***Micronesia and Japan***

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### First Acquaintance

Late 1800s was age of nationalism–for Japan as for many of the countries of Europe (Italy and Germany unification in early 1870s, and Meiji Restoration in 1868).

* Unification under national government, rejection of feudalism in favor of modernization.
* Muscle-flexing as part of nationalism. Search for resources needed for development, and for colonies.

Meanwhile, Micronesia (like most of the Pacific) was opening to the world at the time. Whaleship trade and China trade at first, then Protestant missionaries. By 1870s the copra trade became primary industry–with copra used to make soap and coconut oil. Industry had developed in early 1870s under Germans.

In 1890, the *Tenya Maru*, ship of Nanto Shokai, went on a trading cruise in the Pacific. Ship returned two years later under new ownership–brought several resident traders to live in Chuuk. They included Koben Mori, son of a samurai, and Mogahira Shirai, who had fought in the wars of the Meiji restoration. Soon expanded to Palau.

By 1900, 30 Japanese traders living in Micronesia, most of them in Chuuk and Palau. Mori would remain there for 50 years before death in 1945.

With German acquisition of islands from Spain in 1899, most of the Japanese traders expelled, although the number built up again during the coming years. During the next 15 years, much more island produce was being shipped to Japan than to Europe. Even before its acquisition of Micronesia, Japan had acquired the major share of island trade.

### Japanese takeover

It was October 1914. A squadron of warships steamed into Micronesia. One task force headed for Yap and Palau, and another to the islands in the east. At each of the major islands, the warships sent ashore launches filled with marines. From the stern of these launches flew the red sunburst of the Japanese Navy.

World War I had begun. The British and Japanese had an understanding to help one another protect their colonies in time of war. On the strength of this, the Japanese came into Micronesia in 1914. Japan took possession of Germany’s colonies north of the equator, while Britain did the same south of the equator.

For Micronesians, it was just another change in colonial rule–the third they had experienced in 30 years.

### Island rule under the Japanese Navy

Japanese naval officers took over the administration of the islands. In doing so, they continued features of the system they inherited from the Germans. They retained the flag chiefs that had been installed by their predecessors and continued to collect a yearly land tax.

They also introduced new public services. Jaluit, the capital of the Marshalls, soon had a Japanese-run hospital. The corps of naval doctors, assisted by local health aides, conducted a medical survey of the Marshalls and soon began visiting other atolls to treat patients.

The Japanese also began a rudimentary public school system, the first ever in Micronesia. Only the main island in each group had a school, but it was a beginning of a more widespread education system.

Everywhere there were athletic contests and field days.... Japanese influence was limited at first. But this was just a foretaste of what was yet to come.

### Early Years of the Japanese Mandate

At the end of the war, with the strong support of Britain, Japan secured formal authority over the islands, against US opposition. In 1919, at the Paris Peace Conference, the islands were entrusted to Japan to be governed as a Mandated Territory under the newly founded League of Nations. Japan was to be given full recognition of the administering authority of the islands it had taken from Germany in 1914.

In 1921 a small army of government bureaucrats began streaming into Palau. Dressed in white linen uniforms with starched collars, they were to administer Japan’s new colony. In that same year, Toshiro Tezuka was appointed the first civilian governor of Nanyo-cho, the South Seas Government. Koror, Palau, would be the capital. Branch offices were established in each of the six regions: Yap, Saipan, Chuuk, Pohnpei and the Marshalls in addition to Palau.

White-clad civil servants soon were everywhere. They staffed the offices of a large government bureaucracy that oversaw all aspects of island life. They scuttled in pith helmets over village paths as teachers, medical aides, agriculture extension agents and policemen. The size of the Japanese administration stood in sharp contrast with the small German administration some years before. By the mid-1920s there were 900 civil servants, and ten years later there were 1400.

The Japanese were to “promote material and moral well-being and the social progress of the islanders,” according to their League of Nations mandate. In other words, they were to bring these people the blessings of civilization.

