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THE POI OF THE MEETING ¹

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The Atoll of Puluwat lies 150 miles west of Truk, in the central Caroline Islands. The two principal islands of the atoll, Puluwat and Yáley, with some smaller ones, altogether comprise only 1.313 square miles of land area, but support a total population of 400, all living in two villages on Puluwat island. Puluwat and three other communities, the island of Pulusuk to the south and the atoll of Pulap to the north with its two communities of Pulap and Tamatam, comprise a single cultural and dialect entity, known to the natives as Pátu and to the Americans on Truk as the Western Islands. They are part of a larger entity known as the central Carolines which includes the 14 inhabited islands and atolls between Puluwat and Yap, to the west, and also includes the four inhabited islands south-west of Palau. The speech of this area, and that spoken at Truk and its near neighbours, which have been baptised “Trukic” by Dyen, probably constitute a language chain, with partial mutual intelligibility between most neighbours.

The information in this paper comes in large part from two Puluwat men, Yangowôôr and Tawuweru, and the chant at the end, with its translation and figurative meanings, was supplied by Yangowôôr in June 1967.

Yangowôôr was a man of about 55. He was a Protestant leader and deacon and lived at the southern end of Puluwat, rarely visiting the Catholic area where we lived. He spoke only a few words of English; fortunately he had all his teeth, which made him more intelligible than some other informants. He usually wore a black Ioin-cloth tightly roped about his rotund middle. On rainy days he wore a red sweatshirt with the

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word “Marines” in bright yellow. He was reputed to be among the most knowledgeable men on the subject of *yitang* (of which more later), but proved difficult of access. After several overtures he agreed to impart his *yitang* lore, but only after negotiating an hourly wage, plus permission to select from our treasury, and he chose, unabashedly, a blue blanket, a can of coffee, a box of pens, a fishing line, an insect spray, and a pair of white socks.

Tawuweru was a little older, about 60. He was a Catholic. At the time of our arrival at Puluwat he was acting magistrate, the real magistrate being away just then on Truk. The position of magistrate is an elective one, introduced by the American administration since World War II, and does not necessarily correspond to any native chieftainship. Tawuweru had once held the elective office himself, and in his present capacity the duty fell to him to negotiate with us our requirements for assistance of any kind from the people of Puluwat. He was a man of demonstrated leadership ability and intelligence, and displayed a high order of generosity and integrity, but in performing his function of go-between he proved to be as commercial and hardheaded as Yangowôôr.

This brashness in chaffering certainly knocked out of our heads any romantic ideas about the South Seas we might have retained after our field experience elsewhere in the islands. But we quickly became aware that in this culture the imparting of any knowledge had to be paid for. Knowledge, to a people venturing forth without compass on seas frequently and unpredictably beset with storms, meant life itself. To know the seas, winds, and stars, and the magic that controlled them, was as precious as life, and such knowledge was not divulged freely.

Yitang on Puluwat, as explained by our informants, is a much-diluted and altered form of the institution of the same name as it is known and practised on Truk. There, according to Goodenough:

an *jitag* [as he spells it], . . . is a sort of combined lawyer, general, diplomat, and orator. His knowledge includes the history of the district and its land tenure, the special language and magic of diplomacy, strategy and tactics in war with its related magic, and rhetoric. A chief could handle the affairs of his district much more adroitly if he commanded such knowledge . . .²

Goodenough also refers to several *yitang* schools on Truk, each with its own lore. Similarly, Fischer, who refers to the *itang* [his spelling] as a war leader, says:

These men were military strategists, repositories of historical lore and myth, orators, ambassadors, magicians, and so forth . . . Itangs are specifically reported for both Truk Lagoon and the Mortlocks. Evidently they were not found in the Puluwat area or in the other low islands between Puluwat and Yap . . . Anyone intending to become an itang had to undergo an apprenticeship and pass through two lower degrees before he was formally pronounced to be an itang.³

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It is true, as Fischer says, that the *yitang* specialist of Truk is not found at Puluwat, at least today. But the term *yitang* is used on that atoll to describe a remarkably involuted, circumlocutory, elliptical, and metaphorical mode of speech and form of oral literature. And by some people it is also applied to certain kinds of secret knowledge and to the men who possess this knowledge.

