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Flinn/Mary, the Devil, and Taro

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Hauling around huge stalks of taro inside a Catholic church, thrusting the plants back and forth in the air outside after the service, taunting fellow women with songs and chants, competing to see who has cultivated the largest taro corm—none of this sounds like any Feast of the Immaculate Conception experienced by American Catholics, or probably Catholics elsewhere for that matter. Nonetheless, these activities are associated with celebrations honoring Mary, the mother of Jesus, on Pollap, an atoll in the Caroline Islands of Micronesia in the western Pacific. Furthermore, those celebrations revolve around a unique image of Mary. A respectful and even humble Mary is part of this image, and an aspect that will be familiar to outsiders, but what is unfamiliar and almost startling is an image of Mary that supports a notion of motherhood rooted in being the family breadwinner, a mother who supports her family by producing the essential staple foods and by gathering octopus and other marine resources. This is how Pollapese have conceived of Mary. This is a locally interpreted and imagined Mary, even though she arrived on the scene as an import from the West. Clearly the hierarchical, male leaders of the Catholic Church, even when they are local people, and traditional dogma, even when presented by local people, are not the sole determinants of how a religion is actually lived and interpreted in everyday life, whether in the West or elsewhere around the world where people have converted to Catholicism.

Even Western conceptions of Mary, not to mention those that have emerged in other parts of the world, arose from popular beliefs and practices, deriving at least in part from earlier goddess worship (see, for example, Anderson and Zinsser 1988). Patriarchal Christianity has made some room for female elements, which at times even verge on divinity, and Mary, the mother of Jesus, has been the most prevalent and venerated of the female figures. Religion as lived and practiced in everyday life could not be confined solely to male imagery, nor could divinity completely exclude women. So the very emergence of Mary as a significant figure in Christianity has had its origins in popular practice. This is
not to say that the female elements have not been exploited in attempts to keep women submissive to men or in line with culturally defined female roles, but it is everyday practice that has popularized Mary and ensured that she holds at least a certain measure of influence.

Sered (1991) analyzes Mary as a saintly figure in the context of a discussion of how Judaism, Islam, and Christianity—all patriarchal and male-dominated world religions—nonetheless each includes female figures, the most prominent being Rachel in Judaism, Fatima in Islam, and Mary in Christianity. These cultic personalities have served as intermediaries between the male gods and mortal women, available to assist with everyday concerns about children, husbands, and parents. There are Catholic women in the United States today who point to imagery and rituals associated with Mary as evidence of value placed on women, though largely in their capacity as mothers (Spencer-Arseaulnt 2000).

Mary’s image in the Western tradition has nonetheless encouraged a submissive role for women consistent with the androcentric bent of Christianity and the other major world religions. This tradition is related to Western notions of female chastity as a measure of purity and a defense against evil (Drury 1994; Ruether 1977; Warner 1976). From the perspective of patriarchy, Mary embodies the ultimate in ideal womanhood in the Western tradition, as she harbors purity, virginity, humility, obedience, softness, passivity, acquiescence, while at the same time being a mother who bore and raised a child. This standard, especially the combination of virginity and motherhood, is one that no mere mortal woman can achieve, leaving any woman other than Mary less than ideal, as impure and weak, and thus bound to fail to live up to what a woman should personify. Even when the motherhood of Mary is glorified, submission to a husband and self-abnegation in the face of the needs of both children and husband are expectations associated with the role of mother. Mary kneels before her child, and she obeys Joseph, submits to the wishes of others, and in effect provides a model of humble domesticity for women.

Mixed with such notions of humility and domesticity, however, are some aspects of Mary that symbolize strength. In the popular tradition in the West, Mary historically served in many respects as an earth mother, providing for her children, able to promote good harvests and healthy herds, and willing to listen to requests for assistance (Ruether 1977:59). Mary has also been called Star of the Sea, able to guide and protect sailors in treacherous waters. At times she has also been seen as the Woman of Valor, even as a militant figure capable of leading men in battle and defeating enemies (Pelikan 1996:91; Perry and Achevarria 1988:17). Evidence cited to support such claims is drawn from Genesis, where God tells the serpent commonly interpreted as Satan, “She shall crush
thy head, and thou shalt lie in wait for her heel” (Genesis 3:15), a passage in which “she” has been interpreted as referring to Mary. This particular passage, in fact, is central to the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, and the image of Mary trampling on the head of Satan is a powerful one; this feast and this image are fundamental to Pollapese understandings of Mary.

