

## ***Micronesian Cultural Exchange Festival***

Honolulu, Oct 28, 2006

Greetings to people—from me and the folks back home.

They should be proud of you. You are the new explorers, those tracking new paths to places that once were barely on local maps.

### *The First Dispersal*

To recapture what the old explorers did, you have to imagine what it was like a couple of thousand years ago or longer.

- The Austronesian people, those who spoke a language that was the ancestor of the nuclear Micronesian languages.
- People who had a great technology—the single outrigger canoe that could be reversed so that the stern became the prow, depending on the way the wind was blowing, along with a star compass.
- They sailed hundreds of miles up and into the Micronesian area about 2000-2500 years ago—perhaps longer for the Marianas, Palau and Yap. They brought with them pigs, pottery, taro and maybe other root crops, along with chickens and dogs.
- They became the founders of the island populations, the distant mothers and fathers of all of us today.

But why did they come? Why not just sit tight where they were and spare themselves the uncertainty and danger of a long sea voyage? Why keep sailing upwind to find new places to settle on?

The first and most obvious reason is scarcity of resources. People are multiplying, the land is getting crowded, and the island has reached its carrying capacity. “Not enough jobs,” they would have said if they were talking today’s language. So it was time to strike out for new and distant shores. (Sounds familiar, doesn’t it?) This is a time-

honored strategy for coral atolls that have to population against resources.

But there are other reasons, too. Imagine a situation in which two brothers and their families are living on the same piece of land after their mother and father have died. They may be quarreling over land, as brothers often did, and the younger brother knows that he will always come off second best in any disagreements. So he packs his family, and perhaps a few others, into his canoe and takes off for somewhere he can be free.

But let's face it, there is also the excitement and sense of adventure in heading off to new places. This taste for adventure must be in the Micronesian blood. The same spirit of adventure attracted young Pohnpeians and Kosraeans to sign on as sailors aboard whaleships in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. What will my family and I find when we reach our new homes? What will life be like there?

### *New Micronesian Dispersal Today*

Today we are going through a second dispersal. This time it is you, my friends, who are setting out from the islands to find a new life and livelihood in the great beyond: Hawaii, California and the rest of the US mainland. You are covering the globe, like Samoans and Tongans and Cook Islanders did before you.

Today there are 30,000 FSMers living abroad, along with 20,000 Marshallese and perhaps 10,000 Palauans. That's 60,000 Micronesians in all. About one of every four people born in these islands is now living abroad.

The reasons for this exodus probably aren't much different from the reasons for the first migrations that settled island Micronesia.

- Jobs are getting scarce in the islands, and there are new and better opportunities overseas.
- Perhaps some of you weren't getting along with your brothers and sisters any better than those first explorers were. Or possibly you felt excluded from your own society, or disappointed at the quality of services your island provided.

- Then, there's the attraction of a little adventure. "Let's test the waters and see just how good life is abroad."

Not everyone is delighted to see Micronesians moving abroad in such numbers.

- Some in Washington see this as a failure to build an economy that should be well on its way to flourishing by this time.
- Teachers and healthcare providers in destinations find island people puzzling—silent and mysterious, wrapped in a culture that seems impenetrable.
- Even some of your own people see the mass exodus of islanders as something of a betrayal, and suspect you of discarding old ties to develop a new cultural identity.

As for myself, I have to admit that at one time I was firmly in favor of Micronesians staying home to develop their own economy. If they didn't do it, who would? But as I get older, and maybe a little wiser, I ask myself—develop a local economy out of what? Besides, my own grandparents came from Germany to seek a better life for themselves in the land of the Statue of Liberty. Why shouldn't Micronesians be free to do the same?

But what really turned me into a believer is what I saw this summer on my trip to the US with our MicSem team to do a video on Micronesians Abroad. Let me share with you a few observations.

### *What We Learned*

1] You can learn to recognize Micronesians just about anywhere. They are retaining symbols of their cultural identity in one way or another.

- Women from Chuuk and Pohnpei famous for wearing the embroidered skirt (to the chagrin of their brothers, who are embarrassed by it)
- "Micronesian Blvd" in Corsicana, Texas, with a block of houses all inhabited by islanders.

