

DEMOCRACY OR NAHNMWARKI

What Works Best in Pohnpeian Communities and Schools?

By Rodrigo Mauricio

The establishment of a modern education system in Pohnpei introduced new ways of coping with social matters and a new leadership style. The separation of modern and traditional leadership roles caused confusion, misunderstanding, distrust, and skepticism. Who can lead the society with true respect? Can traditional leaders and modernized leaders coexist in Pacific schools and societies? What leadership characteristics are similar or different? Which type of leadership is most promising for the future of island societies?

Traditional leadership in Pohnpei originated under three principles central to Pohnpeian beliefs and values. The principles include *tiahk en sahpw*, valuing the land and caring for its natural resources; *tiahk en wahu*, reciprocating acts of respect; and the spiritual values embodied in the *Salidi en Enihlap* or *sohpeidiand* the *Pelikilik en Sohpeidi*. These customs allow for spiritual representation in human form through the chief or *Nahnmwarki*. The *Salidi en Enihlap* is the practice of representing God by the chiefs; the *Pelikilik en Sohpeidi* is the worship of God by the people. Ceremonies to the *Nahnmwarki* celebrate human achievements and give thanks to God.

The traditional leadership system took its shape under four different periods, or *mweh*. The first period, *Mwein Keilahn Aio*, translates literally as “on the other side of yesterday.” This period is also known as *mwein kawa*, or the olden days, which implies the dark side of understanding. This creation era is known today through oral history and legends. During this period, Pohnpei was formed and protected with seawalls, the fringing reefs, and the mangrove swamps. Resources on land and at sea were created and economically cared for. Housing from leaves was invented to replace shelters in caves and under big rocks. Fire was discovered, and cooking



Photo: Nancy Lane

▷ Pohnpei’s Nan Madol was built during the Saudeleur Dynasty. The city consists of 92 small man-made islands. The walls, constructed of basalt stones, reach dimensions of 39 feet in height and 12 feet in depth.

and domesticated agriculture began.

Legends tell us that in that era two species existed, *Arem* (humans) and *Sioat* (another, less intelligent life form). The *Sioat* became extinct due to cannibalism, leaving the *Arem* species. The *Arem* recognized the importance of spirits they called *Enihlap*, and brought forward the *Luhk Nahsapwe*, or god of thunder, in the image of *Enihlap*. They placed in a position of authority the *Souminleng* or priest, who represented the people in their worship. Rituals offered thanksgiving to *Enihlap* for human achievement in production on land and at sea. *Souminleng* promoted spirituality as an important cultural value in Pohnpei.

The second period is known as *Mwein Saudeleur*, or the Saudeleur Dynasty. The Saudeleur Dynasty began with the arrival of the two brothers *Olisihpa* and *Olosohpa*, who voyaged into Pohnpei seeking a place to build an altar so that they could worship *Nahnisohn Sahpw*, the god of agriculture. The two brothers successfully built an altar at Nan Madol, where they performed their rituals. When *Olisihpa* died, *Olosohpa* became the first

Saudeleur, or lord of the area in which Nan Madol is located. Sixteen other *Saudeleurs* followed *Olosohpa*.

The Saudeleur Dynasty founded a totalitarian government that put Pohnpei under cruel oppression for more than a thousand years, from around 500 to 1628 A.D. The Saudeleurs promoted cultivation of land and resources from the sea. The administration unknowingly portrayed the importance of mutual respect, and people affirmed the importance of agricultural produce and sea produce used in ceremonies and offerings to the spirits. People also reaffirmed the importance of mutual respect in social affairs as opposed to stiff dictator’s commandments causing suffering and hardship. The turtle *Liahn en Sokele* initiated the process for regaining mutual respect under Saudeleur oppression by sacrificing her life to benefit Pohnpeians. To remember that significant event, Pohnpeians began calling sections of the land *Wehi*, which means turtle. Today, Pohnpeian municipalities are known as *Wehi*.

The third period is known as *Mwein Nahnmwarki*, or the chief system. The chief system began after *Isokelekel*’s

invasion at Nan Madol. In the 1600s, plans to overthrow Saudeleur were in place. Isokelekel returned to Pohnpei from Kataupeidak with his team of 333. The team assessed the conditions of the land and the people and then blended into the Saudeleur's compound at Pahnkedira as special guests. The team worked with the people and learned as they scouted the Nan Madol compound as well as Pohnpei Island in preparation for the invasion. At the right time, playful games sparked a battle. The battle between Saudeleur and Isokelekel was fought, and Isokelekel's team had to retreat. Nahnparadak, Isokelekel's lieutenant, arrived and fought fearlessly as Pohnpeians sided with Isokelekel and defeated Saudeleur.

In 1628, Isokelekel replaced dictatorship as a form of governance with the Nahnmwarki system. This was a decentralized political system. Isokelekel reaffirmed the land divisions, including Wein Madoleihmw Wein Kitti and Wein Sokehs Later on, Wein U and then Wein Net were founded. Each subdivision was granted authority for self-governance through the Nahnmwarki system. Chiefs were authorized to lead communities, with a hierarchy of other ranked titles to support the system (see Figure 1). For additional information on this traditional leadership structure, see Figure 2.