Such strong imagery does not negate the male-dominated aspects of Catholicism inherent in its dogma and structure, nor the meek and submissive characteristics attributed to Mary; but it is nonetheless apparent that Mary has also been interpreted as a source of influence, with the ability to affect worldly affairs. Her image has been amenable to multiple understandings and has exerted appeal across a wide array of cultures, with notions of Mary shifting and changing according to popular perception (e.g., Pelikan 1996; Perry and Achevarría 1988). Authorized dogma, official texts, and designated leadership comprise only one aspect of a religion, and are certainly not the sole forces shaping local belief and practice. With regard to female imagery, women do not inevitably simply take on the roles dictated by church teachings. Certainly, teachings propagated by church officials have an influence, but it is also critical to attend to how women interpret those teachings, how they incorporate them—or not—into their daily activities, how they experience and even actively shape a version of Catholicism from which they can draw meaning and value. Women should not be seen as mere passive recipients of dogma and imagery, but as active agents interacting with and interpreting what they receive in the context of local cultural beliefs and practices. To cite an example related to the Pollap case, understanding Mary as a mother always transpires in a framework of indigenous constructions of what it means to be a mother.

Local cultural beliefs are neither abandoned nor blended syncretically with beliefs brought in by missionaries. Watanabe (1990) convincingly demonstrates how local versions of Catholicism may be actively constructed in a process that involves carefully mingling certain indigenous beliefs and practices with imported notions and symbols, and serving local purposes. Local renderings of Catholicism may well communicate messages about local identity and community rather than devotion to Vatican theology. Furthermore, imported saints, sacred figures, and rituals may become so indigenized that they are perceived of and treated as part of the local heritage (e.g., Barker 1990; Fienup-Riordan 1990:94–122; Harrington 1988). Meaning is locally constructed and asserted for local purposes, regardless of the original source of symbols, beliefs, and practices. Religion as practiced is about local, regional, or national identity rather than commitment to particular dogma, institutions, and hierarchy. Furthermore, since in recent years the Catholic Church has been more accepting of cultural diversity, adaptation to local circumstances, and incorporation of
indigenous elements (Montero 2000), one result has been that local definitions
and practices of Catholicism—within certain constraints—can more readily
flourish.

The impact of missionaries has certainly varied in different times and
places, and also with denomination. Some groups have insisted on more wide-
ranging cultural changes than have others, and, depending on local and his-
torical contexts, responses to missionaries, understandings of Christianity,
construction of symbols, assertions of local Christian belief and practice, and
in general the impact of what was originally a foreign religion have varied. In
many parts of the Pacific, for example, Christianity played a role in moving
women away from food production because such work was deemed by the mis-
sionaries as unsuitable for women, at the same time moving women into a more
narrowly defined domain of the home. Being a woman became more focused
on bearing children, caring for them in the home, and behaving as an obedient
wife (Grimshaw 1989 provides an excellent example). Christian missionaries
throughout the area actively and consciously attempted to change key aspects
of the cultures they encountered, although the details varied with denomina-
tion and era; a key focus of change was commonly centered on family, with
dramatic consequences for the position of women (Jolly and Macintyre 1989).
Although certainly not the only agents of change, missionaries did play central
roles, partly because they deliberately promoted and encouraged change, and
their efforts were directed not just at religious beliefs but at kinship, marriage,
and household relationships. Targets of missionary zeal included extended
families sharing common sleeping space, emphasis on strong lineage and other
blood ties over conjugal ones, frequent adoption, celebrations of female sexual-
ity, and female influence over men. To bring about what they considered a more
appropriate way of life, missionaries stressed the nuclear family, submission of
women to the authority of their husbands, the dominance of conjugal ties over
ties with family of orientation, assumption of Western-style housewife and
mother roles rather than active food-producing roles, and restrained sexuality.

Even in areas where missionaries have made considerable inroads and
effected change in women's lives and family dynamics, women today in a num-
ber of instances nevertheless exploit various Christian beliefs and structures
to influence their own lives, their family situations, and their communities. A
group of Micronesian women, for example, working through church groups,
successfully lobbied to legally ban the selling and drinking of alcohol in order
to reduce the incidence of violence against women (Marshall and Marshall
church groups that foster mutual support among participants and provide
women access to relationships that reach beyond individual kin networks, and
consequently more of a voice and influence in matters of concern to women.
Many American Catholic women successfully negotiate contradictions between feminism and Catholicism, along with tensions between the pursuit of individual goals consistent with American cultural values and feminism, on the one hand, and obligations toward children and family fostered by Catholicism, on the other (Ecklund 2003). But other, especially non-Western cultural groups eschew the individualism characteristic of American culture. Studies such as those noted above reveal Pacific women who tend to negotiate definitions of Catholicism and other Christian faiths collectively rather than individually, and they maneuver in cultural contexts in which individual well-being is closely tied to family and kin well-being. These women thus tend to use dogma and church structures in concert with other women and in ways that further goals benefiting not just themselves but their kin.

