**COMMERCE, CHRISTIANITY AND COLONIALISM IN MICRONESIA**

**Prologue**

It's only fitting that a speaker from a small Pacific island (although not an islander himself) take a worm's eye view of the subject matter for this series of talks. Let's begin small, looking through the reverse end of the telescope, as island people must do, and hope that we end up with some generalizations that help us deal with this important topic. Let's begin with the area I know best, Micronesia, and work from there.

I notice that three of the other speakers in this series have backgrounds in Micronesia, so I may presume that you know something of this area by this time. But let's quickly review the history of the region, in which the US has a continuing interest -- and continuing colonial ties to some extent.

**Historical summary**

The West first made their acquaintance with this region during the Siglo de oro, Spain's golden age of exploration. Magellan and the following four or five expeditions to the Spice Islands across the Pacific first put the islands on European maps. The contacts were fleeting and uneventful -- they introduced the islanders, whose tools were manufactured of shell and stone, to the marvels of iron and left people with tales to tell their grandchildren of ships bigger than anything yet seen.

For two centuries, following the decline of Spain by the end of the 16th century, the islanders had that part of the ocean to themselves. Spain had colonized the Marianas in the meantime, and maintained its rule over the neighboring Philippines, but this had no impact on the islands that came to be called the Caroline and Marshalls.

By the end of the 18th century, with the opening of the trade routes to China, the islands stood astride commercial lanes. While English trade ships coursed through the Western Carolines, two captains who had just dumped their cargo of convicts at Botany Bay, in the new convict colony that would become Sydney, sailed through two archipelagoes on their way from Australia to Canton. The island groups were given the names of the ship captains, Gilbert and Marshall. New England trading captains ventured into the area to find products they could sell in China: sandalwood, turtleshell, mother-of-pearl, and the sea slug that was sometimes called beche-de-mer or trepang.

By 1840 whalers, first British and then American, were cruising the area in search of ambergis, whalebone and the oil that lit the lamps of Europe and America. The found the high islands of Pohnpei and Kosrae pleasant ports of call after months at sea, and a sizable market soon developed for more than sweet potatoes and yams, as we will see. A considerable number of the whalemen deserted their ships to take up the life of a beachcomber. By the early 1850s the Protestant missionaries, eager to repair some of the damage inflicted by the whalers, began evangelizing in these same islands. Before long, their field was extended from Pohnpei and Kosrae throughout all of eastern Micronesia.

Barely had they established a beachhead when another major force reached the islands: the copra traders. By the late 1860s the copra trade was largely in the hands of large companies (predominantly German), trading agents were installed on nearly every island with a population of more than a couple hundred, and ships began making regular rounds to pick up copra and land trade goods.

European nations were obligated to protect their citizens, usually through the occasional visits of warships to investigate complaints (usually against the local people), and to threaten and punish where this was deemed necessary. Meanwhile, as the 19th century was drawing to a close, Europe was experiencing a resurgence of colonialism. Nationalism of the age seemed to demand colonies (the US was no exception although it got a late start). With most of the remainder of the Third World partitioned among the European powers, the powers turned to the Pacific.

In 1885 Spain reasserted its ancient claims to the Carolines, while Germany annexed the Marshalls. After Spain's loss in the Spanish-American War, they were forced to sell the Carolines and Marianas to Germany, while the US took the Philippines and Guam. (Within a few years the US had also annexed part of Samoa and Hawaii, thus becoming one of the major colonial powers in the Pacific.)

Germany, in turn, was replaced by Japan in 1914, when Japanese naval forces wrested the islands from their former rulers. There followed a 30-year rule by Japan over the Carolines, Marshalls and Marianas under terms set by the League of Nations. This rule ended, of course, when Japan accepted the terms of unconditional surrender to end World War II. More than 50,000 Japanese civilians and troops were promptly repatriated, and the islands passed into the hands of the US, again as the spoils of war.

From 1945 until just three years ago, the islands were a Trust Territory administered by the US on behalf of the United Nations. First the Navy governed the islands, and then in 1952 turned the territory over to the Department of Interior (which governed the islands while supervising forests, overseeing national resources and handling Indian affairs). In the fall of 1986, after fourteen years of negotiations, the islands were granted self-government. FSM and the Marshalls became freely associated states with the US, the Marianas chose to become a commonwealth, and Palau is still in the process of deciding.

