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Ethnographic Observations about the Nauru Islanders¹

Antonie Brandeis

The island of Nauru is an isolated island of volcanic origin in the Pacific Ocean, located west of the Gilbert Islands group at 166°51' eastern longitude and 0°27' southern latitude. The island covers approximately 18 km in area and is surrounded by a 100 m to 150 m wide coral reef which drops off steeply into the sea. The fertile ring rises up to 5 m; this is then followed by cliffs reaching a height of up to 30 m. The centre of the island is occupied by a high plateau that is marked with a few depressions. At one place there is a large pond, the bottom of which is said to be connected to the seawater. The highland areas of the island are rocky, they have only sparse vegetation and are covered several feet deep with high grade phosphate.

There are six districts in Nauru: *menin* (= windy), *bog me eiwu* (= western), the two bush districts *boater* and *arunibeck*, *eowa* and *eniburi* (their meaning is unknown).

Each hut is occupied by one family only, which is on average comprised of three to five family members. However, the father, the mother and the children are sometimes joined by the unmarried brothers and sisters of the parents. Upon marriage, the husband always moves into the house

of the wife. When the eldest daughter enters into marriage, then the parents give her their existing house and they build for themselves a new home nearby. Every additional daughter receives a new house in the vicinity upon her marriage. The settlements are laid out without any specific rules. What was considered decisive in Nauru were favourable passages in the reef and the presence of freshwater holes or water-bearing caves. The settlements were always established by one family or by several related families, and all are named. The increase in population is slow, the current number stands at approximately 1500 persons. About 500 people were killed in the battles which took place 20 to 30 years ago. The battles lasted for about 30 years. In the year 1888 the island was placed under German protection and the islanders were disarmed, which brought an end to the warring.

The population is made up of people brought to Nauru from the Gilbert Islands, the Marshall Islands and the Caroline Islands. But at the same time a population of pure Malaysian origin is also clearly in evidence. There are people to be found here who are reminiscent of Hindus. It is particularly noticeable for many men to have a noble skull shape as well as a fine nose and a well-shaped mouth (see Figure 1).

Canoe building is practised only within certain families. Fishing is done by all the inhabitants of that part of the coastal belt that is close to the sea, while the hill dwellers and those who reside in the bush only catch fish in the inland ponds.

The houses are built in a rectangle of 15 to 25 feet in size; the posts are 4 feet high and are made from the hard wood of the *Calophyllum* tree, and sometimes also from the trunks of the palm tree. The inner beams are made from pandanus logs. All these parts are tied together with coconut rope. The different parts of the house are called: *Yvar* = post, *Ikwoar* = roof framework, *Oyao* = rear gable frame, *Kadön* = rafter, *Denapot* = leaf roof, *Kaëb* = floor/ground, *Daman* = narrow sides. The roof is made from pandanus leaves, and since it does not rain much in Nauru it will last four to five years.

There are no meeting houses as such. In earlier times large dancing houses were in existence, and one of them was allocated to each district.

The cooking houses are actually covered earth ovens, of the type commonly used throughout the South Seas. The food is either baked or steamed on hot stones. The steam required for this is produced by pouring a small amount of water over the stones.

In the past, the islanders had birthing houses set up near their residential houses. A postpartum

¹ See the article by A. Krämer about Nauru, *Globus*, Vol. 74, No. 10. 4

woman was considered unclean for 15 days and was not allowed to leave the birthing house that could be entered only by the husband or by the parents. Even today women have to withdraw quite often for several days each month to a house specially built for that purpose, and they have to provide all of their own food by themselves. They can get coconuts from a tree by using a noose tied to a stick. Since it is forbidden to bring them any food, it does happen quite often that they nearly starve to death. Afterwards they have to undergo a sort of fattening (Figure 2), and for that purpose they are not allowed to leave the house.

Provisions are kept in the roof framework of the house. Pigs and chickens wander freely around, but they do keep close to those houses from where they obtain food every now and then. The area surrounding the houses is covered with small, white coral debris from the beach and the women inspect it for impurities using their hands. Waste that has not already been consumed by dogs or pigs is burned, as are fallen branches and leaves.

Residential houses have no doors and are open all the way around. In rainy weather, mats are hung on the windward side. A small door leads to the roof framework. In the past, house posts were painted black and white. A certain type of clay extracted from the soil supplied the white colour, the black colour was produced from burnt coconut shell.



Fig. 1: Young chief, Nauru

During the period of the battles, the islanders built stone walls around their settlements and later on

they utilized a stretched wire with bottles tied to it, so that no one could creep up on them at night.