This book analyzes a community in which women operate within a vernacular Catholicism and imagery of Mary that support opportunities for women to influence opinion and events, and emphasize the value of women as mothers. Despite attempts that missionaries may have made to define appropriate female roles, including what it means to be a mother, local notions of motherhood filter and shape the impact of the Catholic message. On Pollap, women experience and perceive motherhood not so much as a biological process, with a focus largely on bearing children and then remaining in the home to care for them, but rather as a cultural process that encompasses the production and distribution of key resources. Furthermore, local belief posits power in speech and its ability to define and shape appropriate behavior, and this is a belief that women exploit to their advantage in various opportunities made available through the local church structure for them to speak to others beyond their local network of kin. Thus women play a role in defining appropriate behavior, articulating ideas, and influencing activities in the community. In this book I examine how Pollapese women define their own Catholicism, how they live it in practice, and how these definitions and practices affect their autonomy and their ability to shape their lives, support the well-being of their kin, and influence community events.

The Setting

Pollap, part of the Caroline Islands chain, is one of the coral atolls in the western part of Chuuk State in the Federated States of Micronesia. The atoll’s lagoon is about twelve square miles in area, and three islets lie along the reef: Pollap in the north, Tamatam to the south, and uninhabited Fenarik on the western part of the reef. Pollap is the larger of the two inhabited islets, measuring about 0.262 square miles in area (Bryan 1971). Though small, this is typical of Cen-
entral Carolinian atoll islets and is certainly large enough for a lens of fresh water to sit in the ground above the salty seawater, which facilitates the growth of taro and other plants. A minimum of three acres is necessary for such a lens (Alkire 1978:11), and Pollap has more than enough with a total of about 168 acres. Furthermore, the Central Carolinian atolls generally receive considerable rainfall—over one hundred inches a year—which serves to maintain this lens (Alkire 1978:112). Islets at bends in the reef, of which Pollap is one, typically have natural swamps in their interior (Alkire 1978:27), and these areas are ideal for taro cultivation, especially with the addition of organic material.

The settlement area of Pollap lies at the southern end of the islet (see Map 1.1), close to the sheltered lagoon area, which is typical of the Central Carolines. The northern, ocean side is rockier and less protected from the winds. Although the islet is small, the reef, lagoon, and ocean provide abundant marine resources, and the swamppy interior of the island supports the growth of taro, a key staple of the diet. The taro that is prized for the December 8 Feast of the Immaculate Conception honoring Mary is *Colocasia esculenta*, known as *woot* to Pollapese, although *Cyrtosperma chamissonis* (commonly called swamp taro), known locally as *pwula*, is more abundant and easier to grow. Breadfruit, though seasonal, is another important staple, and Pollapese supplement taro and breadfruit with other local foods such as bananas, pandanus, dry-land taro, and arrowroot. When possible, people also buy rice as well as some canned meat and fish, and because of a drought in the spring of 1998, the islanders in subsequent months received several shipments of FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency) food from the United States, which included rice, flour, oil, juice, and canned fruit and vegetables.

Pollap may appear to be isolated from the rest of the world, a tiny speck out in the ocean, with only one inhabited islet visible on the horizon, but the seas connect rather than separate it from other Carolinian islands, and Pollap has a tradition of maintaining social and economic ties with other islands and a history of contacts with a variety of foreign administrations. Until about the middle of the nineteenth century, it was associated, though as a low-ranking member, with the Yapese Empire linking Carolinian islands in a system of tribute and trade, and thus promoting social and economic ties useful for acquiring goods in normal times and providing assistance in the wake of disasters, especially tropical storms (Alkire 1965; Lessa 1950, 1966). More localized systems persisted once the larger empire dissolved. Pollap was part of one that was centered on the neighboring island of Polowat (Damm and Sarfert 1935; Flinn 1992:24).

