

# ***Micronesian Origins***



***Francis X. Hezel, SJ***



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# Introduction

I'll always remember walking down the road in Chuuk many years ago and glimpsing the flickering light in the wooden houses—the light of the kerosene lamp.

In the old days, before most houses had electrical power, long before cell phones and even before television sets, it was story-telling time as darkness fell. The day's work had been done, the food cooked and distributed to the family. Now the gathered family could relax in the couple of hours before the children went to sleep.

Story time for the family. This was when the older people in the house might recite their stories of the past: tales of what life was like under the Japanese, accounts of how the lineage had acquired this or that piece of land... sometimes even the old legends of the arrival of the lineage or clan on this island.

The stories were told to entertain, but they were intended to do much more than that. They offered listeners a link to the past, a relationship with the island community, an anchor in time.

The stories were meant to help stretch the minds of the young—to help young people understand where they came from, so that they might better grasp who they are. Any understanding of people today is always rooted in the past. So is just about everything else in an island society. We are what we are because of our ancestors.

During my younger days I myself was never fond of history. Many years ago when a friend of mine told me with excitement in his voice that he had been accepted to do a doctoral degree in history, I congratulated him. But I couldn't help wondering what it was about history that fascinated him. For me it was just a long list of deceased leaders, dates hard to remember, and events long buried in the past. Dead and best forgotten, I thought to myself.

But then again, I was no islander. Otherwise, I would have been trained from an early age to understand that the past, far from

being dead and forgotten, continually interacts with the present.

That was part of the thrall of those bedtime stories in the near-dark told by an older member of the family. Just as the spirits of departed ancestors once would speak to islanders about their present concerns, the old stories continued to link the past with today's world. How did we happen to settle in this part of the island rather than over there, where the fishing is so much better? How could my grandparents on my mother's side meet when grandfather lived on another island 200 miles away? Why does it always feel as if we're entering enemy territory when our family visits that one village on the other side of the island?

What happened in the past never seems over and done with. Its ghost appears in so much of our island life today. It taunts us with its presence and demands our attention.

How far back into the past can we go? Once when I turned that question into an assignment for my class at Xavier High School, I was astonished to receive one genealogy that went back thirteen generations. That was the best any of my students could do at that time. But on some islands there are recited lists of ancestors that can go back even beyond that. Old men can tick off twenty or thirty generations (amounting to a few hundred years). How much further back can we hope to go here?

This little booklet is meant to help us get as far back as we can—to trace our ties back much further than we might expect. In fact, it tries to bring us all the way back to what we might call the beginning. There will be blank spaces at times, even entire blank pages, but we can hope that in the future some of those blanks will gradually be filled in. Recovering our history is a task that continues for years, even generations. After all, building a history takes almost as long as living it.

So read on, friends, for more stories to pass on at those family gatherings.

## Chapter One

# *Back to the First Settlement of Our Islands* (1000 BC--200 BC)

### ***Where did we come from?***

Most islanders have heard the story explaining how their clan first reached their island. They may also know the tales about the arrival of some of the other clans. One former student of mine, when I asked him about his clan's origins on Fefan in Chuuk, told me that the founder of the clan was carried to his island on the back of a dolphin.

Even after their arrival, however, clans spread out, sometimes widely and in surprising ways. Often they changed names in the course of their movement. The real story of any clan will show twists and turns over the decades, and there are tales to describe all this as well.

### ***Stories of Origins***

But we can go even further back than this. Now and then we hear ancient stories about the very old days—stories that seem to go back as far as our population does. In fact, these stories are supposed to explain the origins of our island population.

On Pohnpei, for instance, we have the legend of the man who supposedly founded the island.

*Long ago there was a man living in Katau off to the east. This man, Sapkini, built a large canoe that could carry many people. His people believed that the sky was a roof that touched the sea far away, and if you went to the place where the sky meets the sea you would find land.*

*Sapkini asked seven other men and nine women to go with*



*him in his sailing canoe to find good land. On their voyage they saw an octopus and asked him who he was and where land could be found. The octopus told them his name and said that he lived on a shoal that runs north-south. The canoe went on and found the home of the octopus, a reef with a small bit of coral jutting out of the water. On this tiny outcropping they began building their island from stones and rocks brought from faraway lands.*

Chuukese, too, have their founding legends.

*Long ago a woman and a man from the east floated on ivory nut palms to Chuuk lagoon. They followed a bird to Weno Island and lived in a cave there.*

*After the woman became pregnant, the man made a house for her. The man and woman had many children: six boys and six girls. The children were given special responsibilities. Onuk was to watch over the others so they remained in good health. Neufonu, a girl, was to plant things to grow in the land. The eldest son gave orders to the other children.*

Palauans tell the story of the four sons of Milad, who populated Palau after the great flood.

*After the waters receded, the gods found an old woman who had helped the seven messengers of the gods with her gift of cooked food. Her raft had overturned and she had drowned, but the gods brought her back to life. Thereupon, she took the name Milad. She became the founding goddess of the new Palau.*

*Milad gave birth to the stone figures of the four leading villages of Palau: Ngeremlengui, the oldest son; Melekeok, her second son; Aimeliik, her daughter; and Koror, the youngest son.*

## ***Movement Through the Islands***

Even after the early settlement, the interaction between the different island groups was captured in legend. As the centuries passed and these settlers became rooted on their islands, currents flowed and influences passed from one island group to another. After all, these inhabitants were “sea people” with their ocean-going canoes and sophisticated navigational systems.

Kachaw is a name that pops up frequently in the old stories. One of the two leaders of a later expedition into Chuuk bore the name in his title: Soukachaw. According to the story, he and his companions came from Kachaw, settled in Chuuk, and founded a new clan system there. Isokelekel, the leader of the forces that defeated the Sauduleurs and ended their long reign on Pohnpei, supposedly came from Kachaw. Even if Kachaw can not simply be identified with the island of Kosrae, what does it represent? Many cultural historians now agree that Kachaw refers to a place beyond the horizon—a place not to be found on the known map and therefore located somewhere in the heavens, either to the east or the west.

Iap is another name that crops up repeatedly in oral history. There are place names in Chuuk and Pohnpei associated with Iap. The stories often speak of the great magical powers that sorcerers from Iap wielded. Chuukese tell of the contest between sorcerers from Iap and from the western islands in Chuuk Lagoon—a contest that ended with one of the highest mountains there being sliced in half. Is Iap to be identified with the high island of Yap? Or could the term refer to one of the coral atolls to the west, islands that were constantly dispatching sailing canoes back and forth? Whatever the case, religion—and the “power” (mana) associated with it—seems to have been a major theme in the legends referring to Iap.

Yap and Palau maintained links with one another for hundreds of years. Yapese canoes regularly sailed to Palau, a couple hundred miles to the southwest, for the limestone rocks they used for their famous stone money. In return for the quarried

stone, Yapese would offer valuable beads from their own island. In addition, sailing canoes from the atolls of the Central Carolines were visiting Yap as the final stop on the trade route that had become a regular feature of island life. So all the islands in the west were linked by these occasional visits in the past.