The islanders only have mats to serve them for sleeping, which are laid onto the shell gravel. First come rough mats made from palm leaves which are then followed by finer pandanus mats. The mats are used as a floor covering throughout the whole day. Each family member has one more extra sleeping mat that is rolled up during the day. Mats also serve as a covering, and a roll of old mats that have become brittle serves as a pillow. The sleeping mats are placed under the roof during the day. That is also where the weapons used to be kept; now the fishing rods and other fishing tackle are still housed there.

The Nauru islander owns little else in the way of household goods. Wooden bowls of various sizes are made from the hard wood of the *Calophyllum* tree into drinking vessels or into bowls for mixing food. Then, one can also find wooden clubs for rubbing the pandanus paste and clubs for beating the pandanus leaves before they are woven into mats. Palm wine is collected in hollowed out coconuts; these coconuts are also used for storing oil. Halved, smoothly scraped nuts are also used as drinking vessels. Hot water is obtained by placing nuts filled with water into the ashes of the fire. The straining of palm wine is done with the aid of coir. The household contents also include a few baskets for storing nuts filled with oil, etc. For the purpose of cleaning small children from sand and dust, the islanders make delicate little brushes (*Dida*) from coconut fibre. For a chief's child the islanders put together a very delicately designed drinking vessel, a dust brush, and a small basket with an oil-filled nut. It is all decorated with a red scallop and draped with the feathers of the frigatebird. These items may not be used by others.

Fire is started by rubbing two pieces of wood together. One man holds the larger piece of wood with his knee and one hand, while another man rubs the wood back and forth with a smaller piece of wood until the wood begins to glow after a few minutes. The larger piece is called *Kainid*, the smaller one *Nettin*. The type of wood is called *Quani* (a wild hibiscus). If one wants to keep the fire burning for a longer period of time, then it is covered with the outer coconut shell under which it continues to smoulder. Small, simple fans made from palm leaves are used to kindle the fire. Half coconuts are used as cooking utensils. The stirring is done with wooden sticks. The Nauruan people eat runny food with a piece of coconut leaf, other food items with the forefinger and the

middle finger. A ring-shaped slice of coconut is used for scraping the pandanus. This is attached to a piece of wood on which the men sit. This object is called *Ranenor*. The main food of the Nauru islanders is composed of: coconut (*ini*), pandanus (*epo*), fish roasted in ash (*dschinen*), crustaceans (*oar*), pig (*cumo*), chicken (*tamno*), seagulls (*toron*), palm wine (*carawe*), molasses from the palm wine (*kumi-dare*), pandanus preserve (*edango*), raw shellfish (*murry*) and fish baked on a stone (*omen*).

The islanders do not have regular meal times, rather everyone eats whenever they feel like it, all day long actually. But family members also do get together several times per day to eat, particularly in the evening, when fish have just been caught, etc. At festivities, the Nauruan people can devour tremendous quantities of food; on the other hand, it is also possible for them to take longer breaks while they are eating, but then they have to sit still or lie down.



Fig. 2: Fatted daughter of the chief Jim, Nauru



Fig. 3: Young woman with a child, Nauru

After they have eaten fish, they clean their mouth and hands very carefully and touch other food only after the cleaning has been done.

It is a peculiar characteristic of the Nauru islanders that a woman never enjoys something that has been touched or worn by her eldest son. In the case of a chief's family this applies also to the eldest daughter. They are caught up in the superstition which says that it weakens the child, causes harm to the mother and brings shame upon

them in the eyes of the others. Pregnant women are not allowed to eat certain kinds of fish. In the family of a chief there are very special ceremonies observed during this time. No nuts that have fallen to the ground around the hut within a 100 foot perimeter may be touched. The wife is not allowed to eat what has been touched by the husband, the father or the mother. From the fifth month of the pregnancy onwards, no nails may be hammered inside the house, nor is the slightest noise allowed to be made. Nothing may be taken down from the wall until the child is born. These rules are particularly scrupulously observed for the first-time mothers.

The Nauruan people were never cannibals. In the past, their excitement during a battle could go so far that they would bite off each other's ears or fingers.

Inside the house torches made from the dried nuts of the *Calophyllum* tree are used, ten of which are placed on a little stick; these burn for several hours. For fishing, the torches are made from dried coconut leaves that are tied together. The islanders make very valuable necklaces from a red oyster or from a white sea shell and a coconut shell. Feathers of the frigatebird usually hang from the end of the chain. There are a great many different types of chains, most of them requiring a lot of time and patience to produce. When dancing, wide belts decorated with sea shells are worn, and the women decorate their heads with small bird figurines carved from the inner wood of the saltwater bush.

A chief's wife carries in her hand a small square mat in front of her body when she is expecting a child. This mat is woven in black and white, and it is decorated with red scallop shells or red oysters. During this time the man wears a braided necklace made from pandanus leaves. Men always cut their hair short; only when the wife is with child does the husband's hair stay long until the child is born. Women always wear their hair long and loosely hanging down, only over the forehead do they sometimes cut the hair short. After a woman has given birth to a child, it is customary to cut her hair very short (Figure 3).