Pollap has also experienced a series of foreign administrations. Initial European contact was actually quite early, in 1565 (Anonymous 1887:20–25), though that particular visit did not have a long-term impact. It was over two
Map1.1 Map of Pollap. Courtesy of Edward Hale
hundred years before another recorded European contact. Despite the early Spanish visit, Pollap remained largely on the periphery of contact with foreign administrations. Spain nominally held control of the area until late in the nineteenth century; Germany subsequently controlled the islands until the outbreak of the Second World War, when Japan took possession. With Japan’s defeat, the United States administered the area, first through the military and later through the Department of the Interior. In 1947 the United Nations designated the United States to be responsible for the Caroline Islands, together with the Marshall Islands and the Northern Marianas, as the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands. In 1979, Chuuk, the district that includes Pollap, along with Yap, Kosrae, and Pohnpei, ratified a constitution for the Federated States of Micronesia, while Belau in the western Carolines, the Marshall Islands, and the Northern Marianas elected to negotiate separate political statuses. The Federated States of Micronesia signed a Compact of Free Association with the United States that went into effect in 1986 and in 2004 was renewed with amendments.

Although peripheral to areas of major change and situated far from an administrative port town, Pollap has nonetheless never been isolated. In addition to regular voyages to other islands, Pollapese experienced and reacted to the presence of the series of foreigners in Micronesia. They killed two Spaniards in 1565 (Anonymous 1887:20–25), though what provoked the attack remains unclear. The islanders traded for items such as axes, knives, and nails when foreign ships arrived at the atoll, but trading networks also provided access to similar goods. Pollapese tradition asserts that a foreign ship, purportedly German, left with several Pollapese men on board. Some Germans attempted to purchase land on the atoll in the hope of developing commercial coconut plantations; even in the face of force, however, Pollapese refused. Pollapese stories tell of Germans returning to punish the refusal by hauling some men off to prison. Men were also taken as laborers to work elsewhere during both the German and subsequent Japanese era. In addition, the Germans put a stop to interisland warfare—though not to hostile attitudes—and in December 1909 they conducted ethnographic research throughout the area, including Pollap (Krämer 1935).

Pollapese men during the Japanese era were conveyed to various areas of Micronesia for work, including Angaur, though many lived in Chuuk Lagoon, an administrative center, and some had family members join them. A few boys attended a Japanese school in Chuuk as well. Pollapese tell of resisting at least some of the Japanese attempts to recruit laborers, and the island’s chief at the time was seriously beaten and left crippled in the wake of his resistance. Japanese soldiers on Polowat Atoll, south of Pollap, insisted on being provided with food.
Early in the U.S. administration, a couple of young men were recruited from Pollap to travel to the port town in Chuuk Lagoon to receive training and then return home; one was trained as a teacher and the other as a health aide. An elementary school for all local children soon opened on the island, but secondary education, in the administration center, remained highly selective. With an emphasis in the mid-1960s on education as an impetus for development, however, all young people were encouraged to finish secondary schooling, which for Pollapese took place off-island, and some even pursued higher education in the United States. The resultant “education explosion” (Hezel 1978a) also fueled changes in migration from Pollap, with more young people leaving the island for school, more interest in employment in the port town and elsewhere, more islanders residing long-term elsewhere in Micronesia and in the United States, and access to new resources and alternative routes to prestige and influence. Thus a place as seemingly isolated and peripheral as Pollap, where daily life still largely focuses on fishing and gardening, nonetheless interacts with the outside world and external forces of change.

The settlement area of Pollap is divided into three villages, with the central area accommodating buildings common to the whole community, and these structures include the church, elementary school, municipal office, and meetinghouse. No obvious boundaries separate the villages, though everyone knows which homesites are associated with which villages. The houses group into villages roughly according to whether they are situated in the west, south, or east part of the islet. Physical residence is not the sole criterion for village residence, however; some women reside in one village but affiliate with and behave as members of another. This happens because, from time to time, members of all or part of a household move to another plot of land situated in another village but the women can nonetheless choose to affiliate with the new village or remain with their original one. Women demonstrate their village membership through participating in village meetings and rehearsals, preparing food when villages are responsible for contributions to a feast or visitors, and assisting with assigned village work. Thus in many respects village membership is demonstrated, not allocated, although one needs land rights to establish physical residence.

The population of Pollap has been growing over the years and may eventually put a strain on the island resources, but migration off the island has so far prevented this from becoming a problem. Whereas in 1980 a total of 476 people were either born on Pollap or were spouses or children of someone born on Pollap, by 1998 that number had grown to 950. Of that 950, only about 51% normally resided on the island, with about 27% in Chuuk Lagoon, 6% in Guam, 5% in the United States, 3% each on the neighboring islet of Tamatam and at the junior high school on Polowat, 2% on Saipan, and the remaining 3%
elsewhere in Micronesia. In Chuuk Lagoon lives a sizeable migrant community, known by the Pollapese as PCI (Pollap Community, Iras); it includes a number of people who hold jobs in the port town as well as young people attending high school or the local community college. Many of the Pollapese residing in Guam, Saipan, and the United States originally traveled to those sites for higher education. Even though some failed to finish their schooling for a variety of reasons, they chose to remain and seek local employment.

