CHAPTER 1

Introduction

A Perspective on Traditional Micronesian Life

“Micronesia” is the name scientists have given to a vast expanse of islands in the central and western Pacific Ocean, and the people who live on these islands have long been called Micronesians. This is not, of course, their traditional name for themselves—indeed, they had none. At least some of them, though, being intrepid voyagers and skilled navigators, have always had a good sense of where all the islands lie, who lives on them, and how to sail among them. The peoples, societies, and cultures of these islands have a great deal in common, and it makes sense to speak of them as a whole. This is a book about them and about the ways in which they have lived their lives. Aspects of their lives have always been changing, and the kinds of changes and the rates at which they have changed have increased since the arrival of outsiders in the nineteenth century. Although much of Micronesian social life continues to reflect these traditional outlooks and practices, so much has changed in recent generations that many young Micronesians today do not clearly understand what their ancestors’ lives were like.

I wrote this book as a means of providing a perspective on traditional Micronesian life not only to outsiders who would like to know more about the peoples of these islands, then, but also to help younger Micronesians understand and appreciate the extraordinary achievements of their peoples. While I have tried to be as exact and as accurate as I possibly can in presenting this material, there is little doubt in my own mind that a part of what I am doing is celebrating traditional Micronesian societies. The people of Micronesia, and especially of Pohnpei, have been consistently welcoming, hospitable, and open to me for well over three decades now, and this book is a form of homage to them, an expression of gratitude for all they have taught me, both about their own lives and about myself.

Micronesia’s islands are for the most part strikingly beautiful places, and they are, when the weather is good (which is most of the time), very pleasant places to live. But life there, especially on the low-lying atolls, can be difficult in times of
drought and when typhoons strike. More than anything else, I believe, it is the social organization of Micronesian communities that has enabled them to survive and even to thrive under these conditions. Micronesians have forged systematic human relations within and between communities, ensuring that everyone works consistently at promoting the general welfare. Virtually everything a Micronesian possesses is shared with family and neighbors, and every family and community is connected by a web of strands to many other islands and communities. In this way, everyone is ensured of being cared for and protected when in need.

The central point of this book, around which all the other themes revolve, is simple: Micronesian societies are organized around interlocking lineages and clans. Lineages are relatively small groups, for the most part located within single communities. Each lineage is a segment of a larger clan, which in turn has numerous lineages dispersed among many different communities and on many separate islands. It is the dispersed character of the clans that provides Micronesians with networks of support, but it is the lineages, with their patterns of face-to-face interaction, that typify the flow of daily life. The lineages possess land and control political titles, regulate marriages, provide the matrix within which child rearing takes place, and in general endow individual Micronesians with a sense of personal identity. Micronesians draw upon their families’ lands and the landscapes and seascapes of their home islands for some part of their sense of self, and they draw as well upon their communities. But their personas as members of these communities are formed in the lineages in which they are raised, and as actors in the social dramas of everyday life they are always rooted in their lineages.

In order to describe and explain Micronesian societies, I have broken social life into a number of distinct topics. I make these distinctions purely for purposes of clarity and explanation—in real life all these elements are woven seamlessly into one another. The chapters of this book represent my understandings of how particular aspects of Micronesian societies work. After the present introduction, I begin with a chapter meant to give an overview of just what I think Micronesia is (and a brief consideration of scholars’ debates about whether Micronesia actually exists as a genuine or meaningful region) and what it includes. This is followed by an account of how Micronesia was originally settled, how its peoples adapted to conditions there, and how several basic adaptations diffused throughout the islands. I then consider the fundamental matters of descent (ideas about how individuals and groups are bound together through the ties of kinship) and descent groups (that is, the practical organization of the kin groups). Next I take up the closely interlinked subjects of households and families, and land and labor. Two chapters cover sociopolitical life, the first focusing on chieftainship and government, the second on politics and leadership. I then turn to art, religion, and values. Finally, I examine a number of exceptions to the common Micronesian patterns of social life.
Many books have been written about events and societies in Micronesia, but only William Alkire’s *An Introduction to the Peoples and Cultures of Micronesia* has attempted to describe at length the nature of traditional Micronesian society and culture. Alkire’s book appeared more than thirty years ago and for the most part draws upon the same sources I use here. My approach, however, is quite different from Alkire’s. He chose to treat the individual island societies sequentially and discretely, covering, for example, Palau, Chuuk, and the Marshall Islands as separate topics. This approach reflects what has perhaps been the most common way of thinking about Micronesia: that is, that while there are important commonalities among its many societies, each is distinct and deserves to be considered primarily on its own terms. I have decided to write about Micronesia from a quite different perspective. What attracts my attention is not just the similarities among the many societies but my sense that these similarities exist for reasons. It is not simply that the islands are in relative proximity and have influenced one another, but rather that some common patterns of social organization proved to be so useful that they were in time adopted by all these peoples. To this end, then, I have organized my account around themes and explored both the ways in which these themes can be encountered on all the islands and the ways they work themselves out in distinctly different styles on individual islands. That is, while I am by no means suggesting that society and culture are identical throughout Micronesia, I am insisting that the commonalities are far more telling than the differences.