For dancing, both men and women paint their faces and upper bodies white with chalk, red with juice from a root, black with a burnt coconut shell. Each family has their particular pattern that no one else is allowed to copy. However, many families do not paint themselves at all.

Tattooing is performed only very rarely, and it is mostly done just on the wrist or on individual fingers. Now a needle is used for the procedure,

previously it used to be thorns from a certain type of acacia. Burnt coconut provides the pigment.

When children are 10 or 12 years old, they have moderately large holes pierced in their ears. They wear flowers and wood pith in these holes, and at dances they wear shells, etc. Men often wear fishhooks in their ear holes, which is done as a convenience, since they have no pockets. Great care is taken with the teeth. Children are allowed to enjoy only cold food during the time when the adult teeth start to come in. Both young and old wash their teeth every morning with salt water; dark spots are rubbed with fine sand. Old teeth are pulled out with a thread, and back teeth are extracted with two small wooden sticks bound to each other. The teeth of the Nauruan people are very white and regular, but they do break quite easily.

The only item of clothing that both men and women wear is an apron made from green or dried palm leaves that barely reaches to their knees (Figure 4). To increase their durability, the short skirts are oiled. Especially fine short skirts are made from white palm leaves. When dancing, men tie a small mat over their palm skirts with strings of hair so that they are held together during fast movements. Children often go without clothes until they are six or seven years old; later on, they wear a small skirt (Figure 5), and after puberty, two skirts. Now the followers of the missions wear calico dresses, at least on Sundays, and in ten years probably no one shall be seen in a palm skirt any more.



Fig. 4. Young girl with flower ornaments, Nauru

Before a fight, Nauru islanders would take along all their ornaments consisting of chains, etc., to have everything with them if they were to die. As with the preparations for dancing, before fights they also adorned themselves with feathers and shells, and they painted their bodies with pigments. As an amulet against injury they would wear a bone from the pelvic fin of a fish that had been charmed beforehand by special people.

To catch fish, Nauruan people practise handline fishing, or they use a fishing rod or a net. Small fish, flying fish, hermit crabs and edible common crabs are all used as a bait. In earlier times the islanders used to make large baskets for catching fish that were anchored at the edge of the reef with a coconut rope 100 to 200 feet long weighted down with stones, and placed into the sea. Even nowadays a small basket is placed on the reef itself for catching eels. Large eels, often as thick as an arm, are caught by divers who attach a noose to the end of a stick and hold a bait to the eel in such a way that the eel has to put its head through the noose. In earlier times fish hooks were made from the ear bone of a human skull, or from a pearl shell with human bones, or from a coconut shell. The fishing line is made from hibiscus fibre and is extremely strong. In the evenings many flying fish are caught from canoes with the help of torches. One of the specialities of the Nauruan people is how, while reef-fishing, they catch a type of silvery fish when it is only as big as a pin. They lift the small fishes with the help of a strainer-like coir net, skim them off with a piece of a coconut shell and then pour them into a large hollowed out nut. This nut is equipped with handles, and on its top edge it has small holes to prevent the water from overflowing. They carefully carry these shells to an inland lake half an hour away, which has brackish water. Each family's portion of the lake is determined with the aid of embankments made of mud and leaves. The fish remain in these ponds for three to four months, and after the fish is fully grown it resembles a large herring and also tastes like one. The islanders are able to enjoy it raw in large quantities. The fish is called *ibiah*. On festive occasions, fishing expeditions are organised, with many people becoming involved. Large nets made from hibiscus fibre that are fastened between forked sticks are specially made for this purpose. About 20 to 30 men plunge into the lake with a yell, holding the nets high, and a number of boys help to drive the fish, while the fish keep jumping into the air. Having arrived at the other end of the pond, the crowded fish are scooped out with large nets. Old women, standing on the shore,

pour the fish onto mats spread out under a tree and then with a sign of obvious delight, bite through the fishes' necks.

During the months of May to July the frigate-birds are caught for sport on the island. A tame bird is placed on a platform made of sticks. When wild birds are attracted to the tame bird, the islanders throw snares into the air that wrap around the bird like a lasso and bring it down. The snares are made from finely twisted hibiscus fibres and are equipped with a polished, fossilized *Tridacna* clam shell at one end. The other end of the fibre is attached to the thumb. Bets are made as to who can bring down the greatest number of birds. Once their wing feathers, which are used for all kinds of decorations, have been stripped, the birds are then tamed and fed with fish. The bird needs no drinking water; if the bird is to have a drink of water, a man squirts some water through his teeth which the bird then catches skilfully.