Although clearly many Pollapese work for wages or salaries off the island, much of daily life on Pollap itself still revolves around subsistence horticulture and fishing. Imported rice now supplements taro and breadfruit as staples, but women continue to work regularly in the taro gardens and men routinely fish. All families have relatives with monetary incomes who can be called upon to provide funds for rice as well as for building supplies, fabric, lanterns, and other imported items, but on the atoll itself, there are few ways of earning money and even fewer full-time jobs. Some people make a little money from selling kerosene, gasoline, and other goods in small stores, and occasionally islanders are able to sell copra. A ship arrived for copra only once while I was there, however, and bought it for a mere nineteen cents a kilo. One family managed to produce enough copra to sell fourteen bags and earn US$277, while others sold only a few bags and thus earned much less. In other words, selling copra usually brings in only enough money to buy a few goods such as soap, batteries, cigarettes, and little else. Occasionally a person can sell a pig for a feast, such as when church monies are available for a religious holiday, and perhaps earn US$150. In addition, a couple of times during the year islanders may have opportunities to be paid by visitors for dancing. This happened three times while I was there in 1998–1999, with the community receiving between one thousand and three thousand dollars each time in the form of money or goods such as medicine (though in one case, the fee also included permission for the visitors to dive in local waters). Usually a portion of the fee was held back by island leaders for a community purpose, such as the dedication of a new building, and the remainder of the money was divided among the participants. This resulted in about three to eight dollars a person, enough only to buy relatively inexpensive goods such as combs, soap, cigarettes, sugar, or coffee.

Another chance to earn small amounts of cash comes when those with access to money hire others to clear out a gardening area or otherwise help with work. In this situation, a group of workers is likely to earn about ten dollars, a sum they share, and they can also expect to receive coffee, food, and sometimes a few cigarettes. What islanders called a “women’s café” operated during part of the year, where women sold doughnuts (bread fried in the shape of doughnuts) about three days a week for ten cents apiece, purchasing the ingredients from the proceeds of their sales. While islanders were construct-
ing their new gym/meeting house, they earned about fifty cents an hour for a couple of weeks, with women hauling rocks and sand, and men mixing and pouring concrete. Teachers at the elementary school on the island and a health aide are the only ones regularly resident on the island with full-time, steady incomes, yet even these income earners continue to subsistence garden and fish, though perhaps not as much as others in their families.

Compared with eighteen years earlier on Pollap, there appeared to be more need for and interest in earning money to purchase Western goods, and more dependence on these goods. For example, by 1998 the island had acquired a generator to operate the church lights and a community refrigerator for storing fish. In addition, a number of people had acquired their own generators, which they used for running TV/VCRs to occasionally show videos outdoors in the evening. A number of islanders had purchased motorboats for fishing and interisland transport, all of which obviously demand fuel acquired from outside. Many of the homes had sheets of linoleum on the floor instead of woven mats. Wheelbarrows were absent in 1980 but common in 1998. Children were wearing clothing at a younger age, and in general people wore more Western-style clothing than before. In particular, many women had started wearing shirts in addition to wraparound skirts much of the time, and most also had a pair of pants they wore in the taro gardens.

The sailing canoes that had seemed so central to the Pollapese way of life and sense of identity in 1980 had practically disappeared. A single one remained, but the only time I saw it used was in connection with tourism. In the same vein, most of the dancing I observed during my return visit was also connected with tourism. With regard to much of their material culture, Pollapese take quite a pragmatic view rather than routinely favoring either traditional, older forms or newer, imported ones. For example, most homesites have “modern” as well as “traditional” structures. Most of the “modern” ones are concrete houses, providing shelter in the event of storms. Some even consist of two stories, the upstairs sections of which are typically the domain of young men. These houses are hot and stifling, however, as the sun beats down on the metal roofs, and the concrete walls block any breezes, whereas thatch houses are much cooler. These thatch structures tend to lie close to the shore where they can catch the breeze, whereas the concrete and wooden ones are a bit inland where they can provide more shelter from storms. For a while these “modern” houses were apparently quite popular on the island since they are sturdier, require less upkeep, and provide more protection, but people soon discovered how sweltering they become in the heat of the day. Thus most people have chosen to maintain both a sturdy structure built somewhat inland and a thatch one closer to the shore. Families with the money to buy and maintain motorboats (and keep them supplied with gas and oil) are also likely to have
one or two small paddling canoes as well, mainly for when they run out of gas or the motor breaks down. While Pollapese embrace many of the benefits of outside practices, at the same time they appreciate the advantages of their own ways—such as living in thatch houses to stay cool and using canoes for fishing without the need for fuel. They continue to take a similar pragmatic attitude toward health, embracing both Western and indigenous ways. For example, they welcomed a health workshop about Western-style family planning, exercise, and sanitation as well as one about local massage. They accept the medicines and expertise of those with biomedical training, as they do those with traditional expertise about massage, therapeutic techniques, and locally available traditional medicines.

