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## Collaborating in the Compilation of the Satawalese Cultural Dictionary : Thirty Years of a Dictionary Project Initiated by Cultural Anthropologists

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## **Communication**

# **Collaborating in the Compilation of the Satawalese Cultural Dictionary: Thirty Years of a Dictionary Project Initiated by Cultural Anthropologists**

**Ritsuko Kikusawa\***

## **1. Introduction**

A dictionary of the Satawalese language is currently being compiled at Japan's National Museum of Ethnology. Its main data are cultural terms recorded by a team of three Japanese cultural anthropologists who stayed on Satawal, an island in Micronesia, for two separate periods in 1978–1980. Various factors hindered progress on the work for two decades, and the original materials were never published. This paper describes part of the “rise and fall, and rise again” of the Satawalese Dictionary Project.

## **2. How It Started**

Satawalese is the language spoken on Satawal Island in Micronesia, located about 2/3 of the way from Yap to Chuuk (formerly Truk) (see Figure 1). It is a raised coral island surrounded by a reef 6km in circumference and 50m wide on average. The island's average height is 4m. An August 1978 census found 492 residents in 86 households. There are also Satawalese communities in Yap and Saipan, which form part of the Saipan-Carolinian community.

Shuzo Ishimori and Ken'ichi Sudo, cultural anthropologists and researchers at Japan's National Museum of Ethnology, first set foot on Satawal Island over 32 years ago in June 1978. During a stay of approximately three months, they confirmed that this was one area of Micronesia where the traditional lifestyle was better maintained than in other areas, and in particular, the traditional knowledge and sophisticated techniques of long distance navigation were still being passed down from generation to generation. With another anthropologist, Tomoya Akimichi, they conducted further research on Satawal between June 1979 and January 1980.

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\* National Museum of Ethnology, Osaka, Japan; Graduate University for Advanced Studies, Osaka, Japan. [email: ritsuko@minpaku.ac.jp]



in Japan for a year. Their activities gradually ceased, however, and as no more action was taken for two and a half decades, it appeared that the project would never be completed.

Soon after I joined the National Museum of Ethnology in 2005, I received an e-mail message from Ken Rehg at the University of Hawai‘i. He had heard about the project and asked if I could find out what had happened to the dictionary data. After some inquiries, a set of data was discovered. The data had been stored in the IT Section of the Museum and—as can be seen in the small sample shown in Figure 2—were in a clean, non-software dependent format.<sup>1</sup> Keys to the conventions were also found with the data, and in general it seemed that there would be adequate resources for anyone interested in reviving the project. The original authors had believed from the beginning that a linguist’s assistance would be necessary to write a proper dictionary, and as an Oceanic linguist and now a resident researcher of the Museum, I made a good candidate. For my part, I was by this time fully convinced that these data were valuable and needed to be made available to the public. In this way I became involved with the Satawalese dictionary project.

### 3. Problems

Although the data were physically clean, many problems surfaced as the work proceeded. For example, it became clear that work on the dictionary had stopped just when the five original researchers had combined their separate sets of information into a single file. As a result, there were not only duplicate entries but at times also three, four, or even five slightly different entries for a single term. Yet this was a minor problem. There were others related to orthography, the details of which are discussed in 3.1. Entries were heavily biased toward traditional culture; while the list included 194 land division names and 46 taro patch names (all proper nouns), many basic vocabulary words were missing, including those for numbers, body parts, and family members (see 3.1). Worse, English definitions in the original manuscript were often incomprehensible (3.2).

#### 3.1 Orthography

One of the first things that had to be dealt with was orthography.

The dictionary’s original orthography, proposed by Sugita and accepted by the other authors and by native speakers of the language, was a phonemically accurate representation of the kind used for “scholarly writing.” However, the islanders’ use of writing systems had

<sup>1</sup> The legends were all kept with the data. Lines starting with the number “00” give the serial number assigned to each word; “01” labels the form of the word, and what follows “02” is the definition of the word, starting with an abbreviation indicating the word class. Symbols such as “%” and “\*” were used to control the data.

892

r'u'u'k

N. basket for carrying

taro, bread fruits and fish etc., made of  
coconut-leaf.

1506

Nu.

name of a specific combination &(3,1)(3,2)@ of  
knot divination (#pwee%), which indicates good omen.

8131k

-fi

SUF. VERB. a \*suffix that derives transitive verbs from  
the stems of intransitive or semitransitive verbs.