In the best of all worlds a writer has a very clear notion of just whom he or she is writing for. I have written this book, however, with a somewhat ambiguous sense of who my readership is, and that has made it difficult for me to adopt an appropriate and consistent style. I have in fact written this for three different audiences, with different needs and expectations. I would like to think that this will be used in college and university anthropology classes on Pacific islands societies, as an introduction to the peoples of Micronesia and as a systematic exploration of the ways in which traditional Oceanic societies have adapted to the conditions they have faced. To that end, I have tried not to take for granted readers’ knowledge about much at all concerning the area. Second, I have hopes that this will be available in Micronesia, and that Micronesians, particularly young people, will turn to it for an accessible, reliable, and respectful account of their ancestors’ lives and as a worthwhile attempt to explain why Micronesians do things the way they do them. Finally, I have at the same time written this with my professional colleagues in mind. There is a small but dedicated core of scholars who continue to explore and puzzle over the nature and history of Oceanic societies, of how and why they came to be the way they are. There are points at which I have shied away from trying to explain just why certain aspects of Micronesian social life are the way they are, but I have tried resolutely to demonstrate just how most of these facets are linked with one another, how they function, and, to the extent I am able, how they came to be.
I decided, after much thought, to avoid too much speculation; while there are a few places where I’ve gone out on a limb, particularly in the matter of what I call the prehistoric “breadfruit revolution,” I assume that to the extent that this work will be useful to a wide variety of readers, it will have to be reliable, and that means not speculating about too much.

I refer continually to “traditional Micronesian societies.” I spend considerable time in chapter 2 discussing what actually constitutes Micronesia, but I should explain right here that I use the term in its historical sense, referring to all the islands and peoples of the region. In recent years there has been a tendency to restrict the term “Micronesian” to just the citizens of the Federated States of Micronesia (that is, the central and eastern Caroline Islands). While the contemporary political scene cannot be ignored, of course, in historical terms the web of connections among all of these island peoples is of much greater importance than the rather restricted definitions of today’s nation-states. I use “Micronesian” throughout this book to refer to all the peoples of Palau, the Marianas, the Marshalls, Kiribati, and Nauru as well as the FSM.

I should also take a moment here to explain what I mean by “traditional,” a term anthropologists of necessity often use but one about which they do not always agree. I do not for a moment imagine that Micronesia was essentially stable, quiet, and unchanging for millennia. My chapter on island prehistory makes it clear that significant changes have been taking place pretty much throughout the two thousand–plus years that Micronesia has been inhabited. But the very existence of a common framework for organizing social life tells us that a basic pattern proved so successful that it was adopted throughout the area and retained for a very long time. It is this shared pattern, characteristic of all Micronesian societies in the nineteenth century, when most European contact got under way, to which I refer when I speak of “traditional society.” It was quickly and dramatically transformed in some places, such as the Marianas (where it was forcibly destroyed by the Spanish) and Kosrae (where epidemics nearly wiped out the entire population). It lasted until quite recently on some of the smaller and more isolated of the Caroline atolls. And it has undergone a gradual and erratic transformation in most of the islands, as a result of trade for commercially manufactured goods, conversion to Christianity, colonialism, and war. I discuss the impact of these changes in the epilogue, linking them directly to the later history of the islands, as the Micronesians have grappled with the forces of colonialism, world war, decolonization, and, most recently, independence.

