

Unit 8: Yap: Halingefesu Canoe House

Louis Yalefalyal

Facts

Capital	Colonia
Biggest island	Yap
Number of islands	4 main islands and 134 outer atolls and islands
Occupied islands	11
Highest point	Mt Matade 571 feet
Language	Yapese, Ulithian, Woleaian and Satawalese (and English)
Government	Independent (State of the FSM)



Figure 8.1. Map of Federated States of Micronesia

This chapter is about the canoe house of Woleai Island, Yap.

The canoe house is a cultural site. The canoe house names Halingefesu is situated on Falalop Woleai, one of the outer islands of Yap State, in the Federated States of Micronesia. Halingefesu has many functions in the life of the community. It is used for important meetings, drinking and socializing, planning and discussions, as well as a storage facility, work place, and place for learning local skills.

After reading this chapter you will be able to:

- Describe the importance of the canoe house in Yap culture
- Identify the functions of the canoe house
- Identify the materials used to build a canoe house
- Appreciate how custom and tradition are linked to community behaviour

Construction of Halingefesu canoe house

Halingefesu is built like the other canoe house on Woleai. It differs only in size. Canoe houses are made from local materials. Preparation often begins two months before construction begins. Local materials used include mahogany trees, breadfruit trees, pandanus trees, and a tree that is called *yaro* in Yap language. Other local materials include coconut tree stems, coconut palm fronds, and coconut husks.

Mahogany trees or *yaro* are often used for posts. Any canoe house requires four main posts. Halingefesu is sitting on the trunks of four mahogany trees that support breadfruit and pandanus beams and rafters. Coconut tree stems are used for the horizontal beams, called *gapengagi* and *gato*. They usually measure three inches wide by twenty feet long. However, each *gapengagi* and *gato* does not have to be of equal length. They can be joined together to make the required twenty-foot horizontals.

To build a canoe house the four posts are selected. After the posts are solidly planted the beams are placed on the posts and tied together with ropes. When the beams are secured the roof-cap and rafters are put in place. The basic construction is finished by placing the *gapengagi* and *gato*. Finally the roof is thatched with woven palm leaves.

Roofing the canoe house

The entire community is involved in the thatching process. Before the event the men and boys gather hundreds of palm fronds and the women and girls weave them into thatch.

On the day the canoe house is to be roofed, the community is called together by the blowing of a conch shell. Each household brings their bundles of thatches to the canoe house and everyone

joins the activities. The young men and older boys remove the old thatching while the men supervise and sort the thatches. When the roof frame is exposed a row of men, working side by side, work their way to the top carefully tying each thatch, one butted against the next. Meanwhile the women and girls continue to weave more thatching until the roof is completed.

Local rope is made from natural materials is used to secure both the logs and the thatching. To prepare the rope, many coconuts are collected and husked. The husks are then gathered, put in baskets, and placed in fresh or salt water for three months. After three months the husks are removed from the water and pounded to separate the fibres, which are then dried in the sun.

When the fibres are thoroughly dried they are bundled together. To make rope, several fibres are twisted using the fingers and then the twisted fibres are rolled up and down the leg. The rope is woven in three different sizes. One person can create small and medium ropes, but the bigger ropes may take four to five people to create.

Ropes are measured in fathoms. A roll of small size rope can measure up to one hundred or even one thousand fathoms. The medium and large rolls measure only twenty to seventy fathoms. The small rope is called *galogalo*, the medium rope *talisepeigi*, and the large rope *tali*. All three sizes are used in the construction of Halingefesu.

Questions and Activities

1. How is Halingefesu different from other canoe houses on Falalop Woleai?
2. List five of the materials used to build a canoe house
3. What are the horizontal beams of the canoe house called?
4. In the community, everyone helps in the thatching of the canoe house. List the jobs of each group after the palm fronds are collected”
 - (a) women
 - (b) young men and boys
 - (c) older men
5. List the four steps used to make ropes

Halingefesu's functions

A canoe house has many different functions. One is to serve as a place for community meetings. Haligefesu is the place where community members gather to discuss issues affecting the community and the welfare of the people.

The problems and ideas of community members are presented during these meetings. Policies and regulations are decided upon and approved by the chiefs, elders, and the community as a whole. The building serves as the centre of the political life of the community.

Halingefesu is a drinking, socializing, planning and discussion place.

The men usually meet at the canoe house in the evening to drink *tuba* and socialize. Planning and discussion of daily activities is a major function of these "drinking circles". But when the planning and discussions are completed, elders often lecture about local skills such as how to navigate, make a canoe, sail a canoe, build a house, repair on old house, and how to fish.