Was there a religious cult spreading through eastern Micronesia that regarded basaltic rock as sacred? There were hints that such a cult might have been common on Pohnpei and Kosrae at one time, and that this cult was spreading to other places. The arrival of Soukachaw and Souwoniras in Chuuk did more than found a new clan and alter the social system; it seems to have begun the veneration of basaltic rock there. Meanwhile, even the Marshall Islands, which has no basaltic rock at all throughout its atolls, acquired two slabs of rock on Namu Island, a place long regarded as the mother of all Marshallese clans.

The Marshalls, too, has its own stories of encounters with other islands in the region. According to one tale, Marshallese leaders were stranded on Pohnpei after drifting there in their canoe. During their time on the island, the story goes, they taught Pohnpeians how to use magic to move the huge slabs to Nan Madol for construction of the site that would soon be built there. Whatever may have happened, the story suggests that not all tales of magical influence pointed in the direction of Yap; some ascribed the power as coming from the east as well.

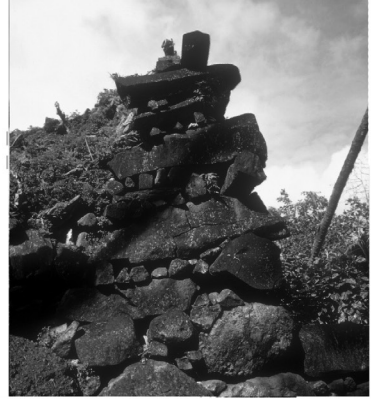
Throughout the centuries, then, the legends suggest considerable contact among the different island groups in Micronesia. The map of these islands below, drawn from the report of island navigators who reached the Philippines in the late 1600s, shows how much of the Micronesia world they knew.



the stone archway in Tonga, and the ancestral stone figures on Rapanui.



*Nan Madol, Pohnpei*



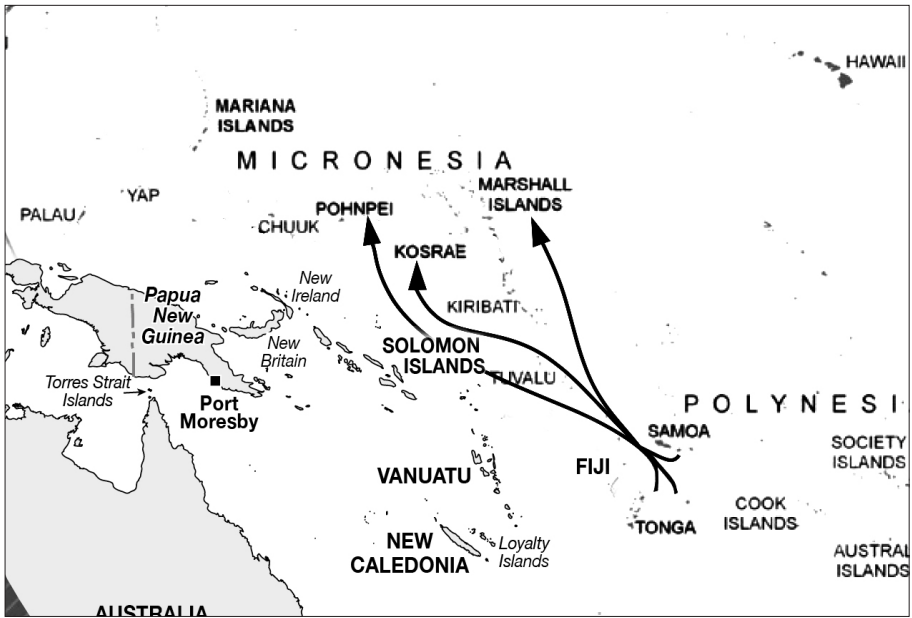
*Lelu, Kosrae*



*Babeldaob, Palau*

### ***Stone Remains in Kosrae, Pohnpei and Palau***

At about the same time something else was beginning to happen. Polynesians, who had been clustered for perhaps two thousand years in Samoa and Tonga, seem to have finally begun their expansion into French Polynesia, Hawaii, New Zealand and other places formerly unsettled. Why they had been so slow to continue their explorations is a mystery. In any case, it seems that the Polynesians exploded all at once to settle the remainder of the Pacific.



***Map of Eastern Micronesia and South Pacific showing places where Polynesian influence was especially felt***

During this expansion, Polynesians reached Micronesia, settling the two coral atolls of Nukuoro and Kapingamarangi. They almost certainly also touched the eastern island groups in Micronesia: Marshalls, Kosrae and Pohnpei. We don't know exactly when or for how long, but the cultures of those islands still bear some of the distinctive marks: paramount chieftainships, honorific language, and some of the respect customs, kava (or sakau), and residual bits of the language. Polynesians came and had their impact, but did not stay. The culture remained Micronesian, but with some big changes in the islands visited. Chiefs, who had once held limited authority in the major island groups in the east, were now treated as if they were kings.

## ***Loss of Navigation on High Islands***

Meanwhile, those seafarers who settled on most of the high islands in Micronesia lost their navigational skills in time. They continued to build smaller canoes to fish off-shore, but not the ocean-going canoes their ancestors had depended on to get to these islands. There was no longer any need for them to sail long distances except in Yap, where men had to navigate to Palau and bring back the limestone discs they used as valuables. As for the rest, they had what they needed on the high islands. Only in the coral atolls, where life was precarious and food might be wiped out in a typhoon, were those navigational skills and the construction of those canoes of continuing importance. After all, their lives might depend on using these skills to find resources somewhere else.

## Chapter Two

# *Where the Original Settlers Come From* (1400 BC--200 BC)

Who were the first people to settle these islands? Where did they come from?

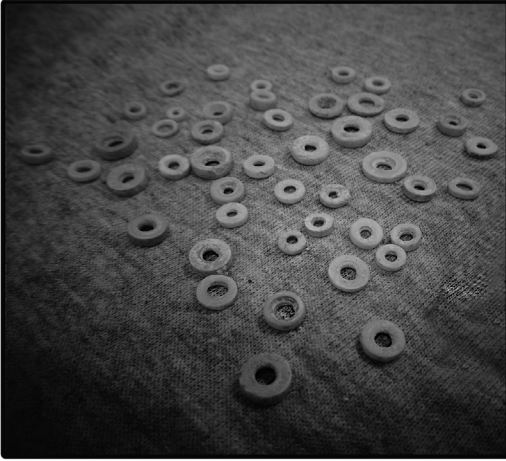
The early settlers in Micronesia left us clues as to who they were and how they lived. They even offered hints of where they had come from. The remains that archaeologists have found in ancient burial sites and in the garbage pits of these people (midden sites, they are called) reveal most of what we know about them. Since these settlers left no written records of their voyages or discoveries, those who wish to learn about them must poke around in the earth to discover what they may have left buried beneath the ground. So, pits were dug on most of the major high islands and even on some of the outer islands like Fais and Lamotrek.

### ***Cultural Remains***

From the remains in these pits we find that the early settlers brought simple pottery. But it seems their pottery-making didn't last very long in their new home, probably because the clay wasn't very good for making pots. Only in Yap did the tradition of pottery-making remain... right up to the present day.

They brought tools that they had learned to make from stone and shell long before they sailed to Micronesia. Their toolbox contained adzes for chopping and carving, scrapers and peeling knives, and shell fishhooks. But they also made carved ornaments for both men and women—adornments that they could wear proudly during their life and be buried with when they died.