EX. #yoofi% grab.

2955

-fiy

&amp;from #fiya'-%@ SUF. NCL. (CON. #-e-n%) \*handful.

EX. #ruiwa'fiy fiya'y suupwa% two handfuls of tobacco.

6239

-fiyawo

&amp;in compounds only@ RT. \*Japanese, \*Japanese\_\*fisherman

EX. #re-fiyawo% Japanese fisherman,

EX. #yo'o'no'fiyawo% Japanese fishing line.

6117

-ka't

SUF. \*child. EX. #woonika't% child. EX. #yimwenika't%  
delivery house. (Cf. #ya'a't%).

3759

-nong

SUF. DIR. \*into, \*inward.

5912k

-sa'a'n

ASP. \*not\_\*yet &spelled together with a subject  
pronoun@. EX. #Yesa'a'n mwongo.% He has not yet eaten.

4487

-ta'n

&from #ta'ni-%@ Suf. NCL. \*row, \*line. EX. #yeta'n  
r'o'o'n pwaay% one row or line of dancers.

2200k

-tiw

SUF. DIR. \*down, \*downward(s), \*westward(s).

EX. #Waa we yittiw peekitiw.% The canoe went westward.

EX. #Ye ppu'ngu'tiw me rhu'u'y nu'.% He fell from a  
coconut palm.

2879

-to

SUF. DIR. \*hither, \*this \*way, \*towards\_\*here, \*here.

EX. #pwikito% bring it here.

8136k

-tu'ku'm

&See #tu'ku'ma-%@ NUM. CO. \*package, \*parcel, \*wrapping  
\*pack. EX. #yetu'ku'm tu'ku'm% a pack of cigarettes.

Figure 2. A Sample of Discovered Data

**Table 1. Correspondence between the Earlier and the Current Orthography for Vowels**

Short vowels			Long vowels		
Phoneme	Earlier	New	Phoneme	Earlier	New
[i]	i	i	[i:]	ii	ii
[e]	e	e	[e:]	ee	ee
[æ]	á	ae	[æ:]	áá	ae
[i]	ú	iu	[i:]	úú	iu
[ə]	é	eo	[ə:]	éé	eo
[a]	a	a	[a:]	aa	aa
[u]	u	u	[u:]	uu	uu
[o]	o	o	[o:]	oo	oo
[ɔ]	ó	oa	[ɔ:]	óó	oa

evolved during the dictionary project's years of inactivity, and the original choice of orthography needed to be reexamined.<sup>2</sup> Based on Sugita's communications with current speakers, a decision was made to replace all accented vowels with digraphs, as well as to disregard vowel length distinctions for digraphed sounds (see Table 1). The glides /y/ and /w/, which are used inconsistently in Satawalese writing, would be maintained in the new orthography. The native-speaking representative was happy with this decision. However, the fact that the vowel lengths originally recorded would be lost in applying the new orthography did not please the linguists. To compromise, it was decided that the earlier spellings distinguishing vowel lengths, when different from those of the headwords, should also appear in the dictionary, listed under each entry as alternative spellings (*AltSp*:).

There were other problems related to spelling and to documentation of word forms. I realized that many words supposedly forming part of the original file were missing from the recovered data, and these had to be reentered based on other materials published by the anthropologists. The earliest publications used inconsistent spelling systems, however, so in many cases it was difficult to determine a word's correct form. We decided to enter such words as they appeared in the original sources—except for accented vowels, which we converted to the new orthographic system. These words, for which there are no equivalent entries in the original files, are identified with a subscript "x". Many basic vocabulary words that were missing in the original data, such as numbers, body parts and kinship terms, were discovered and added in the same manner.

Other inconsistencies in the data appeared to be caused by generational differences.

<sup>2</sup> For details about orthography systems that have been used to write Satawalese, see Roddy (2007: 35–43). The one used in the original manuscript of the dictionary followed that listed as "Sudo (1981)" (which probably refers to Sudo and Sauchomal, 1982) in his Table 6, where six different orthography systems are listed with sound-to-letter correspondences (Roddy, 2007: 37).

Sauchomal, one of the original compilers, was a young Satawalese man when data were being collected from senior members of his community. There is some indication of regional or stylistic variants, particularly in the use of /l/ and /n/. Some compound words appear to be represented as citation forms, while others are represented as natural speech forms. These have been kept as they were recorded.