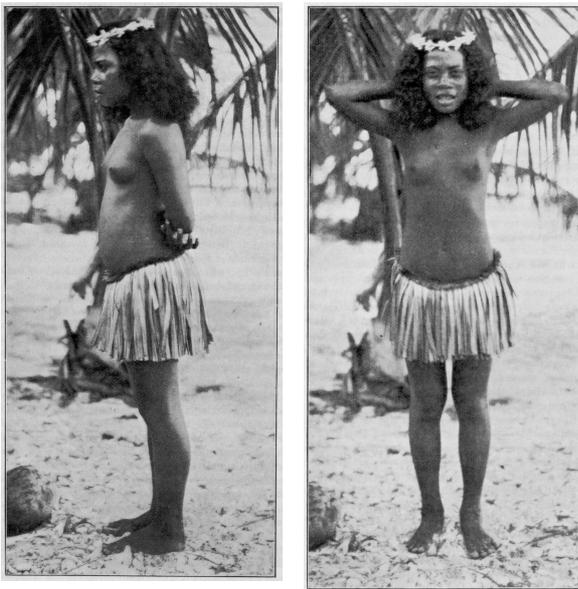


Fig. 5: Young girl with a wreath of flowers, Nauru

The Nauru islander keeps pigs with long, pointed snouts as domestic animals; these had been introduced to the island from ships and have since degenerated; furthermore, there are dogs there, a mixture of all races, that mostly look very scruffy and are often eaten; cats and rats are also frequently consumed as food. They also have chickens to eat, and apart from the frigatebird, sandpipers and “Dösköpfe” (a small seagull species) are kept for sport, because these are used for fighting games.

Only coconuts and pandanus are harvested all year round. Harvest festivals are never conducted. There is a kind of coconut that is cooked with

the green shell still on; the shell is then given especially to children and to sick people. It tastes similar to sugar cane. Often there is no rain on the island for an extended period of time, and then there are only a few coconuts left, which without the fibrous husk are often only the size of a goose egg. The Nauruan people grow small amounts of tobacco, the seeds for which they received from the Gilbert Islands. They dry the leaves in the sun or over the fire without any processing and smoke them in small pipes. Previously, they would use the wood of the *Calophyllum* tree for this purpose.² Nearly everyone smokes, including women and children. They receive Virginia tobacco through barter trade. One or two sticks used to be considered as being the equivalent exchange value for one chicken, etc. Now the dealer has to give more tobacco for the same amount. When the islanders have no pipe, they also chew the tobacco.

The Nauru islander lives largely on palm wine, called *karawe*. It is forbidden to leave it fermenting, as after 48 hours it has a very strong intoxicating effect and the intoxication has had consequences. In order to extract the palm wine, cuts are made into a branch with young nuts and the juice which drips out of it is directed with a leaf into a hollowed-out nut suspended underneath. The incision must be done with a great deal of care. Every morning and evening a new cut must be made. Two shoots can be cut at the same time on one palm. After the shoots have stopped delivering, the tree must rest for a longer period of time. Strong spirits have been forbidden to the islanders by the administration; previously they often used to be drunk.

Children play with balls which are made from dried pandanus leaves. They play skittles with the *Calophyllum* nuts. In earlier times they used to make kites from pandanus leaves stitched together. They carve dolls from a coconut shell to which they attach a strand of woman's hair.

The dances are truly worthy of being seen. They are mostly pantomimes, where the beautiful physique and the graceful movements of both men and women come into their own. The dances have been mostly introduced by the people from the Gilbert Islands, and the language of the accompanying songs is almost always the Gilbertese language. In earlier times, the islanders used to have

2 [Translator's note: The colloquial German term “Dösköpfe”, quoted by Antonie Brandeis in her article, is not currently used to describe any species on Nauru. It may refer to one of the following Nauruan gull species: brown noddy, black noddy, white tern, sooty tern, black-naped tern, or great crested tern.]

large dancing houses located at various places in the island, now the dancing area is usually set up under big, shady trees. The entirely restrained dances have unfortunately been forbidden by the American mission to its followers. At the suggestion of the administration, big dances take place every one to two years. To achieve their admirable precision, the dances must be practised for weeks in advance. Approximately 40 persons dance in each section. The decoration worn by both men and women is often very tasteful. Each family has had their own individual decoration for many years. The dances are introduced by a chorus of men who, to reinforce their words, tap strongly with their hands against the mats covering their lower bodies. The various dances are called: *dedaru* = war dance; *djidere* = little sticks dance (in all the dance figures, the dancers hit at each other with small sticks, Figure 6); *cabura*: the dancers are sitting down and with their arms and hands are performing various figures of the dance); *cadio*: women dance alone, men stand behind them in rows; *ägiba*: three rows are seated, one man and one woman face one another in various dance figures; *dibino*: women sit in rows and are flanked on the right and on the left by two rows of men who perform various movements with their arms that are aimed against each other or are all over the place.