How might this be done? The Japanese representative to the League of Nations spelled out the approach: “Education and religion are the two methods most likely to insure in the long run the educational development of the inhabitants.”

### Religion

The Japanese administration was not long in taking action. Admiral ShijiroYamamoto appealed to the Pope for priests and brothers, and soon Spanish Jesuits were sent to open a new mission in the islands. Four pastors from the Japanese Congregational Church also arrived to begin work in Chuuk and Pohnpei. German Liebenzell missionaries were invited to resume their work and set up new stations in the west. And so nonchristian Japan brought in missionaries to assist it in its civilizing mission. Furthermore, the Jesuits were introduced to Micronesia when the pope appealed to them to take on this mission.

### Education

Public schools were unknown in the islands before the Japanese arrived. Prior to this the only schools were mission-run. Japan, then, founded the first public education system in the islands.

The Japanese schools offered three years of basic education for all who lived within walking distance of one of the schools. For the better students two years of additional education were offered in special schools located in the towns. For the few stand-out students were invited to attend the carpentry school in Palau–which stood at the pinnacle of education. Its vocational arts program was the rough equivalent of a college education in those days, and its graduates were assured of the choicest positions open to Micronesians.

Children from the age of eight attended class in one of the kogakko, the public schools located on every major island in Micronesia. There were 24 of these schools in all. There the island children learned to speak and read Japanese, along with arithmetic, geography and moral education. The school curriculum was rounded out with physical exercise, and some basic vocational education, including gardening for the boys, and sewing and weaving for the girls.

Japanese education, formal and informal, was intended to “civilize” the young–prepare them to elevate their standard of living. Certainly it offered young islanders the opportunity to become proficient in the Japanese language.

Upon completing school, some of them found jobs as messenger boys or held other minor positions. Access to a bicycle was a status symbol for young Micronesians of that day.

### The New Economy

Copra production was still an important source of income for Micronesians during these times. Nanyo Boeki Kaisha–or Nambo, as it was commonly known–operated a network of retail stores throughout the islands. The shelves of their stores were stocked with Japanese goods, which were traded for the copra islanders produced.

Copra production doubled during the early Japanese period, and the sale of copra brought in nearly two million yen a year. But copra was no longer the only industry, or the biggest industry in the islands.

Japan continued to run the phosphate mining operation on Angaur that it inherited from the Germans. Hundreds of Micronesians were brought in from neighboring islands to provide the labor for the mines. They lived, as they had before, in wooden barracks, worked long hours, and exchanged dances and songs with one another in the evenings.

Phosphate yielded a respectable one million yen a year during those years. Later the industry grew as mining was expanded to other islands, especially Fais and Tinian.

In 1928 an Okinawan settler by the name of Tamashiro began a commercial tuna fishing operation in Chuuk that quickly grew in size and spread to other islands (Palau, Pohnpei and Saipan). The tuna catch was dried, smoked and sold as katsuobushi. Dried tuna eventually became the second largest export in the territory, bringing in 5 million yen a year. But even this industry was overshadowed by a new source of revenue: sugar.

Haruji Matsue–the “Sugar King,” as he was known–first arrived on Saipan in 1920 after he had already made a name and a fortune for himself cultivating sugar in Taiwan. Once he determined that the land was suitable for the cultivation of sugar, he procured the land for cultivation, and established a company that became a giant in the region: Nanyo Kohatsu Kaisha, or Nanko.

Matsue brought in thousands of Okinawans and gave each a small plot of land to farm on condition that they sell their sugar to him. The land was cleared and planted–3,000 acres of Saipan’s fertile plain–and a sugar refinery was built. Narrow-gauge tracks were laid down so that the sugar cane could be easily transported to the refinery, and from there to the dock for shipment.

