

# Introduction

The history of the people of the Federated States of Micronesia's engagement with the outside world has been a neglected area of academic scholarship. Historians have often treated the topic as a footnote, with Micronesians perceived as unseen participants of colonial processes. Consequently, Micronesians' perspectives of their own history have been absent from the main corpus of historical literature. Despite the distorted nature of imperial history, which portrayed Micronesians as primitive savages and unsophisticated people, there is an emerging trend of historical discourse contradicting these images.

In this book, I argue that Micronesians have been dealing successfully with the outside world since the colonisation period. This argument is sustained by examination of oral histories, secondary sources, personal experience, interviews and field research to reconstruct how Micronesian internal processes continued, rather than succumbed to the different waves of colonisation. For example, colonisation did not destroy Micronesian cultures and identities. Instead, Micronesians recontextualised the changing conditions to suit their own circumstances. Their success rested on the indigenous doctrines of adaptation, assimilation and accommodation deeply rooted in the kinship doctrine of *eaea fengen* (sharing) and *alilis fengen* (assisting each other).

Micronesians inhabit an oceanic environment of small islands and big seas. This oceanic world necessitated inter-island contact that crisscrossed the seas following the web of the expansive *ainang* (clanship) system. An oceanic civilisation flourished, rich in maritime activities and infrastructure, knowledge and skills of seafaring, warfare, canoe technology, fishing techniques and conservation practices that perpetuated Micronesian continuity. This oceanic outlook also contained effective mechanisms for dealing with a host of unheralded external

influences from beyond the horizon, such as China's emerging influence in the Pacific and the impact of climate change on the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM).

Micronesians perceived such influences as challenges and opportunities to shape and reshape their societies through the processes of accommodation and, later, assimilation for the purposes of adapting to the changing circumstances brought by the four colonial powers that claimed ownership of part or all of what is now the FSM. As colonisation intensified, Micronesians began to organise themselves against outsiders' oppression. Reassertion of independence was the main objective. The opportunity arose post World War II (WWII) with the beginning of decolonisation. The *Constitution of the Federated States of Micronesia* was formally established for the purpose of defining the modern identity of the indigenous people, reasserting and perpetuating Micronesian values and future continuity.

## Humble Beginning in Understanding My History

My journey to write this book has been arduous and challenging. It began on my humble island home, Lukunor (also known as Lekinioch),<sup>1</sup> located in the southern region of the state of Chuuk. I learned the *uruo* of my island and its connection to other islands throughout the FSM. The history was in oral form and learned from my extended families. This experience was reinforced in the classroom in elementary school. For example, students were required to draw the geography of our island. We were also required to draw details of the villages and location of each clan's community *faal* (clan meeting house) and provide a narrative of inter-clan relationships. We learned traditional war dances called *tokkie* and songs called *kolin fonou* (indigenous songs) from our region and other Micronesian regions. We also learned about *leset* (fishing) and *angangan fonou* (local agriculture). Elders were invited to our classes during social studies to reinforce our knowledge of oral history through stories and songs.

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1 Lukunor, also known as Lekinioch, is an island in the Lower Mortlocks in the state of Chuuk, FSM.



**Figure 1: Part of my island, Lekinioch, where my humble beginning started.**

Source: Photograph taken by Bartol Mwarey in 2014.

My high school years were spent on different islands, which connected me to my distant relatives dispersed throughout Pohnpei and Chuuk. In contrast, the history I learned in secondary school came from textbooks written by foreigners and largely about topics unfamiliar to the life experiences of young Micronesians, such as the dawn of European civilisation. We also learned about Japanese and American activities in Micronesia, which were the main topics in my history classes. Islanders' history was not included. This trend continued during my college years in the United States (US). After leaving the US, I continued my studies in Australia. I enrolled in a Pacific history program taught by Australian academics influenced by the new historical movement, initiated by J. W. Davidson at The Australian National University (ANU) in the 1950s. In the program, Pacific Island students were given the opportunity to write history from an islander's perspective. However, Micronesia was largely missing from this program due to the lack of Micronesian expertise in Australia. I was frustrated about Micronesia being virtually absent from the whole curriculum.

