A LITTLE BIT OF EVERYTHING

“How often does the Micronesian Seminar meet?” my visitor asked me. I then proceeded to explain, as I had so many times before, that MicSem--as we casually refer to it--is an institute rather than a discussion group. Think of it as a research-educational institute, I told her, or a social-pastoral institute...or any almost any other kind of hyphenated organization.

“Well, if the Micronesian Seminar is not a discussion group, what does it do?” my visitor wanted to know. What does it do? After years of running the research-pastoral institute, I wondered whether it wouldn’t be simpler to tell my visitor what it did not do. At the time we had just finished doing a series of articles on the political status question that Micronesia faced, I was well into a book on Micronesian history, and we were beginning a round of talks on the suicide problem that was becoming a major concern for the islands. We had just directed a survey of all high school graduates in Chuuk, the better to determine the extent of the recent education explosion in Chuuk, and by extension the rest of Micronesia. Together with two other Jesuits, we were organizing a workshop for church personnel engaged in the production of radio programs. What single statement, embracing all these different activities, could be used to describe what the Micronesian Seminar does, I wondered. “A little bit of everything” is the expression I hit on a few years later to describe our operation.

The Micronesian Seminar was founded by the Catholic Church in Micronesia in 1972, an age in which the cry for social justice was being raised from all quarters. The Catholic Church in Micronesia, then just completing a reassessment of its ministries, had made a heavy investment in high school education years before: Xavier High School in Chuuk and PATS on Pohnpei were two of the premier schools in the Western Pacific. Jesuits also had the sole responsibility for running all the parishes in the Caroline and Marshall Islands. All of this was unquestionably a great service to church and society, but it left a question or two that gnawed at many of us who had been trained or re-trained during the strident sixties. Granted the church’s commitment to the education of the young, what was it prepared to do to relieve the burdens of social injustice that fell upon adults in the these island communities?

Island Micronesia, we knew, did not suffer the grinding poverty, the homeless scavengers, the slum dwellers that are common sights in most other parts of what we know as the Third World. There was no political repression at the hands of a military junta or oligarchy, no threats of civil war, no real risk of genocide--none of what are standard features throughout Africa and Asia. In Micronesia, as the tour books proclaim, nature has been prodigal: the food can be picked from trees or plucked from the sea. Living standards were low, to be sure; health problems abounded, the educational standards in the public school system left much to be desired, and the life expectancy was a good ten years or more below Western standards. Still, it was hard to describe island people as “poor” or to identify the concrete forms of “injustice” under which they suffered.

In 1972, as it still is today, Micronesia was in the throes of great change. The choice of a future political status was seriously being considered for the first time even as the artificial polity known as the Trust Territory of the Pacific was coming undone. The clamor for economic development was becoming more insistent than ever, since self-reliance seemed to be so clearly linked with the islands’ loftiest political aspirations. The impact of social change on the island way of life had intensified greatly during the last decade, following the hurry-up modernization program that the Kennedy Administration initiated during the early 1960s. No one could see it all clearly at that time, but we could all feel its cumulative effects. The number of new pickups on the road, the clothing styles, the rush of high school students to get to college, the drunken weekend parties with the mayhem that ensued. Where were the islands headed? How were they to realize the economic and political goals they espoused? Above all, what effect were the changes having on communities and individuals?

The people in Micronesia seemed adrift, lost in a sea of changes that had swept over their islands and left them without the familiar landmarks to steer by. Their cultural milieu was being eroded in ways and for reasons they did not fully comprehend. They were puzzled at the passing of the old ways and did not fully understand the new ways that were fast gaining acceptance in their islands. They wondered why so many of their children were leaving for the US never to return, why the young didn’t go to church, why so many of their children commited suicide, and why drunken violence was so common. It might be stretching things a bit to call them victims of oppression or injustice, but they certainly seemed to be suffering because of their lack of understanding of what was happening to them.

When the Micronesian Seminar was chartered as a church priority program in 1972, its main purpose was seen as “conscientization”--a term that Paolo Freire and others had so popularized that it became a war cry among social justice groups. The MicSem was founded “to stimulate reflection on current issues in the light of gospel values,” as the original church document put it.

