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East is Not a 'Big Bird': The Etymology of the Star Altair in the Carolinian Sidereal Compass

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Abstract

We argue that the Micronesian constellation centered on Altair, known in Lamotrek as Mailap, has been mistakenly identified in previous literature with another constellation centered on Sirius, known as Mannap. The latter is literally the 'Big Bird' and is well known in parts of Polynesia as well. Confusing this Big Bird with Altair has led to much confusion in the literature on Carolinian navigational arts. We trace the history of how this error arose and why it has persisted over time, and we also suggest an alternate etymology for Mailap.

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East is Not a 'Big Bird': The Etymology of the Star Altair in the Carolinian Sidereal Compass

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We argue that the Micronesian constellation centered on Altair, known in Lamotrek as Mailap, has been mistakenly identified in previous literature with another constellation centered on Sirius, known as Mannap. The latter is literally the 'Big Bird' and is well known in parts of Polynesia as well. Confusing this Big Bird with Altair has led to much confusion in the literature on Carolinian navigational arts. We trace the history of how this error arose and why it has persisted over time, and we also suggest an alternate etymology for Mailap.

The title of Thomas Gladwin's (1970) well-known book on Carolinian navigational arts, *East is a Big Bird*, asserts an etymology for the star known in English as Altair. Here we reexamine that proposed etymology in order to explain how the appellation Big Bird came to be associated with East throughout much of the literature on Pacific voyaging and navigation. Unraveling this mistake requires a careful accounting of the history of the study of Micronesian navigation as well as the historical linguistics of the Chuukic languages.

Gladwin writes that "on Puluwat the cardinal direction is east, under the rising of Altair, the 'Big Bird'" (1970:148). This gloss is found also in David Lewis's book *We, the navigators*, which recounts the author's voyaging with Puluwat navigator Hipour (D. Lewis 1972:130). Neither Gladwin nor Lewis cites a Puluwatese form, but it is clear that they intend the gloss 'big bird' as a literal translation of the Chuukic name for the star Altair. Subsequent authors are more explicit in asserting a Chuukic form. Stephen Thomas's book *The last navigator*, based on his work with Satawal navigator Mau Piki-lug, describes Altair as "the cardinal direction, east, under Mailap, the 'Big Bird'" (1987:83). Ben Finney also cites a Satawalese form, noting that "the compass is not oriented on due east, but on rising Altair (*Mailap*: 'Big Bird')" (2007:160) [*italics original*].

The sidereal compass is widely used throughout the Caroline Islands, and the names for the navigational stars are largely cognate through the Chuukic languages of western Micronesia. Goodenough (1953) provides names for the star Altair in several Chuukic language varieties, including Satawalese *mailap*, Puluwatese *mailap* (Elbert 1972), and Woleaian *mailap* (Sohn and Tawerilmang 1976). The name reconstructs as Proto-Central



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