I was also exposed to Aboriginal history, including Indigenous Australian interpretations of the world and engagement with colonialism. This opened up new insights for me. I began to ask questions about the notion of discovery, decolonisation, independence, identity and continuity. I was also exposed to the writings of an indigenous Pacific historian, Sione Latukefu from Tonga, and a Samoan writer, Albert Wendt, who influenced my own intellectual development. There were also

non-islander scholars such as Edward Wolfers, Stewart Firth and Caroline Ralston who challenged my own indigenous perspective of history. Of particular interest was the book *The Other Side of the Frontier* by an Australian historian of European background, Henry Reynolds. Reynolds used the book to question the Eurocentric historiography of Australia. Reynolds later became one of the chief architects of the watershed case of *Mabo and Others v Queensland (No. 2) (1992)* (the 'Mabo case'). This case overturned the colonial legal fiction of *terra nullius*<sup>2</sup> in Australia for the first time since British settlement, and the government of the day reluctantly acknowledged Indigenous rights to land.

After my graduation from university, I returned home to teach at the College of Micronesia, Pohnpei Campus. I encouraged my students to engage in terms of their own local history. I remember my first session in Micronesian history, where I posed the simple question, 'who discovered Micronesia?'<sup>3</sup> No one said the Micronesians. After challenging them, the whole class burst out in laughter and guilt. Most of the students said, 'well we all know that Micronesians were here first before the Europeans arrived, but according to the textbooks they said Europeans'.<sup>4</sup> After two weeks of discussions, the students decided to ditch the textbooks recommended for the course. They decided to undertake projects writing about their own family or local history using oral sources by interviewing their surviving elders. They were thrilled when I also took them out to undertake fieldwork to see the areas where the 'Sokehs rebellion' took place and the old Spanish fort in Kolonia, Pohnpei.

After many years of teaching in the classroom, both in Micronesia and Australia, I decided to undertake a PhD at ANU under the wing of Pacific historian Paul D'Arcy. Not surprisingly, Micronesia by and large was a neglected discipline of study at ANU. D'Arcy kept the subject alive, having conducted research on the islands over a long period of time.

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2 *Terra nullius* was a doctrine, and later a component of international law, that the colonial powers used to acquire new territories overseas. It entailed that if a territory did not show any signs of agricultural production as perceived by the Europeans, then the first European discoverer could claim the territory on behalf of the colonial power they represented (Ian Brownlie, *Principles of Public International Law* (5th edition), Oxford University Press, 2001, pp. 173–174).

3 My questions to my students were intended to provoke their awareness and focus on island history. I posed questions such as 'Who discovered Micronesia?', 'Who owns history?' and 'Is history written or oral?' These questions led to the students' decision to forgo the textbooks and concentrate on undertaking a personal project about the history of their local communities.

4 Students at the College of Micronesia, Pohnpei Campus, Micronesian History Class, Kolonia, Pohnpei, 1998.

He exposed me to the rigorous challenges of being an indigenous historian in academia. I was forced to think deeply about Micronesian history and its placement in academia.

My global experiences have enriched me intellectually while I have continued to explore my identity as a Micronesian. I have learned that, while oral and written history are often contradictory, in many respects they are also complementary. Micronesians used their own devices through traditional networks<sup>5</sup> to shield themselves and their knowledge and history, both intellectually and socially, until opportunities arose to reassert their voices.<sup>6</sup> I will therefore speak of my own *uruo* and how it can contribute to the enrichment of the historical dialogue between Micronesians and non-Micronesians.

I have long wondered what it would be like writing history based on oral discourses<sup>7</sup> versus the academic traditions of the West. Could I somehow marry the two? And what sort of historical theories could I work from to lay the groundwork for my personal thesis about Micronesian perspectives of history?<sup>8</sup> How would I integrate archival work into my thesis since Micronesians' main forms of communication and engagement with each other are oral? Would my personal experience as a Micronesian, data collected from my fieldwork and secondary sources satisfy academic requirements to write a Micronesian perspective of history? After spending some time pondering these issues, I decided to write this book following

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5 The clanship network system continued to connect Micronesians during the colonisation period and remained so during the decolonisation period to create a nation for Micronesians called 'the Federated States of Micronesia'. See *The Constitution of the Federated States of Micronesia*, Preamble; Glenn Petersen, *Traditional Micronesian Societies: Adaptation, Integration and Political Organisation*, University of Hawai'i Press, Hawai'i, 2009, p. 23.

