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## **UNDER HEAVEN'S BROW: PRE-CHRISTIAN RELIGIOUS TRADITION IN CHUUK**

by  
Ward H. Goodenough

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## THIRTEEN

# Divination: Rituals of Responsibility

RESORT TO 'EFFECTING SPIRITS' was not the only way people sought help for diagnosing of illness and making decisions as to when to fish, plant, or go to war. People used other methods of divination frequently in the conduct of their affairs. Some methods had a limited use, but there seems to have been no concern or activity to which divination of some kind could not be applied.

The most elaborate method was called *pwee* and was done by counting knots made on young coconut leaflets. Another method, called *chiipw*, involved bending a coconut leaflet's midrib back and forth across one's palm. There was also divination by spell recitation (*neeyénú*) and by fishing for lizards (*atéémén*). There were, moreover, a variety of signs that foretold events.

### PWEE: NUMBER OR KNOT DIVINATION

Number divination (*pwee*)<sup>1</sup> was the most prestigious method of looking at the future and was regularly resorted to for important decisions. According to one of its practitioners (Efot 1947), people used *pwee* to determine such things as the cause of illness and what medicine would be helpful; what would be the weather for ocean travel; one's luck in fishing; the outcome of a trip to another island in search of goods and food; the disposition of one's sweetheart; one's chance of survival in battle; the outcome of a battle; how one's garden would grow; the outcome of one's adzework; the auspiciousness of a marriage; the time for a chief to open the breadfruit season; the identity of a thief or adulterer; and the duration of a state of affairs. Bollig (1927:65) observed similarly that "without *pwee* nothing was done, no fishing, no housebuilding, no travel, no medicine."

Number divination was known through the Caroline Islands from Chuuk and the Mortlock Islands to Yap.<sup>2</sup> Knowledge of how to do it was forbidden to women; only a man could be a *sowupwe* ['master of *pwee*']. According to Efot of Romónum, himself a *sowupwe*, knowledge of number divination began in Lamotrek. From there it went to Ifaluk, and thence to Yap. It was brought to Chuuk by people from Yap. The clan named Pwee or Mwáánnipwe is supposed to have originated it in Chuuk and therefore presumably to have come from Yap.<sup>3</sup>

There were two fundamentally different systems of *pwee*. The more elaborate one, to be described below, counted by fours and used four coconut leaflets with knots in them and 256 possible number combinations. It was known as the 'full' or 'whole *pwee*' (*pweewunus*). There were several different versions of it or schools of practice, all of which shared basic features but differed in how they elaborated them. Another, simpler method, called the 'single *pwee*' (*pweeyeew*) or '*pwee* of the top' or 'east' (*pweeniyas*), used only one leaflet, and counted by fives to get a number from one to five. For this kind of divination on Puluwat, the odd numbers one, three, and five were bad signs, whereas the even numbers two and four were good (Damm and Sarfert 1935:213). I infer that this was the case in Chuuk, as well.

The *pweewunus* or 'full *pwee*' was based on the random selection of four numbers, each being any number from one through four. These numbers were paired in order of selection, the permutations of each pair producing sixteen possible combinations. One and four was a different combination, for example, from four and one. Each of these sixteen possibilities had a name (Table 7). The two sets of pairs, each with its sixteen possibilities, were then taken together in all their permutations to produce 256 combinations, each with its own name or keyword and its own significance.<sup>4</sup> The sixteen basic combinations were incorporated into the legend of origin, and the legend in turn provided a format for instruction.<sup>5</sup>

In the origin legend reported by Girschner (1912, translated by Lessa, 1959:189-191), the patron spirit of number divination was a sky god named *Supwunumén*.<sup>6</sup> He bore the 'faces (representations) of *pwee*' (*mesenipwe*)<sup>7</sup> on his body. He took them off his person, placed them on the ground, and they grew into beings of human form. There were sixteen of them. He told them to build a canoe, which they made in two days without a keel. They then descended from the sky in the canoe to begin their teaching travels. Each of the sixteen 'faces of *pwee*' represented one of the permutations of the numbers one through four and gave its name to it. Each had its place in the celestial canoe. This canoe with the places for its crew was the image used in teaching knot divination.

Table 7. Names of the combinations of numbers shown in Figure 6.