- Store in Neosho, MI, owned by a Pinglapese, that sells island products: big plastic combs, skirts, zoris, bathroom things, and turkey tails. Gathering spot for islanders from fifty or a hundred miles around.
- Food served at barbeques includes taro, fish and salted clams, along with spare ribs and potato salad. Nothing more welcome than an ice chest with breadfruit, taro, or fresh fish.

The people we met along the way seemed proud of their Micronesian identity and cultural heritage. They spoke their own language, ate island food when they could, and inquired about home. The question is what will happen to the next generation. Whether islanders can instill this same sense of identity in their US-born children is a difficult question to answer.

- Children are raised in a US environment and are reluctant to return to a place where they can not be as free as they are now.
- Kids prefer to speak English although they can understand their own language in most cases.

2] Most of the Micronesian communities we visited had developed strong networks to support one another. These allowed for islanders to gather from time to time to celebrate special events and renew their bonds with one another.

- Pasadena network out of the evangelical college William Carey University
- Liberation Day and Fourth of July baseball tournaments in Neosho, MI, and Cincinnati, OH (like the basketball tournament I remember seeing in Costa Mesa a few years ago, with 300 Marshallese cheering on their teams in college auditorium).
- Guam Liberation Day celebration on July 12<sup>th</sup> in the US Capitol Building in Washington, with hundreds of people on hand.
- Barbeques and picnics everywhere we went, with impromptu volleyball and basketball games and lots of talk.

- Church services much like here in Hawaii, with Micronesian pastors conducting services in the local language for their island congregations.

But they are not exclusively turned inward. They also have established outreach to others in their communities.

- helping out in sports programs and YMCA
- linking with others through their churches and organizations.

These networks were more than excuses to get together. They also acted as support groups in setting standards for the behavior of their members and helping anyone out who was in trouble. They got the message out that anyone who was unwilling to comply should leave for the next state. Much of the success to the communities we saw this summer is due to the strength of their networks and the oversight they provide for islanders, who could easily get lost without this.

This is the kind of support network that the organizing committee for this Festival would like to establish. Help them do so. You'll all be better off for it.

3] Most of the Micronesians we visited wanted to stay connected with their home islands. To put it another way, they saw themselves as interested citizens and looked for ways to keep in touch with home.

- They were interested in news from the islands, as you are, I'm sure.
- Many had visited home, and others had plans to do so, despite the great expense.
- Some listened to local radio stations, which are now available on Internet.
- Most important, most were sending money home—to their families, their churches for fundraising efforts, and to relatives for funerals and other such occasions. We can estimate that FSM is receiving a total of over \$15 million a year from its citizens in the US and Guam. It's reasonable to suppose that other island groups are receiving similar benefits.
- But nearly all complained about the difficulty in getting responses from their government officials in the consulate and embassy.

These are ties that should be nurtured, in my opinion. I have suggested to leaders in FSM, the Marshalls and Palau that they cultivate these ties with the people who have gone abroad. I'd ask you to continue to do the same.

For those of you who might not be familiar with it, let me mention our MicSem website at [www.micsem.org](http://www.micsem.org). It features a forum discussion, historical photo albums, all issues of our *Micronesian Counselor*. Soon we will be posting on-line all the videos MicSem has produced for computer-viewing. This website offers materials for keeping in touch with the islands and their challenges.

### *Conclusion*

Very positive signs that these people are adjusting well. They are adapting successfully to their new homes, but retaining their interest in home and their networks with other islanders in their area. They are doing what islanders are rightly renowned for—helping one another along in good times and bad.

So, we have something to celebrate—the success of this new Micronesian dispersal and the benefits it's bringing to thousands of islanders who have found new homes in the US. (It's also bringing benefits to the US communities in which our people live, let us remember.)

I'm delighted to be able to participate in this Festival, a wonderful effort uniting all the many parts of Micronesia. You have something to be proud of, to boast about. So celebrate with the confidence that any problems you might experience can be resolved if you hang together. Your friends and families at home are cheering you on. And so am I.