Evening lectures are restricted to only one or two topics a night. Thus in the evening, Haligefesu is a centre for socializing, planning, and learning.

Halingefesu as a work place

During the daytime the canoe house is used as a work place. Young boys are expected to watch what the elders are doing and learn different kinds of skills from them. Some may be making canoes, some handicrafts, some fish traps, some paddles for canoes, and some looms for weaving *lavalavas*. The young men and boys are expected to learn these skills by observing and doing practical work on their own. The elders remain in the canoe house to provide assistance if needed.

The Haligefesu is a place of learning during workdays and evening lectures, but on special occasions a master may share his skills with those he deems worthy of learning it. Such highly prized skills are navigation, local martial arts, massage, canoe making, and house construction.

When one of these skills is taught, the participants must pay a fee to enrol in the class. American currency is not used to pay such a fee, but instead local goods are used such as *lavalavas* and ropes.

Selected participants will stay in Haligefesu until the classes are finished. While these classes are on, only the people who pay the fee are allowed to attend and stay in the canoe house. No one else is allowed to come near the place.

The length of the course depends on the teacher but it often takes one or two months to complete the course. The teaching is done through lectures and demonstrations. The students must pay close attention and observe the demonstrations very carefully so they can pass the oral tests given during and at the end of the course. Such courses are very rare and if a student fails the oral

examination he may have to wait for a long time before such a class is offered again. However, he still has the right to expand his limited knowledge by practicing what he has learned.

Questions and Activities

6. Why is Halingefesu the centre of the political life of the community?
7. What is the canoe house used for in the evenings?
8. List five skills younger boys learn from the elders at Halingefesu

Halingefesu as a storage facility

The canoe house is also used for storage of sailing canoes, paddling canoes, fishing traps, fishing lines, fishing poles, and fishing nets.

Two different kinds of nets are stored in the canoe house. One is used for catching small fish and the other for larger fish. Three different kinds of fish traps are also stored there. The biggest one is used for catching mackerel, the medium trap is for reef fish, and the smaller one is used for catching bait. All this equipment is stored in the canoe house so it is easy to get when people go fishing, a major source of food for the island.

A canoe house as a distribution centre

When a large quantity of fish is caught the boats land in front of the canoe house, the fish are off-loaded, and the elders divide the fish evenly among the people of the community.

Other types of food may also be distributed from the canoe house.

During these distributions every household sends a representative to receive their share. As a distribution centre, the Halingefesu ensures that all residents of the community have enough to eat.

A canoe house as a place to care for sick people

The canoe house also serves as a place to care for the sick when a clan member suffers a serious illness. Not only close relatives and friends gather to care for the sick, but all the members of the clan residing in the community and the neighbouring islands come and stay with the sick person. The canoe house is needed because only it is big enough to accommodate all close relatives, friends, and extended family. They all stay at the canoe house until the sick person either recovers or dies.

A canoe house as a house for visitors

Halingefesu is also used to house visitors who have sailed from the nearby islands. They may stay in the canoe house as long as they are on the island. The duration of their stay really depends on the weather. Usually it takes only two or three days for the weather to clear, but at other times it may take weeks or even months for the weather to get better. Such visitors usually leave the island as soon as the weather improves. They come to Woleai Island to visit relatives and friends. Such hospitality is common among the neighbouring islands of Yap State.



Figure 8.1. Women on Yap performing outside canoe house

Reflections

Halingefesu is a canoe house. It shelters our canoes and fishing equipment, but it also represents something much more significant.

It provides a site for political discussion and debate, a centre for socializing and planning, a classroom for passing on cultural skills and knowledge, a distribution centre for the community's food, a hospice for the sick, and accommodation for visitors from neighbouring islands.

In short, Haligefesu is the site where the community's ideals, values, skills, and knowledge are constantly exercised. It is where culture is maintained for today and the generations to come.

Questions and Activities

Fill the Blanks

Write the missing words from the list below in the appropriate blank space to complete the sentence.

canoes, distribution, friends, fishing equipment, canoe house, generations, fish, visitors, mackerel, clan members, culture

9. Halingefesu is used to store _____ and _____
_____.
10. _____ is a major food source for the island of Woleai.
11. The largest fish trap is used to catch _____.
12. Halingefesu is a _____ centre where food is divided between the communities.
13. When someone has a serious illness, close relatives, _____ and _____ come to stay with them at the _____.
14. _____ from nearby islands often stay at Halingefesu.
15. Halingefesu is a place where _____ is maintained for today and for _____ to come.