

A TALE OF TWO ISLANDS: TOURISM, CULTURE, AND CONFLICT IN YAP STATE

Donald H. RUBINSTEIN*

Abstract

Yap historically has been perhaps the most cautious and deliberative, among all the Micronesian islands, in embracing tourism. While Yapese take continuing pride in their sense that they have preserved their traditions and culture, Yapese official attitudes towards tourism development have changed over the past two decades. Recent tourism development projects in Yap State include plans for the first two small, locally-owned resorts in Ulithi Atoll. One project succeeded while the other one encountered local opposition and became stalled. This paper describes some of the underlying cultural conflicts that arose in the course of these two projects.

Keywords: chieftainship, conflict, economic development, tourism

Falalop Island, Ulithi Atoll. Late afternoon, October 25, 2001.

The tropical beachside scene has a picture-postcard quality: manicured emerald-green lawn carefully bordered with stones and decorated with young coconut palms and plumeria trees bearing pink and white blossoms, azure-blue lagoon waters stretching out to the horizon; and separating the green lawn and the blue ocean, a white coralline beach so blindingly bright you have to squint to look at it. To one side of the lawn stands a cement house-platform raised up slightly on a foundation of coral rocks. Upright beams made from tree trunks support a palm-thatched A-frame roof sheltering the graceful Ulithian outrigger canoe that sits on the platform, its hull painted the customary shiny black with red trim. To the other side of the lawn is an identical cement platform with thatched shelter. Several t-shirted teenaged island boys are resting and chatting on the cement floor. An older man wearing only a loincloth is sitting cross-legged, methodically rolling sennit string on his thigh in the timeless Oceanic craft of rope making. Between the two thatched beachfront platforms, across the green lawn from the beach, stands a much larger, two-story redwood-beamed building: Ulithi Adventure Resort, the atoll's first and only hotel.

This afternoon a dozen middle-aged American men are sitting on plastic lawn chairs around the hotel's open veranda, drinking beers, swapping stories, looking relaxed. They are engineers, lawyers, doctors, and they've all paid over \$5,000 apiece to come to Ulithi Adventure Resort from western Pennsylvania for a week of diving. This is their last evening, and the Ulithian weather spirits have been good to them. They had five days of calm seas and now, as the sun sets over the lagoon, directly across the horizon from the resort, the scarlet light reflecting off the low stratus clouds is glorious.

John Rulmal, the Ulithian proprietor-owner-manager and overall prime mover behind the

* University of Guam, 303 University Drive, Mangilao GU 96913 U.S.A.

Ulithi Adventure Resort, is in good form tonight. In addition to having a fully booked resort, he and his wife Terry are celebrating their 32nd wedding anniversary, and the evening festivities have somewhat the air of a family party. He's arranged a program of entertainment. First, a group of Ulithian women and girls, wearing loom-woven lavalavas and flower garland mwarmwar line up on the lawn and perform a traditional dance for the guests, with the women doing their own musical accompaniment by singing and clapping. Next, Rulmal brings the Americans onto the verandah, around a buffet table heaping with a bounty of local foods: whole lobster, fried reef fish, baked tuna, sashimi, bananas and breadfruit cooked in coconut cream, baked pumpkin.

Rulmal is sixtyish, but he has the energy and intensity of a much younger man. He's had a long career of government service in Saipan and Guam and Yap, and for many years he was the ranking government official in Ulithi Atoll, working as the Governor's "Rep." He's also an ordained deacon in the Catholic church (his first career goal was to be a Catholic priest, because, as he told us with wry humor "I had no interest in women when I was growing up, actually I considered myself a gay then, so I figured I should be a priest") and he still performs mass every week in the Falalop church.

Tonight he's wearing several hats: master-of-ceremonies, historian, host, patriot, pastor. He tells the Americans a bit about the sunken ship they dived to in the lagoon, a World War II American oil carrier, the *USS Mississinewa*, that burned and sank after it was struck by a Japanese one-man suicide submarine attack in November 1943. He leads the Americans in prayers for the fifty US navy men who died aboard the ship, and then he gives a brief impromptu sermon around the themes of "home of the brave, land of the free." Finally he passes out sheet music and gets the American lawyers and engineers standing up, singing "God Bless America" and "The Star-Spangled Banner," while Rulmal stands with his hand on his heart. It is schmaltzy and jingoistic, but the Americans belt out the songs with gusto and good grace. Later John tells me he's got sheet music for each country that sends tourists.