After the dances, which often last the whole day, feasting takes place that is organized by the district in which the dance was conducted. On the following day everything moves to the neighbouring village, where the dancing resumes.

As a sport the people of Nauru play an interesting ball game. A very hard ball, the size of a big orange and comprised of wood and leaves, is thrown with great force against the opposing party which has to catch the ball in their hands, that is only by one of the three men standing at the front. The rules of the game are very strict, the counting is up to ten points and it is a game of one district against another district. Should one party not catch the ball when the ball was meant to have been attainable, then this counts as one point in favour of the opposing party and its members strike up loud songs of joy.

In earlier times, the islanders used to make kites from stripped pandanus leaves that were 12 to 14 feet long and they would let them fly in the west wind, in the course of which bets were made. They also used to make small canoe models, equipped with very large sails, that were placed upon the reef, and bets were also made then. Wrestling matches still take place today; and

there is also boxing, although it is not the English type of boxing but is done more from the wrist with swinging movements.

The islanders made spinning tops from several half coconut shells, meticulously fitted into each other, which they would then skilfully lift onto a piece of a tortoiseshell and let it run there. Drums, which have now fallen into disuse, were made from pandanus trunks and were beaten by both men and women. Their name is: *debugibugi*. Triton shells were used to make signals in a battle, or to scare off or invoke spirits.

Baskets used to carry loads are woven from palm leaves and hung from both ends of a stick to balance them on the shoulder. Heavy loads are carried by two people, by both men and women: the load then hangs in the middle. Water is drawn from holes in the ground using hollowed out large coconuts. Six to eight such nuts, bundled together, are carried on each side of the pole. Old people as well as those who are ill are carried on a crudely timbered platform.

Nauruan people build only small canoes for fishing, in which three people can usually be accommodated. The material used for building the boats is the wood of the *Calophyllum* tree. These vessels are very stable in powerful surf conditions. Ocean-going boats are not built; because of the presence of strong currents that run around the island, the residents do not dare to undertake further voyages. With short paddles they move the canoes into the sea, placing them with extraordinary skill over the at times very high surging waves of the surf. – The canoe is called *equna*, stern = *murin*, prow = *man*, bottom of a vessel = *robin*, sides = *bibich*, outrigger poles = *eka*, outrigger crossbar = *ethen*, outrigger = *egom*, ornaments at both ends = *ebar*, sideboard = *karoga*, seats = *engo*, and the paddle = *oats*.

Trade is conducted only in copra and in shark fins which the traders exchange for tobacco, rice, hardtack, etc.; in recent times trading is also done for calico, hats and similar items.

Money has been introduced in only very limited quantities; tobacco serves in most cases as a payment. It is worth noting as a curious fact that postal stamps are mostly paid for with eggs.

Weights as such do not exist. The length dimensions are a “Klafter” [the span of the outstretched arms] and a “Spanne” [the distance from the tip of the thumb to the tip of the little finger]. Pigs are measured by arm-length.

The islanders make very pretty, durable baskets from pandanus leaves that are braided around fine coconut ribs and are decorated either with

woman's hair or with black-coloured bast fibre. However, this wickerwork seems to have been introduced by white people, and it is practised by only a few families. Woven by women, the mats are only of the coarser type. The material is the pandanus leaf in its various finishings, bleached white, green, grey or brown. For the dancing, men wear mats and braided ornaments around their necks and arms. Small girls get bonnets after they have been fattened up, or at puberty. For carrying small items, there are woven bags (see Figure 7.)



Fig. 6: *Djidera*, a dance with small sticks, Nauru

The islanders make all kinds of ornaments from the red oyster. The pieces of shell were ground down upon a block of coral; nowadays a grindstone is used. Drilling is done with a drill, the origin of which is unknown. Small things are drilled with a shark tooth that is tied to a small stick; this is then twirled between two hands. In the past lovely chains were made from the red oyster that were highly valued and only a few people were involved in their making.

Coconut fibre is used for ropes and twine and it is made by hand-twisting it along the thigh. A strong, durable string is made from the bast fibre of the wild hibiscus (*quani*) and it is twisted with two pieces of wood. Fishhooks were made from pearl shell and from skull bones; shark hooks are even today made from the *Calophyllum* wood. Canoes were hewn in the past with shell axes, and to some extent they continue to be made in this way. The large fossilized *Tridacna* clam can be found and dug out at various places on the island.

