Introduction

Micronesia—“the tiny islands,” as they were labeled in the first half of the nineteenth century—is a geographic designation, based on the belief that this part of the Pacific shared many broad cultural features. Over the years, depending on the need, this term has been adjusted this way or that. Here, Micronesia will be understood to include the four states of the Federated States of Micronesia (Pohnpei, Chuuk, Yap, and Kosrae), the Republic of Palau, and the Republic of the Marshall Islands.

The History

Social change was not unknown in the islands, even before the United States took possession at the end of World War II. While there had always been some change as one island group came into contact with another in the course of canoe voyages, this process accelerated with the islands’ first contact with the West during the so-called European Age of Discovery in the early sixteenth century. During the nineteenth century, after a two-hundred-year lull in European voyages to the area, contact with the West intensified greatly owing to commercial voyages of China traders, whaleships, and copra vessels, all of which had interests in the area. Often these were not just fleeting contacts; the ships brought bêche-de-mer parties, deserters, freebooters, and resident traders who would take up residence on the islands, sometimes for the rest of their lives. Protestant missionaries first arrived in the middle of that century, and the first Catholic priests followed them thirty years later. Meanwhile, islanders acquired not only a pair of religious creeds, but also iron cooking utensils, steel axes, cloth and apparel, firearms, liquor, rice and other select imported foods, and trade stations at which they might exchange local produce, especially copra, for a variety of foreign goods. They also picked up some familiarity with foreign ways and a smattering of some of their visitors’ languages. The basic island cultural institutions, however, remained intact by and large.
Following the inevitable parade of gunboats and naval ships throughout the century to defend the national interests of Western stakeholders, the Marshalls was annexed by Germany in 1885, and the rest of the area came under Spanish colonial rule a year later. By the turn of the century, Germany had acquired the former Spanish possessions in Micronesia, and it ruled throughout the area until the start of World War I. At the onset of the Great War in 1914, Japan seized the islands and occupied them at once, later legitimizing its rule when it gained a League of Nations mandate over the area at the Treaty of Versailles. The Japanese, who established the first public education system in the islands, attempted to instill in local people a passion for production. They offered an even richer assortment of enticements than others before them—bicycles, wooden frame housing, exotic clothing, and various delicacies for purchase—but in the end they gave up on the local people and brought in their own émigrés to operate the high-powered economy they had developed. Even before Japanese troops arrived in great numbers a year or two before the outbreak of World War II, the number of Japanese in the islands exceeded the size of the local population.

Although designated a trusteeship under the newly formed United Nations in 1947, Micronesia really passed into American hands as a war prize. The United States had “bought” the islands, its military leaders in-
sisted, with the blood of the 32,000 Americans killed and maimed in the Allied campaign across the western Pacific. For a few years, the U.S. Navy administered the former Japanese possessions, providing emergency rations for the people, managing the rehabilitation of the war-torn islands, and setting up an administrative system that would be taken over by the U.S. Department of Interior in 1951. Almost immediately after the war, the trappings of Western democracy were introduced to the islands: popular elections, the chartering of municipalities, and district councils (later to become legislative bodies) for each island group. An education system was fashioned from local teachers working in thatched huts to replace the one started by the Japanese. A corps of medical officers and nurses were trained to introduce basic health care to the main islands. In addition to their legacy of quonset huts and surplus military fatigues, the Navy reestablished a network of island trade stores throughout the islands. But the infrastructure that the Japanese had built up before the war could not be restored with the very small annual budgets, and so the island economy remained a shadow of what it had been during the height of Japanese productivity.

Micronesian, in the first decade after the war, lived off a subsistence economy that was not much different from the way their ancestors had lived a century or two earlier. The U.S. administration, which in principle was opposed to any forced change, allowed islanders to set their own developmental pace—and that was very slow. Only in the early 1960s under the Kennedy administration did this go-slow philosophy change. As the contest between the United States and the Soviet Union for the allegiance of the Third World heated up, America reversed its position and adopted an altogether new policy in its Trust Territory. During that decade, as its budgets doubled and redoubled almost yearly, it invested heavily in education and health services, while adding thousands of Micronesians to the government payroll. By the mid-1970s, as the U.S. subsidy continued to increase, the groundwork was laid for a dual economy: a cash economy in some of the towns superimposed on the traditional subsistence economy in more rural areas.

Other changes followed rapidly. The increased U.S. aid led to the buildup of a commercial sector with modern department stores, restaurants, bars, and movie theaters. With public high schools now operating in each island group, opportunities for a secondary education were expanded. Later hundreds of these graduates began leaving the islands to attend U.S. colleges, nearly all of them returning home afterwards in search of jobs. At the same time, the thrust toward self-government had gathered momen-
tum with the creation of the Congress of Micronesia in the mid-1960s. Soon political status negotiations with the United States were initiated, and a constitutional convention was convoked in 1975. With the status issue resolved but not yet signed into effect, the United States granted the islands self-rule in 1978. By that time the former Trust Territory was forever dissolved, for the islands had split into several political units. The Northern Marianas alone remained closely 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.

