

Youth Services Network
Guam - Mar. 13, 1990

THE UNMAKING OF THE MICRONESIAN FAMILY

The Change to a Money Economy

The most significant change occurring in these islands is the transition from subsistence to cash economy. In the post-war years and through the 1950s, most of the Micronesian people lived as they had always lived: from the resources of the land and sea. They ate breadfruit, taro, tapioca and fish. They built their houses largely of local materials. Whatever small cash income they might have was used to buy clothing, cigarettes, rice and other such items.

This pattern began to change in the early 60s as the US greatly increased its subsidies to what was then known as the Trust Territory of the Pacific. Prior to 1963 there were about 3000 Micronesians with full-time employment. By 1965 the number doubled to 6000, and by 1974 it had doubled again to 12,000. As of 1977 when limited self-government was granted, there were over 18,000 Micronesians working for a living in Palau, the Marshalls and what would soon become the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM). This enormous six-fold increase in a period of 14 years was due to the great increase in the US yearly allotment to the Trust Territory in keeping with its new policy of rapid development. The budget increases allowed many more Micronesians to find government jobs. This, in turn, led to the build-up of a service economy in the private sector as stores, restaurants, movie theaters and other service industries multiplied.

In 1962, just before the period of rapid growth began,

was no longer bound quite so tightly to his extended family since he had, for the first time, the means to support himself apart from the group-owned land.

As the number of salaries multiplied, therefore, the ties between the individual and his kin weakened. So did the ties between people and their land. Households that were formerly satellites of a larger group of related people now acquired considerably more autonomy. The heads of families began doing hitherto unheard of things, like feeding their own families rather than putting the food at the disposal of the head of the extended group. They also began making decisions over their own children and on other household matters that were formerly submitted to the lineage head. The break-up in the family was becoming more and more visible.

Fathers now felt a new responsibility to provide for their own children. Formerly, in most places, children were taken care of by the mother's lineage. Fathers normally provided for the children of their own lineage: that is, the children of their sisters. With the breakdown in the old family system, fathers began to experience a conflict in roles. How could they perform their traditional roles towards their nephews and nieces and also care for their children in the all the ways they now felt obliged?

Under this pressure, land inheritance patterns began changing. Fathers started giving their lineage land to their own children. As they did this, however, they found themselves at odds with their own relatives, who accused them of using lineage resources to benefit their own children (who belonged to their mother's lineage

Micronesians' total annual wages and salaries (\$2,300,000) were about equal to the value of their yearly exports. By 1977, the total yearly earnings from salaries had skyrocketed to \$42,000,000, while the value of exports remained about the same as it was in 1962.

The rapid increase in employment, of course, had the effect of putting more money in people's pockets. The yearly per capita income (from wages and exports combined) in 1962 was about \$60. Fifteen years later it was over \$400. Even with inflation figured in, the average real income was three times greater^{than} it had been in 1962. Thanks to the increase in employment, therefore, the average income had grown sufficiently to make cash a major resource in island life. For the first time, money could supplant land as the source of livelihood -- and it actually did so for many families.

The Impact on the Family

It is difficult to appreciate the enormous changes that a simple thing like money can produce in a traditional society. Yet it can undermine and transform the entire organizational system of a society that is founded on land and kin. This, it seems, is what has begun to occur at an advanced pace since the 1960s.

Formerly any individual's livelihood was tied in closely to the kin group holding rights to the land on which he lived. If his sustenance came from the land and sea, it was by way of the lineage or other group that held title to the land they farmed and the shoals they fished. A cash salary, on the other hand, meant that an individual could act independently from the lineage group. He

group). Groups of relatives that had formerly acted more or less as a single unit found themselves bitterly divided over such issues. There were two very different family systems at work: the traditional system that was rapidly fading away, and the nuclear family system in which the father had full authority over his children and provided the resources for their daily life.

The Results of this Change

The consequences of the change in family systems was a major social revolution. The set of rules that had once served to protect individuals, especially as they were growing up, was fast becoming obsolete. A few examples might suffice to show how this worked in practice.

In the larger family group of past years, aunts and uncles were expected to play a large role in the supervision of children, especially after they reached adolescence. Among other things, they counseled the young and helped them when there was friction between the children and their parents. In the newer family system, however, relatives outside the nuclear family circle are reluctant to interfere in family matters. When tension occurs between the children and their parents, there is no one to intervene to solve the problem. Tensions can fester and worsen with time. This seems to be related to the suicide problem in Micronesia, which has become a veritable epidemic in the past 20 years.

The extended family groups of past years almost always provided multiple sets of parents for the young. Just as the large

group shared food, they also shared authority over the young in the residential group. This meant that there was nearly always someone to cover for an absent or ineffective parent. The young person was rarely without supervision. But the multi-parent family of past years has become the two parent family today. When the mother or father is dead, absent for long periods, or busy with his occupation or other matters, the child must do without the needed supervision, for there is no ready replacement. Many of the juvenile delinquency cases can be traced back to situations like this, as a sample of youth done as a class project a few years ago showed quite dramatically.

Wife beating has always been fairly common in Micronesian societies. In the past, however, it was kept in check by the wife's brother, who was on hand to intervene and even remove his sister from her home if she was being seriously abused. Today the brother is very reluctant to interfere with his sister's husband, who is seen as having more or less unlimited authority over his own family. Women, therefore, lack the protection that they once enjoyed from their own kin.

The recent change in family organization often leaves children as unprotected as wives. In the traditional systems, the authority over children was shared by the father (representing his kin group) and the mother and her lineage. Each kin group had an interest in the child and each shared to some extent in the responsibility for raising the child. A father's anger at his son was kept in check by his knowledge that his wife's relatives were supposed to protect the child. The child was as much theirs as his. The rise of the

nuclear family, however, means that the wife's lineage loses much of their stake in the child. With this goes their responsibility to protect the child, even from his father if necessary. Beatings can be and are administered more severely and more frequently now that the father's rights over the child are uncontested.

Summary

Examples could be multiplied, but the above give some idea of how the changes in the form and function of the Micronesian family contribute to social problems today. They should also be sufficient to show that the basic transformation of the family is by far the most significant area of change today. Political and economic changes, although more frequently written about, are much more removed from the heart of society than the changes described above. These family changes touch the everyday life of Micronesians in any number of ways. If we are to help people deal with the pressing social problems they face today, we cannot neglect what is happening to the traditional Micronesian family.

These changes seem to be rooted in the impact of the cash economy on the traditional system. More than anything else, money seems to have been responsible for altering the family. Although changes in the form of the family are not usually highlighted in a modern society as industrial changes, they are having as great an impact in Micronesia as those other industrial changes are in modernized nations.

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