Introduction

Micronesia—"the tiny islands," as they were labeled by a nineteenth-century French naval captain—live up to their name. A couple of the largest are about one hundred square miles, but most are far smaller, the smallest with a land area of no more than a few acres. There are close to two thousand of them in all, but only about one hundred are inhabited. They include mountainous volcanic islands, slabs of continental shelf, and coral atolls that rise only a few feet above sea level.

The islands stretch in a long arc more than two thousand miles across the northwestern Pacific close to the equator. The term "Micronesia," as we will use it here, includes Palau in the extreme west, the Marshall Islands at the eastern end, and everything in between—that is to say, what is now called the Federated States of Micronesia, which includes the four states of Yap, Chuuk, Pohnpei, and Kosrae. There are other island groups that might be called part of Micronesia in the broad sense of the term—Guam and the Mariana Islands, Kiribati and Nauru—but we will not be discussing them in this book. Let me note, however, that much of what is written here would probably also apply to these groups.

The History

Micronesia was first settled a century or two before the Christian Era by seafarers who had worked their way from Taiwan down the islands off East Asia and moved into the Melanesian islands to the south. Even before they sailed north to occupy the uninhabited islands of
eastern and central Micronesia, others from offshore Asia settled in Palau and Yap.

It wasn’t until the 1500s, when Spanish ships began crossing the Pacific in search of the highly prized goods from the “Spice Islands” and the Orient, that the islands of Micronesia began appearing on western maps. The sporadic visits to these islands during the Age of Discovery were followed by a two-hundred-year lull in European voyages to the Pacific, while Europeans attended to their own wars. In the 1800s contact between the West and Micronesian islanders resumed, as China traders and whaleships crisscrossed the Pacific on commercial voyages and European and American naval expeditions set about mapping the region.

In the early 1850s the first missionaries, American Protestants, arrived in the islands. They were followed thirty years later by Catholic missionaries. By the end of the century Christianity was well established throughout island Micronesia. So was the copra trade, which allowed islanders to acquire basic western goods such as iron cooking utensils, steel tools, cloth and clothing, guns, and select imported foods. During the century Micronesians had adopted a western religion, hosted a number of resident beachcombers and traders, learned a smattering of English, acquired some foreign goods, and picked up some familiarity with western ways. Still, their basic island cultural system remained intact.

A century of colonial rule over the islands began in 1885 when Spain laid claim to the Caroline Islands and Germany annexed the Marshall Islands. It was the age of colonization when western powers were carving up the developing world and seizing colonies as status symbols if not for their raw materials. The United States acquired its own first colonies at about this time: Guam, Puerto Rico, the Philippines, and American Samoa. In 1899, following the Spanish-American War, Germany took over Spain’s holdings in the Carolines and so laid claim to just about all of Micronesia.

At the outbreak of World War I in 1914, Japan seized the islands from Germany and later legitimized its rule when Micronesia was recognized as a League of Nations mandate at the end of the war. Japan established the first public education system in the islands. It also undertook large-scale development projects that included phosphate mining, sugar cultivation, fishing, and pearling. To provide the labor
needed for all this, Japan brought in so many of its own citizens that Japanese outnumbered islanders in Micronesia even before the start of World War II.

The islands were surrendered by Japan to the United States at the end of the war. (For the third time colonial rule had passed from one power to another as a result of a war.) Just as Japan had exercised authority over the islands with the blessings of the League of Nations, the United States now administered the islands as a trust territory of the United Nations. Soon the trappings of western democracy were introduced to the islands: popular elections, the chartering of municipalities, and the councils that would later become legislative bodies in each island group. But the infrastructure that the Japanese had built up before the war was not restored, so the island economy remained a shadow of what it had been during the height of Japanese productivity.

During the 1960s, the United States stepped up its budget and its expectations of its island ward. As the trust territory’s subsidy grew each year, education and health services were expanded and thousands more islanders were added to the government payroll. The first local law-making body was set up for the territory, and plans were laid for determining a future political status for the islands. Meanwhile, the size of towns grew as hundreds moved in to seek cash employment. Soon Micronesia had the groundwork for a dual economy: a cash economy in some of the towns superimposed on a traditional subsistence economy in more rural areas.

Micronesians initiated political status negotiations with the United States and convoked a constitutional convention in 1975. Three years later the United States granted the islands self-rule. By that time the former trust territory was forever dissolved, for the islands had split into several political units. While the Northern Mariana Islands remained attached to the United States as a commonwealth, the remainder of the trust territory broke up into the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), the Republic of Palau, and the Republic of the Marshall Islands. Although the three governments began to function by 1979, several years passed before the three nations were recognized as independent and became full members of the United Nations. Official recognition came in 1986 for FSM and the Marshalls, and in 1992 for Palau.

The three island nations, although now independent, are bound to the United States by a Compact of Free Association. This compact
grants the United States certain military and defense rights, while providing yearly financial assistance to the island nations. Even so, the economy in these countries has been largely stagnant since independence. A great number of islanders have been emigrating to the United States in search of the jobs they cannot find on their own islands.