**Before the Westerner**

The Carolines and Marshalls are now split into three separate governments, but they are divided into even more distinct cultural-linguistic groups -- possibly ten, but anthropologists never entirely agreed on the count. The coral atolls of the Marshalls and the high volcanic islands of Kosrae and Pohnpei in the east, all of which had distinct but closely related languages, had highly stratified societies with paramount chiefs over extensive sections of these groups. Truk and the coral atolls of the central Carolines, whose dialects were part of a single language continuum, had petty chiefs but lacked the strong centralized authority of the east. The high islands of Yap and Palau in the west, which differed considerably from the rest of the area and between themselves in language and culture, showed strong village authority and a ranked network of villages.

All these island societies, like those in other parts of the Pacific, produced all they needed to feed, clothe and shelter themselves. They had to, otherwise they would not have survived. They did this by a mode of production and distribution that has come to be called "subsistence economy". This often understood to mean reliance on local resources with a "make-do" technology, but it means a great deal more than that.

Life in the pre-contact Pacific society, where food was abundant and often required little cultivation, did not quite fit Thomas Hobbes' famous description: "brutish, harsh, short and nasty." Given the high productivity, families can produce all they need in 3-4 male labor hours a day, one economist estimates. This allowed plenty of time for people to maintain social relationshipes within the family and community, and even to develop the elaborate social rituals that some societies practiced. Land and sea resources were under-utilized, at least by today's standards, to allow them to replenish. There was a built-in conservation factor, then.

There were no incentives to produce a surplus since it could not be stored anyway. The only exception was the production of occasional food distributed at feasts to the community, under a chief. The reward for surplus production on such occasions was a sort of social capital -- that is, enhanced prestige in the community. In fact, the only type of accumulation that made any sense in these refrigerator-less societies that were without the means to store anything for long periods was social capital.

On the whole, the subsistence economy could be considered as much a mindset as a mode of production. It represents a cluster of attitudes that are inimical to many of those values associated with modern development in a monetized economy.

Pre-contact societies are usually regarded as having been static prior to Western contact. Indeed there is good reason for this. First, they had limited environmental resources with which to work (copper and iron ages demand metals and the means of extracting them). Second, the islands were relatively isolated from one another. From whom could they borrow ideas and inventions? Sea voyages of even several days brought seafarers to other islands with similar resources and technologies. Finally, the societies were conservative in outlook; they regarded maintenace of the system as a virtue and disruption as perilous, given the need to maintain harmony in their small communities.

**Change and Westernization**

If we wish to catalogue those external forces for change that were at work on island Micronesia during the past 200 years, we could fall back on the old triad: missionaries, merchants, and military (meaning naval commanders and, in time, their replacement as upholders of Western law: colonial governors). Keeping the alliteration, we could also refer to them as: churchmen, capitalists, and colonialists.

There were other groups, such as beachcombers, that appeared at times, but those were eventually incorporated into one of the three. In the case of beachcombers, they usually became traders or merchants, although in a few cases they actually served as missionaries.

Missionaries and merchants were often at odds with one another, of course. Albert Sturges, a veteran missionary on Pohnpei in the late 1860s, lamented the arrival of traders who were "flooding the island with foreign goods." He was dismayed to see his people "rush into the hands of the traders... even throwing aside as much of their religion as they dare that they might get rich." But Sturges and his colleagues had other objections to a group that they regarded as godless and an evil influence on the people with whom they had worked so long.

The merchants had their own complaints against the missionaries. They often regarded the missionaries as troublesome meddlers who wanted to monopolize authority over the islanders. And six traders filed a formal complaint with the first Spanish governor of Pohnpei that the two American missionaries there had bullied and otherwise abused the people for years.

Yet, missionaries and merchants contributed to one another's aims more than either group cared to acknowledge. One old trading captain confessed to a Protestant pastor that "Christianity, with its civilizing influence, made better business for him. Natives reached by missions wanted more clothing, and household utensils, and other articles of trade." On the other hand, as traders implanted in island peoples a taste for western goods and western ways, they were laying the foundation for the religious edifice that the missionaries hoped to erect. "In their strange, almost unholy alliance, missionaries and merchants were both prophets of progress."