Ulithi Adventure Resort

When I interview John Rulmal in his small, cramped office inside the hotel, just next to the dive shop, he speaks with passion and conviction about the hotel project.

"My plan for the hotel is to provide opportunity for the boys and girls who have not chance to go to Yap or Guam or Hawaii... So what I'm doing now, I try to train and then hire them so that they learn how to cook, learn how to fix bed, learn how to sweep, learn how to clean toilet, learn how to clean sink, learn how to fix up nice meal, and then serve the guests... All the kids are developing themselves to grow up and be responsible, and to do something with their lives, and to serve their family and to serve God."

For Rulmal, the hotel project—and economic development more generally—assume lofty, even spiritual dimensions. When he began the project two years earlier, he envisioned it as part of God's plan, the continuation of His work of creation.

"I knew two years ago that things will change, because I knew that Creation cannot stop. I knew that Creation was not completed with Adam and Eve... The world was created, and everything, not only Eden, is part of Creation. God allows that, for His world to be developed and advanced... the airlines and the computer, those are part of Creation."

Rulmal goes on at length in this vein, sermonizing to me about the Parable of the Talents, from the gospel of Mathew. The sermon is an entertaining mix of religious rhetoric salted with

earthy wit.

“I think the U.S. will be very frustrated and very disappointed, when they come back after the first fifteen years of the Compact, and they see some of the Islanders, who abused their budget, abused the fund that they give out. And they’ll find those people who utilized whatever little they gonna give them. So if God gives us our talent to use, and we don’t utilize them, He doesn’t like it. The United States gave us the funding, and we abuse it, that’s bad. I also believe that if United States before give us money to survive, we cannot continue to be spoon-fed. We cannot. United States has to help us develop economically. There’s so much energy poured in politics these days, but very little economic development. And they go together, they cannot be separate. We need money to survive. Everybody, every chief is wearing United States or Japanese or foreign-made cloth. If we’ve got to wear the hibiscus, the men, they’ll scratch their balls. Really, I mean, a lot of chiefs today don’t want to wear the handmade, from the loom, banana fiber, because it’s very itchy.”

I’ve known John Rulmal since my first trip to Micronesia 30 years ago when he hosted and housed me on my weekend transit in Guam, and I’ve long admired John’s canny knack for getting things done, his foresight, his mental agility. When I ask him about the kinds of problems he encountered from others in the community, as he was developing the hotel, he passes quickly over the question and continues extolling the benefits of the hotel.

“A lot of people...they did not believe, especially on this island, that we would be able to build a hotel on Falalop. But when the hotel was standing, out from nothing, they began to understand... The chiefs of Falalop are all in support of this... it’s working out very good. Right now, this hotel employ, maybe ten people. And then the diving operation, there are two boats now, maybe another ten working there. And then there’s this diving shop being built. Right now, we hire Ciano, a certified diver. We’re gonna send two more to Yap to be certified. And so those people will have opportunity to earn money and help their families.”

Soholoi’s Foiled Venture

Falalop literally means “big land.” At just under one square kilometer (BRYAN 1971), it is the largest among the 44 or so coral islands and islets making up Ulithi Atoll. Besides Falalop, only three other islands currently are inhabited—Asor, Mogmog, and Fassarai. In earlier generations nine islands supported settlements (LESSA, p. 25), but today these abandoned islands are used mainly as garden sites, for fishing, and for hunting coconut crabs, birds, and turtles. One such island is Sohloi, just one-third the size of Falalop, about 2 kilometers east of Mogmog. At low tide, one can hike along the reef from Mogmog to Sohloi in under an hour. Mogmog is not only the seat of traditional chiefly power in Ulithi, but also the highest ranking island among all the Yap Outer Islands, and Sohloi falls under its shadow.