The Islands

Marshalls (population 53,000). This easternmost part of Micronesia is composed of two chains of coral atolls running north and south. Crops and plant life are fewer and rainfall lighter on these coral atolls than in other parts of Micronesia. In the past pandanus was one of the chief staple foods. Despite its limited resources, the Marshalls had a Polynesian-like authority system headed by paramount chiefs, or irooj, that distinguished it from other coral atolls in the region. Chiefly authority in the Marshalls even today remains stronger than in any other part of Micronesia. Marshallese, like many other Micronesian peoples, derive their membership in a clan and lineage from their mother. At one time people may have tended to live in lineage groups on parcels of land inherited from their mothers, but residence groups are now more mixed.

The Marshalls is an independent nation today. Its capital is located in Majuro, an atoll that contains over half of the population of the country. Kwajalein, the other heavily populated atoll, is the site of a U.S. missile range that has been in operation for over fifty years. Hundreds of Marshallese living on nearby islands in the atoll hold jobs on the Kwajalein base.

Kosrae (population 6,600). Kosrae, now a state in FSM, is a single high island with a cultural tradition that was once very similar to Pohnpei’s. During the nineteenth century, however, Kosrae suffered a drastic loss of population brought on by western diseases that left the island with only three hundred people by the end of the century. As a consequence, many of the traditional institutions collapsed. They were replaced by social and political structures introduced by the American Protestant missionaries then working on the island. All but a few of the people in Kosrae today are members of the Protestant Church. Rank and prestige are acquired through church office or a high position in the government. Married couples usually live on the husband’s land as
part of a larger kin group. Many Kosraeans still support themselves by cultivating breadfruit and taro and by fishing, but the island has lost nearly two thousand people in the last ten years due to emigration.

**Pohnpei** (population 36,000). Pohnpei is the capital of the Federated States of Micronesia. The high island of Pohnpei, with an area of about one hundred square miles, is one of the largest in Micronesia. In addition, the state includes seven coral atolls, some with different languages. In contrast with Chuuk and the coral atolls in central Micronesia, Pohnpei has always had a strongly developed chiefly system. There are five chiefdoms on the main island, each headed by its own high chief (Nahnmwarki) and under-chief (Nahniken). Offerings of traditional prestige foods at feasts and funerals—pigs, yams, and kava (called sakau)—have always been a major feature of the culture. Although the society is organized into matrilineages, children inherit their land from their father and married couples usually reside on the husband’s family estate. Pohnpeians in rural areas generally live in homesteads scattered over the countryside rather than in the more compact villages that are found in other parts of Micronesia.

**Chuuk** (population 49,000). The heart of this state in FSM is a barrier reef embracing a number of rather small volcanic islands. This center, Chuuk Lagoon, is surrounded by several coral atolls to the north, west, and south, a few of which have retained even to the present their traditional dress of loincloths and lavalavas. Authority was so fragmented that individual islands were seldom unified under a single chief, and this island group still remains much more politically fragmented than other parts of Micronesia. This has hampered the development of the state, with the result that the education system and infrastructure lag behind most other island groups in Micronesia. In recent years thousands of Chuukese have emigrated to the United States to seek employment and good education.

The main social unit has always been the lineage group, descended from a single living woman. The staple crops in Chuuk are breadfruit and taro. In contrast to most other parts of Micronesia, women in Chuuk do offshore fishing while men work in the taro patches and pick breadfruit.

**Yap** (population 11,000). This westernmost state in the FSM is divided into two different cultural and language groups: a cluster of high islands with its own distinct language, and a chain of coral
atolls in which people speak a language closely related to Chuukese. This state has the reputation of being the most traditional of all the island groups in Micronesia. Until the early 1970s men walked around town in Yap wearing loincloths while women dressed in grass skirts. Although most have now adopted western clothing, Yapese retain a deep respect for their cultural ways. Women work in the taro patches to produce the staple item of the diet, while men fish. The villages of Yap are tightly organized and ranked according to a caste system, with each village having its own chief and council. In the main islands of Yap, unlike the rest of Micronesia, the patrilineal kin group—the one traced through the father’s side—is dominant.

The four thousand people living in the coral atolls near Yap practice a much simpler way of life. They subsist on fish and taro or breadfruit, wear their traditional dress (loincloth and lavalava), and even today carry on the long-distance canoe voyages for which their islands are famous. Like Chuuk, these islands are strongly matrilineal and have a political system that is much weaker than most parts of Micronesia.

**Palau (population 20,000).** This group of high islands, the largest
landmass of all Micronesia, shares many of Yap’s social and political features. It is divided into villages, or districts, each under the authority of a chief and council. As in Yap, the women traditionally worked in the taro patches while the men gathered the fruits of the sea. Palau, too, is a matrilineal society, but married couples generally resided on the husband’s family’s estate. In one major respect, however, Yap and Palau differ greatly. Palau has always had the reputation of being the first and fastest island group to modernize. Long before the other islands, it sent off hundreds of young people to school and young adults to find work outside Palau. The intense competition at every level of traditional Palauan society has carried over to the present, helping it modernize as well as it has. Today it is considered the most economically advanced group in Micronesia and forms a separate nation, the Republic of Palau.