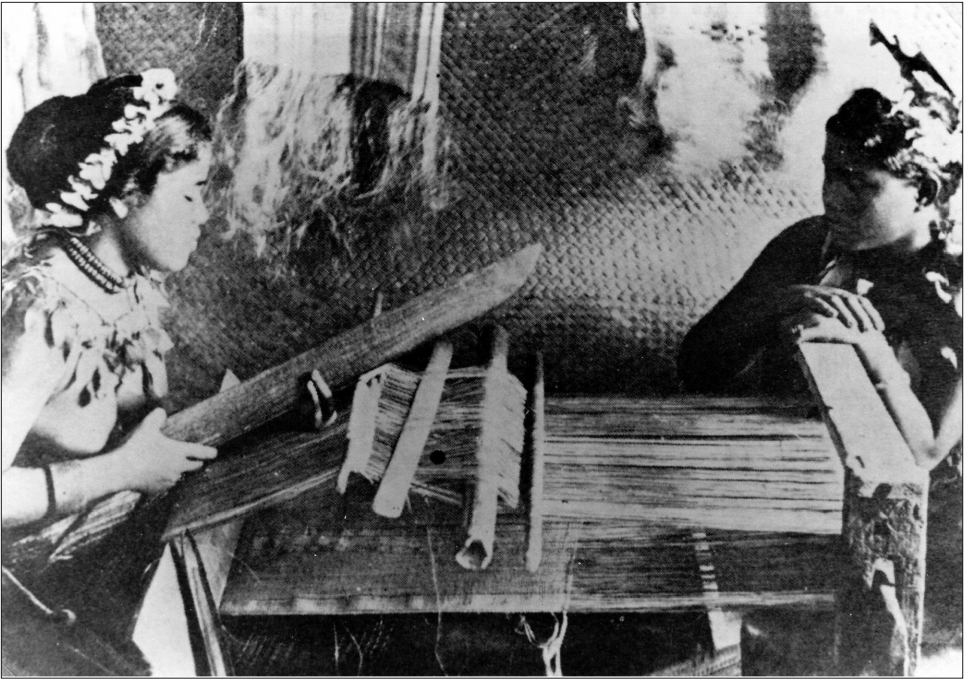


*Old shell ornaments*



These settlers also carried plantings for some of the food they needed to help survive on the islands they settled. They brought taro and yams as well as breadfruit. In addition, they also introduced dogs and perhaps pigs, animals that they could raise to feed themselves.

One of the more unusual imports was the loom employed for weaving fiber—not just plaiting strands of leaves to make a basket or a sleeping mat, but actual weaving of thread into cloth. The Caroline Islands were one of the few areas in the Pacific where people knew how to make thread and weave it on a loom. Pottery may have been lost, but weaving was kept, as we can see from the skirts and cloaks and loincloths made even to the present in some of the islands.



***Weaving fiber on the back loom***

These early settlers also brought their language. That is something that can be a telltale sign of where they came from and what their pathway through Micronesia might have been. Many of the words in the languages of Pohnpei and Chuuk, along with the coral atolls ranging to Yap, are closely related. For that matter, the languages of Kosrae and the Marshalls also have many striking similarities. You can see this yourself if you compare such basic words as father, tooth, night, shark in these languages. The close similarity is no accident; it is evidence that the different islands were settled by speakers of one common language. It also suggests that the islands might have been settled roughly around the same time.

### ***When and Where?***

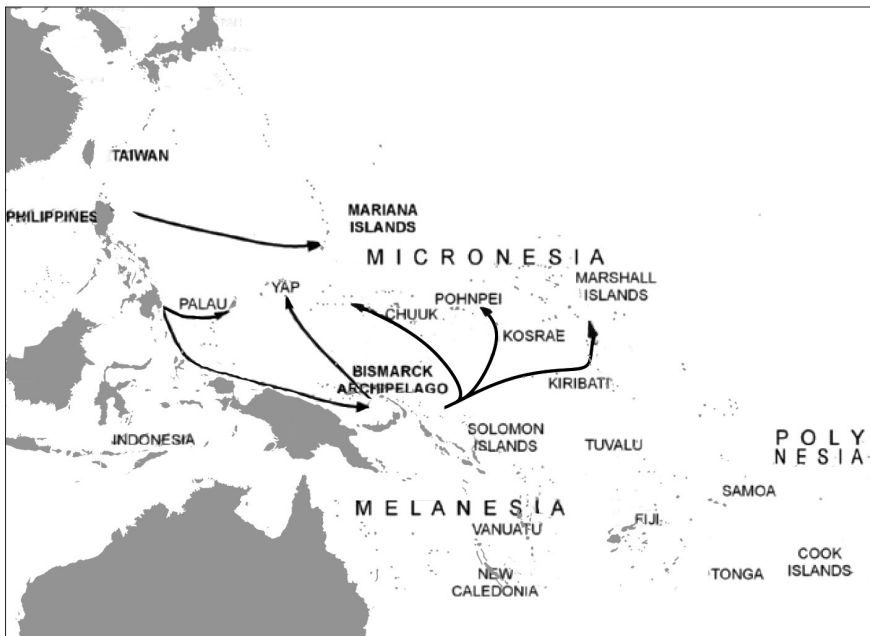
The evidence that has been gathered suggests the first settlers arrived a little over two thousand years ago, perhaps just a couple hundred years before the time of Christ. We're not sure what island was settled first,

but this group of sea-voyagers and those other groups that followed moved quickly from island to island until all the main islands were populated.

Where did these first settlers come from? Their toolkit, their sailing skills and their language all point to somewhere in northern Melanesia. The precise location is not clear, but it could have been the Bismarck Archipelago, the Admiralty Islands, or possibly New Britain.

Certainly the ancestors had lived in Melanesia for a long time, probably 1,000 years, before setting out for island Micronesia. It's possible that they sailed off directly to the northeast where they found the Caroline Islands, but that's a voyage of well over a thousand miles with nothing but sea in between. Most scholars think the settlers may have made a few stops along the way. They think that it might make more sense to imagine them following a string of islands in Melanesia before heading off to the north. Perhaps the voyagers sailed to Santa Cruz Islands or even Vanuatu before they veered upwards to follow the island chains running north-south into the Marshalls and eastern Carolines.

But that doesn't account for all of Micronesia. What we've said above applies to what scholars call "Nuclear Micronesia"—everything between the outer islands of Yap and the Marshall Islands. Yap and Palau are the two islands to the far west that stand outside this area. The story of their settlement is different from the other islands, and it's even more murky.



***Probable routes from Melanesia to Micronesia***

What do we know about the first settlement of Palau and Yap, then? Their languages are distant relatives of the others spoken in Micronesia, but not nearly as closely related as the rest of the languages are to one another. This makes it harder to figure out where they came from.