Position	Combination	Trukese name	Woleaian name <sup>*</sup>	Possible Gloss
1.	1-4	Pwukunumwár	Bugolimare	'Garland Knot'
2.	1-2	Sowuppis	Sawuppesi	'Master of Floating'
3.	2-4	Inemmeyin	Ilemmayile	
4.	1-3	Nipwpwun	Libbulo	'Flarer'
5.	2-3	Móómwu	Magoomwéwú	'Broken Joint' (?)
6.	3-4	Nichéénúwén	Lishéélhwélu	'Bush Leaf'
7.	4-4	Sewiiya	Sawiiyage	
8.	4-3	Pwiinges or Pweyinek	Beyingegi	
9.	3-2	Meséwúk	Meséwúgú	
10.	3-1	Nengeperen	Langeperale	
11.	4-2	Ineféw	Ilefaawuwe	'Four . . .'
12.	2-1	Inepwey	Ilebayi	'Untie . . .'
13.	4-1	Innifár	Innifare	
14.	1-1	Tinifes	Tilifegi	'Inserted'
15.	3-3	Towunap	Tegawulape	
16.	2-2	Inóóman	Ilagoomale	
17.	1	Supwunumén		'Wind Grabbing'

<sup>\*</sup>An additional spirit of divination named *Bugori* is given for Woleai (Sohn and Tawerilmang 1976:12, 330). In Woleaian *bugori* is a name for certain grasses or sedges, as is its Trukese cognate *pwuker*; but no spirit of this name is recorded from Chuuk.

There were two major schools of *pweewunus*. One held the celestial vessel to have been a sailing canoe *waa seres*, and the other held it to have been a paddle canoe *waa fétún* (Bollig 1927:66). The system Bollig describes and that was described to me by Efof (1947) involved the sailing canoe.

When giving instruction, a diviner used a routine he called the *kiiroch*, so named for the *Nerita polita* species of sea snail. He spread a sleeping mat out in the meeting house and placed the snail shells on it. If no *kiiroch* shells were available, he might use those of other species.<sup>6</sup> In the absence of any suitable shells, he might make the *kiiroch* pattern by punching holes in the sand with his fingers. The diviner laid the shells out on the mat according to a set pattern representing the position of each of the sixteen number combinations in the celestial canoe, shown in Figure 6 and listed in Table 7.<sup>9</sup> It was prohibited for women or children of either sex to be present during this routine. As reported by Bollig (1927:68), a *sowupwe* and his pupils were not allowed to eat the flesh of fruitbats and rats nor any fruit that had been gnawed by either of these animals. I was told by Efof, moreover, that unlike in other specialties, a

diviner's sons and sisters' sons were not eligible to receive instruction in the art without paying him a substantial tuition fee.

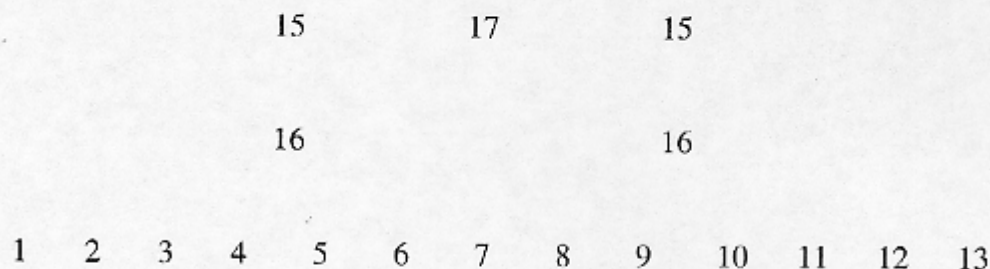
In divining, the *sowupwe* went to a coconut palm he had selected, grasped the trunk, and recited the following spell:

*li mwowuchowuch, ii mowuchowuchootiw, ii mwomwmworomworeetiw. Piyy, e-mwor; piyy, e-mwor; piyy, e-mworomworotiw.*<sup>10</sup> ('It shakes, it shakes down, it is dropping down. Behold it drops; behold, it drops; behold it is dropping down.')

He then climbed the tree and selected a young frond (*wupwut*) from the inner part of the growing end of the tree. It had to be from a young tree (*núúfé*) in accordance with the saying *awen wupwut awen semiriit* ('the mouth of an *wupwut* is the mouth of a child'), which means that it cannot lie. He then took the *wupwut* home to use in the actual divination.

When preparing to divine, the *sowupwe* took the *wupwut* and bent back its two bottom leaves. He did not use them but left them as offerings (*ósór*) to the patron spirit of *pwee*<sup>11</sup> He then stripped off a leaf next up from the bottom of the *wupwut*. He separated the two sides of the leaf from their normal folded together position and flattened the blade out. Beginning just above the base of the leaf and on the right side of its midrib, he then slit two strips with the thumbnail of his right hand from the right side of the leaf. He then did the same with his left thumbnail on the left side of the midrib. The result was that four strips, two on each side of the midrib and each about a quarter inch wide, now hung from the base of the leaf.<sup>12</sup>

The *sowupwe* took the first leaf strip he had slit, pulled it loose and, beginning at the base, made a series of overhand knots in the strip, somewhere between six and twelve. He did not count these knots as he made them, leaving their exact number to chance. He placed the first strip, so knotted, between the little and fourth finger of his left hand with its base toward his



palm. He held it there while he pulled off the second strip, knotted it, and placed it in like fashion between the fourth and third fingers of his left hand. He did the same with the third and fourth strips, placing the third between the third and second fingers and the fourth between the second finger and thumb of his left hand.