As such, both usually paved the way for the colonization of the people with whom they worked:

- by creating needs that could only be satisfied by western institutions;

- by dazzling their people with the glories of the West and instilling the desire for Western law;

- by advertising the places in which they worked and alerting their own nations to the advantages these islands might offer;

- and by turning to their government for protection in time of need, and so affording them an excuse for establishing protectorates and colonies.

The military, in the form of naval commanders, had the problem of selectively enforcing Western law in remote islands. Eventually there must be a push towards enforcement of this code of law all the time (rather than on occasional visits) upon all the people (rather than those of one's own nationality or whoever happened to be bothering them).

The net effect was colonialism, pure and simple. All of Micronesia - in fact, the entire Pacific with the single exception of Tonga -became the colonies of one or other foreign power. This meant that they had to yield to the laws of a foreign power -- and suffer the humiliation that always accompanies colonial status. The local peoples were usually regarded as lower forms of beings (but they had become accustomed to this in their dealings with missionaries and merchants anyway). They built an infrastructure and acquired some of the conveniences (and inconveniences) of western life. Within the past three decades, most of the onetime colonies were granted independence.

Political sovereignty apart, they also tied into a money economy, won for themselves a status as beggar nations, and became entitled to foreign grants in aid (that are never enough to handle their needs, but more than enough to win them scorn from the West as indigents). In this, however, they were no different from most of the nations in the world (including some that had once been economic powerhouses).

The political autonomy has been restored to many, if not most of the Pacific island nations. But have these societies perhaps lost something else in the course of their dealings with the West? Their cultural integrity? (Their soul, as it were?) Loss of political self-rule can be remedied, but the cultural changes that Westernization has precipitated may leave wounds not so easily healed. The damage inflicted on the culture may be irreversible, observers have been suggesting since the last century. Or is it?

**The Strange Workings of Cultural Change**

Before we attempt to answer this question, we would do well to look at some specific examples of cultural innovation and examine their effects on Micronesian societies. I would like to reach into the trove of historical information we possess on the islands to do this. Later, we can generalize on the process of cultural change, and perhaps re-assess our own assumptions as we do.

I was raised on the notion that Western nations steamrolled the small island populations, remaking their societies -- first unwittingly and then quite deliberately. The splendid and clear-cut example of this was Lewiston Sharp's classic study, "Steel Axes Among Stone-Age Australians". When missionaries and merchants began giving steel axes to women and young men in return for services, they rewrote the cultural rule book. The old status system was undermined, food production changed, and the culture went through a terrible upheaval.

In time I learned that the processes of change produced by Westernization are too messy to fit into neat little categories. Not all change resulted in the cultural upheavals described by Sharp. Consider the following examples (which, incidentally, show that the islanders were no fools; they took surprising initiative and often had a remarkably clear idea of what they hoped to achieve through their interaction with Westerners).

1) Whaleship trade on Pohnpei threatened to put prestige goods in the hands of the lowly and untitled as well as the exalted. The Pohnpeian chiefly system depended on sustenance, fruits of the land, being distributed by the chiefs and confirming their central role in society. The trade was quickly coopted by chiefs, using beachcombers (who mostly deserted from whaleships!) as middlemen. They married their daughters off to the beachcombers and employed them as their negotiators with visiting ships. The bc's took a percentage of the goods and delivered the rest to the chief, who then distributed in the goods in the traditional manner.

Commoners found a way around this monopoly when they began trading their wives and daughters to the lonely sailors in exchange for cloth, tobacco and ironware. The chiefs, in turn, aligned themselves with the Protestant missionaries who had arrived in the islands in the meantime. Together with the missionaries they waged a strong campaign against prostitution -- at least with whaleships.