Ideally, dictionary entries use a consistent spelling system and have been double-checked for accuracy with native speakers. We lacked the time, funds, and personnel to fulfill this ideal, however. Many of the original native-speaking assistants had passed away, and few younger speakers could reproduce their elders' knowledge in our areas of interest. We could either leave data unpublished or publish it in its imperfect state, and I believed we should choose the latter option. Achieving this goal required compromises that were sometimes painful for linguists to make, but we had to be realistic and make the best of unavoidable circumstances.

The number of Satawalese language speakers probably exceeded 400 when the project was revived (Lewis, 2009); however, we were dealing with the Satawalese as it was spoken 25 years ago, a language that no longer existed. Moreover, the Satawalese-speaking community has undergone significant cultural changes since the original fieldwork was done. Additional fieldwork would only confuse the data more, making the entire project unmanageable. In short, we had to work with what information we already had. This was even truer in the context of yet another problem we faced.

### 3.2 Definitions

As stated earlier, the words that had been collected were precious for their part in the cultural heritage of Satawal. Many of their definitions in the original manuscript, though, were incomprehensible. At first, this appeared to be a simple issue of language; the original compilers were just beginning researchers at the time, and none of them was a native speaker of English. But I soon realized that these factors accounted for only part of the problem. The truth was that terms like the ones in this dictionary depended heavily on cultural context and required lengthy explanations in order to be fully understood. I will give some specific examples to illustrate this problem.

Examples (1) and (2) are definitions of certain words as they appeared in the original manuscript.

- (1) name of a specific combination (3, 1) (3, 2) of knot divination (*pwee*), which indicates good fortune.
- (2) a fish, the name of a particular shark. It is believed to be found in the direction of *táán*

*Máyinap* as observed from Puluwat Island, or *tupwun Máyinap* as observed from Truk.  
Cf. *pwukoffin Ponowat*, *wukoffiy Rúul*.

Trying to understand (2), we could look up the word *táán Máyinap*, where we would find (3).

- (3) a direction, rising position of a star, Altair. Cf. *tupwun Máyinap*. It is 81° in the compass bearing.

What puzzled me about entries such as (2), setting aside the question of whether a shark would always be in the same direction relative to an island, was that many fish names listed in the dictionary were defined with a scientific name and sometimes even an English common name, while many others appeared in terms similar to this one. I wondered why some fish names and not others were defined in a way usually found in dictionaries.

In answer to my inquiries, Akimichi, one of the original researchers, explained that all the results of the three anthropologists' research in Satawal had been published (in Japanese), and that the only way the "lost" information could possibly be retrieved was to go through all these papers. This search for more information enabled many of the old definitions to be rewritten, as shown in (4), the newer version of (2) above.<sup>3</sup>

- (4) the name of a shark that is part of the *pwukof* system of navigational clues, said by some to be located in the P9 direction from Polowat Atoll. See *pwukoffin Ponowat*.<sup>4</sup>

If you look up the word *pwukof* in the dictionary, you will find:

- (5) the set of navigational clues given with reference to points on the star compass, memorized by navigators to help guide canoes from one island to another.

In short, it turns out that the definition in (2) was referring not to a real shark or shark name but rather to a label used in Satawal's navigational system.

We hoped these new definitions would be more comprehensible than the original ones, but they still seemed not to convey the full meanings of the entry words. After reviewing some

<sup>3</sup> We received generous help from Lawrence A. Reid throughout the compilation of the new version of the dictionary, including English editing and advice.

<sup>4</sup> Because island names have changed over the last 25 years, spelling adjustments needed to be made in some cases. One such instance in English definitions is "Puluwat" in (2) appearing as "Polowat" in (4). Note that the same island is spelled *Ponowat* in Satawalese.



records of Satawalese traditional knowledge, I became aware that the words belonged to a much bigger system of signifiers. The following background should help explain what I mean.

It is commonly known that people in Micronesia had highly developed navigational skills, which enabled them to sail through Micronesia and beyond. People in Satawal were still practicing long-distance ocean voyaging in the 1970s. They named ocean areas according to their own system and navigated canoes with reference to the star compass and directional-orientation knowledge shared by all male members of the community. However, the more advanced skills necessary for long-distance ocean voyaging—such as directional orientations associated with major islands (the *pwukof* system mentioned earlier), knowledge of phenomena surrounding the major islands, and route information—were traditionally kept secret by specialists within each school of navigation and taught only to selected youths after several periods of training. Those who completed the training and were approved as qualified underwent a ritual called *ppwo*, and thus they became *paliu*, or navigation specialists. A navigation specialist was responsible for taking a canoe to its destination and bringing everyone on board safely back home, and to do so, he needed to know not only about canoes and navigation but also about rituals and taboos. Thus a good *paliu* was usually, at the same time, a good *sennap* (canoe-building specialist) and *sawpwwe* (number-divination specialist), and he was highly respected in the society.

