

# Hereditary Status And Strength

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Division of Cultural Affairs  
1998

# *Hereditary Status and Strength*

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 4*

1998

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- 4 *Hereditary Status and Strength* by the Palau Society of Historians. [English, 1998] vi+9 pp.; glossary; index. Translation by Palau Resource Institute.

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The cover illustration depicts a traditional Palauan family. Cover illustration by Taurengel Enesiochel.

English translation by Julie Tellei, Palau Resource Institute. 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.

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# Hereditary Status and Strength

According to long standing Palauan tradition, the status of a person in a family is established by birth and other relationships. Accordingly, the female is of a higher status. This is so because the female brings money and wealth into the family, whereas the male expends the money and wealth. Bringing money and other wealth into the family and clan is accomplished through the females' constant contributions to relatives in appropriate cultural events. Male family members deplete the family resources because valuables flow from them to their wives and their wives' families. These are the accepted traditional practices which have been passed down through generations. The female members as well have additional responsibilities to the family and the public depending on the rank of the family and clan. One of the most important responsibilities of the female members of the family and clan is the selection and appointment of the title holder for the clan.

When a male family member has been given the clan title, he becomes the head of the clan. He leads the clan and shoulders all the responsibilities of the clan in the village and the community.

## Ochell

Relative status and power of a person in the family is derived through birth. An *ochell* is a child of the female members of the family. The ranking members of the family by virtue of birth are the children of a female *ochell* of the family. Clan titles are passed on through the female line. Hence *ochell* members of the family are first in line to hold clan titles and to be the leaders of their family

and clan. By birth the *ochell* should inherit the family title, however before the person is appointed, his/her character is scrutinized by the family elders and the *klobak*.

## **Ulechell**

*Ulechell* is a child of a male *ochell* of the family. *Ulechell* have relatively high status within their father's family. However, their status and relative power do not exceed that of the child of a female *ochell*. *Ulechell* may be able to achieve and hold some of the leadership roles and titles of the father's family by virtue of their hard work, good deeds and performance, and ability to shoulder responsibilities.

## **Omerodel**

Traditionally *omerodel* was practiced mostly among kin. Most *omerodel* fall under two categories: *ngalek ulaol* and *ildeuekl el ngalek*. The two terms refer to two categories of adoption in a formal sense in Palau.

## **Ngalek Ulaol**

*Ngalek ulaol* is the child of an *ochell* woman of the family who is reared by the brother of the birth mother, his/her maternal uncle. Literally, the term, means 'child of the floor' (*ngalek* means child; *ulaol* means floor). The term describes how the child has been raised. It implies that the child has been brought up right within the family inner circle, the floor of the house. In this instance such a child does not regard nor does he/she address the uncle as a father.



He/she however addresses and regards the wife of the uncle as a mother. In the event of the death of the uncle or his wife, the child is not considered for inheritance during the settlement process<sup>1</sup>. The family of the uncle does not include this child in the inheritance considerations and no money is expected to be given out to him/her as children's money. The rationale is that this child theoretically has the same status as his maternal uncle, being an *ochell* of the family, and hence can also discuss and give out inheritance or valuables to the children of his maternal uncle.

However, the wife of the uncle, and in the event she is the deceased, her close kin, may provide *ongolel*<sup>2</sup> if the child is male, and if the child is female may prepare a *til*<sup>3</sup>, usually made of a number of *toluk* (tortoise shell dish).

*Ngalek ulaol* also applies to the child of an *ochell* female who is reared by her sister or another *ochell* female, and stays within the circle of maternal kinswomen within their family and clan. In this instance, the child is likely to remain within the family. However, if the adopting mother is married such a child acquires a connection to the adopting father and becomes the child of his family. In the event of the death of one of the parents of this child, the father's family, during the *cheldech duch*, will discuss and provide *udoud* for children's money, and/or other valuables as they see fit.

*Ngalek ulaol* possess status and carry more weight than any of the other adopted children within a Palauan family setting.

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<sup>1</sup> *Cheldech duch* is the final settlement of the estate of the deceased held after a married person dies. It literally means to talk about or to discuss.

<sup>2</sup> *Ongolel* refers to a large *toluk* given to a male child after the death of one of his parents.

<sup>3</sup> *Til* is a possessive pronoun from the root word *tet* (a purse). *Til* is prepared for female children after the funeral. It usually comes in the form of two or more *toluk*.

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## **Ildeuekl el Ngalek**

*Ildeuekl el ngalek* refers to an *ulehell* child of the family who is adopted by an *ourrot* of the family. Such a child's status is elevated to a level higher than that of his/her siblings who are not adopted. Another term used synonymously is "*rirot a chocherir a ruurrot*". This essentially means that the child slept in, played in and was fed from the lap of the *ourrot*, implying near birth status of the adopted child. The female *ildeuekl el ngalek* could eventually be considered as *ourrot*. Thus she can participate with the other *ourrot* in their deliberations and important discussions about the affairs of the family. However, she will never have the same status as true *ourrot*. The male *ildeuekl el ngalek* as well could eventually be considered in the important discussions and deliberations about the affairs of the family and clan with other male *ochell*. However, his status will never exceed the status of the *ochell* male.