In addition to—or perhaps associated with—increased access to money, jobs, goods, and the outside world are some social problems that Pollapese used to believe were confined to the port town but are now looming larger on the island. One such problem is young men sometimes fighting when they drink, which had not been the case eighteen years earlier, though it existed elsewhere in Chuuk (Marshall 1979). Pollapese used to feel somewhat insulated from such problems and perceived them as events happening to other people but not to them. Like many U.S. parents, they blame part of the problem on all the TV videos children are being shown on the island through the use of the imported machinery. Adults also recognize problems that arise from sending their young people faraway from home—especially to places like the United States—unsupervised by mature Pollapese. This is one reason parents and elders in recent years have tended to restrict the colleges their students can attend to more local ones in Micronesia itself.

Although many in Micronesia have become disenchanted with the promise of education (Hezel 2001), Pollapese parents nonetheless still equate it with access to jobs and the ability to bring money into the family to pay for these new items. In fact, an additional concern about showing videos was that they keep children up late in the evening so that they are tired and inattentive the next day in school. Education now begins on the island with a Head Start program, and students then pursue eight years of elementary education at the local school. Almost all elementary school graduates, along with other students from the Western Islands (an area known locally as Pātiw), then proceed to nearby Polowat for two years of junior high school. Pollapese elementary school graduates used to attend Weipat Junior High School on Onoun in the Namonuito Atoll, together with students from Namonuito, the Hall Islands, and the Westerns, but several years ago, some Western Island leaders organized their own local school, PJ (Polowat Junior High School), closer to home and to their own kin and customs. Attending PJ also enables the students to return home more often and more readily, especially during the Christmas break.
some young people drop out of junior high school, many manage to continue on to high school on Weno in Chuuk Lagoon, where there are now several private options in addition to the public high school. Although in the 1970s it was popular for high school graduates to attend college in the United States, local college options have become more common in recent years. Parents are increasingly hesitant to allow their young people to leave for the United States, in part because too many have not returned. Thus in recent years a number of islanders have attended the University of Guam or community colleges in Chuuk, Pohnpei, Saipan, Belau, or Guam.

Although Pollapese remain proud of many of their older practices, especially those connected with respect shown to senior siblings, they feel more ambivalence about ééreni ‘tradition’ compared with earlier years. Since 1980, when I first arrived on Pollap, many more islanders had gone to school or work off Pollap and even outside Chuuk on Guam, Saipan, Hawaii, and the mainland United States, and more outsiders, including a Japanese anthropologist and a number of female Peace Corps volunteers, had visited or lived on Pollap. In 1998 and 1999, I noticed there was more concern about the possibility that outsiders might look down on them and perceive Pollapese perhaps as “primitive” and “dirty.” There was a self-consciousness verging on embarrassment about the nudity of children, and younger women seemed particularly inclined to wear a shirt or blouse instead of just the wraparound skirt they had worn in the past. When preparing for photographs in 1998, for example, parents dressed their otherwise unclothed young children, often with comments such as “What will Americans think of you if you have no clothes on!” Younger men tended to tie their loincloths to cover their buttocks, inciting some of the community leaders to complain that from the back they could no longer tell the women from the men.

Island leaders are seeking more outside assistance. For example, community leaders successfully sought money and expertise for the installation of a desalinization pump on the island to prevent problems in the event of another drought and for the construction of a new building to serve as a gym and meeting hall. Islanders were particularly proud of their new gym, the first of its kind in the area, which will presumably bring them status in the eyes of others. It was something they believed would advance iten Pwollap, or the ‘name’—reputation—of Pollap. Thus, instead of being considered primitive, they strive to be perceived as actually ahead of their neighbors in what they view as improvements to their community, while at the same time they manage to continue practicing many valued traditions. Islanders in 1998 were generally much more aware of outsiders, other possibilities, and potentially negative attitudes about what they locally construed as ‘tradition.’