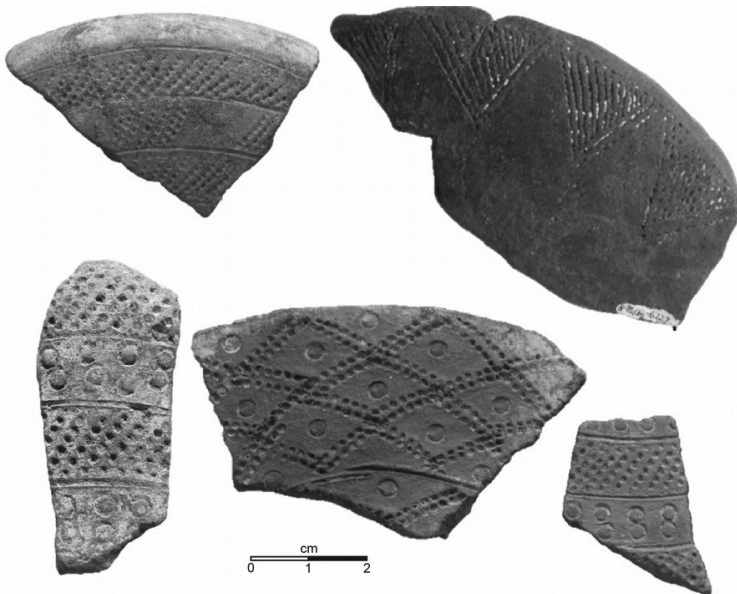
The first Yapese might have originally come from the Admiralty Islands, perhaps even around the same time the other settlers in the area arrived. But they might have taken a more direct route to their new home and brought with them stronger traces of their Melanesian home.

Palau's settlement could date back much earlier, perhaps as far as a thousand years before the other islands of Micronesia were settled. We know that the Palauan language is far more ancient than the other Micronesian tongues; it is more closely related to Filipino but through the filter of Indonesia. There are still many unanswered questions about the settlement of both islands.

## ***Their Way of Life***

These distant ancestors who lived in Melanesia for over a thousand years were a people who were comfortable on the deep sea. They resided in villages situated close to the shore, their houses usually perched on long poles, where they could easily gather fish and other marine resources. But they also planted root crops, mostly yams and taro, to help them survive on the land. Their food sources also included banana, breadfruit, pandanus, and sugar cane, and they planted bamboo and ginger for other uses.

As we've noted before, these people were pottery-makers. Those who do the digging in the old garbage dumps have found thousands of pieces of the pottery they made. We who have never been engaged in the digging sometimes wonder why all the fuss about pottery. But we must remember that the pots they made were not just supposed to serve as containers (for food or medicine or whatever), but to serve as a distinctive trademark for the people who made them. That's why the design features on the pottery were so important. The design served as the insignia of the tribal people who used it, their calling card when they had dealings with other such groups.



***Old pottery fragments***

These ancestors might have lived in Melanesia for more than a thousand years, but they were a sea-people at heart. They could make a home on an island group, growing their own crops and managing their own community, but they were also explorers who had the sailing craft and the navigational skills to set out in search of new lands.

### ***Why Leave Home?***

Even so, there are questions that must be asked. Why sail off into the wind on the open ocean? Wouldn't it have been much easier to stay where they were instead of facing the risks of a long sea voyage?

It's possible that resources might have been getting scarce and land more difficult to acquire as the population expanded. Then too, the push might have come from quarrels within the village or even within the family. Perhaps a younger brother who was chafing under the authority of his old brother wanted more breathing room and an estate of his own, even if he had to look for it on a distant island hundreds of miles away. But there's still another motive—the sense of adventure—that lies deeply embedded in the genes of Pacific Island peoples. Why stay home when you can be exploring the fascinating world beyond? Their descendants a few thousand years later might have expressed this sense of adventure differently—by signing up on a foreign whaleship or enlisting as a plantation worker abroad in the 19th Century, or perhaps joining the US military today.

So off they went, sailing mostly into the northeasterly wind. If they didn't find anything suitable, at least they could make it back home much more quickly with the wind at their back.

## Chapter Three

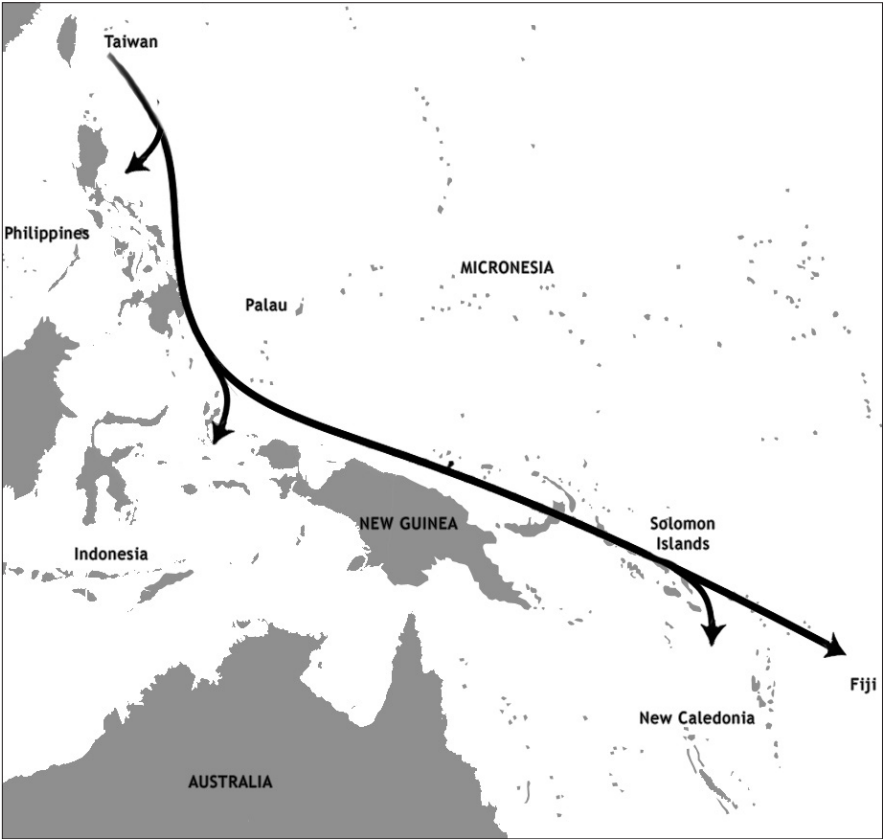
### *The Beginning of the Seafarers* (2500 BC–1400 BC)

So where did these restless sea-people, the voyagers who sailed to Melanesia and made their temporary home there, originally come from?

The answer we get from nearly all those who have studied this question is Taiwan, an island just off the coast of China. Taiwan is generally regarded as the starting point: the place in which the Austronesian language family—the broad family that embraces nearly all the major Pacific Island languages—originated. It is also where the seafaring tradition, the navigational skills, and so many of the other cultural traits associated with early island societies were formed.

Taiwan seems to have been the place at which the languages and cultural features of all Micronesians—including Yapese and Palauans—began. The dispersal of this family throughout the region started about 2,500 years before Christ. It was a process that went on for the next 4,000 years as voyagers reached just about every island in the Pacific. Changes occurred along the way, of course. Tools were improved, the canoes were modified, the diet changed according to the environment, and cultural practices were adapted in many ways. Still, the founders of the family can be traced to Taiwan.

About 2500 BC, the Austronesian speakers on the sea-craft they had been improving began their voyages to the south. Through the Betanes Islands, the island chain linking Taiwan and the Philippines, they sailed into Luzon. But that was just the beginning. Within a few hundred years, they moved into parts of Indonesia and many other islands in Southeast Asia. No doubt they met earlier settlers in the places they visited, but their cultural influence persisted even up to the present. Indonesian and nearly all the tongues used in the Philippines today are part of the Austronesian language family.



