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## BOOK REVIEW

*The Rope of Tradition* by Lino M. Olopai with Julianna Flinn. Published by the Northern Mariana Islands Council for the Humanities, Saipan, CNMI 96950 2005, under the Micronesian Authors Initiative , 242 pages, ISBN number 1 – 878453 – 44 -X

reviewed by

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The indigenous ethnicities of the Northern Mariana Islands consist of two widely distinct groups: Chamorros and Carolinians. The Chamorros are assumed to be the original settlers (the earliest settlement of the Marianas has been relatively dated at 1870 BC but newer data just coming to light could push that back two thousand more years). We know little about the earliest people because they left little behind in terms of material remains. We can say with some certainty that from approximate 700 A.D. the people who we can document through skeletal remains and material goods are ancestors to the people who were in the Marianas prior to the coming of Spanish settlers in 1668.

By 1720, the Spanish had moved nearly all Chamorros from the islands north of Guam to Guam and the population decreased, because of armed conflict and epidemics, from an estimated 40,000 Chamorros at the time of contact to as low as 1200 by the early 1700s.

Saipan was virtually unpopulated from that time until around 1810 to around 1815 when a group of atolls, which are now known as the Caroline Islands, running on a line east from

Yap to what is now Chuuk suffered a serious typhoon/earthquake. Several canoe loads of survivors from the atoll of Satawal made to Guam seeking shelter. Although they were fearful of the possible rejection by the Spanish authorities, much to their surprise, they were welcomed by the Spanish Governor who told them they could settle on the island of Saipan. From about 1815 to the late 1800s, Carolinians were the sole inhabitants of Tinian, Saipan and the islands to the north. They maintained their unique culture largely due to their isolation from the Spanish clergy in Guam. They were able to survive culturally during the following German era largely because the Germans had a great tolerance for indigenous culture and made no attempt to change their lifestyles. The same is true during the Japanese civilian period and the Carolinian society remained relatively untouched by outside influences.

All that was to change when the Americans arrived in 1944. From that time on, the inescapable impact of American culture and lifestyles had a growing influence on the Carolinian culture. Ultimately, the Northern Marianas became a part of United States by vir-

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tue of the adoption of the Covenant to establish a Commonwealth in Political Union with The United States. This book is the first ever documentation in the first person of the Carolinian point of view of the process of transition and the struggle to maintain a unique identity in the face of overwhelming forces of change.

Lino M. Olopai, whom I consider a very good friend of long standing, and Carolinian of high standing and outstanding intelligence (and a grasp of the forces of change very early on), determined that he was going to trace his roots back to Satawal before they were completely lost. He only knew a small amount through oral history from his elders and the arrival of some canoes bearing relatives from 700 miles to the south made the long and dangerous voyage led by skilled navigators came to Saipan.

This book is his story, both of his recognition of the inevitability of change and the need to preserve what is essential to the identity of the Carolinians and to pass on this knowledge to the youth of his community.

Lino and I worked together throughout the 1970s on a program called "Education for Self-Government" which was designed to prepare the people of Micronesia, I.E. the Trust Territory the Pacific Islands, for eventual self determination and self-government under some new form of government of their choosing. I can remember very clearly discussing with Lino during a trip to Palau when we were explaining the options the people of Micronesia had and the changes that were to come inevitably once the trust territory had been dismantled and a modern Western-style government established. It was clear at this point that he suddenly decided that he had to do something important. Not long after that, he dropped off the radar screen, jumped on a canoe in Saipan and took his first long canoe ride back to Satawal and two years of living education in a traditional way of life which is still being practiced on these remote atolls. It was here that he met and became a protégé of world famed Carolinian navigator Mau Pialug.

As a result of his experience, he then became an extremely active educator within the Carolinian community. He also became a

spokesman and interpreter for his people to the outside world.

This book, with the excellent help of Julianna Flinn who provides some very useful notes at the beginning of each chapter and another old friend of his, Scott Russel (former Commonwealth Historic Preservation Officer) is truly Lino's self-expression and deepest description of his hope for the future his people. The language in which it is written is simple and if you close your eyes you can hear him speaking from the heart. This is not to say that the thoughts are simple. The reader can see the conflicts and accommodations described and gain a much richer understanding of the culture which, until this book, has only been described by anthropologists from an anthropologist's point of view. Here we have one man's thoughts from the inside about the changes taking place in his own culture and his life, his regrets and his hopes.

The book is richly enlivened by his personal photographs which are great illustrations of both the modern Carolinian on Saipan and the traditional on Satawal. The title comes from a custom, which he describes a remark at the book signing. In it he describes how he breached a local custom on Satawal and, much to his surprise, it was not a punishment that he had to endure as a result, he was ordered to sit inside a circle of rope with the people he had offended and from which he could not leave until everyone and everything was in harmony again.

This is a story which is being repeated in many forms in many ways all over the Pacific and, for a personal insight from an insider, this book is a must for understanding the Pacific Islands societies in transition.