Any item of information, any esoteric place name from navigational knowledge, any word or phrase from one of the chants, may be used in *yitang* communication. Even gestures, postures, and physical contortions are part of the language. In the past, when inter-island hostility was something to be reckoned with, it was extremely useful to be able to communicate in secret with a fellow *yitang* among a group of potential belligerents. There is a story of an ostensibly friendly visit to Puluwat by several canoe-loads of natives from the Mortlock Islands to the south of Truk. They were overheard by a boy, plotting to conquer the atoll. The boy informed the chief of one of the two main Puluwat villages, who sent a message of warning to the chief of the other, the message consisting only of a ripe coconut, broken in a certain way.

Men who are learned in *yitang* language often delight in ostentatious display. During a meeting, or even when men are informally sitting around and chatting, they will often idly choose some *yitang* name or phrase, then use it as the basis upon which to build a discourse or deliver a sermon on some subject or other. Or they might recite a series of items of *yitang* information, as we might recite poetry, but merely as a vain exercise, a pedantic display, or perhaps to confound the uninitiated who may be present. Riesenbergr's interpreter, Basilio, said: "When I hear *yitang* talk at a public meeting and don't understand what is going on, I sometimes get mad; I think they are showing off; but they feel real good".

Yangowôôr's knowledge of *yitang* began with chants, and these we taped. Then we went over each verse with great care, aided greatly by Basilio. A few others, friends of Yangowôôr, were allowed to listen, but the entire affair was shrouded in secrecy. Everyone knew what we were up to, but for once respected privacy. An early recording was a chant with 81 verses that listed the navigational stars and anchorages encountered in an alleged trip of more than a thousand miles north from Puluwat to Namonuito and the Hall Islands, south and east to Truk, Ponape, and Kusaie, and then westward to the Mortlocks and back to Puluwat. This was matter-of-fact and not difficult to follow. But the chant that excited us, and with which this article is concerned, was so abstract that it became meaningful only after Yangowôôr's detailed and patient explanation.

Yangowôôr, Tawuweru, and other informants regard *yitang* information on Puluwat as organised into five categories. These five bodies of knowledge are thought of as being contained in five wooden bowls. The bowls are essentially domains or spheres of knowledge. They are called:

- ▶ 1. *Márewáycil*. *Márew*: a splinter or thorn in the foot causing infection and pus; hence, by extension, anger. *Cil*: a burden carried in the hands. The full meaning is given by our informant Yangowôôr as, "The enemy

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- ▶ is upon us, seize whatever makeshift weapons you can and fight". This bowl contains knowledge of war.
- ▶ 2. *Niwetipwic*. Fear of hot things. "Magic and tricks are in this bowl, the people are afraid of being harmed by them, it is regarded as hot".
- ▶ 3. *Kkónen lee cuulap*. *Kkón-*: pounded breadfruit ("poi") placed in a bowl; *-en*: third person singular attributive suffix "of". *Lee*: in. *Cuu* (Trukese): meeting. *Lap*: big. Thus, "The Poi of the Meeting".
- ▶ 4. *Kkónen fán aawu*. *Kkón-en*: poi-of. *Fán*: under. *Aawu*: mast. Thus, "Poi under the Mast". This is the bowl containing navigational lore.
- ▶ 5. *Kkónen Ayééf*. *Kkón-en*: poi-of. *Ayééf*: a vague place "to the south", perhaps New Guinea, hence "south". Thus, "Poi of the south". This is the bowl of breadfruit knowledge.

Kkónen, although literally meaning pounded breadfruit, refers in these bowls of knowledge to work, skills, and stores of information of any kind having to do with secret words and meanings—that is to say, *yitang* lore. Breadfruit is used here as a figure of speech for knowledge. And the breadfruit of knowledge is contained in all five bowls, even though the names of only three of them include the word for pounded breadfruit, and even though only the last contains knowledge about breadfruit in that word's literal meaning.

Thus, the Puluwat people classify *yitang* information into five categories: war, magic, meetings, navigation, and breadfruit.