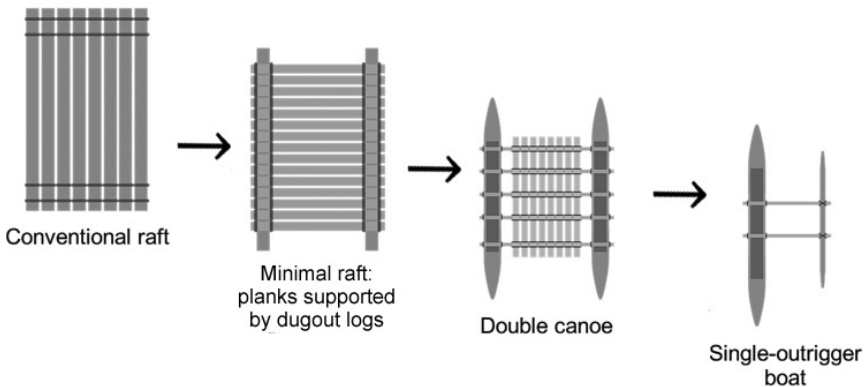
***The Austronesian spread from Taiwan through Southeast Asia and Melanesia***

We don't know for sure just why these voyagers left Taiwan in the first place. Some scholars think that the movement of the earth's tectonic plates around that time created a change in sea-level that altered the coastline. This could have made it difficult for people who were living along the shore to obtain the shellfish and other marine resources they needed. It could have been this, or perhaps something entirely different, that motivated their voyages to the south.



## ***Acquiring the tools for voyaging***

For the people from Taiwan to move throughout the region, they had to have reliable seagoing sailing craft and a dependable navigation system. For thousands of years human beings had been using shallow dugout canoes and simple rafts to carry them and their goods across narrow bodies of water, like rivers and even ocean straits. But longer sea voyages required better boats than that. So the sailing craft evolved—from rafts made of wooden planks bound together, to double-hulled canoes, and then to deeper-hulled canoes with an outrigger. The mast and sails changed as well—from square sails to triangular sails, from fixed sails to reversible sails.



### ***Evolution of the sailing canoe from a simple raft***

These improvements were made along the way, together with the more sophisticated navigational tools needed to allow these people to find new fishing grounds. We don't know much about how this happened, but we do know that these early voyagers had words in their language for many important navigational terms: lash, plank, bow, keel, paddle, boom, bailer, anchor, and mast. The improvements proved crucial as the Austronesian sailors widened the scope of their exploration.

## ***Settlement of Marianas***

Around 1500 BC, not long after they reached the northern Philippines, a few of these Austronesians sailed to the Marianas, well over a thousand miles to the east. This was the longest direct sea voyage made up to that point, as far as we know. It was also the first human voyage to Micronesia or, for that matter, anywhere in the interior Pacific. The new arrivals settled on the coastline and moved from one island to another along the Marianas chain as their population grew. How do we know this? The pottery found in Luzon garbage dumps has a close resemblance to pottery fragments discovered in several sites on Saipan, Tinian and Guam. The close relationship of Chamorro with the languages in the Philippines confirms the fact.

The early settlers in the Marianas, like other early Austronesian settlers, lived along the shoreline and depended almost entirely on sea food—at least for the first few hundred years. When they finally moved inland, they began planting and harvesting. And so they returned to the mixed life their ancestors had once enjoyed on Taiwan, where they were able to take full advantage of the land as well as the sea. All this happened more than two thousand years before the latte stone constructions began.

## ***Movement into Other Islands***

The early Austronesians made good use of the improved sailing canoes and their navigational skills. Apart from their settlement of the Marianas, they were moving in every direction throughout Southeast Asia and probably making stops in southern China as well. As they wandered through the area, they were continually meeting members of other language families. The peoples they met included newcomers like themselves who had just come from mainland Asia; peoples of other origins who had begun to grow rice in the area; and some of the shorter, dark-skinned people who had arrived in the islands many thousands of years before. As the Austronesians intermingled with these others, they were constantly adapting, altering their language and so much else. Their journey is impossible to trace since it could not be mapped as

a straight line, but their influence was great throughout the region.

Not too long after the Austronesians discovered the Marianas, they began venturing eastward once again. By 1400 BC, they reached the islands off Papua-New Guinea, among them the Admiralty Islands and the Bismarck Archipelago along with Santa Cruz and Vanuatu. As we have already seen, one or more of these islands became the departure point for their later settlement of Micronesia.

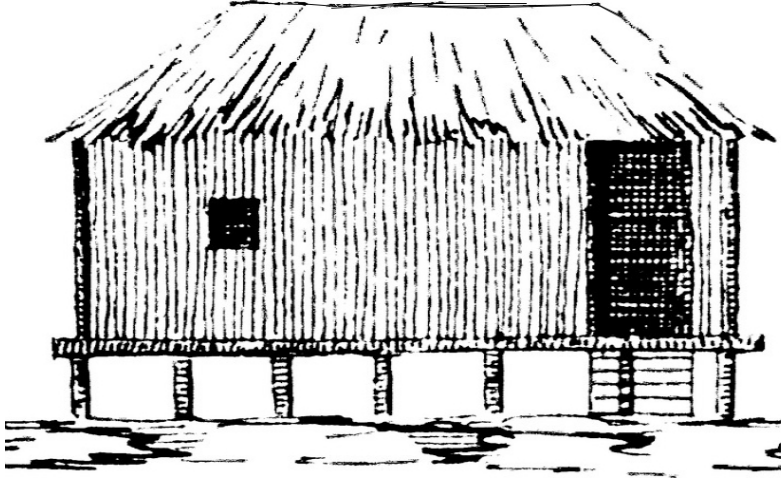
But some of these Austronesians sailed even further, as far as Tonga and Samoa, bringing with them their distinctive pottery. In fact, we can trace the pattern of their pottery fragments to follow the course of their travels. By 1000 BC they had reached central Polynesia, where they would develop their navigational and canoe-building methods even as their language and social system was transformed. They would remain in the Tonga and Samoa area for two thousand years until they were ready to undertake the great Polynesian expansion around 1000 AD. During this expansion, as they took to their canoes again, their descendants, by then fully Polynesian, would sail off to encounter Micronesians in Pohnpei, Kosrae and the Marshalls. Even if their stay was short, their impact on the culture in these places was significant.

### ***Cultural Products***

By this time we should be familiar with the major features of the Austronesian family. Besides their canoes, their distinctive pottery, and the various polished stone tools and shell ornaments they made, they seem to have lived on houses mounted on poles. They also brought the bow and arrow for hunting and for warfare, but that feature never made it to the Pacific. They developed the custom of tattooing, which they did pass on to the Pacific peoples they founded. Weaving was another technological gift that they brought to the Carolines, although not to most other island groups.