Within a few years Matsue’s company was producing twelve hundred tons of sugar a day. But Matsue saw opportunities for even further expansion. By the early 1930s he had land under cultivation on Tinian and Rota as well. The industry was bringing in over 6 million yen a year–far more than all other industries combined. For the rest of Japanese era, sugar would be the mainstay of the economy. Haruji Matsue, the Sugar King, and the industry he founded had made the islands self-supporting.

The sugar industry was bound to have an enormous impact on these islands. The Japanese and Okinawan population in the Northern Marianas exploded–from well under 2,000 in 1920 to more than 40,000 by 1937.

The industrial build up of the islands, and the influx of the Japanese who ran it, was bound to make significant changes in island life.

### The New Towns of the 1930s

Koror in the 1920s was a bustling town. “There was a post office, shops and a department store. Palauans could walk through the town and not get wet during a heavy rain... a resort for Japanese pearl divers during the late 1920s with names like Ginza Dori and Geisha Lane.” By the end of the 1930s there were about 15,000 Japanese living in and around the town. With its dozens of government buildings and hundreds of stores, Koror had become a genuine city.

Toloas, the district center of Chuuk, took on much of the flavor of a Japanese town. It had dentist offices, auto shops, and barbershops with full wall-sized mirrors. There were also “flower quarters” where men could eat, drink and enjoy the company of women for an evening. For entertainment, people could watch sumo wrestling in the town plaza.

Pohnpei had an even larger metropolitan center. The main road in Kolonia was a well lighted street of stores half a mile long. The town had stores of every description: butcher shops, curio shops, liquor stores, ice cake stands, and bicycle repair shops, besides the usual restaurants and bars. Kolonia enjoyed telephone service, electricity and a sewer system.

In Garapan, on Saipan, there were shoe stores, geisha houses, barbershops, ice cream parlors, bathhouses, and move theaters. Other specialty shops opened: tofu factories, sword makers, and sake brewers. With its electrical power, phone service and a radio station, Garapan had became almost indistinguishable from any other small Japanese city. By 1935, Garapan had a population of about 10,000, nearly all of it foreign.

Although the majority of those who lived in these towns were Japanese, the boom had a great impact on the lifestyle of islanders as well.

“The women wear their hair in the Japanese style. Their wardrobe is not complete if they do not have a colored Japanese fan and a multi-hued kimono. The chief of the Marshalls carries a Japanese cane and his clothes are tailored in Japan. The young islanders are like Japanese cadets in their khaki outfits and black caps.” (quote from American journalist visiting the Marshalls in 1919)

Local policemen were dressed in white uniforms. Chiefs in some places could be seen decked out in their in white duck coats and matching trousers. Everyone ate ramen and sushi when they could afford it. And, of course, just about everyone spoke Japanese.

### Shadows in the late 1930s

The 1930s saw a great growth in the island economy, but it also witnessed a sharp surge in the Japanese population, since they were the ones who drove the economic miracle. In 1937, the foreign population in the islands numbered 62,000 and it would swell to over 90,000 by the end of the decade. The 50,000 Micronesians in the islands were outnumbered 2:1 by Japanese.

Events in Asia–especially in Manchuria and China–were leading to a confrontation between Japan and the US. As always at such times, nationalism was the order of the day. Micronesians were swept up into the vortex of these events. They began each workday singing the *Kimigayo*, the Japanese national anthem. Before their classes, school children bowed to the imperial palace in Tokyo and recited the oath to the emperor.

The Shinto religion, embodying the national ideals of Japan, became a focal point of the nationalism that was washing over the mandate. In late 1940 a new Shinto shrine was dedicated in Koror.

Then came the war... and the reversal of all that had been done in previous 25 years. In a talk he gave in early 1944, one high official of Nanyo-cho reminisced over some of the splendid triumphs in education and industry that Japan had realized in the islands. He concluded his talk with a lament: “I feel very sorry that the model flower garden we worked with such great effort to design is about to be destroyed.”