Non-*yitang* knowledge is organised differently. Some skills are called *háák* (pandanus mat), e.g., *hákinpwe* (mat of divination). Or the word for the sleeping mat, *loh*, may be used, e.g., *lohanppalô* (mat of navigator). Tawuweru refers to his non-*yitang* navigational knowledge as his *kiyen nóómw* (mat of the atoll; *kiy-* is another name for pandanus mat and is most commonly used as a possessive classifier for such mats). The skill of canoe building is called a “rigging”, *Héllap* (Great rigging), as are the different schools of canoe carpentry, e.g., *Hálinruk* (Rope of Truk), *Hálinpátu* (Rope of the four Western Islands).

Such non-*yitang* or lay knowledge is independent of the bowls, according to Tawuweru and Yangowôôr. Thus, knowledge of the various systems of practical navigation, to use one example, extends all the way from the Western Islands westwards to the Woleais and Ulithi. It exists as a single body of information among all these islands of the central Carolines. But the knowledge of the secret meanings associated with it, the *yitang* part of navigation, is contained in Bowl 4, and is said by these Puluwat men to be unknown beyond the four Western Islands.

However, it should also be said that some other Puluwat men include lay information when describing the contents of the bowls, and it is in that context that they will say that Bowl 4 is also known west of the Western Islands. There is also another kind of overlap between spheres of knowledge, for both Yangowôôr and Tawuweru refer to use during meetings of *yitang* speech derived from items within all five bowls, not just items from Bowl 3, which is the Poi of the Meeting bowl.

It may also be said here that Dr Thomas Gladwin's notes, which refer only briefly to *yitang*, give a rather different cast to it than do Riesenber's.

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One of his informants, Ahelimwu, who has no first-hand knowledge of *yitang*, refers to it as only a mode of speech incomprehensible to the uninitiated; it related largely to island affairs, although navigators who knew the system might thus communicate in secret with other *yitang* on other islands, usually in the context of inter-island warfare. Another man, Romolow, who, like Ahelimwu, says that *yitang* long ago disappeared from Puluwat, says that only the navigators knew the speech, that it was used to command food and help on strange islands, that it was not associated with sorcery or magic but was only a method of speech which established a fraternity among those who knew it. But since other people say that a few Puluwat men do know *yitang*, since some name Tawuweru and Yangowôôr as among those who do, and since Tawuweru and Yangowôôr themselves claim such knowledge, we are inclined to put more faith in them than in contrary statements.


In the instruction of *yitang* knowledge by *yitang* teachers there are basically two schools, *Kkapahan fan aawu* (literally Talk under the Mast) and *Kkapahan fanô* (Talk on the Land). Some people say that Bowl 4 information corresponds to the first school, all the other bowls of knowledge being taught by the second *yitang* school. But according to Tawuweru, Bowl 5 belongs to a third school, *Kkapahan peliyee* (Talk of This Side, but said really to mean Talk of the South, referring to the mythical Land of the South, *Ayéér*.)

According to Yangowôôr, the first three bowls originated on Truk, the other two in the Western Islands. The Namonuito Islands and, formerly, the Hall Islands, also know the first three bowls. But Bowl 4 was founded on Puluwat, by Ppalôwelap, the god of navigation and the originator of that skill. And Bowl 5 originated with a woman of Pulusuk, very long ago; she learned it from the spirit which inhabited the decorated tie-beam of an ancient canoe-house and which instructed her at a tabooed pond on Pulusuk. So today the *yitang* knowledge contained in the first three bowls is regarded as basically Trukese, while that of the last two bowls belongs to the Western Islands.

Besides the bowls there is a further imagery involving a bundle of sticks, viewed as standing on end and held together by three twine lashings around them. These sticks comprise the knowledge in all five of the bowls. Each stick represents a chant which contains some of the items of knowledge, and each of the three lashings is also a chant. The chants do not coincide with groupings of items by bowls. Thus the middle of the three lashings, which is a chant relating the adventures of a canoe and crew which sailed from Murilo to Fana and Moen in Truk lagoon, is regarded as corresponding to part of the information in both Bowls 3 and 4 because it contains *yitang* elements concerning both meetings and navigation. The lowest of the three lashings is a chant which bears the same name as Bowl 3, *Kkónen lee cuulap*, “Poi of the Meeting”. It is this chant, as recorded from Yangowôôr, which follows. ⁴.