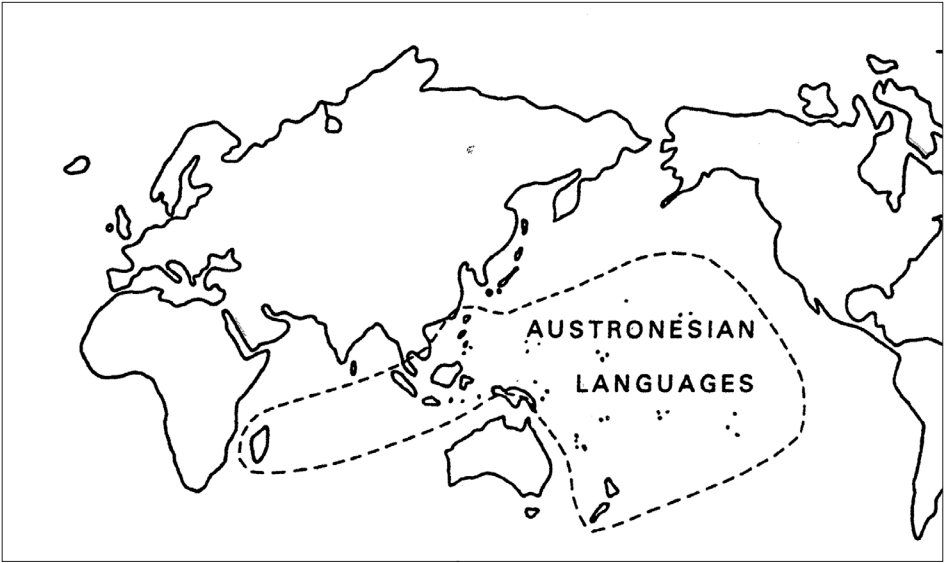
These people cultivated certain root crops (like yams and taro), as we have seen, and they kept a few domestic animals (pigs, dogs and possibly chickens) to supplement their diet.

They also cultivated sugar cane, introducing this wherever they traveled. The rice that they were probably growing on Taiwan may have been brought to the northern Philippines, but it did not seem to reach the Pacific.



*Illustration of house mounted on poles*

The cultural package they brought with them out of Taiwan was pared down in some ways, but expanded in others. But they were used to making such adjustments as they moved. These people were tribal and had roamed for centuries before they reached Taiwan. From there they would continue to wander and explore, but now in canoes rather than on foot.



*Extent of the Austronesian Language Family*

## Chapter Four

### *Through China to Taiwan*

(5000 BC--2500 BC)

About 5000 BC, just before the people we know as Chinese settled down in their land and before rice fields spread widely throughout the country, bands of hunters and gatherers roamed throughout eastern Asia. Different language speaking groups were very much on the move, wandering this way and that way, looking for places where they could find the resources they needed to survive.

Some of these foraging groups were already beginning to settle down on good farm land where they could cultivate rice and millet, the grain crops that were starting to become popular. The gradual switch to agriculture in southern China was just taking off at that time.

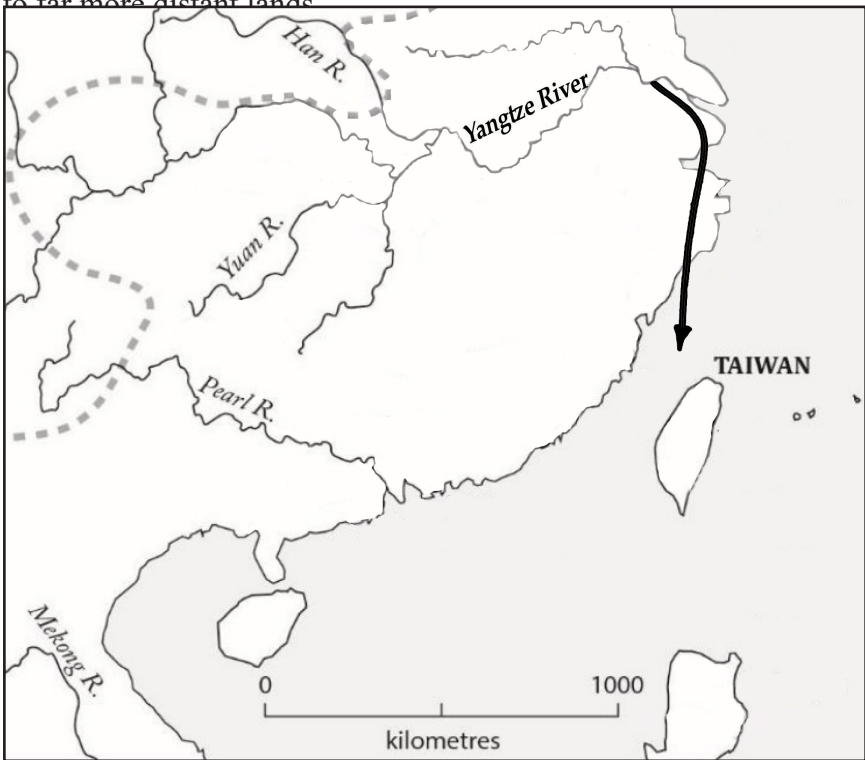
The groups who settled down to farm applied what they knew about plants to grow their own crops. They tended to settle close to rivers or pastures in hilly areas. Since they needed a source of protein, they raised domestic animals—especially larger animals such as cows and water buffalo—as an additional source of food, especially if they were far from the ocean and could not easily obtain fish. As the numbers in these new farm communities grew, they attracted craftsmen and others who did not farm but could provide special services for the community. Eventually, as the community became more complex, the people required leaders with powers greater than those of the tribal chiefs who had guided them when they were still wandering from place to place. As the community grew, ceremonial centers were built for the worship of high gods rather than simply the nature spirits that they had honored as they were moving from place to place.

Not all the wandering bands were ready to settle down, however. Some of them began moving down the Yangtze River. We

know very little about these people other than that they might be called “fish foragers”—tribal people who depended heavily on fish rather than land animals for protein. They also seem to have been traders. Both of these traits would serve them well as they traveled downstream toward the coast.

Perhaps they learned how to plant millet or rice at some point in their journey down the Yangtze River. But even if they could grow these crops, they remained people on the move, slowly making their way to the sea where they would depend on the sea’s resources to sustain them.

By the time these people approached the seashore, they had become experienced in building and working boats they could use for travel on the river. That gave them a head start in developing the canoes and the method of navigation they would need to sail to Taiwan. From there their skills would grow as they prepared to sail to far more distant lands.



*From China's rivers to Taiwan*  
Chapter Five

*Out of Africa*  
(50,000 BC)

***How far back can we go?***

Back to Africa where it all began. To the land where the earliest remains of human-like creatures were found, dating back to at least two million years ago. These creatures were the first that walked upright, but they looked more like apes than the humans we know today. Their brain was barely half the size of the human brain today, and they eventually went extinct.

Neanderthals were another step forward; they spread out to the Near East and Europe about 400,000 years ago. The discovery of some grave sites and the caves they lived in shows that they could make simple stone tools by chipping away at rocks. We don't know whether they spoke or how strong their thinking ability was, but we do know that they took care of their sick and carefully buried their dead. The very simple jewelry they made from the talons of eagles suggests that they had some appreciation of symbolism. Before they died out, some of these Neanderthals migrated as far as what is now Russia. Some intermarried with a new group of humans that was just beginning to evolve. But in the end, the Neanderthals simply didn't have the tools or the brainpower to survive.