Depending on accomplishments and contributions to their family and clan, including commendable behavior, *ildeuekl el ngalek* -- whether male or female -- can acquire the appropriate titles and responsibilities within the family, clan and village. He/she can even be given some authority to discuss selected affairs and valuables of the family and clan. Authority and responsibilities of such children are always conditional.

## **Mlodars a Keai**

There is another process of adoption in which a person is accepted into the family, which does not follow kinship ties nor bloodline. This is known as *oldars a keai*. Typically practiced by high clans in the old days, *oldars a keai* occurred when members

of a high clan family adopted a particular child from a family which did not have any type of relationship to them. Upon the death of one of the adoptive parents of the *mlodars ra keai*<sup>4</sup> child, the sisters or kin of the adoptive father were responsible to give the children's money for the child.

## Omengeas

*Omengeas* is the act of persuasion through provision of gifts of foods by the natural parents of the child who was *mlodars ra keai* to the adoptive parents. Typically, good foods including prestige foods are given to the adopting parents. The parents whose child was adopted usually diligently cultivate a taro patch and give it to the adopting mother to supplement their food supply. The rationale is that the mother is busy raising the young child. It is meant to be the *telochèl* (literally pre-chewed food), or source of food for the young one and her family. Once the child is grown or is deceased, the taro patch is returned to the natural parents of the adopted child, who offered it to supplement the foods of the adopting family. In some instances, the taro patch is never returned and remains within the adopting family.

*Omengeas* is a persuasive approach meant to strengthen the position of the adopted child. It generally influences the size of and/or amount of valuables given out for the child as children's money in the event of the death of the adoptive father or mother.

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<sup>4</sup> *Oldars* means to lift up, stretch or extend (arms or legs). *Keai* is a thick betel nut leaf fiber used for wrapping food, making rain hats, etc. Large *keai* in the old days were used as baby holders, hence the term *oldars a keai*. It implies that the adopting family extended their arms with a *keai* to ask to adopt a child.

## Ultechakl

Other family relationships are forged through the assimilation of members of a family which is said to be fading by a distantly related and wealthier family. *Ultechakl*<sup>5</sup> refers to a person who drifts to such family arrangements and remains in such affiliation under the family. This can refer to a foreigner who drifts to a village and is brought into a family and becomes a part of that family, clan and village. Therefore, an *ultechakl* person may or may not have distant blood ties to the family in which they have settled. An *ultechakl* person lives under the auspices of the family and clan into which he has drifted. Such a person is considered a child of that family.

## Terruaol

Another manner in which a person becomes a family member is by way of being *terruaol*. *Terruaol* implies that the person was found or collected by the host family. Such a family member often cannot trace any blood ties to the host family. Typically the family members as well do not know of anyone anywhere with ties to this person. This type of person remains under the host family and is known to be a child of the family.

The status of *ultechakl* and *terruaol* children within their families is conditional. Both *ultechakl* and *terruaol* children may acquire modest responsibilities and titles within their family and clan depending upon their accomplishments and merit.

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<sup>5</sup> *Ultechakl* literally means stuck (on a beach, against a dock, etc.) after floating ashore; staying in another house or village.

## **Cheltekillel a Chebechiil**

*Cheltekellel a Chebechiil* is when a woman or man brings a child from another marriage or an adoption arrangement into a new marriage. Such a child becomes a child of the family of the father. The status of this child is below that of the *ochell* and the *ulechell*. Such a child may achieve rank, minor titles and modest family, clan and village responsibilities depending on his/her good deeds and exemplary conduct. In the event of the death of one of the parents of this child, the family of the father is responsible to give out children's money or some other valuable for this child.

## Glossary

*Keldngil* -- a person who is well behaved or a law abiding citizen; one who conforms to appropriate norms and behavior, such that he/she could be considered to hold responsible titles for the *blai*, *kebliil* and *beluu*.

*Meliukes* -- divide or share (food). Division of inheritance or properties/valuables among children of the deceased.

*Merodel* -- to adopt a child; remove or lift (pot) from fire

*Nglingil* -- order of things; ranking.

*Okdemelel* -- the brother of the birth mother of a person.

*Oleleb* -- actions which go beyond what is already a set of accepted norms.

*Olsechall* -- title and position of responsibility to which a person is appointed.

*Omdoud* -- the giving of *udoud* or valuables/properties set aside for children of the *blai* as children's *udoud* or property. Such decisions are made and carried out after the funeral, usually during *cheldecheduch*.

*Ongolel* -- tortoise shell dish given out as *ongall* for a male child after the funeral.

*Ourrot* -- those elder women who have contributed much to the family and clan.

*Telochel* -- taro patch prepared and given out as a food source for *mlodars ra keai* child and her adopted family.

*Terruaol* -- from the root word *meruu*, meaning to collect; to gather.

*Til* -- more than one tortoise shell dish gathered and given to female offspring after a funeral.

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