would allow none but her kin to fish there peacefully. Thus today the reef belongs to her kin group, but fishermen must obey several taboos while on the reef (avoid vulgarity, smoking, urinating, defecating) if they wish good luck and avoid disaster.

2. Satawan Atoll

A coconut crab which lived on Kuttu had two sons, one of whom went with the chief to Mokil Island. The son married and stayed there. His wife's people murdered him. His ghost returned to his home island and instructed his brother to return to Mokil and avenge him; this the younger brother did. With the consent and aid of the older brother's ghost, the younger brother married and stayed on Mokil. When the people of the Mortlock Islands see a shooting star coming from the east, they say the ghost of the older son is visiting his home island.

3. Namonuito Atoll

Of Merope's sons, only the youngest was respectful, and when she died this youngest son gave her a decent burial. Later the sons were fishing, and the youngest hooked and pulled up an island. Then an argument broke out as to whom the land belonged. The sons went to the mother's grave and asked her spirit to settle the argument. This she did in favor of the youngest son.

4. Truk Atoll

A man from Tol Island married a girl on Moen Island. The young men of Moen murdered him. His ghost appeared to his wife (she didn't

know her husband was dead) and took her to his home island, where he called his people together and instructed them to look after his family. As the sun rose, the ghost disappeared.

5. Losap Atoll

Once a ghost changed himself into a plover and went from island to island, eating all the people. When it came to Losap, the men snared and killed it. When they opened it up some of the people were still alive in its stomach.

6. Losap Atoll

A boy finds an egg, brings it home, and a plover hatches. Its appetite and size increase rapidly. Finally it began to fly to neighboring islands to eat the people. When all the neighbors were gone, it ate its adopted family. However, the father had a shell knife and cut his way out, freeing his family and many others.

7. Truk Atoll

Two women, one from Uman Island, the other from Nama Island, were close friends. The Nama woman sent a message to the other that she would like her to come to Nama to be with her during pregnancy. Before the Uman woman arrived, her friend died in childbirth, and her ghost prepared fires in order to cook the Uman woman when she arrived. Fortunately, the old man Lipepenimong came along for the trip and rescued the Uman people by recognizing the Nama woman as a ghost and defeating her.

8. Losap Atoll

Despite his pregnant wife's protests, a young man went with a group of males to another island to take part in a feast and in dancing. While he was gone, his wife died in childbirth. When the young man got home, he hurried straight to his house. He was met by his wife's ghost, and they retired for the night. The husband became suspicious, made an excuse and ran away, but the ghost caught him and brought him back. She lectured him for leaving her, then ate his eyes and left. When his friends came, all there was the eyeless corpse.

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