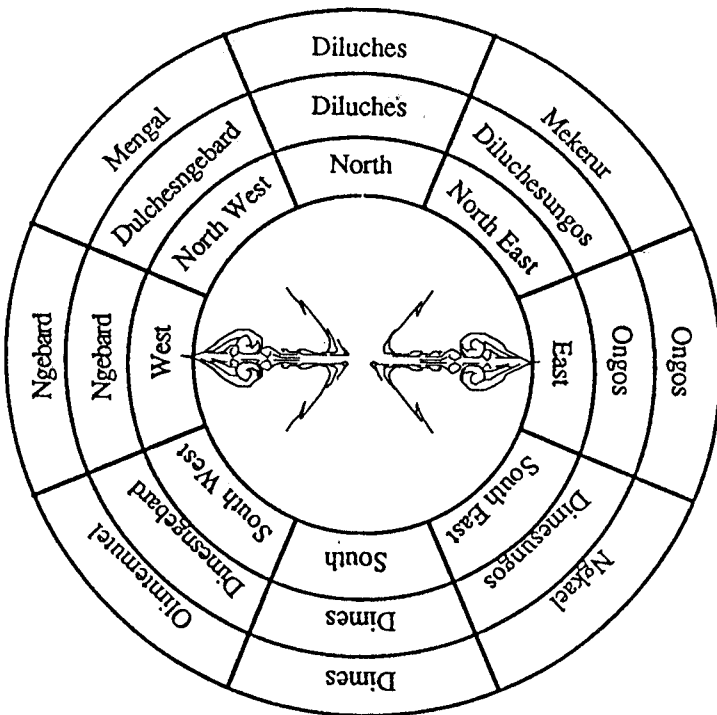


# Economy And Trade

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**Division of Cultural Affairs**  
1999

# *Economy and Trade*

by  
The Palau Society of Historians

Division of Cultural Affairs  
Ministry of Community and Cultural Affairs  
Koror, Republic of Palau

*Traditional and Customary  
Practices English Series 5*  
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The Traditional and Customary Practices Series provides information about Palauan culture in the Palauan language and in English. All booklets are abstracted from *Rechuodel* with additional information provided.

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The cover illustration depicts the traditional Palauan directions .

English translation by Florencio Gibbons. This translation reflects the words of the Historians as closely as possible, and is based on DeVerne Reed Smith's translation of Palau Ethnography, "Rechuodel: Traditional Culture and Lifeways Long Ago in Palau". The English translation was edited to improve readability without changing the meaning.

# Table of Contents

Money .....	1
Sources of Income .....	1
Public Income .....	5
Income from Meeting Obligations .....	5
Traveling by Sea.....	5
Wind Directions Traveling by Sea .....	6
Knowledge and Art of Wood Carving .....	6
Economy and Trade in Sonsorol .....	10
Glossary .....	12
Index .....	13

# Trade and Economy

## Money (*Udoud*)

When we talk about trade and economy we must discuss money and its uses. Although there are Palauan myths and legends that try to explain the origin of Palauan money, no one really knows where Palauan money came from or how it was made. One idea is that the money beads came from heaven. But whatever explanations of the origin of them there are, the bead money has been consecrated and honored as money in Palau. Because of their sacredness in the culture, they are used as payments for property, dowries in marriages, children's money at the settlement of an estate, or to make peace with neighboring villages and for other important occasions in the villages and communities all over Palau. Other valuables that could be considered as money in some instances are *chesiuch*, *toluk*, *chutem*, and *mesei*. These things were usually used to reward people who helped others who were in need. The *toluk* is considered to be women's money in Palau.

The economy in Palau was dependent on women. When a woman gets married, she brings money into her family as her marriage dowry. When she first conceives a child, the husband's family puts up money to her family as *buu el diil*. When she delivers the baby and goes through the hot bath ceremony the husband's family also puts up a piece of money called *delsongel el beluu*.

During the course of a woman's marriage, if her father, uncle, or brother is going to buy a house, a canoe, or fulfill another customary obligation, then she will get money from her husband to give in the occasion. When she dies later in her life, or if her husband dies, the husband's family is obligated to give money as *chelebechiil*, as well as the children's money.

Women, then were the main source of income for their families. But there were individuals who possessed different skills who were able to carve or were proficient in planting taros for their own use and when they were asked, would sell their wares and taros to whoever would need them. Nobody specifically made anything to be sold or planted taro patches just for the sale of taro.

