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Dr. Takuya Nagaoka's Pohnpei research findings

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DOCTOR Takuya Nagaoka, a Japanese anthropologist, is in Pohnpei where he is conducting research on the cultural traits of the people of Micronesia, specifically Pohnpei, from prehistoric to historic periods.

His research focuses on the colonization of Pohnpei, the prehistoric interaction of Micronesia with Melanesia and Polynesia, the history of Micronesian marching dances and Mwoakillese canoe building.

He said research suggests that eastern Micronesia was settled from the southeast Solomons-northern Vanuatu region by Lapita people's descendants around 2,000 years ago. Professor Peter Sheppard of the University of Auckland and Dr. Takuya conducted geological analysis of two stone artifacts discovered in Pohnpei and the results show that those artifacts originated from New Guinea. They suggest that the early settlers had some social relations with New Guinea.

Dr. Takuya said ancient Micronesian people had extensive networks extending to other regions.

The Pohnpeian people's interactions with Polynesians in the prehistoric period are clearly shown by the presence of kava, or "sakau" in Pohnpei, which is a loan word from a Polynesian language, he said.

He pursued this connection through the place called "merei" in Pohnpei, since this word was also borrowed from the Polynesian word malae/marae, which means "sacred or communal place for religious and social activities."

"Merei" is a gathering place of people or spirits, where such activities as singing, dancing and playing dart games took place, suggesting certain similarities to Polynesian malae/marae.

"Prehistoric inter-regional contact between Micronesia and Melanesia is shown by shared cultural traits in the two regions, such as loom weaving, kite fishing and some forms of shell tools," Dr. Takuya said.

Nan Madol is one of the special places in Pohnpei.

"Professor Osamu Kataoka of Kansai Gaidai University and I conducted archaeological research in Nan Madol and the Metipw area in Pohnpei to investigate how the Saudeleur dynasty developed to construct their religious-political center of Nan Madol," Dr. Takuya said.

"Although we are still analyzing our data, we think the Saudeleur chiefs' political power was derived at least partly from their monopoly over the production and possession of shell valuables, such as personal ornaments and lure shanks."

Shared cultural talents in dancing and in building canoes are some of the other visible traits in Micronesian.

"Marching dances are performed on many islands in Micronesia, but past ethnomusicological research did not pay much attention to this westernized dance genre," Dr. Takuya said.

Professor Junko Konishi of the Okinawa Prefectural University of the Arts and Takuya investigated the history of marching dances and found that they were probably created by the Marshallese people around 1900.

The dances were then introduced to the neighboring Pohnpei area, and were learned by Micronesian laborers from different islands at the phosphate mines on Nauru and Augaur during the German period.

Canoe-building has been taught as well throughout Micronesia, and building canoe skills and design are transmitted from generation to another.

Based on Dr. Takuya's research, "On Mwoakilloa (Mokil) Atoll, communities held public classes to pass this dying tradition to younger generation."



EXCAVATION AT METIPW, POHNPEI. PHOTO COURTESY OF OSAMU KATAOKA

According to oral traditions, the styles and building technology of the Mwoakillese canoes originated from Marshall Islanders who were stranded there in 1865. After the introduction of the Marshallese canoes, the Mwoakillese people improved the structure and refined the building techniques as they were known as an enterprising group in fishing, carpentry and cooking using traditional and modern methods.

“Micronesian culture is visibly and physically shared and transmitted, and is about mobility, settlement and resettlement,” Dr. Takuya said.

He has carried out an archaeological survey on Lenger, a small island in the lagoon of Pohnpei, and found that it was inhabited 2,000 years ago.

“The island became a center of commercial activities from the late 19th century to the German period, when early white traders and German government sponsored-Jaluit Company set up their trading stations there.”

In the late 1930s, it was fortified by the Japanese military which built a seaplane base and installed a coastal gun.

Dr. Takuya's research also indicates that Micronesian culture continued to evolve in new settlements where cultural traditions were shared and cultural traits were passed on.

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