I have given a great deal of thought to just what tense to write this book in and, quite frankly, have never arrived at an entirely satisfactory conclusion. Much of what I describe here lies squarely in the past, and it is possible that by using the present tense I will confuse some readers into thinking that all these patterns of
behavior still exist. I have in the end, however, decided to risk this misunderstanding in order to make the larger, and what I think is the more important, point: that despite the many changes that have taken place, life in Micronesia is still profoundly Micronesian. I write consistently in the present tense (with occasional exceptions) partly as a means of avoiding the confusion that would follow if I were to shift back and forth between past and present, and partly because I want to emphasize the continuities in Micronesian life. Patterns of descent group organization, household composition, and political process are no longer what they once were, to be sure, but they remain much more Micronesian than not.2

There are, of course, problematic aspects in this approach. We have very little in the way of reliable ethnographic reporting on any Micronesian societies that were not already appreciably affected by powerful outside influences. There are only a handful of trustworthy accounts of traditional Micronesian belief systems. Likewise, political processes on most Micronesian islands were in some ways already influenced by depopulation and the interference of colonial administrations by the time they were described. And nearly all of them were engaging in some form of trade relations with outsiders, either European of Japanese.

I would like to say something clear and consistent about using early historical sources—that is, the writings of explorers, traders, castaways, and missionaries—but I find that their powers of observation and critical analysis varied enormously. In all honesty, I have no systematic means of evaluating their reliability. To take but one example, the Irish sailor James O’Connell was shipwrecked on Pohnpei in the late 1820s, lived there for several years, and later published a lengthy account of his experiences. Saul Riesenberg produced a critical edition of this work. As the distinguished Pacific historian H.E. Maude (editor of the series in which it appeared) put it in his introduction, the worth of O’Connell’s account “as a main ethnographical source on Micronesian culture is largely invalidated if it is accepted uncritically at its face value.” Maude says that in his annotations to the edition, Riesenberg describes a “maze of exaggerations, anachronisms, improbabilities, and outright fabrications, commingled with thoroughly accurate and original observations.” Some of O’Connell’s statements “are flagrantly incorrect,” “apparent falsehoods,” “far from reality,” or “deliberate untruths” (Maude in O’Connell 1972, 5, 18–20). I nevertheless find that O’Connell, because he lacked the ulterior motives of missionaries and administrators (most of whom sought to portray Micronesians as being in dire need of intervention on behalf of European and American civilization) and because he spent vastly more time in one place than any of the explorers, was a remarkably candid observer (although he also, of course, wanted to sell books), and his descriptions of many aspects of daily life are invaluable. I know of no simple, straightforward way to explain how it is that I have decided what parts of his work to distrust and which parts to make use of.
And this in fact holds true for the ways I use all the available sources, including those of trained ethnographers. In the end, I have to acknowledge that I consider myself able to write this book only because I have spent lengthy periods over the course of more than half my life living on Pohnpei, in Pohnpeian homes, speaking Pohnpeian, and getting to know individual Pohnpeians as they have lived their lives and grown and changed through the years (and I have also traveled throughout the rest of the region). I believe that, as a consequence of these experiences, I have developed a sense of what to believe and what to discount. I have engaged in decades-long conversations about aspects of Micronesian life with a number of others whose judgments I have come to value and trust. I do not assume that what I know about life on Pohnpei today gives me an entirely clear picture of what life was like there 150 years ago or of what other Micronesian societies are like, but it does provide me with an excellent lens through which to view both Pohnpei’s past and the rest of Micronesia. How I have chosen to draw upon written sources, then, is of a piece with all that I write here. It is rooted in what I have elsewhere described as the process of struggle that lies at the core of ethnography (Petersen 2005).

Ethnography is not simply the description of cultures; it is also, I think, a necessarily and inherently critical activity. It requires struggle: the ongoing struggle between trying to see what is actually happening and trying to put it into an interpretive framework; the struggle, once one has arrived at tentative conclusions, to then continue paying attention to what is actually going on; and the struggle between seeing patterns of social behavior and losing sight of individual actors engaged in living their own lives. These struggles include the willingness to appreciate tensions between the different aspects of direct observation and interpretation, and between the actions of individuals and collective patterns, and the recognition that a successful attempt to resolve the contradictions in what one sees in and understands about a society should not reconcile them away. This struggle can lead us toward an appreciation of how the countervailing forces and tendencies within societies work to preserve the whole.