## Sources of Income

Traditional individual sources of income were:

1. collecting and boiling coconut sap to make syrup
2. making coconut oil
3. tobacco farming
4. construction of houses and canoes
5. making clay cooking utensils and oil lamps
6. selling taro
7. making (weaving) pandanus mats for burial purposes
8. selling tortoise shell and making the shell into toluk
9. supplying fish and pigeons for feasts
10. carving wooden plates and containers
11. making mortar and pestle for pounding taro and crushing betelnut and women's mother of pearl taro cutters
12. making *chekbaki*, *uleld* and *miich*
13. extracting oil from the parinarium nut
14. fishing for shark and stingray from outside the reef
15. hunting dugong to get the neck bone for bracelets
16. gathering and collecting medicinal herbs, leaves, and roots and treating wounds and other ailments
17. preparing love potions for men and women
18. making magic that would get people to divorce
19. preparing pandanus leaves for weaving
20. weaving canoe sails from pandanus leaves
21. preparing coconut husks to make twine for fish nets and ropes
22. grinding and extracting turmeric extract for ointment
23. selling logs

The collection of coconut nectar was a tedious job. It involved climbing coconut trees every day. The tools of the trade were a knife, sharpening stone, containers for the nectar, safety rope for the climber, hangers for the nectar containers, carrying pole for the nectar containers, strings to tie the coconut flower pod, ladle, a large pot, and a cradle for the ladle. The fire place for the pot is not used for any other purpose, because the nectar is collected everyday and poured into the pot to be boiled down to produce molasses.

Making coconut oil was also hard work. The tools at the time were crude, so they used shells to grate coconut and that took a long time. The coconut oil was used by the people on a daily basis. This meant that one had to grate a lot of coconuts in order to produce a sufficient amount of oil. The oil was used in lamps as well as for food preparation. The oil was also used during funerals as *ukerael*, or a gift to the people who came to the funeral.



There are two ways to make coconut oil. One is called *uldechelakl* and the other one is *delengobel*. The *uldechelakl* way of making coconut is that when the coconut is grated, it is then mixed with water and kneaded so that the coconut milk is squeezed out. Then it is strained into a pot and boiled down. As it is boiling the water evaporates and leaves the oil and a type of sediment in the bottom of the pot. The oil from this process smells good and is used in the preparation of food and ointment. The sediment in the pot is also very good to eat. The *delengobel* method is about the same except that it is put in a pot and covered until the next day. The following day the water has separated and settled to the bottom, leaving the curdled coconut milk on top. The water is then siphoned out, and the pot is then put on the fire. This technique produces oil which is utilized in the lamps because it is not as fragrant as the *uldechelakl* oil. Coconut oil is a little bit more expensive than the molasses due to the amount of time spent on its production.

Tools used in coconut oil making were, a large pot, a kneader, a grater (of sea shell), a sieve, a dipper, a funnel which was half a coconut shell fitted with a short length of bamboo, a round pot seat made of bamboo, and a spatula made of mother of pearl shell fitted with a wooden handle.

The planting and growing of tobacco was a tedious chore. The seeds were sown in carefully prepared plots and the farmer checked the plants twice a day. He checked each plant and pulled off small insects that fed on the tobacco plants. When the plants matured, he picked off the leaves and sun-dried them, then cured the leaves by wrapping them in *mengchongch* (betel nut leaf sheath). This specially prepared tobacco is called *ngimes*. Because of the time consuming effort and preparation involved in producing tobacco as a useable commodity, it was considered to be very dear.

The construction of houses and canoes was done by an individual who possessed the skill and knowledge of construction. Construction of *bai* (meeting houses) and war canoes were done by men's clubs, but there was an individual who oversaw the whole project (the master carver). Other related information on carving and construction will be covered later on in this booklet.

Making pots, lamps and other pottery utensils was primarily done in areas where there is good clay. Ngatpang and Ngersuul are two areas well known for their pottery. In other areas good clay materials are found, but not in abundance, so some people made pottery vessels to a limited extent. There were skillful people who knew how to make pots, lamps and other utensils who made pottery for others when they were ordered.

In the old days of Palau, only *kukau* (the small taro) was used for special occasions, like a feast. When there was a big feast in a community the taro was

ordered from the women who cultivated and owned big taro patches. All the women of a village cultivated the taro for their own family use, but when the occasion arises that the whole community would have the need for taro, the women would sell some of their taro.