In other words, it was to be a tool of public education on the fullest and deepest level. Originally, its first target group was to be the church leadership, who would have to be steered towards key issues and educated on these matters so that they could promote discussion among their people. Then MicSem was to work with the educated elite in Micronesia, a growing and increasingly powerful force in the islands. Its mission was to help them gain an understanding of the forces at work on their world so that they might better control these forces and be masters of their own future.

According to its mandate, there was virtually nothing outside the scope of MicSem. The earliest territory-wide conferences that MicSem sponsored, during the 1970s, keyed on issues ranging from political status, to the purpose of education in a developing nation, to the impact of US federal programs on the local economy, to youth drinking. Between conferences flowed a regular stream of articles on these and a wide range of other topics. When I was appointed director of the institute in 1972, I settled down to the business of becoming a jack-of-all-trades with little remorse. When attacked by doubts about the wisdom of attempting so much, I took consolation in contemplating the posters that festooned the walls of my room--“The Whole World is My Parish” and “Nothing Human is Foreign to Me.”

From its slender beginnings--a dozen boxes of books on the Pacific, a few rusty shelves and a battered Olympia typewriter, all housed in one of the smaller faculty rooms at Xavier High School--the Micronesian Seminar grew. Slowly at first, as might be expected of an operation run on only a few hundred dollars a year and dependent on whatever time and energy its director could summon at the end of a full day teaching high school. .

 As the early years passed we moved....from a tiny room at Xavier to a much larger one, with bookshelves encircling the walls and even spilling into the director’s office. Students sat on the floor flipping through periodicals or journals of the Congress of Micronesia, as visitors stepped around them and commented on the unpretentious surroundings.

 MicSem’s biggest thrust during most of the 1970s was organizing and planning the two-week refresher programs held for mission personnel nearly every summer. These programs offered us the opportunity for updating our theology, while reflecting on what could be done to improve our church radio programs, add zest to our religious education classes, and carry out our social justice mandate. Does this sound dull? It was anything but in the early 70s, with the watchwords of the age ringing in our ears and the fire of Vatican II in our belly.

For spice we had our yearly conferences, drawing leaders from as far as Palau, Saipan and Majuro and sometimes beyond. There was a thrill in hearing many new voices, including a new generation of Micronesian leaders, bringing their thoughts to bear on some of the most pressing issues of the day. What did political sovereignty mean and how vital was it to human dignity? What should the schools of the future look like--suburban US educational plants, the village schools of Latin America, or trade schools offering manual skills that might keep the young close to the land? How could a people have economic development and still retain their traditional cultural practices?

Then in 1982, MicSem went through a major reorientation. Severing its ten-year ties with Xavier High School, MicSem was relocated at the main church residence in Tunnuk, a village three miles down the road. A young Jesuit brother, Henry Schwalbenberg, joined the staff at precisely the time that the political status issue was going to public referendum in Palau, the Marshalls and the Federated States of Micronesia. Moreover, since I had been freed from school work at Xavier, MicSem had a fulltime director for the first time in its ten-year history.

In the next two years, Br. Henry produced an amazingly thick sheaf of tomes analyzing the Compact of Free Association and offering a commentary on its many different provisions. He also authored a long series of articles, most of them soon afterwards published, on issues related to the political status choice. Finally, he assisted two of the new governments as they conducted political education programs for their people. In his three years with MicSem, he made a lasting mark for his acute analysis of the issues and his competent direction of the political education programs.

Meanwhile, MicSem turned toward social research during the 1980s. The suicide epidemic that had first broken out ten years earlier was the first target. Working with anthropologists in Hawaii, MicSem began accumulating and analyzing data, studying probable causes of the epidemic, and addressing different groups of Micronesians to discuss what was happening and why. The journal articles that followed were probably never really as important as the many local audiences reached through oral presentations. With more than a thousand Micronesian suicides recorded since 1970, the problem has continued unabated up to the present. The research at MicSem likewise continues until clearer answers are found.