The garden may have been destroyed, but the achievements during those years of Japanese administration were substantial.

* Islanders were introduced to modern world, just as Japan itself had been a half century earlier during the Meiji restoration. Not just dress styles, and songs, and rise of the towns, but through education system.
* Industry rose to new heights, with diversified exports. For one short period at least, the islands were able to pay their way in a global economy.
* Island culture had been so transformed by its exposure to Japanese influence that the signs of this remain to the present.

### After the War

After the war all Japanese nationals in the islands were repatriated. Thus, loss of experienced personnel, especially in business and technical matters. Island economy went back to dependence on copra and sale of scrap metal.

Painful separation of married couples when the Okinawan or Japanese spouses were sent back home. Only from the 1970s were the regulations relaxed–eg, Tosiwo Nakayama’s father allowed to return and live out the remainder of his life in Chuuk.

Yet, the bond between Japanese and islanders continued. When I first came in 1963, Micronesians expressed their fondness for food (ramen, sushi, etc) and their nostalgia for the “old days” of their Japanese schooling (including the strict discipline). On my first visit to Palau, I heard popular songs with Japanese-like melodies. Japanese names seemed to be everywhere.

The Japanese impact on the language was evident to me as I was finding my way as a new teacher. Students excused themselves to use the *benjo*. They amused themselves by looking at *sassing* or watching the Friday night *kachito* or by taking to the field to play *iakiyu*. Now and then they might find a *simpung* to read. Most of the students wore *zori*, but a few might go *atashi*. Their wardrobe included *sarumatta* and *angkachi* as well as *anchupang.* In their after-school hours, some would find a *riakaa* and head for the *atake*, where they grew *nengii* and *kuurii*, among other kinds of *iyasayi*. On days off from school, they might find a *chitoosa* to bring them downtown for a checkup at the *pioing* or to the *kassooro* to say goodbye to someone leaving on the *skooki.* Before their return they could stop by TTC (then known as *kapuu* for its curved roof) and pick up *tempura* from the store next to the company *soko* and pack the treat in their *firosiki* for their trip back. Once back at the school, unless there was an *appiyo* that there was no *tengki* in the evening, the students– both full-blooded islanders and *ayinoko*–would study hard so they could *sochungiyo* at the end of the year.

But the impact wasn’t just one-way. The islands had made their mark on the Japanese and Okinawans who had lived and worked there during the 1920s and 1930s. Guntos were formed, regular meetings were held, and yearly books appeared with published accounts and photos of the old days. Pacific Island studies programs were established, and *The Journal of the Pacific Society* was published for years afterwards.

Early tourism build up in the islands was Japanese, resulting from the historical and cultural ties. Saipan and Palau were the principal destinations–because they were closer to Japan, not just in geographical distance but culturally as well. The islands still bore the marks of Japanese presence. Palau Pacific Resort, financed by Noboru Gotoh and opened in 1985, is singular example of business collaboration between Japanese and islanders.

### Present and Future

* JAICA and funding projects were begun with independence in the late 1980s. Japanese involvement in the islands remained modest throughout these years. For FSM and the other compact nations Japan had funded one large capital improvement project a year. Japan and Micronesia remain partners with a fondness for one another and a shared history–but at a distance from one another.
* Micronesia will face the problem of all independent nations in the Pacific: developing an economy that will support them. Island nations are small, distant, and short on resources. Even with its growing tourism, Palau will need foreign aid for the foreseeable future. FSM and the Marshalls even more so.

* Yet, the Micronesian islands represent strategic importance because of their location across the western Pacific, just as they have for three centuries or longer. They are a pathway across the Pacific. So perhaps they do have a value after all!
* US is signaling a partial retraction from the islands: possible withdrawal of Compact funding in 2023, and recent shut-down of Peace Corps. Holes to be plugged somehow.
* What will be the next phase of the Japanese-Micronesian relationship that is now more than a century old? I present that as an important question for reflection.