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1. Tine mwokitii faaw Ah, 1-3. The chief is angry.
shaking whale,
2. Tine selipeey faaw Ah,
quivering whale,
3. Nge mewaaló Toppling,

4. Nge, wóónopaaló Be calm 4-6. If the chief scolds, do not answer back.
5. O te serepwicii Without
burst of hot anger,
6. Ngó wó ta atapwana
Hasten not.
7. Si pwé weti yeían We await 7-9. The chief's mood will change, wait patiently.
the day;
8. E té maalélap The light of
dawn rises
9. Me woú ppeeylang. On the
horizon.
10. Si pwe yitiitiy We shall 10-11. We will observe the chief to see how he feels toward us.
observe,
11. Yitiitiy fáaw Observe the
whale
12. Yika e tiw caman (To see) 12-14. He will let us know whether or not he is reconciled to us. (The chief is
whether he dives brow first conceived here to be in a canoe, looking towards his people, who are on the
outrigger float.)
13. Yika e péféwókén Or his
tail dips
14. Me lee temanu waa. (As
we look) across the outrigger
float.
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15. Wo te pway 15. Do not answer back to the chief's scolding. (Coorak, which is here personified, is an
sééséngaw Coorak ointment of coconut oil and turmeric. When applied, the skin becomes slippery; the
Do not take an unfair reference here is to a person who cannot hold on to his patience. The phrase is used in
head-start, Coorak, wrestling, to ensure that both opponents begin at the same time.)
16. Yitá ko pwe 16-21. Do not attempt impossible tasks (by struggling against the chief).
mwétefiy Nor leap
17. Lókôni Polowat
Into the centre of
Puluwat,
18. Yitá ko pwe
pélôw Nor up-turn
19. Féy lee mefik
The seaweed-strewn
floor;
20. Nge e se pélo
seemw. But can one
not upturn
21. Yafe e pwe pélo
feemw? Or can one
upturn?
22. Wow taa 22-23. The chief has qualities of which we we are unaware. (Likowupwuupw, a legendary
áfamaha Treat not figure, who lives underground, is the source of all food; hence the chief is the source of all.)
as a common man
23. Néyiy
Likowupwuupw My
son Likowupwuupw
24. Yemen Kitleelé A 24-27. All ye people, take heed. (The seat of thought is the stomach; that of enlightenment,

man, Ankle,

the head; references are to four parts of the body, from low progressively to high, but the symbolism is rather from weak to strong; thus all the people are addressed, whatever their condition.)

25. Yemen itang
Eelé A man named
Knee,

26. Yemen
Řekifekiló A man,
Thought,

27. Yemen
Lamalamaló A man,
Enlightenment.

28. Si yatupu kiic We
struggle up

28-31. We are taking a difficult road. (The references are to an actual path and stone on Tol Island, Truk; Féwôôp is a high village. The implication is that to go against the chief would be a most difficult task, like this climb.)

29. Le yaleni
kacaawow The
pathway to the black
volcanic rocks,

30. I lókôn féwi máá
Past the Stone-of-
Death

31. Peliyeni Féwôôp.
Beside Féwôôp.

32. Ne yifa yiyéewe
Where is the
honoured lord,

32-33. Who will be the clever one, to be our leader: (Yífmél, here personified, in *yitang* language means "to seek".)

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33. Mwáán
ee Yífmél
The man
Yífmél?

34. E see
wônefaato
Why is he
not plucking
us a
feather?

34-37. Why does he not bring good to us, so that we can please the chief? (The heron feather, being difficult to obtain, represents anything of value. Wupwucóól, described here as a canoe, is actually roasted, charred breadfruit; the people are represented as appearing black, like the breadfruit, to the chief, i.e., they are in bad grace, but decorating with the feather, i.e., causing somehow a good impression, would mitigate the blackness.)