2) Fifty years later the land system on Pohnpei was changed at the initiative of the German Government. Pohnpeians held full legal title to their land rather than simply use rights, which could theoretically be revoked by the chief at any time. Land inheritance changed as well, with land passing from father to oldest son rather than through the matrilineage, as in traditional custom. Or was it at the initiative of the Germans? Forty years earlier, one of the most influential chiefs on the island departed abruptly from custom and bestowed his land on his own son, making him one of the wealthiest landowners on the island throughout early colonial times. This chief was succeeded by a tyrrant who, together with other chiefs of the period scrambled to secure advantages for themselves and abused their chiefly power. This, in turn, caused a reaction among the people. By the time the Germans came to power, it could be argued that the common people had had enough of the abuses of the traditional system and willingly acquiesced in the changes legislated by the colonial power.

3) When copra became king in the Marshalls in the late 1860s, the chiefs stood to profit considerably. They retained customary ownership over all the land parcels that had been worked for years, even centuries, by commoners. On the basis of these traditional rights, they demanded and received one-third of the proceeds from the sale of all copra from their land, with another third going to the manager of the land parcel and the remainder divided among all the people who worked the land. Within twenty years, some of the chiefs became wealthy enough to purchase their own schooners and hire foreigners captains for their vessels. They dressed in suits and top hats and clothed their wives in silk. (This system endures to the present day, by the way, for land rental payments for the US base in Kwajalein are still divided the same way.)

When the Germans made their first move on the Marshalls in 1878, they signed a treaty with one of the two high chiefs contesting a disputed titled over the western chain in the Marshalls. In signing, his claim to the title was given a boost. When the Germans returned in 1885 to declare a protectorate over the Marshalls, he was the first to sign the agreement. He had also convinced others to do the same, since by that time the new-found source of wealth of the chiefs was tied to the German copra trade. The copra company, Jaluit Company, became the administrative agency of the German government. The chiefs lined up squarely behind the company and its directives, for what was good for Jaluit Company and its business was clearly just as good for the chiefs' bank accounts.

4) In Palau the British had a century of dealings with the local people -- or at least with the one district of Koror, which had the advantage of being situated next to the best harbor in the island group. Again and again, when British ships visited Palau during the early 1800s, the ranking chief of Koror took the opportunity to lavish kindness on them in the form of food and hospitality, while also complaining of the rebelliousness of his subjects elsewhere in the island group. The British never seemed to comprehend that the island group was made up of several autonomous districts, and that the "rebelliousness" of which the Koror chiefs complained was only the ordinary maneuvers that districts made, sometimes with force of arms, to achieve prominence and upgrade their own status. Often enough the visit of a British warship ended in the bombardment of or attack on a district that happened to be on bad terms with Koror. Koror's prominence grew, thanks to the abundant help it received from the British and other foreigners, but it never achieved the sort of supremacy over Palau that Kamehameha did over Hawaii or Pomare over Tahiti. The sport for Palauans, after all, was in the game, not just walking away with the pot.

When the Germans established a colonial government there at the end of the 19th century, they prohibited wars and institutionalized concubinage (the women installed in the community clubhouses after they were seized from other districts in something that often resembled a mock war). Koror already held most of the cards throughout the 19th century by virtue of its location and its long history of dealings with foreigners. Now the major means of circulating wealth, and of permitting other areas to raise their own status, was lost. Assets (ie, traditonal Palauan money) were frozen and so was status.

5) Throughout Micronesia the introduction of firearms effected surprising changes in traditional warfare. They were used for a time, but their use was controlled more and more as the years went by. They were perhaps the equivalent of the modern-day nuclear weapon; their function more and more came to be to deter warfare rather than render it more effective. In the Marshalls, a battle between two armies equipped with firearms resulted in no casualties and few shots fired, while a war being conducted in the northern islands of the Marshalls at the same time produced several deaths.

6) When the Protestant missionaries came to the eastern Carolines in 1852, they dreamed of doing far more than bringing souls to God. They aspired to make of the island societies of Pohnpei and Kosrae Christian republics, not unlike the New England or midwestern towns in which they had been raised. Following the wave of conversions on Pohnpei during the late 60s, they thought they saw their opportunity. One of the missionaries began what he called the "reconstruction" of the island. To teach the converts individual responsibility, they laid out a Christian town grid-like and had each nuclear family build its own house on an assigned lot. Sheriffs were appointed to enforce the laws, and one of the titled nobles was called the "head of the republic". The experiment lasted for no more than a year before old ways prevailed and the people returned to their homesteads to live in the extended family groups of the past.