Two years earlier, as John Rulmal was developing plans for the Falalop resort, planning also began for a second, smaller resort on Sohloi. Unlike the two-story building of redwood and reinforced concrete with modern air-conditioned rooms, planned for the Falalop resort, Sohloi was to have a more rustic design: half a dozen small bungalows constructed with local materials, using only solar power and rain catchments for lights and water. Some of the investment money that Rulmal had attracted from one of his moneyed American contacts was set aside for the Sohloi resort. Rulmal’s longtime friend Philip Nery—a Mogmog man with land on Sohloi—was the main mover behind the Sohloi project. Like Rulmal, Nery had been one of the bright stars of Ulithi’s first generation of students to go off to college in the 1960s. And like Rulmal,

he had returned to Ulithi and served a long career in government before recently retiring. Philip Nery is also a master sailor, navigator, and fisherman, and for many years he taught hands-on culture courses at the Outer Islands High School on Falalop.

Nery purchased several thousand dollars of materials for the Soholoi resort, put together a proposal for a much larger loan from the FSM Development Bank, and hired some people to begin clearing the land. But before any actual construction could begin, he ran into a wall of opposition from other residents of Mogmog. In Ulithian culture, any conflict usually is well concealed behind a public mask of affable humor and equanimity, and it is mainly in private that people may complain, and criticize or condemn their neighbor's actions. The Soholoi resort project, however, provoked an openly acrimonious conflict, which came to the fore at a meeting held in Mogmog. A week later I read about this meeting in an email letter sent by the General Manager of the Yap Visitors Bureau.

"FACTS: On October 2, 1999, a meeting was held in Mogmog regarding the development of a resort on Soholoi island. The result of the meeting was to halt the already ongoing development of the resort. That is the fact.

"RUMORS: The meeting was not for all the Mogmog people. It was more of a clan meeting. All those who have some connection to the island of Soholoi supposed to participate. It was well attended. It was held where both males and females can attend and participate which was what happened. The group got split up into two opposing views. The two different views have already been in existence for quite some time. The meeting environment was extremely tense. It went to as far as labeling individuals, throwing harsh words to each other, cousins against each other, uncle's view against nephew's views, to as far as a debate can go. No physical harm took place though. Words worked very well in deepening wounds, creating further wounds, revived other forgotten wounds, etc. Some people were even told to vacate their seats or titles they're holding or perceived to be holding. Strong accusations were employed. Not a very good scene." (LIMOL 1999.)

In a long interview with Philip Nery, two years after the conflicts had erupted at the Mogmog meeting and the Soholoi project had been terminated, he still registers bitter anger and disappointment. He describes the preparations for the project, and he lays the blame for halting the project on a few jealous individuals.

"Seven months of work to clean up the area [on Soholoi]. We cleared up a small patch that would go for each of the bungalows... So we were doing very well. We were ready to build the houses. And all the chiefs signed the agreement to the proposal. But then probably somebody in Yap with what I call 'infection in the heart' tried to block me from getting the loan from the bank... And he gave drinks to these chiefs and elders on Mogmog and talked to them, that these are imported ideas and the tourists may come and they might do things that are against the customs, and it was a mistake to do this."

In the Yap Outer Islands, chiefly powers and prerogatives are vested in particular landed estates, and the elders who speak for those estates hold positions of chieftainship. It's a complex arrangement in which the various chiefly positions are ranked, and on any one island, a goodly portion of the elder landowners may hold chiefly status at lower or higher levels. Even at the highest level, chiefly power tends to be consultative and consensual. Chiefs consult among each other, and they strive to speak from a consensus of all the individuals involved, chiefs and non-chiefs alike. As Hilary Tacheliol puts it to me later in Yap, "The island is not owned by the chief, and we don't have castles," meaning that even the highest ranking island chiefs—in contrast to

medieval Europe or Tokugawa-era Japan—do not rule as the lords of their domain.

During the early postwar American administration in Micronesia, a Council of Tamol ('chiefs') was created as a political forum for the traditional leaders from all the outer islands to meet together occasionally. The position of Chairman of the Council of Tamol customarily is held by the high chief from Mogmog's western district, who is one of the two highest ranking chiefs of Mogmog. Today, the Yap State Constitution establishes the Council of Tamol—together with its Yapese counterpart, the Council of Pilung—as a fourth official branch of government comprising the traditional leaders, in addition to the three American-styled executive, legislative, and judicial branches.