The Nahnmwarki system served Pohnpeians for roughly 200 years. Then foreigners invaded and began introducing new types of governance. In the early 1800s, foreign powers – first Spain, then Germany, Japan, and America – administered the islands. Each introduced new values, new religions, and new types of leadership. These undermined the traditional system and devalued its beliefs. The new and traditional leadership systems became vastly separated, likewise the people.

Under traditional leadership, education was geared to acquiring knowledge of and becoming skillful in functions related to local economic productivity. Learning was primarily participatory, taking place on task and through observation and conversation. The goal was not only to be aware of the cultural value or belief, but to be productive in utilizing resources in accordance with beliefs and values. For example, productive usage of land is measured by the size of agricultural produce. Young people

learned the functions associated with titles and roles and responsibilities in order to perform appropriately. In Pohnpei, leadership is viewed as successful if it promotes cultural values in meaningful contexts. These include showing dedication to the chiefs through tributes

of food and gaining titles; reciprocal acts of respect through language use; and utilizing spiritual power to enhance success in work and social functions.

The fourth and current period is known as Mwein Wai an era of "Sneakers," or foreigners who sneak in. [continued page 12]

Figure 1. Nahnmwarki and Nahnken Chiefly Titles in Hierarchical Order

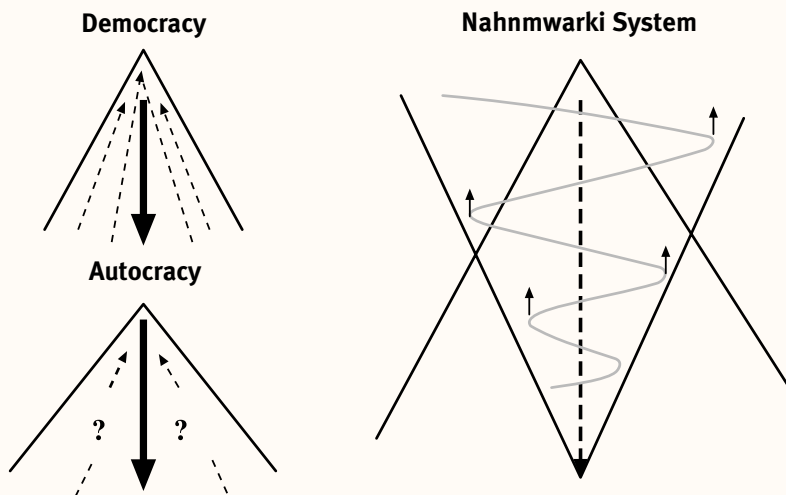
| 1. Nahnmwarki | Chief | 1. Nahnken |
|------------------------|----------------------|-----------------------|
| Oloiso Ranks | Lengileng Kan | Serihso Ranks |
| 2. Wasahi (Nahnpwutak) | Ninleng Kan | 2. Nahlaimw |
| 3. Dauk (Nahniau) | Ninleng Kan | 3. Nahnapas |
| 4. Noahs | Ninleng Kan | 4. Nahnsahu Ririn |
| 5. Nahnawa | Ninleng Kan | 5. Nahnmadau en Idehd |
| 6. Nahnpei | Ninsei Kan | 6. Lepen Ririn |
| 7. Nahnkiroun Pohndak | Ninsei Kan | 7. Souwel Lapalap |
| 8. Nahlik Lapalap | Ninsei Kan | 8. Ou Ririn |
| 9. Nahnihd Lapalap | Ninsei Kan | 9. Oun Pohnpein* |
| 10. Lempwei Lapalap | Ninsei Kan | 10. Ouwahtik* |

* Wein Kitti, Wein Madolenihmw, Wein U.

This chart lists ranks of titles for the Nahnmwarki system in all Pohnpei municipalities. The Nahnken serve different functions from the Nahnmwarki. For example, they identify those eligible to receive titles in the Nahnmwarki line. While men can earn titles by providing service to the community, only members of certain clans are eligible to attain the top five titles in the Nahnmwarki line.

Figure 2. Consensus Building in the Nahnmwarki System

While the Nahnmwarki system may appear to be a top-down leadership structure, inclusive consensus building is part of the decision making process.



In the traditional Pohnpeian system, authority is vested in the high chief, the Nahnmwarki, by birthright. As the Nahnmwarki's representatives recognize consensus, they invite stakeholders to discuss a topic with larger community groups. All Pohnpeians have the right to give input to decisions, starting in small household groups. Decisions issued by the Nahnmwarki reflect the consensus that has evolved through the increasingly inclusive process.

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[continued from page 10] This period overlaps with the Nahnmwarki system and introduced the term “democracy.” The democratic system introduced new values, elected leadership, and new ways of thinking. After decades, the expectation that this system will result in productive citizens is not yet realized. The new system is now turning back to the communities to find out what has gone wrong.

The traditional leadership had been suppressed for over a hundred years. But

it is important to remember that it did not emerge overnight. The traditional leadership slowly evolved over many, many generations. Through that process people learned and understood the importance of unity in a belief system, value system, and spiritual system as components of living together in a society. Hence, learning was meaningful and practical in social contexts.

Under the current leadership, the outcomes are quite impractical. The majority find what they learn at school not applica-

ble to their daily lives as good citizens. A small minority finds that books and pencils work as a way of life in Pacific societies. As a leader elected by the people, do I carry the true respect to be listened to? Who should be the respected leader in the social wellbeing? If both systems coexist, are they capable of supporting one another? How can the two systems benefit the future of the Pacific societies?

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