**EWC Presentation**

***German Colonial Experience in Micronesia:***

***What We Can Learn from It***

Introduction

* 100th anniversary of the end of German rule in the Pacific–beginning of WW I, when Japanese and British swooped into territories and occupied them.
* My intention was to write a monograph, with an analysis of what happened during German rule and plenty of photos to illustrate it. By “what happened” I’m not talking about the quality of the meals of the District Officer or a detailed review of the correspondence to Berlin. Rather, what happened to Yap, and Palau, and Pohnpei, and the Marshalls and the Marianas during these years? How did the local people fare in general?
* In reviewing what I had previously written on the period, especially in my book on the colonial period, I was able to draw some broad conclusions on the German period in Micronesia, and possibly on even wider colonial experience, that I would like to present here.
* Two sayings to remember as you listen: “Things are not always what they seem.” A lifetime of trying to calculate power relationships in the islands, and even in the marriages of my brothers, leads me to believe that our naive belief in what *should* be happening doesn’t always correspond to what really *is* happening. The corollary of the first is: “Analytical schemes can always be improved, sometimes vastly so.” Nowhere is this more true than in the analysis of relations between muscle-bound world powers and small powers, at least in past centuries.
* Emphasis is not on what Germany took away, but what it brought to the islands.

Account of German Takeover

* How Germany got into the Pacific in the first place. Copra trade in 1870s, request to protect trade. German unification in 1871. Cry for colonies as a proof of having arrived. Contest for the Carolines in 1885. Bismarck yielded Carolines to Spain, but annexed the Marshalls. At end of Spanish-American War, Germany bought rest of the islands.
* How German rule commenced: small staff, few troops, and district officers who were willing to improvise. Contrast with Spain: hundreds of troops, short-term district officers (changed each year on Pohnpei), little personal involvement with local people.

Note: German system became more rigid in 1906 when Colonial Office took stronger control to meet its economic development objectives (which didn’t happen anyway). Flexibility was lost, and little ground was gained.

* Examples of Senfft, Winkler, and Fritz. Very small staff, so thrown into the local society. They learned some of the language and had local friends (like DAs in the 1950s). Readiness to collaborate with local authorities and create a system that responded to local concerns. At its best, German rule was less an imposition from above than an element woven into the cultural fabric.

Illustrations on outcomes of German colonial rule

*Yap, under Senfft*

* Village-based society, population of 8,000, with 80 or so villages woven into a “net” linking them to one another under three highest-ranking villages. This system was ignored by Spanish, who worked with Filipinos and Chamorros as administrators, teachers and police–buffers between Spanish and Yapese.
* Senfft set aside the intermediaries and worked with chiefs themselves. Formalized a chiefly council of eight major chiefs: met monthly to discuss administration policy and work programs. They weighed in on and approved everything. Later, higher chiefs met with other village chiefs to pass on orders.
* Police appointed to enforce German rule were often younger relatives of chiefs, and so supported chiefly authority at the same time. Police were given uniforms, and received education. Fines were collected in Yapese stone money–possession marked by letters painted on stone, but could be redeemed by labor. Germans were, in effect, enforcing Yapese custom through the use of younger Yapese.
* Outcome was an impressive array of public works that were testimony to both the chiefs and the German rule: 60 miles of paved road, stone pier 400 yards long, Tageren canal half a mile long, and several new causeways. Celebration for completion of canal was two-day party, Yapese-style.
* Harmonious relations: Yapese called Senfft “Great father” up to his death in 1908. No social programs undertaken. Despite terrible typhoon of 1907 and loss of copra production to leaf lice, Yap was a successful colony. Everyone had benefitted.