As my interview with Philip Nery continues, it becomes clear that his anger is focused on the Chairman of the Council of Tamol, whom he blames for blocking the Sohloi resort project. He is angry at the Chairman for listening to a few people in Yap whom Nery considers to be spoilers motivated by jealousy; angry that the Chairman held a meeting on Mogmog; angry at being excluded from the meeting; and most of all, angry that the Chairman wrote to him instructing him to close down the project. The interview brings out a litany of Nery's complaints against the Chairman. He tells me the Chairman is "not the right person" for the position because he's related to the chief's clan through his wife and not his mother. Nery tells me with scorn that the Chairman is illiterate and needs younger educated assistants to write his letters. And he hints darkly at damning family secrets he will reveal about the Chairman, if the conflict continues.

"I said a lot of things against him, and it's not something I just make up, because it's really according to the custom. He did not answer this letter, and from that time until now he doesn't talk to me... You know the chairman of the Council of Tamol does not know anything about the law. So these people just write things and give it to him to sign. And I put that in writing too. I told him that I know that his level of education is not even close to Head Start. So even his name he couldn't sign... He's lucky that he did not answer my letter because if he answered my letter, then I'd write back to him even worse than what I already wrote. Because he did a lot of things that will, according to custom, will cut him off from all these clans that has power on Mogmog... That's why Mogmog is kind of falling down. Because you know how people really respect Mogmog, and Mogmog is going down, because those people who are not real people for those positions get in... You should read that letter I wrote."

In Yap the following week, I get to see a copy of Philip Nery's letter. After teaching local culture in the Ulithi high school for many years, Philip can write like an anthropologist, and much of the 5-page letter spells out Ulithian customs in very anthropological terms: how matrilineal claims take precedence over patrilineal claims to land, tribute payments the paternal heirs owe the maternal heirs, ranking of clans, authority of chiefs. But the rancor is also evident, and the letter takes a hurt and protesting tone.

"Your meeting in your minority have destroyed ... a good brotherly relationship between you and me ... and between me and my sister ... and cousins. It has created friction between me and my nephews and nieces. It has divided our people into groups. Your group and my group."

"In your letter you thanked me for my understanding, but actually I do not understand... So I am sorry to say I do not understand your reversed custom... Sorry also to say that I ... do not agree with the results of your secret meeting and ... therefore, I shall not comply with such decisions."

Tourism, Culture and Conflict

Yap historically has been perhaps the most cautious and deliberative, among all the Micronesian islands, in embracing tourism and foreign schemes for economic development (HANLON 1998). While Yapese take continuing pride in their sense that they have preserved their traditions and culture, their official attitudes towards tourism development have changed over the past two decades. In the early 1980s Governor Mangefel of Yap was quoted as saying “We have only two small hotels in Yap and we are not encouraging building more” (FINE 1984: 26). In the mid-1980s, under Governor Tun, tourism received watchful approval, with the proviso that projects must be under local control and ownership. The state commissioned a Comprehensive Tourism Plan (DUNLOP 1985), and then a few years later contracted a Tourism Marketing Plan (CAIN 1990). By the mid-1990s, under Governor Figir, Yap was actively developing its tourism potential. The Yap State Visitors Bureau was created by public law at the end of 1995 (Yap State: 173) and early the following year, the First Yap State Economic and Social Summit listed tourism among its goals and objectives. A goal of 15,000 visitors per year by 2001 was set, which was optimistic although not unreachable, considering that visitors had averaged 850 per year during the first half of the 1980s, 1,800 during the second half of the 1980s, and 4,550 during the 1990s (KUWAHARA 2001). No longer is it the official position in Yap that tourism and cultural preservation are antithetical. Rather, traditional culture itself is now touted for Yap’s tourism appeal, as a tour of Yap’s tourism-related websites reveals (e.g., <http://www.visit-micronesia.fm/yap/index.html>, <http://www.visityap.org/>, <http://www.diveulithi.com/>, <http://www.telecom.fm/yap.htm>). “Village tourism” and “cultural tourism” in Yap are being promoted as possibly beneficial to cultural preservation (KUWAHARA 2001; MANSPERGER 1993).

Within this changing scene, the contrast between Rulmal’s idyllic and seemingly successful resort on Falalop and Nery’s foiled plans amid a bitter dispute on Soholoi, indicates some of the tensions underlying tourism development in Yap today. The issue of why the two projects came to such different ends is not easily reducible to simple determinants. And because the Islanders tend to shield conflicts from view (especially when speaking to outsiders) through a variety of conversational tacks—from jocular dissimulation, to guarded circumlocution, to feigned ignorance, or even to outright avoidance and flight—any direct inquiry is fraught with difficulty.