Most women wove their own mats and other bedding. Sometimes, though, there would be someone who would be more skillful in the art of weaving. That particular women would receive orders from others for mats and bedding. The mats and bedding were important to every household, because the bedding were used to wrap bodies before burial, and every household had mats and bedding especially for that purpose.

Turtle shells are prized commodities in Palau. People buy turtles from fisherman and give the shells to individuals who are skilled in molding them into *toluk* or dish-shaped utensils. The price of the turtle depends on the size and elegance of the turtle and the shells. The useful shells on a turtle are the big ones, but the biggest is the one called *odanged*, or the roof of the shells.

Suppliers of fish and pigeons for feasts are men who are well known in their communities as good fisherman and hunters. The fish and pigeons for feasts are paid for by the individual who gives the feast or the chiefs of the community who host the feast.

Making the mortar and pestle for pounding taro and crushing betel nut was a slow and tedious process. Clam shells were chipped and ground on stones in streams into usable shapes and sizes. The mother of pearl shell taro cutters were also ground on hard stones found on stream banks. It took a lot of time to finish the products, because of the crude tools used in the old days.

The carving of wooden plates, platters, and other containers was done by craftsmen when others ordered them. Nothing was produced in advance solely for sale. These wooden utensils were found in all the households throughout Palau.

The making of *chelbaki* (a mixture of grated taro and coconut), *uleld* (grated coconut cooked with coconut molasses), and *urkekerek el miich* (Palauan nuts candied with molasses) was mostly for the four highest chiefs of a village. The *miich* made into the shape of a dugong was used in the induction ceremony for the first chief. The other three chiefs used either the *chelbaki* or *uleld* in their ceremonies. The induction ceremonies were not everyday occasions, therefore the making of these kinds of food items was rare.

Extraction of oil from parinarium nut was also a bit of hard work. It required the collection of the nuts, then cracking them and extracting the meat. Then the meat was grated. After that the grated pulp like substance was put into a pot and heated. While it is still hot, it was put in the squeezer and squeezed so

the oil came out, which was then collected into a container. The oil was then used to varnish canoes after they were painted with clay. Doing this would hold the clay so it would not be washed off and also preserve the coconut strings that hold the parts of the canoe together.

Shark and ray fishing outside the reef was an expedition for expert seamen. These animals, along with the aforementioned *uleld*, *miich*, and *chelbaki*, are included in the ceremony for the installation of a chief. The shark is used as the bridge for the first four ranking chiefs into the *bai*. The ray symbolizes his seat in the *bai*. It is not every day that someone becomes a chief, so such fishing expeditions were uncommon.

## Public Income

1. *Udoud* earned by women who participate in *klomengelungel* (courtesans)
2. Income from peace talks or as evidence of repaired relationships between *beluu*
3. *Udoud* from fines
4. *Udoud* from a conquered people and *beluu*
5. *Udoud* earned by spearing an enemy.

## Income From Meeting Obligations

Sources of income from marital and parental relationships are:

1. Provision of food by female affines (*omeluchel kall ra chebechiil*)
2. *Ududir ar ngalek* (children's money)
3. *Udoud* as marriage bond (*orau*)
4. *Udoud* as an older *rubak*'s marriage bond (*bus*)
5. *Udoud* given by a man who divorces his wife (*olmesumech*)
6. *Udoud* to apologize for a damaged or broken relationship (*tngakireng*)
7. *Udoud* contributed to wife's kinsmen (*belduchel*)
8. *Udoud* given by a kinswoman to a *rubak* for his "seat" in the *bai* at his inaugural feast (*chetul a mur*)
9. Other.

## Traveling by Sea

In ancient times, traveling by sea simply meant sailing in Palau's waters from village to village. The outlying Southwest Islanders came to Palau by sail. Palauans did not often sail to distant places.

Those who sailed used the stars, sea currents, laws of the sea and wind directions. They sailed only within Palau, between Kayangel and Ochallechutem (main island of Babeldaob), between Angaur and Peleliu, or when they went outside the reef for shark or mahimahi.

## Wind Directions Traveling by Sea

There are eight important directions of the wind (see cover illustration). During the *raud* (an unstable wind), the wind frequently shifts from one of the eight directions to the other.