Taking the knotted strips in the same order, the *sowupwe* then counted the number of knots on each.<sup>13</sup> In each case he counted to four and then counted from one to four again, and so on. Whatever number the last knot represented over the previous four was the number to be used. This number was paired with the one obtained in the same way from the second strip to produce the first number combination, corresponding to one of the basic positions in the legendary canoe as represented by the shells in the *kiiroch* display. The third and fourth strips similarly produced a basic number combination. The pair of basic number combinations thus obtained represented one of the 256 such possible combinations. Some of them were favorable regardless of the subject matter of divination, others were similarly unfavorable, and some others could be either favorable or unfavorable depending on the subject matter (cf. Krämer 1932:338).<sup>14</sup>

Once the diviner had obtained a number combination and observed from its name and meaning whether it was auspicious (*pweeyééch*) or inauspicious (*pwengngaw*), he told his client of the outcome. The procedure was repeated with new leaves for as many times as considered necessary to cover the possibilities relating to the problem under consideration.

A divination procedure ended with an invocation and ritual meal (*ósó-pwun kiiroch*). No one except the diviner and his pupils could eat the food prepared for this meal. What was left over, along with the scraps of the coconut leaflets used in the divination, was placed at the foot of the coconut tree from which the diviner had obtained the leaflets used. (Bollig 1927:68)

Divination in relation to illness might well require many repetitions, each one divining for another specific thing. If someone was ill, for example, a close relative took an *wupwut* (young palm frond) and some gifts to the diviner and asked him to determine the medicines needed to effect a cure. Accepting the gifts, the diviner took the *wupwut*, turned down the bottom leaves as offering, and then, taking one leaf after another, divined for every known type of medicine, performing a series of three *pwee* for each. These were the *pween manaw* ('prognosis of life') to determine whether the patient would live or die, the *pweeyisár* ('prognosis of termination') to determine whether the sickness would end or continue indefinitely, and the *pween mwayisa* ('prognosis of attitude') to determine whether the patient's thoughts were oriented toward life or toward death. If the knot combinations were favorable



## CHIPW: DIVINATION BY 'BENDING'

For divination by 'bending' or 'folding',<sup>17</sup> the material used was the midrib of a coconut palm leaflet (*ótongotongen paayinú*). After reciting the appropriate spells, the diviner (*sowuchipw*) took a length of midrib and laid it across the palm of his left hand. He laid the butt end of the midrib flush with the outer edge of his forefinger. At the point where it extended beyond his little finger, he folded the midrib back (flush with the outer edge of his little finger) across his palm again. In this manner, he bent it back and forth across his palm in equal lengths until it could not be folded further. If the remaining length of midrib projected a little beyond the forefinger, it was a good sign; if it projected a little beyond the little finger, it was a bad sign. Similarly, if the tip of the remaining length lay on a finger, the prognosis was good; but if it lay between two fingers, the prognosis was bad.

*Chipw* was used for all the purposes for which *pwee* was used; but by comparison with the latter, it was relatively simple. The diviner could be either a man or a woman. His or her children and sisters' children were eligible to learn the art without having to pay for the privilege. Other prospective learners had to bring the *sowuchipw* gifts of food, fish, and material goods, though in relatively small amounts.

## NEEYÉNU: 'SPIRIT PLACE' DIVINATION

According to Efot (1947), the *neeyénu* ['spirit place'] was used by magical specialists generally as a quick way to check the auspices of an impending situation. It consisted of reciting a spell. If the recitation was without error, all was evidently well; but if the reciter faltered or made a mistake, it was a bad sign. If a specialist had reason to suspect sorcery against him when he was presented with food or a drinking coconut, for example, he recited the spell before eating or drinking what was brought to him. An *itang* used this form of divination, among others, to see if a particular day was auspicious for a military expedition.

Bollig gives a quite different account (1927:204), saying that the way *itang* used *neeyénu* in their undertakings was to pierce a young coconut with a bush knife. If the coconut water spurted out, the undertaking would succeed; if it did not spurt out, all effort would be for nothing. Another way was to pierce the nut, sing into it, and then split it in two. Divination was then made from the way the edges of the shell were shaped.