In Yap I get a long interview with Hilary Tacheliol in his office in the governor’s complex. Tacheliol is from the western Mogmog district chieftainship that seats the Chairman of the Council of Tamol. Yap State’s first elected Lieutenant Governor (1979–1987), Tacheliol has perhaps the longest career of high level government service of anyone in Yap. He’s also the longest serving member of the board of directors for the FSM Development Bank, which reviewed the proposal for the Soholoi project. Tacheliol puts the issue partly into personal terms, contrasting Nery’s single-minded tendency to go it alone with Rulmal’s versatile networking. “[Nery] is really one-sided mind... The thing is that he’s kind of acting alone. He got a lot of points though. I praise the guy for putting a lot of points together... John Rulmal, you know, had known what do to. He actually went to the right people. You should be asking, ‘Whom should I approach here and talk about it?’ And then the chief will say, ‘OK, these are the people that you will have to meet.’” Tacheliol is speaking from his long experience as a veteran politician when he emphasizes the necessity of building up a consensus among the island community.

I have one more interview in Yap, with Sophiano Limol, an articulate, bright 30-year old who has degrees in public administration and management and tourism development from

University of South Pacific in Fiji, and has recently taken the position of General Manager of the Yap Visitors Bureau. He also sees the issue partly in terms of personalities and personal factions, but he points as well to some of the deeper issues of land, politics, and culture. Limol has made it part of the mission of the Yap Visitors Bureau to address some of the local concerns over tourism, and to raise the local understanding of tourism's potential benefits and risks in Yap.

“So, from the talks I had with these people from Mogmog, I feel that a major problem was that there was not enough preparation from the beginning in terms of making sure that everyone in Mogmog understands the benefits and disadvantages of having such a small-scale adventure tourism kind of project... People don't see any direct benefit from something that would be established on their family clan land. They feel that most of the monetary benefits would be going to Philip Nery and John Rulmal. That's my observation. People were just not consulted and they got mad because they were not consulted... We've all known in the islands that once you start trying to go through all the proper channels, it might take forever to finish a project. But they can still play some strategies to minimize the opposition to the project and then go on with it and finish it.”

Rulmal's Ulithi Adventure Resort on Falalop, which appeared so idyllic on our brief visit, has also encountered some opposition, as Limol explains. On occasion, local fishermen have confronted tourist divers, and on one occasion a few tourist divers were threatened at spearpoint. Some of the Falalop landowners are disgruntled, and are asking for compensation for the small portion of their land on the resort premises. And others are concerned about the cultural impact of tourism in Ulithi. Limol tells me,

“Every now and then I have a chance to sit down with one or two men or several of the ladies from Falalop and just listen to them. And a lot of them are confused when they have something like the resort right in front of their houses. They're afraid of what might happen to life in Falalop. They all have a feeling that they're already having difficulties right now, controlling their youngsters, and they're afraid that tourism development in Falalop will not help their situation, their social problems. So there's that feeling of resentment against tourist development... They love the money coming in. 'But how about our social lives? And what happens when some big guy come in with more money, and a bigger resort or hotel development? How are we going to deal with it?.'”

“The Yap Visitors Bureau should do more to educate people out there, so they don't wake up one day and be surprised with this major international chain of tourism business operators walking in on their shores and taking over everything. We've heard of examples in Guam or Saipan... Some Japanese walk in and say, 'OK, here's \$500,000, we want your piece of land.' We don't want that kind of example in Yap.”

Limol agrees that the Falalop chiefs are “basically behind the resort” but the older, un-schooled generation of chiefs also finds themselves in a dilemma as they attempt to mediate conflicts and make decisions on tourism development projects that are quite new to them. They must rely on their young educated kin and advisors, and as Limol puts it, the senior chiefs complain of being pulled in one direction or another, like fish caught on the hook.

