**Globalization in a Tiny Pacific Nation**

For a while it looked as though the world had once again passed by poor old Micronesia. A roughly defined region that I and another 200,000 people call home, Micronesia is a scattered island group in the Western Pacific that was colonized for a hundred years before it split into three tiny independent island-nations about 15 years ago. When I first came to the Caroline Islands as a scholastic in 1963, the place was a backwater–famous only for the battles that were fought there during World War II. As part of the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands, the Carolines and Marshalls were being supported by annual subsidies from the US. If anything was being produced at that time, the US subsidies soon put an end to that. In the early 1970s I wrote an article contending that the main industry in the islands was the “school industry.” Teachers and other government employees were the mainspring of the economy. Any private sector depended entirely on government spending to support it–and the funds to sustain the island government were coming from the US at the height of the Cold War.

The world was still passing the islands by in 1986 when the nation-states became independent. With a population growth rate of over 3 percent a year, the islands were acquiring too many new mouths to feed on what was a standstill economy. The government made attempts to establish a fishing industry, but they all came to naught. Next, people tried to set up a tourist industry aimed at the Asian market, but that, too, was unsuccessful except in the case of Palau. The islands were too far from Japan and Korea. They had nothing Asian tourists desire that Guam and Saipan, much closer tourist meccas, didn’t have more of. Meanwhile, the main funding source for these islands, the United States, started getting impatient at the sluggish nature of their economy. Working through the Asian Development Bank, the US supported cutbacks in the government sector and emphasis on private business.

Poor old Micronesia was again out of the mainstream, even when it desperately needed an industry other than schools. But resources were few, wages were relatively high (thanks to the upward pressure exerted by government salaries), and the labor force was scattered and not especially well-trained. Just at the time that the islands needed a boost, there was nowhere they could turn to develop their economy. But their Compact of Free Association with the US had offered them one option: they could leave their islands to join the growing mobile workforce that was heading where the jobs were.

One of our staff here at Micronesian Seminar is a 46-year-old woman from Chuuk, Eugenia Samuel, who has been living on Pohnpei for twenty-five years, ever since her return from college and marriage to a Pohnpeian. She is the oldest in a family of eight children from one of the most conservative parts of Chuuk.

The next oldest in the family, a sister by the name of Faustina, never finished high school. She and a younger brother, Fabro, who is a teacher at the local elementary school, continue to live on the family estate in Chuuk farming the land and caring for their parents. Faustina may be spending her life in Chuuk, but her two children will probably not be doing so. One of them, a 19-year-old, has already told his mother that he plans to head for the US mainland to get a job in a fast-food place after he finishes school. He already been in Hawaii for a year sampling the lifestyle there and looking into job prospects after graduation.

Four of the remaining five members of Eugenia’s family have moved off the old Chuuk homestead for good. Mary has worked for the past year and a half in a nursing home in Iowa taking care of the elderly. This is a kind of work that scores of Micronesians are recruited to do in New Jersey, in North Carolina, in Florida, and in Iowa. Islanders are brought in, fifty or so at a time, to take positions in a nursing home. They have a reputation for being gentle and respectful toward the elderly, but they will also work for wages that are unattractively low in the eyes of American citizens.

Paul, who never quite finished college, moved to Denver two years ago. He works for an airlines food catering service and has an apartment where he puts up other members of his extended family who have migrated to the US for jobs. A nephew, Eugenia’s oldest son, now lives with him while working for the same catering company that employs Paul. On the side, Paul takes on demographic projects with an American friend from whom he received census training a few years back. Paul is one of the more fortunate in the family, for he has marketable skills that allow him to seek other than entry-level work in the US.

Andy, the youngest of the family, is also living in Denver, a city that has seen a rapid growth in the number of Chuukese residents over the past ten years. Without even a high school degree, Andy would be virtually unemployable on his home island, where even a high school degree is no assurance of a job. If Andy were lucky enough to find a job in the main town there, he would be earning no more than two dollars an hour. In his job for a Seven-Eleven Store, Andy is making at least eight dollars an hour, a small fortune in the eyes of islanders.

Another brother of Eugenia’s, Tomaso, who lived on his own island for a time. now spends much of his time traveling from one place to another. One week he is on Guam staying with relatives there; the next week he might be headed to Hawaii to visit a nephew. Eugenia thinks that he might be casting about looking for a permanent residence and weighing job possibilities.

That leaves Pauline, the one who has been chosen by Eugenia to run her small store in Chuuk. The store markets fresh fish and pounded breadfruit, a very popular food item among Chuukese. The store has been losing money, largely because of management problems, but the sisters have been making plans to export local food products to Guam, where a large Chuukese population will pay good money to enjoy food from their home island.

Norbert, Eugenia’s husband, has watched his own brothers and sisters make their fortunes abroad. Four of his brothers and sisters live overseas; only one sister and his mother are still living on Pohnpei. Eugenia and Norbert’s own four children seem headed in the same direction as most of their aunts and uncles. The oldest, Norwel, is already living in Denver and working for the same company that employs two of his uncles. Eleanor, the second oldest, is soon off to Honolulu to finish college at the University of Hawaii. She hopes to major in psychology but knows that there are few positions in this field to be had in Micronesia. Eugenia’s two youngest children are still in school, but seem headed in the same direction, she admits.

During the 1970s and even the early 1980s, there may have been job prospects in the islands for the young men and women who were returning from college abroad. The school industry was flourishing in those days. New schools were being built each year to accommodate the rapidly growing population and the government work force was still expanding. As US subsidies were cut and the nation-states reached the limits of government expansion, the picture changed entirely. With no solid productive base to build on, the Micronesian economy seemed to be at a dead-end. Between 1994 and 2000, only 300 new jobs have been created in the Federated States of Micronesia. If jobs could not be found in the islands, Micronesians decided that they would follow the labor market overseas to find work. During that same six-year period an estimated 3,000 islanders found employment in the US. In other words, jobs abroad outnumbered new jobs at home ten-to-one.

These new Micronesian states–Palau, the Marshalls and the Federated States of Micronesia–now have an estimated 30,000 people living abroad. Over two-thirds of these have left during the last fifteen years as the economy of their own islands has stagnated. Island Micronesia has now joined the ranks of such island groups as Tonga, the Cook Islands, and Samoa in exporting labor to industrial countries abroad.

Eugenia’s mother still lives with one of her sons on the family homestead in rural Fefan supporting herself from the land as she always has. She would like to have her children back home with her, but she recognizes how difficult it would be to support all of them and their families on the modest piece of land the family owns. People today expect much more than they can find at home, she might say as she shrugs off the splintering of their family that has taken place in the last five or ten years. Globalization? If it means opportunities to follow the jobs abroad and to capitalize on a prosperous American economy, her children would say, let’s have more of it.

Francis X. Hezel, SJ

July 17, 2001