Other subjects of concern were alcohol and drug abuse among the young, the seemingly growing incidence of psychosis among males, child abuse and neglect, and domestic violence. No matter what particular problem we studied, the arrows always seemed to point in the same direction--toward the breakdown of the extended family as one of the major underlying causes. The lineage, with its broad distribution of authority and shared supervision of the young, has given way to the autonomy of each household in the larger group. Hence, the father must manage his own affairs and raise his own children without the support he enjoyed in the past. Authority is concentrated in the parents to an unprecedented degree. This not only enormously increases the likelihood of a serious buildup of tension between parents and children, but it also rips apart the safety net society once had in the form of the many back-up parents that the lineage once supplied.

Modernization is not without its price here or anywhere else in the world. If the MicSem is to serve the new Micronesian societies well, it cannot be content with issuing a catalogue of woes to these fast-changing cultures and wringing its hands in despair. It must join, sometimes even lead, the search for a clearer understanding of these problems and the causes that contribute to them. For only when they are understood can they be properly addressed and healed.

But MicSem was studying other aspects of society as well. How had all those high school graduates fared since the education explosion of the late 60s, for example? How many of them were able to find the full time jobs that they were led to expect they would find upon completion of high school? Twice, six years apart, MicSem surveyed all the high school graduates from Chuuk to find out where they lived, whether they had gone to college, and what occupation they had. The results were written up and published as testimony to the impact of the education explosion on the population of one state years later.

The migration to Guam after the implementation of the Compact in 1986 was another fruitful area of research. For years social scientists had been scanning the social horizons to find signs of the long predicted “brain drain.” When it finally came, in trickles at first and then with the force of a riptide, the “brain drain” proved to be a misnomer: hundreds of under-educated were leaving to seek jobs, while those with the qualifications good enough to find emplyment in FSM stayed. Working with demographers and social scientists from Guam and the US, we measured the outflow of people, described the problems they encountered on Guam and Saipan, showed how the typical emigrant household was evolving in form to resemble the family patterns they had left, and even tried to measure the economic impact of their remittances to families back home.

Meanwhile, another Jesuit, Fr Joe Cavanagh, and I began making regular visits to the major islands to run what were known as Reflection Weekends. If the leaders could no longer be summoned to attend the large-scale conferences we held during the 1970s, we would go to them instead. Somehow, we felt that we had to continue making an effort to reach the more educated--the movers and shakers of Micronesia--to reflect with them on the latest set of changes and the newest problems. Each year we would arrange to hold on each major island a two-day reflection program on any issue of people’s own choosing.

MicSem was becoming a slightly more complex organization during the mid-1980s. Thanks to US federal support, we adopted a program called “Youth Link” under the leadership of Innocente Oneisom, a Chuukese. We were able to keep in touch with other youth workers throughout Micronesia via a newsletter and a yearly conference during the three years that the funds lasted. Mariano Marcus, another Chuukese, also joined the staff to coordinate the child abuse studies that we were asked to do in as many of the island groups as possible. At the same time, MicSem acquired a few other desks: a media desk and an education desk (both filled by Mercederian sisters) and a pastoral desk (occupied by a Jesuit priest). For at least a brief shining period during the late 1980s, there were six people working for MicSem and four of them were Micronesians.

In 1992 the MicSem library and office furnishings were once again packed up--this time it took two 20-foot containers rather than a few cardboard boxes--for shipment to Pohnpei. The Micronesian Seminar was to be relocated in the FSM capital. It was not until a few years later, in August 1996, that MicSem would move into its own new building, complete with ample library, video studio and conference room.

Almost at once MicSem began holding monthly discussions, which attracted a large number of national government employees. Many people on the island were eager to be informed on current issues and, above all, wanted a forum in which to discuss these issues with others. The topics ranged as widely as the audience--the status of the fishing industry in FSM, what we can do to promote private business, the place of foreigners in Micronesia today, the extent of FSM’s foreign debt, and what might be done to improve our schools. Edited summaries were sent out to all participants and made available on the MicSem webpage.

“The Micronesian Counselor,” an occasional bulletin on social and development issues, was also started by the MicSem during the early 90s with the help of funds from FSM Substance Abuse and Mental Health Program. In the first series, running from 1991 to 1995, we produced 17 issues, each containing a single article. The articles were usually drawn from other social research projects in which MicSem was engaged. More recently a second series has been begun, with each of the issues offering several articles related to a single theme.