Battles used to be very frequent on the island in the past. In particular the Gilbert Islands people brought war-like customs with them. The cause was often just a small squabble, occasionally a murder. The rule of fighting was that groups of three men would always face each other. In the middle stood a big man, whose strength was maintained with frequent fattening diets, who held a thick, very long coconut-wood spear to fend off

the blows from smaller, thicker spears hurled towards both his companions standing to the right and the left of him. If one of these two men came down, he was immediately replaced from the rows standing behind. If the big man in the middle came down, then the battle of that group was over. One district announced the battle to another district by sending messengers. Women would follow the fighters and would bring them water and supplies. Those who had been attacked would await the approach of the enemy party, and the battle continued until one of the parties was weakened. By howling, the men tried to encourage one another, as is still done today in the war dances. Captives were taken only rarely, and then they were kept for only a short time. Later on, the islanders received shotguns from the traders, whereupon their battles

got badly out of hand. Women and children were not spared. Old and influential men brokered peace between the parties.

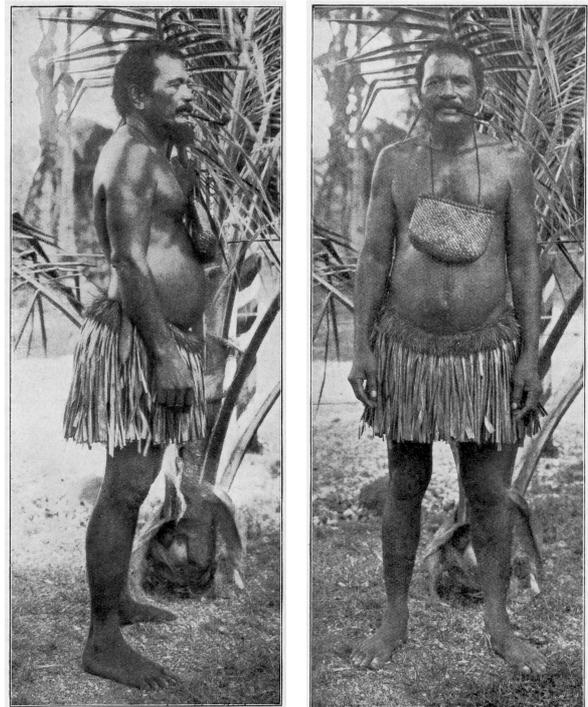


Fig. 7: Man with a tobacco pipe and a small basket, Nauru

There are no real chiefs as such, only the village elders (Figure 8). Their influence is mostly based on their larger landholdings, acquired by inheritance or in battle. With the establishment of the German Administration in the year 1888, the current chiefs were instructed to ensure order in the district. Many previously (and even now) influential men pushed others forward at that time,

since they were afraid. In the past, sorcerers also had great influence. Several villages form one district. There are 13 tribes living on Nauru. In the order of the number of their members, they are as follows: *amit* (sea snake), *iruwa* (strangers), *tāboi* (unknown meaning), *emea* (eye), *emnitemit* (cricket), *erunibeck*, *emanum*, *ano*, *emidera*, *āoa-dō* (meaning of these five names is unknown), *edidji* (strangers), *iwii* (lice), *anobao* (shark). The *anobao* tribe is almost completely extinct.

People were seldom turned into slaves. This could happen either during a battle instead of killing the captives, or if a man was in the wrong; sometimes it also occurred with the people brought in as labourers. Even now there are still some slaves, whose children are also considered to be slaves. But they are often given a piece of land. In terms of authority, the chief is followed by the eldest son, and if this son is not available, then by the son of the eldest sister.

Children inherit from their parents, uncles and aunts. Childless people leave their property to their nephews and nieces. Rich landowners share out land to their poor relatives, even if they do have children. In the event of a separation, the children sometimes stay with the father, sometimes with the mother, just as they want, back and forth. Nearly every child has a godmother, who is an old relative or a friend of the parents. She is the one who chooses the child's name and who always takes care of the child. Many fathers often distribute their land to their sons while they are still alive, if these sons take good care of them. The mother's jewellery is inherited by the eldest daughter, but the younger daughters can use it.

There is no joint property in a marriage. Matriarchal law prevails upon Nauru; all children follow the lineage of their mother's family. If a boy and a girl were born as twins, the boy was always killed. Fully grown twins are only seldom found, because one of the children usually dies from a weakness. Old people were sometimes strangled to death, if they had become a burden to the family. But the grandsons, who did that, enjoyed little respect.

Theft does happen, but it is despised. As the people are supposed to wear clothes now, theft of calico and that sort of thing has become more frequent. If a lost item has been found, the finder can keep it; but in most cases they give it back out of their own good nature.

Nauruan people both make and take gifts; after a dispute they often request that these be returned. They also sometimes borrow things, but they usually forget to return them. If the object is

important to the owner, he can request that it be returned.