35. Wônán
kééré mwán
Feather of
male heron

36. Si pwal
álinge
ngenyi For
us to
decorate

37. Waa we
Wupwucóól.
The canoe
Wupwucóól,

38. Si pwe
wuwey
nganiy

38-42. We shall do our best and utmost for the chief. (The idea of "utmost" or finality is conveyed by the comparison with the very end of the sand spit to which the canoe is brought. "Best" is implied by

Which we bring the word "fish", a term of approbation when applied to the best student in a navigation or *yitang* school; here it refers to the best idea or action of the people.)

39. Wóón
meráni ppiy
To the tip of
the sand
spit

40. Pwe
yina ikéwe
Because of

41. Yikkey
le kkapah
This fish's
words

42. Yikkene
meráni ppiy.
On the tip of
the sand
spit.

43. Nge woc
fókulukul
(We are)
rather
confused,

43-45. The words of the people are unwise. (Wofofis, which means a canoe in good condition, represents the people; the tangled canoe lines are their words.)

44. Nge
woc
mwaaliel
Rather
bewildered

45. Nge
helin
Wofofis By
the lines of
Wofofis.

46. Wofofis eey yen
Wofofis
here

46-55. But the forces of wisdom will prevail. (Malôkôlap is a long reef, with no passage through it, on the eastern side of Truk atoll; the three trees mentioned have many roots, hence they also impede the progress of the canoe, which again represents the people. The reference is to natural but base human desires, which will be prevented from being gratified by the operation of higher good and traditional forces.)

47. E se
tuuficô
Unable (to
escape)

48. Pwe ye
mwôc
Because
stuck

49. Me le
Malôkôlap
At
Malôkôlap
reef

50. Pwe ye
mwôc
Because
stuck fast

51. Le
waree nô In
coconut
roots

52. Pwe ye
mwôc
Because
stuck fast

53. Le
waree
mááy. In
breadfruit
roots

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54. Pwe ye mwôc
Because stuck fast

55. Le waaree
yaawow. In banyan
roots.

56. Yáytiyeló
pówômw And your
hand points

56-63. We will take the way of good. (The path of good is pointed out; it is narrow, like the tiny opening of the netting shuttle; likewise the wreath of goodness, worn by Lónifa, who is the spirit of goodness, has a small opening.)

57. Wóón awôtiwôtiit
The forefinger,

58. Wo pwe
yitangaaló You will
point

59. Lewan ááser In
the shuttle's mouth;

60. Wo pwe
yitinganiy You will
point

61. Ma seey Lónifa
To Lónifa,

62. Pisekin weni
móng Parts (of the
wreath) on the
crown,

63. E no le makôr.
Resting on the head.

64. Pungupung iitip
Discuss (your)
desires;

64-70. The path of good is hard to follow. (Discussion of desires is a reference to the individuality of men; discussion between men is necessary in order to reconcile different opinions of what constitutes good. And the road must be traversed alone; brothers and sons must be discarded if they do not follow the way. The two canoes are a reference to the difficulty, again, of two different wills being bent to the same course.)

65. Rúuway róoy
eray (In achieving
them) men go singly

66. Ya likeláálá Their
several ways

67. E saro pwiipwi
Without relatives

68. Ye saro naynay
Without children,

69. Riyáffay nganiy
Wretched (with
desire for)

70. Rúwefóor fale fé.
Two newly hewn
(toy) canoes.

71. Ya likateete (The
canoes) have gone
their ways Piseiki lee
waa (With the)
trappings of the
canoes.

71-72. (The two canoes, mentioned in 73-78, represent the spirits of good and evil, which each person follows. The trappings refer to all the different feelings and thoughts a person has, and their connection with one another.)

73. Waan Orofaas
Orofaas's canoe

73-75. All will be well in the end. (Orofaas is literally rain cloud, but again refers to the spirit of good. The sea crevice is a reference to the final, last place in the world where peace and good prevail.)

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74. Faseló yipwan
Makes an imprint

75. Meseni póóy íéé In
the sea crevice.

76. Waan Ineluufa
Ineluufa's canoe

76-78. Evil-doers are punished. (Ineluufa is the spirit of evil. People who follow this canoe have a hard time; the tooth-grinding is their pain; the crowded place represents hardship. This is in contrast to Orofaas's canoe.)