MicSem’s passing encounters in the area of media over the years finally developed into a more permanent program in 1993 when a series of grants enabled us to equip a video studio and begin editing our own documentaries. The leap into television production began with a series of half-hour educational shows entitled “Island Topics.” One of the early shows in the series dealt with how the traditional roles of women have changed; another looked at how Micronesians handle anger. One of the most popular was an insider’s view of Pohnpei’s history from myth and scientific evidence. Production continues, even to the present, with specially contracted shows on drug abuse in the Marianas, the need for economic reform in FSM, and migrant workers throughout the region. All these shows are distributed to the local TV stations throughout the region for telecast in each place.

Opportunities shape MicSem’s programs today, just as they always have. A chance to speak on economic reform to the leadership at state summits in Kosrae and Pohnpei is a good case in point. An invitation to deliver a keynote speech on education to hundreds of Pacific Island teachers is another. When MicSem was invited to coordinate a small two-year project aimed at improving health services in the region, we gratefully accepted. What is there to prevent us from carrying out our educational mission at other podia and in other conference halls, after all?

Over its 25-year history, Micronesian Seminar has changed its location several times. Its programs have changed with the needs of the times, as have the formats of its educational ventures--from large conferences, to weekend retreats, to evening discussions. It has alternated from face-to-face education, dabbled in radio, and lately experimented in TV. Its scope of activity has ranged over dozens of areas of interest: political status, economic development, reform of government service, local history, social problems of every description, mental illness, and nearly everything in between. It has shifted its structures whenever this seemed called for. At one time it has had different desks, at other times none at all; and the governing board has taken a half dozen different forms. Staff members, Micronesian and expatriate, have come and gone.

MicSem has assumed many different faces in the past: a “think tank,” a discussion forum, a consulting agency, a church training program. Perhaps its greatest strength over the years has been its flexibility--its willingness to mold itself to whatever form might best serve the people of Micronesia.

Yet, one thing will never be altered--Micronesian Seminar’s commitment to its basic mission to “encourage reflection on current issues in the light of gospel values.” Whatever form its work may take tomorrow, you can bet that MicSem will be carrying on public education at its fullest and deepest level.

 “How did the Micronesian Seminar get its name?”

people often ask. It goes back to the loose association that Jesuit scholastics who returned from a teaching stint at Xavier High School in Chuuk formed when they began their study of theology at Woodstock College in Maryland. During those years of exile from the islands they had learned to love, these future priests met each month to relive and reflect on their Pacific experience and to share information on recent developments in Micronesia. “Micronesian Seminar” is what they called their monthly gatherings. These young Jesuits also assembled a small collection of books on the area, the core of what would one day become the MicSem library.

**The Original Micronesian Seminar**

**Library**

The MicSem library, a collection of 11,000 titles, is recognized as one of the best specialized collections on Micronesia anywhere in the world. Its special strengths lie in history and anthropology, but it is expanding rapidly in natural science and government. Among its holdings are all 24 volumes of the German South Seas Expedition of 1910-1912; all the microfilmed papers and letters of the American Board that first evangelized Micronesia; original publications by Jan Kubary in German and Polish; a full set of articles on Micronesia in the standard mission journals, Protestant and Catholic, for the 19th and 20th centuries; yearly reports to the League of Nations from Japan and to the United Nations from the US.

The library also contains locally produced reports that are found virtually nowhere outside Micronesia. These include feasibility and market studies, engineeering reports, health and education plans, and island-designed curriculum materials. Current regional periodicals in nearly every field are also available.

Besides print materials, the collection contains microfilms, maps, videos, and photos on Micronesia. All holdings are entered onto a computer program for easier and fuller search capabilities. Bibliographies can be easily generated for any of the hundreds of subject-coded categories.

Each year a computer search is made of periodicals published around the world for articles on Micronesia. These are acquired for the MicSem collection and the list offered to other regional libraries for their own accessioning.

The library, now occupying the spacious top floor of the new MicSem building, is used by local residents and visiting scholars. A comfortable reading room is open daily during work hours and at other times upon request. A fulltime librarian is now on staff.