Kosrae was an entirely different matter, though. The pastor of that island inaugerated what he called "an experiment in civil government". Representatives were elected from different parts of the island to sit with the paramount chief and his council. A few years later the council deposed the chief, at the pastor's urging, and within a few years a system of electing the new chief was begun. In time the council became a democratic organization, and the island was well on the way to replacing its old hierarchic political structure with something that resembled a US township system.

Kosrae, however, had suffered an enormous population decline and could not support the old chiefly system. Pohnpei could and so they continued to do so. This example should caution us from attributing too much to the charism of a Christian missionary.

7) An Irish-born American by the name of David Deane O'Keefe made his way to Yap in the early 1870s. Like so many others who made their home in the islands, he was there to make a fortune. Unlike most, however, he succeeded. For 30 years until he was lost at sea in a typhoon in 1903, he dominated trade in the western Carolines. Instead of trading dry goods and tobacco and rum for copra, as most traders did, he saw that the Yapese placed a great value on the large stone disks that they used as local money. He used his ship to haul these disks from the quarry in Palau, accepting a set amount of copra as payment for his services. The Yapese had their stone money and O'Keefe had his copra.

**Re-examining Our Assumptions on Change**

At one time, under the influence of the anthropologists I read, I believed that culture was like an intricate machine with complex inter-related parts. Think of a watch, an old-fashioned spring watch, for example. Tinkering with any single part was liable to interfere with the workings of the entire system. Insertion or removal or substitution of any component could ruin the watch.

I now find it more helpful to use as a model an organism like the human body that is capable to adjusting to changes in its own system. The organism has a resilience and capacity to heal itself that a machine lacks. Cultures demonstrate these powers all the time.

Effects of Change. The brief case studies that I just presented suggest a few general statements on the effects of change on Pacific societies.

1) First, there are dislocations resulting from cultural change. It would surprising if there were not.

2) But usually institutions can be adapted in such a way as to serve the purposes of the culture in which they are introduced (as beachcombers were on Pohnpei and the copra trade was adapted in the Marshalls to consolidate the power of the chiefs).

3) The result as it is subsumed into the culture is a "tertium quid": a cultural feature that is neither Western nor traditional Pacific, but something that has taken on a new face and reflects the value configuration of the adopting culture. (The land inheritance system taken over on Pohnpei in German times, and the use of firearms in warfare are examples of this. Neither guns nor land deeds are used for exactly the same purposes or in just the same ways that they would be in the West. The same can be said about the education system and hospitals that Micronesians have inherited from Americans in our own day.)

4) The disruption that changes cause in a society tends to be temporary. There is a reaction, as in the human body, when a foreign agent is introduced. There may be pain or any of the other symptoms that accompany stress. But culture's recuperative powers, again like the human body's, are nothing short of amazing. (We only need reflect on any of the case studies discussed, or on more contemporary examples like the disruption caused by beverage alcohol when drinking was legalized in the early 1960s.)

The Process of Change. We would do well also to re-examine our assumptions on how change is introduced.

Possibly we have all rather naively believed that the technologically dominant culture had it within its power to impose changes on the subordinate people, by attraction if not by fiat. This belief is not only belittling to island people, but manifestly untrue. A more satisfying explanation is provided by the use of an interactional model. This model would yield the following conclusions.

1) First, we must take far more seriously than we have in the past the importance of the junior partner (in this case, the Micronesian society) in the dialogue. Even if the smaller society does not always initiate the change, it has and uses the power to respond to invitations to change. (Consider how Pohnpeians and Kosraeans

used this response to missionaries' invitation to alter the whole social structure of their islands.)

2) The cultural change process, therefore, is far less inevitable than many of us may have once believed. The people of even a small Pacific island can reject change outright (as the Pohnpeians did to the proposed social changes) or adapt it insofar as it suits their needs (as Kosraeans did in a time of population decline). (There are interesting present-day examples that could be cited here. One anthropologist suggests that Pohnpeians have accepted money-making enterprises like stores, not to make money as such, but to gain social capital by lending and giving away money and goods to others. The goal is social indebtedness, not savings.)