Then, about 150,000 years ago, a new species evolved, one that we can all consider our true ancestral people. *Homo Sapiens*, "Intelligent Human," is the name given to this new creature who shares our human traits and has passed on to us its genes. From the very start this creature began making crude tools, discovered how to light fire, and hunted in bands before retreating to caves or other shelters for protection from wild animals and the weather. That might not seem like much to us today, but it was just the beginning of their growth curve.



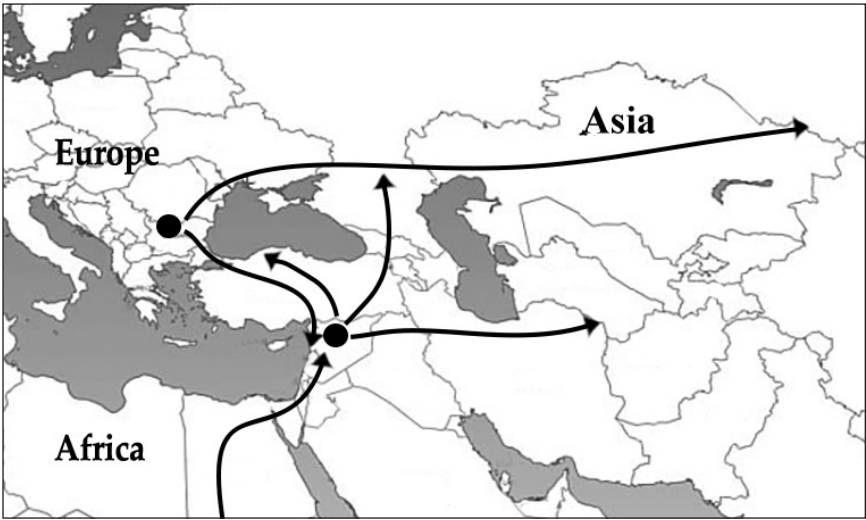
Gradually they developed the use of language. Not the distinctive calls that many animals have to warn others of the presence of a lion or an elephant, or to alert them to the presence of drinking water nearby. But a language rich and deep enough to allow them to tell stories of what happened to them that day as they gathered around the campfire in the evening. The language they shared allowed them to bond with one another more deeply and more widely so that they could travel in even larger groups. With their language came the power of imagination. For the first time, an animal species could imagine things that they had never seen, as we know from the paintings they left on the walls of caves and from the strange figures they carved from bone.

These accomplishments might seem modest to us, but the best was still to come. Their descendants, many thousands of years later, would split the atom, invent the computer, and map their own bodily genes, so leading us a deeper understanding of where we came from.

The new human species spent 100,000 years in Africa polishing their skills before they left Africa with their advanced tool kit about 50,000 BC. That last date is important, because it was then that this people burst forth from Africa into different parts of the world.

Some of them went to Europe, while others traveled east into Asia. A few made it all the way across Siberia where they moved across a land bridge into North America. Those groups that had moved north into Europe may have lived there for many generations, but most were later forced to retreat because of the cold and ice brought on by the first Ice Age. Eventually they returned to Europe and became the founders of early European communities.

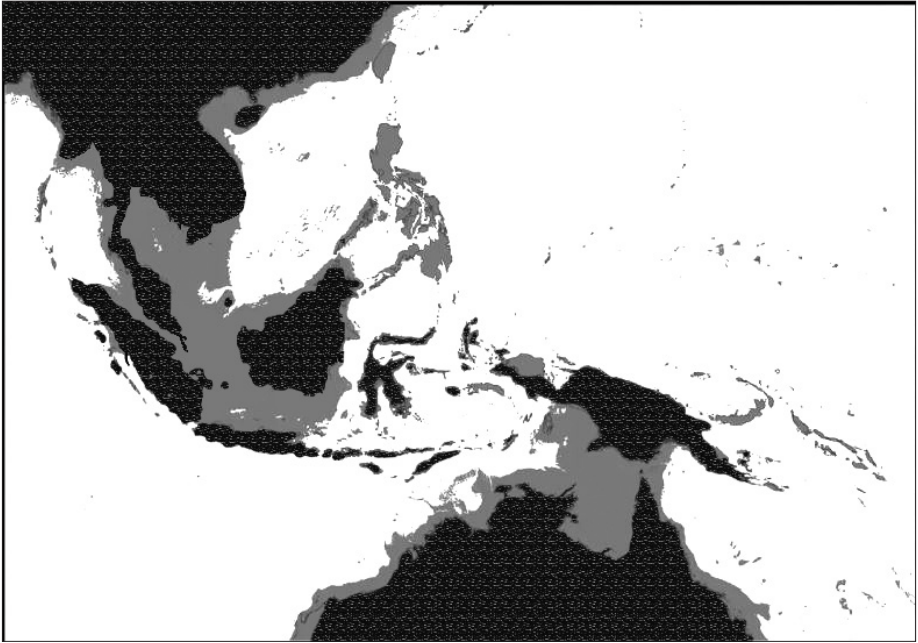
Meanwhile, other groups wandered through Asia along two major routes: one south into India, and another northeast into mainland Asia. The wanderings of these early tool-makers eventually brought them into what is now Southeast Asia. Since they arrived during the Ice Age, they could have practically walked into Australia, where they became the first settlers, known as the Aborigines.



***Movement of people from North Africa into Europe and Asia about 50,000 years ago***

The sea level had greatly dropped because so much of the water had frozen into glaciers that extended well into continental Europe, Asia and North America. With the fall in sea level, the Sunda continental shelf was exposed. It formed a land bridge extending throughout Southeast Asia and practically into western Melanesia. The shelf linked the Malay Peninsula with Sumatra, Java, Bali and Borneo—and almost Papua New Guinea.

Travelers looking for new lands to settle didn't have to be ocean-going voyagers to move into nearby Pacific Islands at that time. They could have paddled the short distance needed to reach the western tip of Melanesia. That is just what they did, as the first human settlers moved into the closest parts of that island group.



***Map showing in gray the extent of the land on the Sunda Shelf during the Ice Age***

Even without reliable sailing craft, the people who had left Africa 50,000 years ago made it all the way to the Pacific. Many thousands of years later, others who possessed good canoes and dependable sailing techniques would follow. From there it was just a matter of time before they moved much further out into the expanse of the ocean and found their way to the islands we call home.