The recent half century, from about 1950 to the present, has been a critical era in the history of island Micronesia. It has also been an era of unprecedented change, marking as it has both economic and political revolutions. It has been an era of rapidly expanding self-awareness for Micronesians, who formed their own governments and began to look with unblinking eye at the new shapes that their ancient societies were taking. It is this era that is the subject of this book.

**The Islands and Their Cultures**

*Marshalls (population 51,000).* The Marshalls is an independent nation today. 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. Despite its limited resources, the Marshalls had a Polynesian-like authority system headed by paramount chiefs, or *iroij*, that distinguished it from other coral atolls in the region. Chiefly authority in the Marshalls today is far stronger than in any other part of Micronesia. It is the only island group in Micronesia where chiefs have retained their share in landownership up to the present day. Marshallese are matrilineal in that they derive their membership in a clan and lineage from their mother. At one time they may have tended to live in lineage groups on pieces of land inherited from their mothers, but residence groups are more mixed today.

*Kosrae (population 8,000).* Kosrae, now a state in the Federated States of Micronesia, is a single high island with a cultural tradition that was probably very similar to that of Pohnpei. During the nineteenth century, however, Kosrae suffered a drastic loss of population over a forty-year period that left the island with only 300 people by the end of the century. This depopulation, brought on by Western diseases, was far more severe
than that suffered by other islands in the region. 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. Today 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.

**Pohnpei (population 37,000).** Pohnpei is the capital of the Federated States of Micronesia and its largest state. The high island of Pohnpei, with an area of about one hundred square miles, is one of the largest in Micronesia. Scattered throughout the state are seven atolls, each with its own linguistic and cultural differences. In contrast to Chuuk and the coral atolls in the central Carolines with their relatively simple political systems, Pohnpei has the political stratification of a Polynesian island. There are five kingdoms on the main island, each headed by its own high chief (Nahnmwariki) and underchief (Nahnken) as well as parallel lines of titled nobles. Offerings of traditional prestige foods at feasts and funerals—pigs, yams, and kava (called “sakau”)—have always been a major avenue of social advancement. 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 generally live in homesteads scattered over the countryside rather than in more compact villages. While the social organization in the outer islands resembles that in Pohnpei to some extent, these atolls are without much of the formality of Pohnpei’s feasting rituals and prestige economy.

**Chuuk (population 56,000).** The heart of the state of Chuuk 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, on some of which the traditional dress of loincloths and sarongs have been retained even to the present. Authority was traditionally so fragmented that individual islands were seldom unified under a single chief. The main social unit has always been the lineage group, descended from a single living woman. In the past this group usually resided together on one or more parcels of land. In contrast to most other parts of Micronesia, women in Chuuk do offshore fishing while men work in the taro patches and pick breadfruit. Although food is commonly exchanged with other relatives, there are few of the competitive food exchanges that are still commonly found on Pohnpei and on some of the other islands of Micronesia.
Central Carolines (population 5,000). The coral atolls known as the central Carolines, although politically joined to Yap State, are populated by a people who bear very little cultural affinity to Yapese. These Outer Islanders, as they are called, speak a language and practice customs that are much more similar to those of Chuuk than to those of Yap. Their way of life is simple; they subsist on fish and taro or breadfruit, wear their traditional dress (loincloth and lavalava), and carry on the long-distance canoe voyages for which their islands were famous. Like Chuuk, these islands are strongly matrilineal and have a political system that is much weaker than those of most parts of Micronesia.

Yap (population 7,000). Yap is a cluster of high islands comprising the administrative center of the westernmost state in the Federated States of Micronesia. Yap has a reputation for being the most traditional of all the island groups in Micronesia. Until the early 1970s men walked around town 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 in 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. Within the village, parcels of land are named and ranked. A married couple will usually take up residence on the man’s estate along with the man’s father and possibly some of his brothers. Although the patrilineal kin group dominates, Yapese still maintain a strong interest in their matrilineage, which is the refuge for those who are unwelcome in their father’s kin group.

Palau (population 17,000). The high islands of Palau, the largest land mass of all Micronesia, share many of Yap’s social and political features. Palau is divided into villages, or districts, each under the authority of a chief and a council. Traditionally, however, each village was divided into competing halves at every level to encourage a rivalry for production that was rewarded with local “money” and the prestige that it carried. 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 hundreds of young people to school and sent young adults to find work outside Palau. Today it is considered the most economically advanced group in Micronesia and forms a separate nation.