This book is at least as much an ethnographic account as it is a work in ethnology. The distinction between ethnography and ethnology, never particularly clear to anyone not immersed in these fields in the first place, is one that has largely disappeared or at least dissipated in recent decades. While “ethnography” has generally referred to the study of individual societies or cultures and to published accounts of them, “ethnology” refers to scientific attempts to explain relations among cultures and the processes of development that shape them. Ethnology today, ironically, is practiced for the most part by archaeologists, whose interests in the patterns of historical development sometimes outweigh their concern with the complexities of what has actually been observed. This book is something
of a hybrid. It is ethnographic in outlook, in that it seeks to faithfully describe Micronesian cultures, but it is equally ethnological in intent, because it is meant to explain both how multiple aspects of Micronesian societies are integrated with one another and how these came to be so widely diffused across the islands.

About Micronesia

I discuss the general character of Micronesian societies in chapter 2, and their prehistory in chapter 3, but a brief introduction to the islands themselves and the seas around them—an account of the natural world the Micronesians occupy—is called for.

Micronesia extends across the Western Pacific Ocean from the southwest islands of Palau and the northernmost islands of the Marianas archipelago eastward to the northern outliers of the Marshall Islands’ Ratak chain and the southern islands of Kiribati. The latitude at the northern extremity of the Marianas is approximately 20 degrees north and at the southern tip of Kiribati, 2 degrees south, but most of Micronesia lies between 5 and 10 degrees north of the equator. The island of Tobi, at the western edge of Micronesia, lies at 131 degrees east longitude, and Arorae in Kiribati, the easternmost island, lies at 177 degrees east. This is a distance of approximately 3,100 statute miles, that is, roughly the same distance that lies between the east and west coasts of the United States.

There are many different kinds of islands in Micronesia, and diverse ways to count their numbers. Several are relatively large (over one hundred square miles), most are quite small (less than a mile square in area), and some reefs and shoals are barely awash. Many of the atolls include numerous reef islets, and in enumerating islands it is important to distinguish between inhabited, sociologically meaningful units and simple raw numbers of physical units. It is also important to keep in mind that the atolls, though comprising only tiny bits of dry land, often have vast expanses of lagoon, and that it is the marine resources of these lagoons that provide most of the basic subsistence for the atoll populations. In Bruce Karolle’s summary (1993, 41) there are 123 island population units (or inhabited islands) and over 2,200 individual islets and reefs, altogether totaling a little more than one thousand square miles of dry land.

The islands have been (and are still being) formed by a variety of processes. In general there are three basic island types: continental and volcanic (known as high islands), and coral (low islands). The continental islands—Palau, Yap, and the Marianas—rest on the eastern edge of the Philippine tectonic plate and are composed of essentially the same archaic geological materials as eastern Asia. The Pacific plate dives beneath the Philippine plate at this point, in a process known as subduction, and this feature marks what is known as the andesite line. To the east...
lies the Pacific basin proper, and its seafloor is composed primarily of andesite, a form of basalt. At many points along the sea bottom there are weak spots or cracks through which molten magma flows upward in what are known as plumes, forming undersea volcanoes. Some of these grow so large that they eventually breach the ocean surface, forming the volcanic islands. The intense weathering processes of the equatorial climate erode these islands away. Their soils are fertile but thin; because of the climate they support dense vegetation, and the Micronesians have developed agricultural systems that in many ways mimic the natural vegetation, with a variety of tree and root crops, especially breadfruit, coconut, yams, and taros.