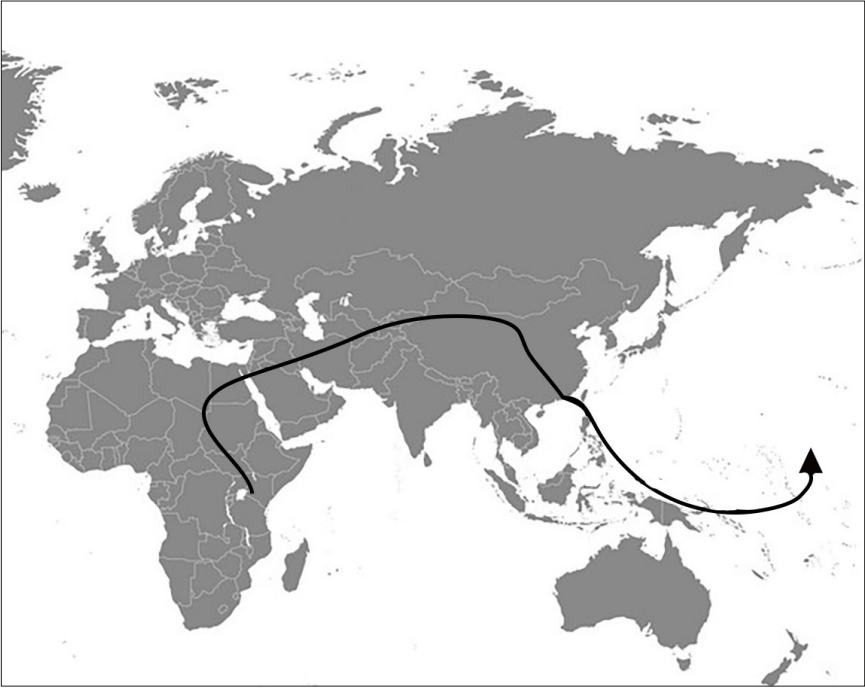
## *Conclusion*

That's the story of the grand journey that began in Africa and brought people to the shores of island Micronesia. During the long journey there were many detours, retracing of steps, and what might have looked like dead ends. Then, too, there is the mingling with other peoples along the way. But let's not get confused in the details. We could never keep remember it all. Even if we did, the story would never end. The kids sitting around that kerosene lamp would never get to bed.

What you're read here is the big picture, as far as we can reconstruct it today. But remember that there are still lots of question marks and a few blank pages in this. We have to work hard to recover the history of our people, and that work is still going on today.

So when someone asks where you came from, you'll be able to tell a story that goes back further than your family genealogy, back beyond the foreign powers that once raised their flags over the islands, back beyond the arrival of Soukachaw or even Sapwikini or any other of the other founders we hear about in the old legends. You'll be able to trace your roots all the way back to Africa.

Remember that the purpose of this story, like so many of the others we tell, is to help us understand who we are.



***The general route from Africa to Micronesia over the years***

## *Credits*

A few years ago, as I was working on a video documentary of the first settlement of the Mariana Islands, I was fortunate enough to meet Mike Carson and Peter Bellwood. Our discussions awakened a personal interest of mine in the history of the islands before the written documents and the legends that we have at hand. Both have written extensively on the subject, Mike tracking the coming of the first humans into Micronesia and Peter exploring the origins of the Austronesian family. Hiro Kurashina, retired professor at University of Guam, added thoughts on Indonesian influence to the discussion.

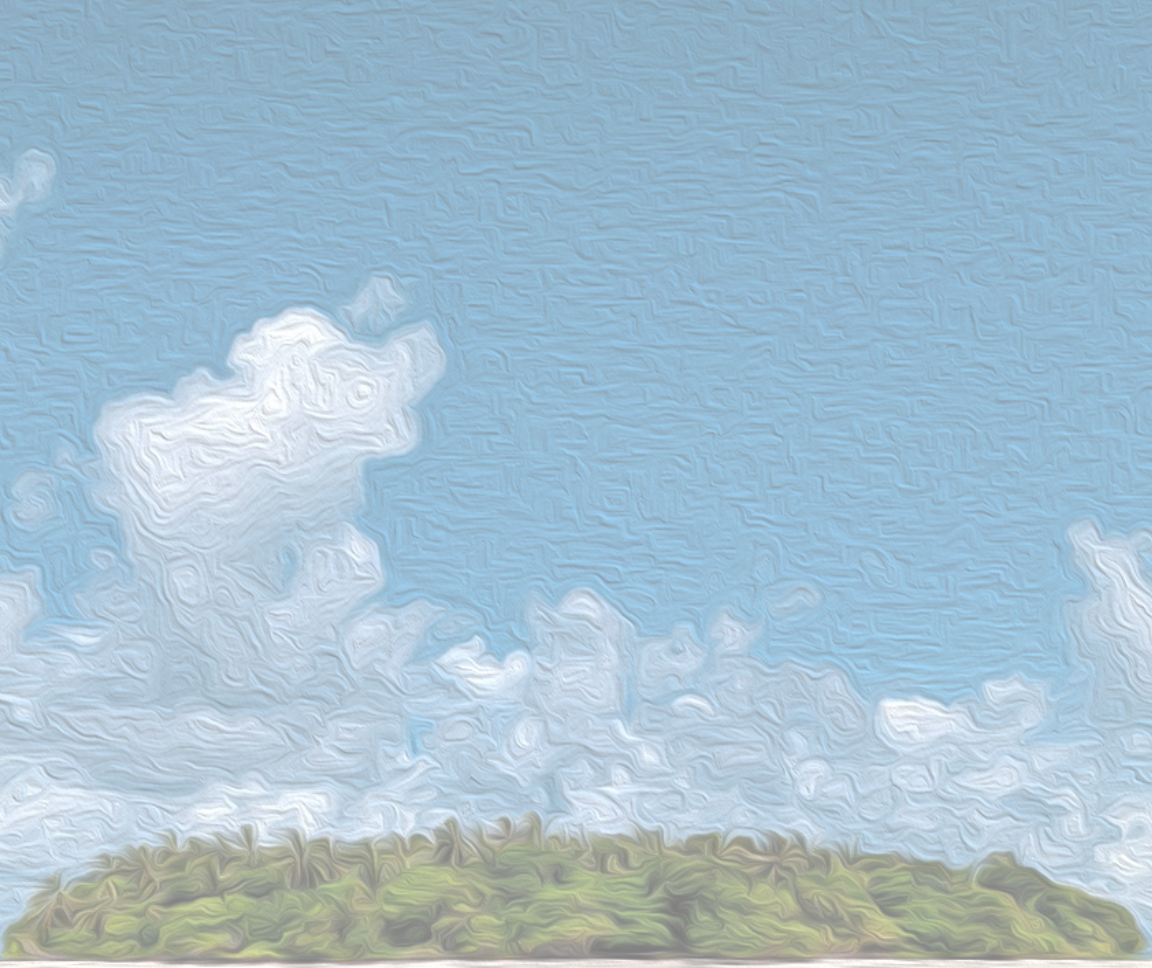
Ken Rehg, formerly on the faculty at the University of Hawaii, offered insights on the relationship of the Micronesian languages to one another and the impact of Polynesian tongues on some of the eastern Caroline Islands. Glenn Petersen's overview of the area, *Traditional Micronesian Societies*, explored the ancient links between island groups. Don Farrell and Scott Russell, authors of histories of the Marianas, gathered considerable research materials and summarized their findings in a readable form. I have used some of their illustrations in this booklet. Tim Smit, who wrote a Micronesian history textbook, provided other maps and illustrations that I drew on.

Dozens of others have written helpful articles on different aspects of the early history of the Pacific and its ties to mainland Asia. I tried to absorb this material and incorporate the best of it into this simple—perhaps too simple—booklet. David Reich's book, *Who We Are and How We Got Here*, was especially helpful for my synthesis here. I am indebted to the book for several of the maps used to explain the early origins of those who settled in the islands.

The Micronesian Seminar photo collection was the source of most of the photos used in this booklet as well as the map drawn from the information of those island navigators who had drifted to the Philippines in 1696.

I am grateful to all these scholars along with all the others, too many to acknowledge, who provided the sources for this work. As for this brief history, my fond hope is that it will open a door to the rich early history predating the first settlement of the islands. If it does this, I'll be satisfied.





# ***Micronesian Origins***

***Francis X. Hezel, SJ***

2021