6 Glenn Petersen, 'Strategic Location and Sovereignty: Modern Micronesia in the Historical Context of American Expansionism', *Space and Polity*, Vol. 2, No. 2, 1998, pp. 200–201.

7 Micronesian history predominately takes an oral form. It has its own internal logic and can be used to determine what the 'truth is'. There are processes by which evidence can be produced to substantiate the truth. For example, language format and concepts used by orators called *itang* are used to test one's knowledge of historical events. Misstating traditional views of *itang* could bring shame to the narrators of history; that is, inventing one's position in history could cause conflict between opposing clans as historical truths determine one's standing and prestige in the community.

8 Micronesian historical theories are often left to highly knowledgeable clan historians to prove or disprove (Lin Poyer, 'The Ngatik Massacre: Documentary and Oral Traditional Accounts', *Journal of Pacific History*, Vol. 20, No. 1, 2003, pp. 4–22). For commentaries and detailed analysis of Pacific history, see Paul D'Arcy, 'Introduction', in *The Pacific World: Lands, Peoples and History of the Pacific, 1500-1900. Vol. 3, Peoples of the Pacific: The History of Oceania to 1870*, edited by Paul D'Arcy, Ashgate Variorum, Burlington, VT, USA, 2008, pp. ix–xiv.

the Western traditions but to frame it within a Micronesian perspective.<sup>9</sup> I decided to use a combination of thematic, linear and chronological approaches to document Micronesian perspectives of history. That is, to investigate the written history of Micronesia and, where necessary, insert Micronesian perspectives into the growing corpus of knowledge in the field. Many scholars I met along the way warned me about the huge pitfalls I would encounter and the likelihood of distorting the FSM's history in the process. Some advised me to take an easier approach by narrowing my topic to a more manageable one or fewer islands. However, as already noted in discussing my own history, regional visions and connections are fundamental to being Micronesian and understanding our history.

Naturally, I understood their reticence about my approach and appreciated their concern. However, many also encouraged me not to be distracted as my work could set the stage and encourage future indigenous scholars to write more about the Micronesian perspective of history at the regional level—something long overdue. I decided to use the Micronesian Constitution as my guiding star. The Constitution is my reference point to start my own personal journey as a Micronesian into the sea of the indigenous past in order to understand the present for the purpose of engaging the future. I chose the Constitution because it is a collection of narratives by the contemporary Micronesian leadership who framed the nation in the images of the islands' past to ensure a prosperous future outlook for *shon Maikronesia* (Micronesians).

My decision to use the Constitution as a guiding star rests much with my background in law. My decision to become a lawyer while growing up in the Mortlocks was deliberate. I realised that the law could be used as a protective shield for islanders to preserve and control their future. During the campaign for Micronesian independence, for example, it became very clear that the proposed Constitution would empower Micronesians to govern themselves and forge relations internationally based on their own understanding of who they were historically. The birth of the *Constitution*

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9 What is 'perspective'? It is debated among scholars whether the term 'perspective' debases Micronesian history in academia as it is seen by some academics as tokenism. It is claimed that perspective allows indigenous scholars to express their point of views, yet it is not considered part of mainstream history as practiced at the academic level (Vincent Diaz, pers. comm., at Weaving the Threads of Indigenous Knowledges: Te Whare Kura Symposium, The University of Auckland: Faculty of Arts, 21 June 2013). See problems of indigenous research in academia in Linda T. Smith, *Decolonising Methodologies*, London, Zed Books Ltd, 2001, pp. 1–3.

*of the Federated States of Micronesia* emancipated Micronesians from colonisation and allowed their entry into the United Nations (UN) as a sovereign state.