Coral reefs form around all these islands and provide rich habitats for myriad varieties of sea life. As the volcanic islands erode, over the course of millions of years, reefs that were initially joined to the shoreline (fringing reefs) are transformed into freestanding rings that encircle the island (barrier reefs) and are in time left surrounding nothing but open lagoons, thus forming atolls. The relentless battering of currents, storms, and typhoons fragments the reefs, and at points where the shattered coral collects, islets slowly build up. Because of the porous character of the underlying coral, seawater filters in beneath these islets, but freshwater (which has a lower density) from the abundant rains floats atop the salt water in what is known as a lens. By digging down into the sand and coral and fashioning pits that are saturated with this freshwater, atoll dwellers are able to grow several kinds of taro, which serve as the staple crops of nearly all the atolls. The hybrid breadfruit varieties characteristic of Micronesia thrive in the salty atoll soils (unlike most other breadfruit), and while the atolls are not as fertile and productive as the higher islands, they can be fruitful, and many have supported dense populations.

Micronesian populations do not appear ever to have grown as large as those of some Polynesian island chains (e.g., Hawai‘i). There are many reasons for this, but tropical diseases do not seem to have been chief among them. It is quite possible that the primary check on Micronesia’s population growth has been the climate. In the best of times, the islands are spectacularly bountiful, but weather conditions at times prevail against life there.

Nearly all of Micronesia lies within or along the edge of the Intertropical Convergence Zone, a wide band of low-pressure air that runs along or near the equator. Heavy rainfall and much storm activity are associated with this phenomenon, and its precise location is unstable, tending at times to drift northward or south. This zone is particularly affected by what climatologists call the El Niño–Southern Oscillation (ENSO, more popularly known simply as El Niño). During these El Niño periods the entire climate of the region shifts, and vast areas that normally receive abundant rainfall can experience prolonged droughts. The largest islands,
such as Pohnpei, are relatively protected by their deeply saturated surfaces, but smaller islands, and especially the atolls, may be devastated during these periods (which typically last for six months to a year or so).

The solar energy that heats these tropical waters also generates frequent storm activity, powerful typhoons, and occasional super-typhoons of unbelievable intensity. The atolls and smaller islands are often overwhelmed by storms and typhoons, and walls of seawater driven ahead of the winds—storm surges—flow over the atolls and inundate their crops, rendering the gardens sterile. Low islanders must abandon their homes following these depredations and voyage to islands that have escaped the full brunt of the storms. While the high islands are not quite so vulnerable, a direct hit by a major typhoon can destroy most vegetation on even a high island and cause considerable disruption.

The combination of these aspects of the Micronesian climate help explain important aspects of Micronesian social organization and culture. During the best of times the islands are fruitful, pleasant places to live. But they are subject, if not regularly then at least recurrently, to weather-induced destruction. They are far too valuable to abandon, but they can be inhabited only by peoples who have developed means of preserving themselves in the wake of typhoons and droughts. And it is the extraordinary webs of ties binding the individual populations of Micronesian islands that characterize social life there. Micronesia’s dispersed matrilineal clans are elegantly adapted to this task. All Micronesians are, through their mothers, members of dispersed clans and, through their fathers, have close ties to additional clans. Each clan has member lineages resident on a number of islands. When extreme hardship visits any given island, its people are able to call upon these connections, journey to other islands, and settle for a time with close relatives while they rehabilitate the damaged gardens.

There are striking differences between the situations of the high and low islanders, and yet their lives are in most ways profoundly similar. The low islanders are above all else focused on the seas that surround them. They derive an overwhelmingly important portion of their subsistence from their lagoons and from the open ocean. For men, deep-sea voyaging skills and esoteric navigational knowledge lie at the pinnacle of all that is deemed worthy. High islanders are more focused on their gardens and on producing foodstuffs that can be given away at feasts, so that individuals and lineages can garner prestige and higher political titles, a pattern that reaches its zenith on Pohnpei.

Environmental and economic conditions for the most part mean that there are larger populations on the larger islands, and the hierarchical politics that organize these larger populations increase in intensity or complexity. Yet the elementary principles that shape how interpersonal relations, social organization, and political process unfold actually vary little between large and small islands. The
ties of clanship are virtually identical almost everywhere, and they bind individuals and lineages in distinct communities on the high islands to one another in precisely the same ways that they connect low islanders. And while two of the islands, Kosrae and Nauru, are really quite isolated, they have nevertheless retained all the elements of the matrilineal organization so characteristic of the others. Although Micronesian matrilineal clan and lineage organization probably developed as they did in response to the environmental exigencies of life in the region, these forms have proved so effective in organizing social life within communities that they have remained strong and vital even where their primary purpose is no longer linking island populations together.