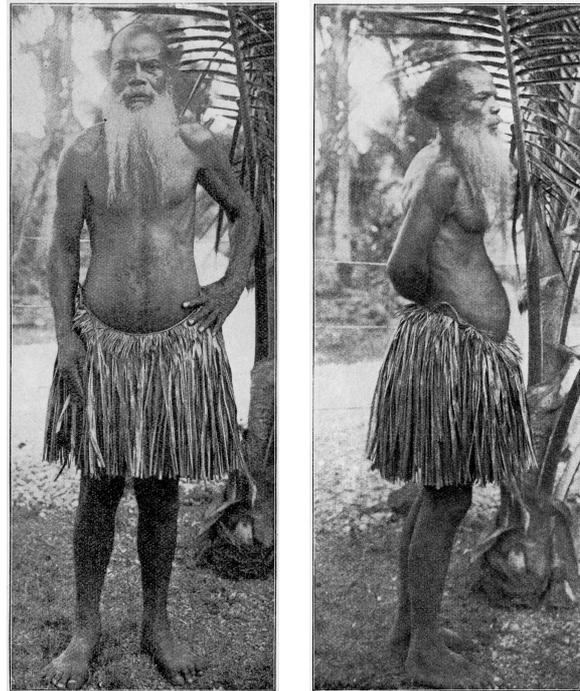


Fig. 8: Old, respected man, Nauru

A family's authority is mostly based on ownership. However, some people know how to win influence even without such a factor.

The inhabitants of Nauru do not have a greeting. They only say when they meet someone: "Where are you going?"

The status of women is good. If the woman belongs to a higher status family than the man, then she is held in higher regard and the man subordinates himself to her. Polygamy does occur, but it is not very common as there is no surplus of women. Polyandry is rare; only sometimes do several brothers have one wife. A widow often marries a brother of the deceased; otherwise, she stays with her mother-in-law, who is also responsible for providing a second husband. In the past when a girl reached puberty, this used to be celebrated with great feasting.

Marriages only take place between members of two different tribes. If a man marries a girl from the same tribe, it is not respected; it is even regarded as a sin. That applies also to a marriage between individuals who are closely related to each other, even if both of them belong to different tribes. There is a man living on the island who is married both to a mother and to her daughter. At first he was engaged to the then ten-year-old

daughter, but since the mother became apprehensive that the man might turn his affection to another woman before the daughter became eligible for marriage, she therefore married the man herself, and later on he took the daughter as his second wife. As there are children born of both unions, strange relationships have resulted from that. Before marriage a girl can do as she likes, there are no restrictions imposed on her; although purity is more respected in the families of the chiefs. If a girl gets pregnant, it is considered a disgrace and the child will be viewed as a bastard. Abortion of the foetus is frequent; it usually happens in the third month.

Pregnant women are well looked after and they are held in high regard. Old, experienced women, and sometimes men as well, provide assistance in the childbirth. For more difficult births sorcerers are engaged. The births are usually quick and easy; but there are also known cases of paralysis and the like. When the first child is born to a family, anything and everything in the house that is not nailed down may be taken away by the neighbours, who are already eagerly waiting for the moment and then take what they find. Out of pure joy for the event, immediately thereafter a wrestling match is performed by young men in the neighbourhood. Breastfeeding usually lasts for two years; but it is not uncommon for children of up to five years of age to continue to be breastfed.

The dead are buried in the ground inside the huts, only a few feet deep, and a close relative of the deceased sleeps on the burial spot. Later on, the skull is dug up and kept inside the house. Often only the front teeth are taken out, which are then worn around the neck as an amulet by the relatives. After the burial, all the relatives come and bring food, which is then eaten together.

After the grave has sufficiently subsided, approximately in two to three months, family celebrations with lavish feasts take place once again and all the mats in the house have to be turned over. The bodies of humble people are thrown into caves in the island's interior or they are released into the sea from a canoe, but always without the cover of a mat, because they take the view that the mat would prevent the soul from entering into the spirit realm. The Nauruan people believe that the spirits of the deceased influence their actions and deeds, and that they also stand protectively by their side. Therefore, in the past they held the skulls of their ancestors in great esteem. They were often rubbed with oil which helped to preserve them, and on festive occasions they were decorated with floral wreaths. Until quite recent-

ly, in disagreements and land disputes etc., older people carried skulls inside small baskets to the place of the disagreement. It is believed that when someone dies the "shadow" leaves the body to go to the spirit land (*bitani*). From there they come back as a spirit (*ani*) to the world of the living, and live nearby in the air. Fetish houses were not common on Nauru. The islanders made sacrifices to their gods on large, upright stones. These gods had been brought in by the Gilbert Islands people from their own islands. The main god was Taburik, the god of thunder, whom they imagined as a bird, and who produced the thunder by moving his wings while the fire (the lightning) came out of its beak. Other gods were: Tormagai, Wuddia, and Tabago (the shark), who punished with the fluid retention disease dropsy. The islanders made food sacrifices to these gods, one of whom each family had chosen as its protective deity, so that they would get a good catch of fish, achieve success in battle, or secure a favourable progression of a disease. Only certain old men were allowed to touch this food or to partake of it. If the food was removed during the night in a prank or with the intention to cause harm to the sacrificing household, then the people believed that the gods had accepted the sacrifices. Each family had its own sacrificial stone.