Ambivalent or not, the Pollapese nonetheless retain considerable interest
and pride in their heritage, and tradition is seen as guiding much of their lives in a very positive fashion. They cling with fierce pride to customs of deference to senior kin; to knowledge of navigation, fishing, gardening, medicine, history, dancing, weaving, and other skills; to values of generosity, patience, and modesty; and to commitment to kin and community rather than personal self-development. In several respects, there has even been revival of some abandoned customs. Just before my arrival, a traditional ceremony for the initiation of navigators had been reconstructed and performed on the island, the place where the art of navigation is believed to have originated. And parents are beginning to select traditional names again for their babies.

Another force that Pollapese understand as guiding their lives—and one that is not supposed to conflict with tradition—is the Catholic Church. Church-related activities are woven into the fabric of both ritual and everyday life on the island, and Pollapese are immensely proud of their Catholicism (Flinn 1990a). They were converted through the influence of a catechist from the Mortlocks, a group of islands southeast of Chuuk Lagoon; this happened in the late 1940s, which was later than for much of the rest of Micronesia. Established in 1948, the church on Pollap was first named St. Michael, had its named changed in 1957 to Sacred Heart, and was rebuilt again in 1985, retaining the Sacred Heart name. Today Pollapese are committed Catholics and see their religion as one of the forces governing and shaping their lives. Although the realm of chiefly authority persists, it has been supplanted in some contexts by the introduced religion in a process similar to that described by Comaroff and Comaroff (1986) in their analysis of the disjoining of politics and religion under missionary influence, with the chief’s domain of influence narrowing.

Pollapese accept both chiefly and Christian authority, and they are pleased that a Pollap woman has even become a nun and that another young man studied for the priesthood. In the same vein, no longer is a foreign missionary responsible for Pollap; in fact, the priest responsible for the parish is a native of neighboring Polowat, just a few miles to the south. Although there is no resident priest on Pollap itself, some of the local islanders have been trained to hold prayer services and distribute communion. Sacraments such as baptism, marriage, confession, and first communion must wait for a visit from the priest, but other church leaders are quite active in his absence. Prayer services are held every morning, recitation of prayers associated with the rosary every afternoon, and other island events are typically scheduled before or after one of these daily occurrences. In other words, these church events even structure the day. Catholic holidays are occasions for community feasts, the four major ones being Easter, Christmas, New Year’s, and the Feast of the Immaculate Conception—this last more commonly referred to as “December 8.” Six major church organizations and a youth group keep islanders busy planning events, visiting
the sick and elderly, and studying the Bible. However, Pollapese Catholicism is not all form or superficial. Central to a Pollapese system of meaning are commitments to generosity, caring for those less fortunate, respect for rank—in effect a wedding of indigenous and Catholic values. Pollapese view Catholicism as a force that has allowed them to nurture their good qualities and to resist those that have come to be defined as less desirable (Flinn 1990a). In other words, Catholicism has come to be an integral part of Pollapese identity, not an alien intrusion, despite its origin.

According to Pollapese, the Mortlockese man responsible for converting them to Catholicism is also the one credited with promoting the celebrations of December 8, which, according to older women on the island, began in the early 1950s. In consultation with new church leaders at the time, the decision was made to celebrate the holiday with food offerings. Though perhaps not explicitly taken into account, this practice paralleled earlier indigenous rituals that involved food offerings to spirits. Men, for example, regularly contributed the best of a catch of fish as an offering. On a larger scale, however, a type of fair was held during which people brought an offering of food to a meetinghouse, where coconuts, taro, and fish—the bigger the better—were offered to spirits. For the occasion, people presented the very best of their harvest, especially taro. One or two leaders would then be responsible for calling out the names of the spirits for whom the food was designated. Taro offerings for the Feast of the Immaculate Conception in honor of Mary thus dovetailed with these older ceremonies.

The December 8 events became an open contest or competition to determine who had grown the largest taro, with a focus, however, on honoring the day celebrating Mary, demonstrating women’s best work, and contemplating one’s spiritual life. The details have varied over the years, some celebrations having a more explicit contest, sometimes even with an awarded prize, and others a more muted competition. In fact, the theme of competition used to be much more evident than it is today, with its clear attempt to determine by measuring who had provided the largest taro corm.