As this book is the reflection of the past on Micronesia today, each chapter discusses the interaction between these themes as being fundamental to the Micronesian perspective of history, and as influential factors in the type of engagement possible with the outside world. Micronesians are armed with their own local strategies to facilitate the changing historical circumstances brought about by colonisation and globalisation. Local adaptation involves the process of cultural refinement through successive generations to ensure the maintenance of Micronesian identity and continuity.

This book is organised into eight chapters. Chapter 1 deals with pre-colonial Micronesian society and how Micronesians organised themselves by utilising the traditional infrastructure for the purposes of maintaining their indigenous interactions, giving rise to their identity and thus continuity.

Chapter 2 deals with the various Micronesian identities and how they played a crucial role in their engagement during the contact period in defining who they were historically. It demonstrates the extent of Micronesians' desire to be in control of their own destiny in the modern world in order to perpetuate their continuity. The principle of 'diversity in unity' reveals the depth and success of multiculturalism between the constituent groups that predated the external powers and continues into modern times.

Chapter 3 compares and contrasts Micronesian engagement with the outside world from 1521 to 1979. This is the era of Micronesian interaction with colonial powers—Spain, Germany, Japan and the US. Micronesian terms of engagement with these colonisers depended on the application of their intellectual history to manage outside influences to suit Micronesian contexts. Micronesians' historical knowledge of adaptation were used to safeguard indigenous interests despite the unequal power relations between the colonisers and the colonised. The main emphasis of this chapter is on the effective management of the four colonising powers by Micronesians to suit their own purposes.

Chapter 4 focuses on Micronesia's move towards constitutional independence in 1979 and the aftermath. Issues such as the rejection of the US's offer for Micronesians to integrate into the US political system are highlighted. The reasons for the creation of a constitution to advance Micronesian interests against those of the US will also be addressed. This chapter also deals with the Compact of Free Association as a forerunner to full independence. The Compact allowed Micronesia time to organise itself politically and economically. After 2023, financial assistance under the Compact will diminish substantially.

Chapter 5 discusses the Micronesian Constitution as the organising framework for the reproduction of Micronesian continuity as islanders adapt to the changing world. The Micronesian identity is embedded in the Constitution, which perpetuates the idea of Micronesians as a distinct group of people who share a common history. This identity is analysed in relation to the past, present and future. Micronesians are conscious of their past and strive to preserve that heritage for future generations. That heritage must therefore be protected at all costs. The Constitution is central to the preservation and maintenance of multiple identities while simultaneously superimposing a single Micronesian identity. The Constitution is a living document that speaks to the past and organises the present for the betterment of the future. Principally, it established and strengthened Micronesian institutions to deny further external usurpation of Micronesian independence as enshrined under international legal instruments.

Chapter 6 analyses Micronesian engagement with both China and the US in Micronesia's jurisdictional space and the international arena. The interaction between the two superpowers is part of the long history of colonial rivalry in the northwest Pacific. Although China is not seen as a colonial power, the implication is that the US is treating China as such because China is seen by the US as a rival. The competition is about winning influence in Micronesia and thereby gaining a strategic and economic foothold in the region.

Chapter 7 deals with climate change and its consequences in the FSM. Like colonisation, climate change is a new phenomenon emanating from external forces, in this case, industrial pollution by the world's major economic powers. The consequences of this industrial negligence are now confronting the security of the FSM in terms of its customs, identity, health, food production, emigration and sovereignty. The FSM

is constantly exploring ways to maintain itself despite this new threat. Climate change is a top priority for the national agenda and will affect the FSM's future engagement with the outside world.

Chapter 8 investigates and speculates on future challenges facing the FSM. They include the Compact, climate change, the Constitution, leadership and foreign affairs. These issues are discussed in light of the political conversation between the three levels of government and how this conversation will assist the country's move towards the future. The above challenges will shape the FSM's future policies and diplomatic engagement with the external world as well as its present integrity. It will be argued that Micronesians should solve their internal problems as best they can by way of learning from the lessons of history; that is, the best method to resolve arising issues is by returning to their knowledge of history as it is at the heart of preserving Micronesian culture and identity. This is essential to the perpetuation of Micronesian future continuity in a changing world.

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