**A PUBLIC FORUM**

MicSem’s chief goal--to promote discussion and reflection on key issues of the day--may have remained unaltered, but the type of forum it has used for carrying on this conversation has changed with the years.

Through its earliest years, MicSem organized and ran a yearly conference, focused on a major theme, to which government, business and religious leaders were invited from throughout the region. These major conferences lasted for a week and would draw from 25 to 80 participants. Proceedings were issued afterwards. Topics included: the ethics of political status, the purpose of education, youth delinquency, economic development, the pros and cons of US Federal programs, and alcohol abuse among the young.

During the 1980s, MicSem experimented with other formats. In place of the big conferences we once ran, we initiated weekend reflections in the various island groups. The local group picked the theme and we would run the discussion from Saturday morning through Sunday afternoon. Sometimes a written report followed the weekend reflection, but just as often no clear statement was possible even after two days of talk. This format allowed great flexibility on topics: at one place we might discuss the population problem, while in the next we could do changes in the family.

Since 1993 we have begun holding two-hour discussion sessions--a sort of town hall meeting--on topical matters. Special guests are invited to give a brief introduction to the subject and kick off the discussion. The edited summaries of these sessions are all available at the MicSem office or on its Internet webpage.

Even while MicSem furnishes its own forum for discussion of critical issues, its staff takes frequent advantage of opportunities to speak at other workshops and conferences throughout the region. Fr. Hezel often gives presentations on economic development, education, suicide, and historical themes at such conferences and meetings.

Micronesian History

Fr. Francis X. Hezel, SJ, director of MicSem, has authored several books and over thirty articles on Micronesian history. His **First Taint of Civilization** (1983) and **Strangers in Their Own Land** (1995), both published by the University of Hawaii Press, together form a history of the Caroline and Marshall Islands from earliest European contact in the sixteenth century until political independence in the 1980s. **Micronesia: Winds of Change** (1980) is a well-illustrated, single volume history stitched together from primary sources that offers a look at the broad sweep of the nearly five centuries of contact between islanders and Westerners.

**The Catholic Church in Micronesia** (1991) is a collection of essays on the founding and growth of the church in each of the major island groups in Micronesia. Appended to each are encyclopedic lists of data on parishes, church construction and renovation dates, pastors and religious personnel.

He has also done extensive work on the early Spanish colonization of the Marianas: “From Conversion to Conquest” on the first 30 years of missionization and “From Conquest to Colonization” on the period that followed. His writings on this period include a monograph, two articles published in the **Journal of Pacific History** and a few shorter pieces.

Other work includes two social studies textbooks written with Charley Reafsnyder in the early 1970s, journal articles on prominent Western figures and key events in island history, and pieces on the early history of Chuuk. He also has an article or two offering reflections on Pacific historiography today.

**TV Programs**

During the 1970s church media teams used radio to bring issues in real-life form to the people of Micronesia. Half-hour radio dramas, island-style soap operas, were studded with slapstick and serious personalities and woven around themes like child neglect, the changing family, and the problems arising from a modern educational system. The weekly shows in Pohnpei and Chuuk were especially popular.

Then came the wildfever of video entertainment, which made the old tin-roofed movie houses obsolete and left us with video rental shacks by the dozens. Soon the islands had cable television from the US--canned tapes from California along with CNN and ESPN, but also a local station that went begging for visual material to be devoured by hungry local watchers. The viewers were there but not much local footage was being aired, almost none of it standard broadcast quality. One night, at the end of one of our monthly discussions, someone suggested that MicSem consider filling this opening and begin making educational programs for TV.

In 1993, Karl Kernberger, a TV producer with ten years experience in Albuquerque, began production. With funding assistance from several sources, we purchased a modest studio set-up and editing lab and began turning out the “Island Topics” series. Over the next three years, Karl and his successor, Blanca Amado, crafted ten half-hour documentaries on a wide range of topics. Blanca went on to produce several other shows, almost all of them contracted to meet special needs in the area. All shows are shown on local television stations throughout the region.

**Micronesian Seminar “Island Topics”**

No. 1 **After the Compact, What Then?** (Roundtable discussion on the end of the Compact.)