Fig. 9: Boy with negro blood

Water or a young coconut, conjured by a sorcerer, are used as magic and given to a sick person to drink. After an injury, blood is collected from wounds and given to the injured person to drink. Until now, Nauruan people have suffered from few illnesses, apart from the infectious tropical

disease yaws, which was introduced by a ship in the year 1887 and affected several hundred people. Through the application of appropriate measures, case numbers have been brought down. There is also a skin disease that causes light brown spots so that people who are afflicted by it look like a tabby cat; but this condition is not dangerous.

Cooling leaves, or a decoction made from such leaves, are applied directly onto wounds. Those who are ill are often fattened up so that they will stay strong, and massage is frequently used on all parts of the body. Boiling oil used to be poured into gunshot wounds, and a finger-long and finger-thick piece of soap was put on top of it. For a wide range of complaints, ill people are usually burnt upon their back. A piece of hardwood is made red-hot and then it is used to burn a hole half an inch deep, into which a glowing pandanus kernel is inserted. The pandanus kernel, kept red-hot by blowing onto it for a quarter of an hour, burns out the hole. Fractures are splinted with a piece of wood and with coconut bast. Dislocations are usually stretched without much success.

Celebrations take place when a house is completed, on the day when the roof leaves are cut straight, or when a canoe or a fish basket has been finished. When a chief's daughter is expecting her first child, in the fifth month of her pregnancy a celebration is organized, and in some families also during a second pregnancy. The onset of puberty of a chief's daughter is also celebrated with organized festivities, just like when a taboo has been lifted for coconut trees. This is because after a period of severe drought, a taboo of five to six months is imposed over using coconut trees until they have sufficiently recovered. Thirty years ago, the island was struck by a very long dry spell, with starvation as a result, since there was also a lack of fish at that time. The only food that was available were roots, and people died in large numbers. Every now and then the island was also hit by tidal waves that washed over the fertile lowlands.

Nauruan people count by lunar months. The time of the reappearance of the Great Bear constellation in the same location is counted as one year. If days need to be counted, e. g. the 15 days during which a woman who has recently given birth is kept locked up, then knots are tied in a cord.

Those stars which are most observed by the islanders are: the Seven Sisters/the Pleiades (*ejuwit*), Orion (*aramanamada*), the morning star/Venus (*men'ewak*), the evening star/Venus (*ediparanbia*) and Sirius (*tangineparowa*).

Nauruan people have outstanding counting skills. They practice with games using shells, where they are finally able to estimate 100 shells at a single glance. Women in particular are very skilled in doing this. Shells are used as a tool for calculating large amounts.

The islanders have the following view on how Nauru was populated: in the distant past, before the Gilbert Islands people landed on the island, the people of Nauru had a great god, who according to their beliefs had created and populated the island. This god had a number of secondary gods, out of whom the most influential was Ligi (the butterfly). When Nauru was created, all the secondary gods helped out. In the beginning the clouds and the sky were a dense mass and they lay upon the ground. Then the great god commanded Ligi to fly in between and to separate the sky and the earth by lifting his wings. Thereafter the great god created two beings to bring life into his world, a man and a woman, who, after having begotten many children, were turned into stones. Their progeny married amongst themselves, but after some time they became very wicked and did not follow the words of the god; then, to punish them, he spoiled all the fruit of the coconut trees, which was a very big punishment indeed; because these trees were their main source of food. He also made the flesh of the shark inedible. A little while later a man died, who appeared to have had some connection to the spirits; because a coconut palm grew out of his grave. And because the tree had grown out of a skull, this is why all nuts have two eyes and a nose, and they are round like a head. The two stones into which the two ancestors of the islanders were transformed can still be seen today.

Foreword: Father Alois Kayser MSC, His Life and Work on Nauru

Hilary Howes*

The following work is an English translation of a German-language article by Father Alois Kayser MSC (1877–1944),¹ a Catholic missionary who

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¹ The abbreviation MSC comes from the Latin name for Kayser's missionary congregation, *Missionarii Sacratissimi Cordis*, Missionaries of the (Most) Sacred Heart (of Jesus).