All words related to navigational systems and navigational techniques, social activities, religious beliefs and practices, and so on therefore belonged to the world of the Satawalese, and constituted one extensive, interrelated set.

#### 4. Compiling a Cultural Dictionary

Our original plan was to publish a dictionary of the Satawalese language with a grammatical sketch and a list of abbreviations indicating the grammatical features of each entry, such as *vt.* for transitive verb and *vi.* for intransitive verb, as in other dictionaries. We were not likely to have a grammatical sketch to go with the manuscript, however, and I did not know enough about the language to complete one myself. With no grammatical information, and many basic entries missing, it seemed almost impossible to publish our data in the form of a dictionary. On the other hand, we had background information for almost all our entry words, although it had been published only in Japanese and thus was accessible only to Japanese speakers. Such information would provide for better understanding of the documented terms, and it would not be available anywhere else.

So we decided to focus on providing a list of culturally significant words and expressions, along with any information necessary for truly understanding these entries. Reflecting its nature,

our publication would be called the *Satawalese Cultural Dictionary* (Sauchoman et al., in prep.). The structure of the dictionary was rearranged, and its final manuscript contains a section called “Cultural Notes” instead of a grammatical sketch. There is also a list of relevant papers published by anthropologists (most in Japanese) reporting the results of their fieldwork.

The Cultural Notes section provides lists and figures to supplement the Finderlist. In this dictionary, reflecting the specialization of each of the compilers, many culture-specific terms and place names are recorded. These terms are more easily accessed when listed according to the categories appearing in each section, rather than being scattered throughout the Finderlist with nonspecific English glosses. In addition, this supplement is intended to provide access to relevant information that is available only in Japanese and which cannot easily be contained in the definitions provided for many of the cultural terms.

The Cultural Notes section consists of subsections on the world and society, navigational knowledge, stars and natural phenomena, categories of fish, and an index of scientific names of plants, fish, and other animal names, canoe part names and terms related to canoe building, and house part names. About 200 words indicating canoe parts and canoe building processes are of course listed along with pictures of a Satawalese long-distance voyaging canoe showing exactly which part each word indicates. If you look up a word in the dictionary, at the end of the definition, there is an indication, such as “[Cultural Note C4],” which brings you to the section in the Cultural Notes that is directly relevant to the word you have just looked up.

## 5. Concluding Remarks

A final dictionary page reflecting the decisions described in this paper and others will appear as in Figure 3.

The *Satawalese Cultural Dictionary*, with some 5000 lexical entries and over 100 pages of cultural notes and prefatory information, will have both strengths and weaknesses that reflect the specializations of those who originally collected the data. However, I believe that its strengths will make it a unique and valuable product once it is made available to the public, particularly for the speakers of Satawalese, to whom the whole work will be dedicated. The dictionary is presently being prepared for possible publication in 2011.

## faamini

**faamini** *n.* family, people who live in one house. *From:* Eng. family.

**faamw** *nu.* an adopted child; mother with a newborn child. *NCL:* yerhay. *PCL:* nayiun.

— *vs.* [*vt.* faemwa]. to adopt a child. *Syn:* mweoyiumweoy.

**faamwuto** *n.* a person who has been adopted into a lineage. This usually refers to a child who is adopted as a toddler if not younger. An adopted person acquires the same rights to the ownership of property as that of its step-parents. This word has a negative connotation when uttered directly to the adoptee and is avoided in everyday conversation. [*AltSp:* mwánnireto.] [SK85–mwánnireto]

**faan**<sub>1</sub> *nu.* meaning, significance, import, sense. *Syn:* weeween.

**faan**<sub>2</sub> *nu.* spines on the fins or skins of fish; thorn. *NCL:* yefoarh.

**faang** *nu.* a gift, as of food, goods, etc. *Syn:* niffang, kkefang. *NCL:* yeew. *PCL:* yaan.

**faangeras** *num.* four thousand. *Morph:* faa-ngerass.

**Faankeengiy** *nu.* a land-division name, coconut grove. *Lit:* 'under the keengiy'. *Morph:* faa, -n, keengiy. *See:* pwuneok 'coconut grove'. [*Anth:* Cultural Note B2 (25)]

**Faaparh** *nu.* the name of a crescent-shaped reef that is part of the pwukof system of navigational clues, said to be located in the P18 star compass direction from Polowat Island. *See:* pwukoffin-Ponowat 'the set of navigational clues from Polowat'; pwoaropwoar 'crescent shape'. [*Anth:* Cultural Note C4]

**faar** *n.* the soft core of a fruit; the sponge-like core of a coconut; the pith of a tree; the egg of an octopus. *NCL:* yefay. *PCL:* yanan.