There are four major wind directions: *Ongos* (east), *ngebard* (west), *diluches* (north) and *dimes* (south). *Ongos* is where the sun rises in the morning; *ngebard* is where the sun sets. To understand *diluches* (north) and *dimes* (south), you stand facing the sun in the morning, stretch out your two arms, and your left arm points to the north and your right arm to the south. Now that these four wind directions are clear, the direction between the north and the east is *diluchesungos* (northeast). Between the east and the south is *dimesungos* (southeast). Between the south and the west is *dimesngebard* (southwest). Between the north and the west is *diluchesngebard* (northwest). The north and northeast, the east and southeast are *melilchesakl*. The south and southwest, the west and northwest, are *melilemsakl*.

The main wind directions in Palau are from the east and the west. The wind direction is easterly for six months (*ongos*); then it shifts to westerlies for the next six months (*ngebard*). There are days in these months when the wind moves south or north but not for long, and the wind then moves back either to the east or west. There also are days when the wind has no clear direction. It shifts frequently to all wind directions. This unstable wind direction is called *raud*.

## The Knowledge and Art of Wood Carving

Every aspect of the art of *omelasech*, including the knowledge, skills, and natural talents of Palau, originated from two sources. One source was Chorachel and the other was Mechiideuid. Chorachel and Mechiideuid were humans. Chorachel originated the art of constructing the *bai*, *diangel* and *blai*. Mechiideuid originated the art of constructing canoes and wooden serving platters for the kitchen, including *orsachel* (wooden container for starches), *ongall* (wooden plate for proteins), *buk* (wooden plate for starches), and others.

The art of *omelasech* in Palau contains traditional procedures described in the successive order by which a project must be undertaken. The craftsman must adequately prepare himself to follow the prescribed procedures

and comply with all the signs and rules of the calendar for *omelasech*. This elaborate preparation is necessary to ward off evil spirits or misfortune. The prescribed procedures for *omelasech* include the ability to foretell the outcome, the rules associated with the process and the things to be avoided. Therefore, the preparations are as follows:

1. The master craftsman responsible for the project must observe certain taboos. He should not sleep at his own house; when he leaves his house, he must not step on the *ubeng* (baseboard from one door post to another).
2. He must refrain from looking for women for sexual pleasure.
3. He must not eat giant taro (*brak*), nor fish nor meat with soup. However, he may eat *kukau* and grilled or smoked fish wrapped with betel sheath (*cheluomel*).
4. When spending the night in the *bai*, he sleeps with his axes and the other tools of his trade.

Depending on the choice of tree to be felled, magic tells whether the undertaking may be postponed or advanced. Using tree reading to foretell the outcome, one knows whether the felled tree should be used as materials for a *bai*, *blai* or *diangel*.

If the *omelasech* occurs in the mangrove, there is no need to prophesy or tree-read to foretell the outcome. The master craftsman simply views the first tree in the mangrove that he selects for a house. This act alone constitutes the process of *ulechouch* (foretelling by felling a tree). The craftsmen of the past had adequate tools with which to work their trade. These tools were axes (*otilech*), adzes (*ebakl*), devices for horizontal measurements (*ungamk*), sanders made of stringray skin (*seksel a rrull*), devices for holes and crevices (*ongiuch*), devices for measuring angles (*chidabd*) and straight lines (*olkael*).

The measuring device, *olkael*, is used to measure the length and width of the items or trees to be worked on or the size of materials needed for handicrafts. The smallest unit of measurement, *ngill*, is equivalent to a piece of hair, and *rreongel*, the largest unit of measurement, is approximately the length of both arms extended out. The units of measure, from smallest to largest, are listed below:

1. *ngill*—a hair fiber
2. *tetiud el chur*—one-half length of a coconut leaf stick
3. *teluolchur*—one whole length of a coconut leaf stick
4. *telbisaos*—one-half split of betelnut or such
5. *telechid*—one finger length
6. *telbechos*—one thumb length
7. *erechid*—two fingers width (placed vertically to the body)

8. *edeichid*—three fingers width (as above)
9. *euaichid*—four fingers width (as above)
10. *telchimkomk*—five fingers width (as above)
11. *telberober*—one hand palm length or width
12. *telbesungel*—one-half hand palm length or width
13. *teliutech*—length from thumb to tip of the longest finger
14. *telmedeu*—elbow to tip of longest finger
15. *bitang el chim*—length of whole arm
16. *dochedacheb*—length from one upper arm across to chest
17. *bkulrrieked*—length of one upper arm across chest to next upper arm
18. *bkuliikr*—length of one arm stretched out to the elbow of the other arm
19. *rreongel*—length of two arms both stretched out.