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Eighteen months later I am back in Yap on a one-week visit, and I am sitting in the office of Ignathio Hapithey, the 70-year-old traditional chief and Chairman of the Council of Tamol. The 1996 “Yap Researcher Registration Act” requires foreign researchers to obtain local

permission to publish material on Yapese culture, and I have come to collect the Council's letter of approval for Kagoshima University to publish all the research papers, including this one, from the October 2001 visit to Ulithi and Yap, organized by Kagoshima University's Research Center for the Pacific Islands. The elderly Chairman is voicing his disagreements with my paper, explaining in a quietly forbearing tone how I've been misinformed on this point and that point. The letter of approval, written and signed by the Chairman's young administrative assistant, is also rather forgiving in its reservations: *"Thank you very much and please be assure that there won't be any fault against you and your university on these publications. If there are some misleading stuffs find after the publication we can always blame our own people for giving you wrong informations, so go ahead now and print out your papers."*

It is an anthropological truism that contradictory versions of social reality coexist, each with its own truth claims, and social conflicts are built on such competing accounts. Even genealogies, the flesh and blood of family histories and claims to clan titles, are susceptible to alterations based upon the "facts" of contested paternity or long-forgotten adoptions or other contingencies. The Chairman specifically takes issue with a quotation in my paper that questions his claim to office, and he corrects that statement, while averring that my informant's own lineage is other than what he thinks it is, owing to an illegitimate paternity—a "birth in the bushes"—several generations earlier. And he tells me that my paper failed to report that Soholoi landowners had come to him actually threatening to burn down the resort if the plans had proceeded. For the sake of community peace, it was necessary to forestall building the resort, and the Chairman's solomonic decision was to halt the project for five years, hoping that by then a consensus could be reached. I suggest somewhat self-defensively to the septuagenarian chief that getting out the story of Ulithi's conflicts over the hotel development is instructive, even if some of the details are incomplete or mistaken, because the tale demonstrates how the community solves conflicts inherent in tourism development, and in the end, upholds the authority of the chief despite attacks on his judgment and legitimacy.

More troubling is an argument brought to me by several educated younger Ulithian men employed in government jobs in Yap, who seek me out after my meeting with the Chairman. They don't want *anything* published about the conflict over the proposed Soholoi resort that might serve to inflame old hostilities. They argue that it was a painful episode that should be left alone to heal, like an old scab, not picked open and re-examined—and especially, not written up and published for everyone to read about. Mulling over whether to simply withdraw this paper from publication, I recite their argument to several other friends in Yap, government employees whose thoughtful counsel I trust. One tells me that several neighboring islands near Ulithi are pondering similar small resort projects, and the story of the Soholoi experience is valuable for them as a cautionary tale that dramatizes some of the pitfalls they want to avoid. Another person points out that the paper should be read by outsiders who intend to promote or invest in tourism projects in Yap, and who need to understand how carefully they must proceed—gaining community support, building consensus, resolving local concerns, working through the many chiefs and landowners who may have competing claims of authority. Another friend offers the opinion that the Yap Researcher Registration Act is bad policy, hindering critical commentary and enforcing a conformity of interpretations of Yapese history and culture and affairs. I decide, in the end, to append this section and let the paper stand, while acknowledging with gratitude the reviewers' criticisms.

界Doing Tourism Right陰

In an earlier study of tourism on Yap's main island, Mansperger argues that "Yap is a good example of how to 'do' tourism right" (1993: 20, 1995: 90). Mansperger's point is that the Yapese have avoided the most harmful impacts of tourism in "small-scale societies," which is to disrupt indigenous people's relationship to their land. At the time of Mansperger's study, all the hotels in Yap were locally owned. Yet Mansperger also warns that "Tourism has also brought some social conflict and cultural disruption... Social factionalism occurring over the issue of whether or not tourism on the island should be increased is another potential problem. Divisions could potentially grow to the point where they become socially and economically disruptive to the Yapese" (1995: 90). The conflicts recently embroiling the expansion of tourism to Soholoi in Ulithi appear to confirm Mansperger's words of warning.

On the other hand, this incident also demonstrates the extent to which the Islanders now command both sides of the dispute over tourism development. Historians examining earlier colonial eras in Micronesia have viewed economic development plans largely as an American program for "remaking" Micronesia (e.g. HANLON 1998), and Yap's refusal to allow hotel development in the 1960s as a form of opposition or resistance to foreign cultural incursion. Today the primary agents of change are the Islanders themselves—individuals such as John Rulmal and Philip Nery, who can articulate notions of "progress" in compelling terms even if not always enlisting community consensus in support of their schemes. Whether their plans succeed or fail, the outcomes reveal distinctively Yapese solutions to the inherent cultural conflicts involved in "doing tourism right."

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