**faarh** *nu.* pandanus tree. *NCL:* yefoarh. *PCL:* yaan.

**faarheey** *vt.* to run after, chase or pursue s.o./s.t. *Syn:* faattapweey.

**faarheo** *num.* four (flat objects). *Morph:* faa-, -rheo. [*AltSp:* faarhé.]

**Faas** *nu.* the name of a reef that is part of the pwukof system of navigational clues, said to be located in the P5 star compass direction from Ifalik Atoll. It is said to be very dangerous for navigation because of the waves (noanoa) that break over it. *See:* pwukoffin-Ifeoniuk 'the set of navigational clues from Ifalik'. [*Anth:*

## faemwa

Cultural Note C4]

**faas** *n.* a nest. *Syn:* fasafas. *NCL:* yeew.

**Faasaet** *nu.* the name of the ocean area between Pollap Atoll and the Chuuk Islands. *See:* yitimetaw 'knowledge about ocean areas'. [*AltSp:* Faasát.] [*Anth:* Cultural Note C1–Table C1 (40)] [AT84–Faasát]

**faasto** *nu.* first base in baseball. *From:* Jap.

faasuto, orig. Eng. first. *NCL:* yeew.

**faat** *n.* eyebrow (non-deferential). *See:* noangoy-tacyiuk 'eyebrow (deferential)'.

**faatapw** *Variant:* faattapw.

**faattapw** *vt.* to run. faattapwenoa run away, flee, escape. *Variant:* faatapw.

**faattapweey** *vt.* to run after, chase or pursue s.o./s.t. *Syn:* farheey.

**faay**<sub>1</sub> *nu.* stone, rock. *NCL:* yefay. *PCL:* yaan.

**faay**<sub>2</sub> *n.* tooth, teeth (deferential). *See:* ngii 'tooth (non-deferential)'.

**faay**<sub>2</sub> *nu.* a rich fishing ground outside the lagoon where bonito and other non-reef fish are caught. *NCL:* yefay.

**faay**<sub>3</sub> *n.* a k.o. sickness.

**Faayis** *nu.* a taro-patch name. *See:* pweon 'taro patch'. [*Anth:* Cultural Note B2 (T14)]

**Faayiu** *nu.* the name of the ocean area between West Fayu Island and Pikelot Island. *See:* yitimetaw 'knowledge about ocean areas'. [*AltSp:* Faayú.] [*Anth:* Cultural Note C1–Table C1 (26)] [AT84–Faayu]

**faef** *nu.* evening. *Syn:* yoatoafae. [*AltSp:* fááf.]

**faefae** *vs.* [*vt.* faeti]. to stomp on; to stamp. *Syn:* pwuuraek. [*AltSp:* fááfá.]

**Faefaen** *nu.* Fefen Island in the Chuuk Islands. [*AltSp:* Fááfán.]

**Faekenaes** *nu.* the name of two little terns (yaraar) that is part of the pwukof system of navigational clues, said to be located in the P14 star compass direction from Lamotrek Atoll. *See:*

pwukoffiy-Noamweoccheok 'the set of navigational clues from Lamotrek'. [*AltSp:* Fákenás.] [*Anth:* Cultural Note C4]

**faekiti** *vs.* [*vt.* faekiti]. to seek or search for lice in s.o.'s hair; to chant while pretending to search for lice in the hair of a breadfruit ritual specialist (soawumaey) when breadfruit are not in abundance. [*AltSp:* fákit.]

**faekiti** *vt.* [*vs.* [*vt.* faekiti]. to search someone's hair for lice; to search the hair of a soawumaey for lice when breadfruit are not in abundance. [*AltSp:* fákiti.]

**faemwa** *vt.* [*vs.* faamw]. to adopt a child. *Syn:*

Figure 3. A Sample Page of the Final Manuscript

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