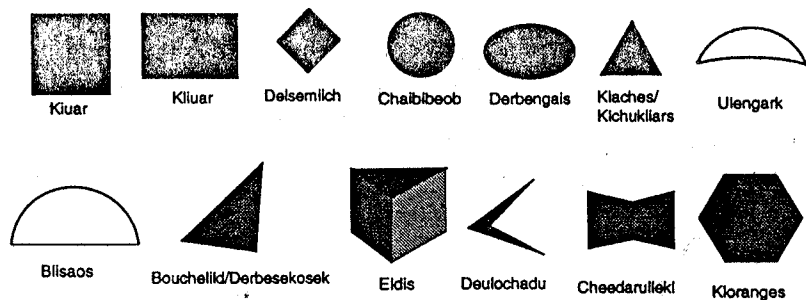
The rib of the coconut frond (*alings*) or the coconut leaf sticks (*temikel*) and pieces of coconut husk string are used to mark measurements by bending, breaking or tying them together. Black ink (*chas*) is used to mark the area to be shaped or worked. There are certain requirements for the foundation of a *bai* or *blai* regarding direction because misfortune may come to a house that faces a direction forbidden under the calendar for *omelasech*. The following list contains the directions used as reference points by the traditional master craftsmen:

1. *Diluches* (north)
2. *Dimes* (south)
3. *Ongos* (east)
4. *Ngebard* (west)
5. *Mengal*—*diluchesngebard* (northwest)
6. *Mekeruul*—*diluchesungos* (northeast)
7. *Ngkael*—*dimesungos* (southeast)
8. *Olimtemutel*—*dimesngebard* (*Ngemelokl*) (southwest).

These points of reference are also used when felling a tree as *ulechouch* (foretelling) or cutting the first lumber to be used for a house.

Another important aspect of *omelasech* is the various units of measurement. There are units of measurement with which to count round and flat, long objects, numbers for length, for people, for objects contained in baskets, numbers for pairs and numbers for canoes, numbers for listing and ordering words, things or items, and people, and numbers for clubs. There are numbers for bundles, liquids, weights, rolled objects, and objects in containers secured by a string into a unit.

The numerical systems convey different concepts, and they are different in their sound, based on the manner of speech and the object described by the use of numbers. The numerical system of Palau ends at one thousand, the highest number. Beyond this figure, we multiply a factor by one thousand to obtain the correct total. Orally, we would say, one thousand, two thousand, and so forth.



The numbers, and the traditional activities for which numbers were used, had a system for addition, subtraction, and division. Division was used for allocating things as a whole unit. The artisans did not only use numbers, but they also used shapes of objects (see figure above). These shapes are:

1. *Kiuar* (square)
2. *Kliuar* (rectangle)
3. *Delsemiich* (diamond)
4. *Chaibibeob* (circle)
5. *Derbengais* (egg-shaped)
6. *Klchukliars/klaches* (triangle)
7. *Ulengarek* (clam shell, flat shaped)
8. *Blisaos* (half a unit)
9. *Bouchelild/Derbesekosek* (triangle with three unequal sides)
10. *Eldis* (pentagon)
11. *Deulochadou* (scissors-shaped)
12. *Cheedarullekl*
13. *Kloranges* (octagon).

Paint (*chesbereber*) is another important item. Artisans painted the canoe, *bai* or *blai* upon completion of their work. Traditional paints consisted of: *aus* (white), *oriich* (brown), *chas* (black), and *laok* (oil) from the *cheritem* tree and red soil.

The knowledge and skills of the art of *omelasech* were traditionally valued and well preserved in Palau. This is because *omelasech* has its own language, its own art or trade, medicines, predictions, prescribed procedures, and taboos. When these requirements were ignored, misfortune such as death or failure fell to the artisan. There also were magic spells that caused death to the artisan or prevented his project from being completed. At the same time, there were magic spells that could remove the evil spell and save the artisan from death and his project from failure. *Omelasech* and *cheldechuil* have inherent gods of fortune and misfortune. The sickness that comes from not following the traditional procedures for *omelasech* is *telbaki*, and its god is Chedecheduch. Artisans appealed to these gods for good luck in their undertakings. Knowledge of *omelasech* was so highly valued and restricted that only a few possessed this knowledge.