I was also told that the celebration had been scaled back for a while a few years ago because of concerns over the heavy work demanded of the women in cultivating and preparing the taro, the large amount of food involved, and the unequal ability among islanders to make the monetary offerings for the taro brought to the church. The celebrations were later resumed, though, in the wake of Typhoon Owen and its destruction of much of the island in 1990. Since Mary is believed to be able to protect the island from storms, many residents wanted to revive the more elaborate celebrations in her honor, thinking that perhaps the storm would not have come had they been honoring December 8 in the former grander style, and that perhaps they could prevent future
typhoons by reinstating the full tradition. Furthermore, women maintain that they actively wish to make an offering of both the taro and the hard work involved in growing it; they assert their exhaustion and their commitment as integral to their *yasor* ‘offering’ to Mary. Certainly the celebration I witnessed entailed considerable work and involved offerings of choice taro plants at the church as well as huge plates of cooked taro for the feast.

The Feast of the Immaculate Conception is one of four holidays during the year for which the parish council has monies to sponsor a major feast. In 1998 all six church groups had been expected to contribute US$200 each, making it possible to spend US$300 for each of the four feast days of Easter, Christmas, New Year’s, and December 8. (The money can cover paying for items such as pigs grown on the island and/or flour, sugar, coffee, and other imported items brought in from the port town.) In other words, this feast that is so clearly associated with women and with Mary is not relegated to a set of lesser holidays but occurs in a category along with Christmas, New Year’s, and Easter. No one claims explicitly that it has equal importance, but the fact that it holds such prominence culturally is evidence of a high value placed on Mary and what she represents, including an emphasis on the value of women and their work, especially in their roles as nurturers of children, land, and taro, all of which are key community resources.

**The Organization of the Book**

I first provide an overview of the Feast of the Immaculate Conception on Pollap and an introduction to the imagery of Mary for the islanders. I discuss how her image is largely that of a mother, not a biologized mother but a productive one, one largely of strength rather than meekness, and one that promotes women’s ongoing contribution to the production of key island resources.

Chapter 2 takes a closer look at the nature of women’s work on the island and the prominence of their productive activities. The work of women is constitutive of their identity as women; an individual demonstrates appropriate womanhood through appropriate productive and nurturing activities. In other words, womanhood is something one does rather than something one is. Women produce and tend key resources, especially staple foods and children, and these activities also define their motherhood. The key subsistence activity involves the production of taro, which carries not only practical nutritive value but strong symbolic significance as well. Thus Chapter 3 analyzes the various types of taro central to Pollap life, gardening practices associated with these major types, and symbolic uses associated with offerings of taro made in various cultural contexts. This life-giving resource produced by women has
strong cultural value in addition to being essential to community survival, and
the image of Mary continues to promote this role for women. The production
and distribution of taro communicate messages related to values of nurturance, generosity, commitment to kin, and respect for community well-being
and reputation.

The fourth chapter investigates the roles of women in various domains, or
institutions, perceived as governing Pollapese lives, and one of these domains
is Catholicism. As a result of both missionary influence and the introduction of
new political and economic institutions, especially on the part of Americans,
Pollapese perceive three realms of governance: traditional chieftainship, the
representative political system promoted by the United States, and the Catholic
Church. They speak of tradition as governing certain aspects of community
life, and the chief and clan elders play the public roles in defining guidelines
for behavior. Women can negotiate influence in this arena with some indirect
tactics at their disposal. The American-introduced system of government is
a second domain, and although women vote, they do not hold and are not
expected to hold, public positions. Ironically, however, it is in the domain of the
introduced religion—androcentric and patriarchal Catholicism—that women
have the most opportunities for public influence. In the midst of messages that
keep women in bad marriages and focus on conjugal relationships and nuclear
families rather than extended family ties, the area of religion nonetheless also
provides women with opportunities outside the domain of tradition and the
introduced government to shape and influence community life.

Next follows a closer look at the activities of women associated with the
church and the role of these activities and the church in everyday life during
the course of the year. Included is an examination of issues raised at a church-
sponsored workshop on roles of women at which islanders had an opportunity
to articulate their views about women’s responsibilities. Following this discus-
sion of church activities is a chapter devoted to the imagery of Mary herself and
connections with Pollapese notions of motherhood. The concluding chapter
then takes a look at the implications of this imagery of Mary and Pollapese
notions of motherhood for women’s ongoing productive roles, especially in
comparison with Western notions and with contexts in which women have
been pulled or kept out of production. Pollapese notions of Mary in many
respects dovetail with proposals advanced by some feminist theologians regard-
ing ways to improve women’s status in Christianity.