3) Islanders have always attempted to manipulate Westerners no less than the reverse. The picture we get throughout Micronesian history is of partners trying to manipulate one another to achieve their own ends. (This was certainly the case during the hundred years of dealings between the British and Palauans. It is no less true today in the political negotiations between Americans and Micronesians over political status.)

**Some Conclusions on Change in the Pacific**

Having begun with historical examples of change in Micronesia, we have proceeded to reflect on what these might tell us about the processes and effects of change. We have examined our own assumptions on the workings of change. Now, finally, we can consider whether any broader statements on change in the Pacific can be made. Anthropologists and historians have been notoriously cautious about making sweeping statements about change. Perhaps I should be also, but since fools rush in where angels fear to tread, let me warily offer these generalizations as the conclusion of this presentation.

1) Islanders collaborated with foreigners to forward their own aims, especially in the face of internal rivalries. There were always local groups more than willing to align themselves with missionaries or traders for prestige or power. Without this foothold foreigners would have found themselves frozen out of the society soon after their arrival.

2) The ability of the islanders to control the impact of the goods and technologies that Westerners carried to the islands was perhaps greater than anthropologists once believed. For every instance of subversion of island culture, there were perhaps ten cases of adaptation in which the foreign elements were used and modified by the local people for their own purposes. This is true of visitors themselves, who found themselves being used for purposes of which they sometimes had only the most vague awareness. It is also true of Western systems of law and even colonial governments. In the short term, then, Micronesians were surprisingly successful in controling the process of change and harnessing it for their own ends.

3) Yet a virus was transmitted all the same. Change begets more change, as a rule. The most powerful agents of change were not necessarily the foreigners, but the inherent dynamics of those items that they helped introduce. The most obvious example is money and what it implies. Ultimately the process of change became self-perpetuating and its directions no longer remained under the control of the islanders. (review of what the cash income has done in recent years to the family in Micronesia)

4) Eventually (by the post-war era in most places), the process of change had advanced to the point of no return. Island societies were so transformed by the money economy and political democracy that it was virtually impossible to reverse the direction and even difficult to slow it. Pacific island societies could and did rid themselves of their colonial masters, but they could not divest themselves of the capitalism and democratic leanings that had been embedded into their society by this time. These would alter the traditional cultural forms beyond recall.

5) Yet, despite these long-term cultural changes, a sense of continuity with the past endures, even in places that are as seemingly Westernized as Guam and the Northern Marianas. People look to their mythic and historical past much the same way Americans recall the heroes of the Revolutionary War, Kit Carson, Davey Crockett, and the defenders of the Alamo. Islanders have woven the wonders of the single-outrigger sailing canoe and the wooden spear with its sting-ray tip into their present identity, just as Americans in our computer-age have done the same with the village blacksmith, the spinning jenny, and the water wheel. They, no less than Americans, have the ability to imaginatively bridge the enormous distance between past and present to construct for themselves a sense of who they are and where they have come from.

**Conclusion**

This is not, I hope, a pollyannish treatment of a sensitive topic. Change has been and continues to be a painful process for Pacific islanders, even if they handle it with their customary graciousness and good humor. It has been even more painful because island people, confident of their ability to manage the change they have initiated or willingly accepted, find as time passes that they are in over their heads.

"Refrigerators" (in the general sense in which I am using this term) mean the possibility of actually saving goods -- this means that it makes sense to hoard -- and this, in turn, implies turning from the community's welfare to that of one's own family. A bank account is a lot like a refrigerator. Savings for personal use implies a change in the old way of thinking. Children are now no longer as important as they once were when they were the only form of social security. They took care of the man and woman when they got too old to provide for themselves. Even the shape of the family changes with a money income, as we have seen in recent years. So do the roles of men and women in the society.

These, in turn, lead to all kinds of other problems: suicide, delinquency, child and spouse abuse, among others. We are reaping today what was sown in the post-war years and the decades before as the West made its mark on the island societies.

But this is beyond the scope of my subject tonight. It is the subject of another whole talk sometime.

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