## Economy and Trade in Sonsorol, Southwest Islands

Sonsorol encompasses the islands of Sonsorol, Fana, Merir, and Pur. Unlike the main islanders of Belau, who used bead money, the Sonsorolese did not have currency as such, so they traded with food items and other goods. The knowledge and skills of individuals were also considered sacred and were passed on to other people as an expression of gratitude or payment of services rendered.

Usually, when a young person reaches an age appropriate to learning a trade or skill, he or she approaches a knowledgeable elder in the community who is well versed in the trade or skill that the person is seeking. The young person asks the elder to instruct him or her in the skills or trade that the elder possesses. If the elder agrees to transfer his or her skills to the youth, then it becomes the young person's obligation to find food and bring it to his or her instructor's home. The food items brought to the elder's home are deemed as payment for imparting the knowledge to the young person.

There were also enchantments for healing, love, divorce, marriage, illness, etc., that were practiced and the payments to the enchanter were food items. The food items used were breadfruit, wild native apples, *bisech* (a species



of land taro), *seboseb* (a plant rich in starch), bananas, and giant swamp taro. Proteins were derived from fish, frigatebird, sea gulls, turtles, coconut crab, coconuts, and giant clams.

The Islanders were heavily dependent on sailing canoes to travel between Sonsorol, Pur, Merir, and Fana. They paid for their canoes with food items as well.

They used food items as *tinga lori lili* to bind the marriage of older men, and *tapangalis* to bind the marriage of younger men. The Palauan equivalent of *tinga lori lili* is *bus*, and *tapangalis* is called *orau*. They also used food and other items as an inducement or persuasion to win over ladies, and the local term for this is *hobe hae hapitekil faifir*.

The Islanders have names for each month of the year, which tells the basic weather conditions and direction of the wind. The first month is Isii, which is usually a dry month with lots of mild breezes. Takebir is the second month and the skies are usually cloudy with light rain. Yalemaud, the third month, brings clear skies and mild weather. The fourth month of Tamuli continues the fine weather from the third month. Madisil is the fifth month and the weather is still good, but the wind is shifting to the west. On the sixth month of Madirap, the wind is westerly and beginning to bring in some rain clouds. During the seventh month, Tauta, there is usually a lot of rain. Naha, the eighth month, brings on overcast skies and bad weather. The ninth month, Kue, continues with the foul weather from the previous month, including rough seas. Uru, the tenth month, sees the foul weather continue, but slack off a little. The eleventh month of Eru brings about high winds that cause rough seas as the wind begins to shift to the east. On the twelfth month of Mar, the westerly wind comes around to the east and the cycle repeats itself again.

There is a saying in Sonsorol that goes like this, "A person should always listen and learn good behavior from others, and take good care of himself and his belongings, so that he may be able to survive when hard times come around."

# Glossary

*beluu* -- a country, village, place or community

*chelkbakl* -- sweetened crushed tapioca or taro wrapped in leaves and boiled

*chelebechiil* -- money given as payment to the wife's family after the death of either the husband or wife

*chesiuch* -- a type of tortoise shell money; mother of pearl shell taro cutter for women

children's money -- money paid to the children of the deceased

*chutem* -- land

*diangel* -- canoe house

hot bath ceremony -- a rite performed after a woman gives birth for the first time

*klomengelungel* -- institutionalized concubinage where the women of a village visited the *bai* of another village

*mesei* -- a taro patch

*miich* -- tropical almonds, usually mixed with molasses to make marzipan

*omelasech* -- the action of carving, and skills associated with it

*toluk* -- tortoise shell platters used as women's money

*udoud* -- money, but originally only Palauan bead money

*uleld* -- candy made from grated and roasted sweetened coconut

# Index

## B

beads 1

## C

carving 3, 4, 6

chesiuch 1

chutem 1

coconut 2

## D

directions 6, 8

dowry 1

## F

food 7, 10

foretelling 7, 9

## G

gods 10

## H

hunters 4

## M

magic 2, 7, 10

measurement 7

mesei 1

money 1

mortar 4

## N

numbers 9

## O

omelasech 6, 7, 10

## P

parinarium nut 4

payment 1, 10

peace 1

pottery 3

## S

sailing 6

shapes 9

Shark 5

## T

taro 4

tobacco 3

toluk 1, 4

tools 2, 3, 7

## W

weaving 4

wind 6

women 1, 4, 7