*Palau, under Winkler*

* Political authority in Palau: Dozen villages or districts, each with its own ranking title system. No networks as in Yap, but bitter competition among villages for status. Two-way split rather than three-way. Alliances formed, constantly shifting at one time, but frozen into two confederations under Koror and Melekeok.
* Senfft’s attempts to replicate what he had done–appointed police related to chiefs, offered a list of public projects, and made James Gibbons, West Indian on Palau for 40 years, his administrator. But no results seen at Senfft’s visit to Yap three years later. Palauan men lounging in clubhouses all day long.
* Winkler made administrator of Palau in 1905. He increased the size of the Palauan police force and organized a council of chiefs, but people still dragged their feet on the public projects–they still lounged in the clubhouses.
* Louch, with second-ranking title from Koror, former seaman with a few languages and long experience in dealing with westerners, became the key figure during this time. Louch was a reformist and saw that Palau had much to gain from a modernization program. But the two forces that stood in the way of modernization also curtailed chiefly power: clubhouses and spirit mediums. Clubhouses were labor unions of the day, powerful enough to resist the orders of the chief, while spirit mediums had become nearly unrivaled in their influence.
* With Louch’s help, the influence of the clubhouses was greatly weakened, and the spirit mediums were exiled–two rivals to the authority of the chiefs were dispelled. [Louch called in German warship to pursue men who were trying to defy German order by procuring women from another island for their clubhouse. He also betrayed a plot in northern Babeldaob, initiated by spirit mediums, to resist German rule.]
* In the end, Louch and his reform-minded allies had their way. Spirit mediums and clubhouse were crushed as rivals to chiefly authority. [But nativistic reaction was channeled through Modekngei for a time.] This, in turn, led to acceptance of some of the external changes (in dress and hair style, for instance) that led to still other changes during Japanese colonial rule. Path to modernization was cleared–competition in Palau, such a strong internal component of life, could be directed outward for the first time.
* Kaiser’s birthday in 1908 was a celebration of the collaboration: German songs done by Palauans, traditional competitions (eg, war canoe races).

*Other islands*

* Chuuk. No official there until the final few years of German rule (1909), but most important changes occurred immediately. Three warrior chiefs jailed, and Japanese traders expelled for selling alcohol. Germans gave Chuukese people an excuse for ending the local wars that had always bedeviled them. Chuukese handed in their weapons when asked to do so, and with this the era of peace began (not, interestingly enough, with the advent of Christianity). Germans also appointed flag chiefs that gave some semblance of political hierarchy to an island culture that had none whatsoever.
* Marshalls. Mostly short-term administrators there under Jaluit Company rule (throw-back to the old East India Company influence in 17th and 18th centuries). The most achieved by the Germans, aside from nurturing the copra trade, was in ending the warfare between rival chiefs. Dispute between Kabua and Litokwa was settled by appeal to a “higher” authority.
* Pohnpei. Known for the Sokehs Rebellion, but this was atypical of the German rule in the islands, as we have seen. From the start, no interest of Pohnpeians in joining police, working on projects, or collaborating with Germans. Overall on Pohnpei, Germans failed to connect with the traditional system, but by the end they did leave Pohnpei with the suspicion that they would do better with a unified, or at least an integrated political system of some sort, if only to deal better with powers from abroad.

Lessons learned

* If colonial masters assumed the appearance of over-all authority, the truth is that they were often manipulated by local leaders to achieve their own aims. Sometimes the results are dramatic (eg, Palau with Louch pulling the strings).
* Colonial rule is not a zero-sum game, as it is frequently represented. Aims of both parties may be achieved, if the colonial power is willing to collaborate with local authorities. Examples of Yap and Palau, but perhaps also in Chuuk.
* Size of the colonial force seems to matter. A small force forces the district administrator to make closer contact with local people.
* Economic development goals of the Germans were foremost in the German colonial office after 1907, but these failed more often than not. This was perhaps the least successful part of the rule. But something more important happened–the pathway to development (although this needs clarification since its form and direction differed for various island groups).
* One important achievement of colonial rule was in helping local people understand the urgency of coordinating their local authority system so they could deal with the outside world, not village by village, but as a single unit. The importance of coordinating the local authority system was one result–especially for Pohnpei and the Marshalls.
* Historiographical lesson reasserted. Islanders were, as usual, the “silent partner” since we have few quotes from them and almost no sources that represent their response to the initiatives of the Westeners. Yet, we can infer what they are saying–just like listening to someone on the phone: you hear the person responding to the speaker at the other end, and so fill in the blanks.

Task of the historian is to assemble what he can to recreate one side of the conversation. Find whatever exists to help reconstruct how the foreign power was setting policy and goals and how it was reshaping the goals according to the responses received from local people. Once this is done, the historian dials in and listens carefully to the one side of the conversation he can hear clearly. Then begins the task of reconstructing the other side of the conversation. It’s not as difficult as you think.

Micronesian who has been away from the islands for years complained to someone once that he “doesn’t see himself” in my writings. He was correct–he couldn’t see himself in the tale of naval ships, foreign intervention, and political intrigues. If we confined ourselves to recording islanders voices as they are handed down to us, we would end up with blank pages. But historiography in the Pacific is more interesting and much more complicated than that.

If you don’t have the wits and imagination to do this, then drop the study of Pacific history. It’s pointless to wring your hands and lament the absence of sound from the party on the other sound of the phone. If you don’t grasp the possibilities here and can’t figure how a voice can be given to the silent partner, then try another field of study.