77. E lôôw singérôngér
(Is) chewing, grinding
the teeth.

78. Llóón afeŷeyng In a
crowded place.

79. (Absent in Elbert's
recording) Don't show
off at Piyepwápwa

79. Avoid overweening pride wherever you may be. (Piyepwápwa is a particular sandbar, but here stands for all sandbars and all places.)

80. (Absent in Elbert's
recording) Planted,
planted, come back

80. Go your way (the meaning of the phrase "planted, planted"; i.e., follow your will, for good or evil) but bear in mind that you must return (and subject yourself to the will of the chiefs).

81. Wofii rem maan
Beings (or birds) recall
their walks.

81. Whatever you are doing (walking or other pastimes) remember to think of good and evil.

82. Yiye sôôsô Flying

82-83. Good and evil visit us all. (It is the two spirits that are flying; the waves they fly over represent the people. Their action is likened to navigators seeking seamarks.)

83. Wey rimw nóónó
Over the waves.

84. Wo pwe
pukonékuw Bind
together

84-85. Bear tightly in mind the words of good counsel. (The bird represents Orofaas, the good spirit. At sea navigators are reminded where the land lies by the flight of birds. Thus the good spirit recalls to one where good resides.)

85. Maani reki fanô
Beings (birds) think of
land.

86. Lametiw, lametá
Thoughts below,
thoughts above,

86-87. Think of good and evil under all conditions.

87. Lamerekitip
Thoughts and musing
in the heart.

88. Tipe na anaayfiir
Heart treats well.

89. Wó te wolupélupa
Let not shake

88. But the best thought of all is of love of children.

89-90. Do not confuse good and evil. (The coconut of light is a reference to the stomach, which is the seat of knowledge. The liquid of the coconut is knowledge. "Do not shake" is an admonition not to mix together ideas of good and evil.)

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90. Rani nô sefam. The water of the coconut of light.

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¹ The authors were two of three participants in an expedition to Puluwat in 1967. The third member was Dr Thomas Gladwin, then of the National Institute of Mental Health in Washington, now of the University of Hawaii. Riesenbergr was supported by the Smithsonian Research Foundation, Grant Sg 0611030. Elbert wishes to acknowledge support in the field by National Science Foundation Grant GS 1410 and by the University of Hawaii. Time for writing up the data was made possible by an appointment as senior colleague at the East-West Center, 1969-70.

² Goodenough 1951:144.

³ Fischer 1957:173.

⁴ In the chant the English punctuation, where it differs from that used in the Pulu-watese, is intended only for readability. The Puluwat punctuation reflects Yangowôôr's delivery. His delivery, as recorded, might be considered a form of rhythmic recitation, different from both conversation and chanting. Each verse without final punctuation in the transcription ended with a pronounced pitch rise on the final vowel. The question in verse 21 seemed to incorporate a rise in the second syllable not noticeable in the other verses ending with higher pitch. Thirteen verses ended with /./ . Yangowôôr said that a speaker might either recite in some such fashion as this or chant and that he himself knew both styles (he demonstrated chanting), but for this particular song he recited only as indicated here. Transcription, in contrast with the great difficulties of interpretation, presented few problems, other than the many strange words, including some Trukese words and substitutions of Trukese "s" for Puluwat "h". A few vowels were lengthened or shortened, but entire syllables were not omitted, as in chanting. Any kind of rhyme is lacking. Most but not all verses contain six syllables. Repetition of words and regular substitutions are found in verses 16-19, 24-27, 48-55, 67-68. Verses 79 and 80, which were included in the first, informal, recitation to Riesenbergr, were omitted in Elbert's recording of the chant. His recording contained about 24 additional verses, not included in the analysis. The consonant phonemes in the Puluwat language are /p pw t c k f s h m mw n ng l f r y w/. /c/ is an alveolar affricate, /ng/ a velar fricative, /f/ a trill; /r/ is not trilled and is much like an English *r*. The vowels are front unrounded /i e á/, central unrounded /ô é a/, and back rounded /u o ó/. Long vowels are doubled. The text appears to be a mixture of Trukese and Puluwat, with more Trukese than Puluwat. Most words in the text with /c/ are Trukese; Puluwat /r/ corresponds to /c/ in Truk. Similarly most words with /s/ are Trukese; Puluwat /h/ corresponds to Trukese /s/.