No. 2 **Women’s Changing Roles in Micronesia.** (How the traditional roles of women have changed.)

No. 3 **Voices of Pohnpei. Part I** (A history of Pohnpei from the inside.)

No. 4 **Voices of Pohnpei. Part II** (Continuation of the history of Pohnpei.)

No. 5 **Beneath Paradise.** (Roundtable discussion on child abuse and spouse abuse.)

No. 6 **More Than Just Doctors.** (A look at the quality of health care in Micronesia.)

No. 7. **Owning Our Own Health.** (What Micronesia can do to improve health services.)

No. 8 **Too High!** (Lyrical documentary on alcohol abuse.)

No. 9 **Reflections on Anger.** (How Micronesians handle anger--and how it sometimes controls them.)

No. 10 **A Matter of Peace, a Question of Justice.** (Roundtable on how conflict resolution is handled in the courts.)

No. 11 **The Upside Down Economy.** (Shows how the FSM economy is grounded in government rather than private production.)

**Social Research**

Social research, like medical research, should not be simply speculative; its aim should be to heal. With this end in view, MicSem has been deeply involved in the study of social problems since 1980. Beginning with a systematic study of the suicide problem in Micronesia, MicSem has gone on to investigate several other areas of social concern.

***∙ Suicide:*** collected and analyzed data on over 1,000 suicides in Micronesia; collaborated with other social scientists to produce five journal articles on suicide; presented findings in conferences and workshops throughout the Pacific.

***∙ Juvenile Delinquency:*** convened a major conference in 1977 to discuss the youth problem; worked with two regional universities to produce a study of delinquency in 1980; produced a paper on the study of violence in Chuuk; established “Youth Link” as a liaison between youth workers in the area (1985-1987), issuing a newsletter and sponsoring an annual conference.

***∙ Youth Drinking:*** convened a three-day workshop in 1981 to establish parameters of the problem and gather data; published a monograph on the findings of the workshop, “Youth Drinking in Micronesia.”

***∙ Child Abuse and Neglect:*** conducted a study of child abuse in Chuuk in 1985, and directed a regional study of the problem during the next two years; published summary papers on findings and addressed the problem in many public talks.

***∙ Mental Illness:*** conducted a private survey of schizophrenia and other serious mental illness throughout Micronesia (1988-1990), storing case histories in database files; in collaboration with a clinical psychologist wrote a journal article presenting the findings (much higher rates in Palau and Yap than elsewhere and male rates three times as high as female).

***∙ Spirit Possession:*** supervised in 1990 the collection of data on spirit possession among women in Chuuk and other parts of Micronesia; stored and analyzed the computer data; researched the history of spirit possession in the area; published two journal articles on the change in the form and meaning of possession.

***∙ Change in Family Structure:*** conducted a three-year study of the breakdown of the extended family in Chuuk and Pohnpei (1988-1990) based on a study of ten representative families over a 40-year period; produced and distributed monographs on the results of the study in these two island groups; showed the application of this to other social problems in papers and talks; held workshops on family change in all major islands.

***∙ Alcohol and Drug Use:*** conducted a survey of alcohol and drug use in FSM and the Marshall Islands (1995-1997); produced monographs on the results of the survey along with recommendations for treatment and prevention.

**Micronesian Seminar**

The Micronesian Seminar is a private organization that has been engaged in public education for twenty-five years. Established as a research-pastoral institute by the Bishop of the Caroline-Marshall Islands in 1972, the Micronesian Seminar was officially turned over to the Jesuit Order in 1992. Its office was moved from Chuuk to Pohnpei at that time. A year later it was registered as a private non-profit organization in the Federated States of Micronesia.

The Micronesian Seminar is intended to serve the people of FSM, Palau and the Marshalls. It does so chiefly through its research and public education programs.

Since its founding, the Micronesian Seminar has been directed by Fr. Francis X. Hezel, SJ. It is subject to a Board of Directors, composed of Catholic Church representatives, that meets yearly.

The organization currently operates on an annual budget of $35,000. The Society of Jesus provides a yearly subsidy of $12,000. The remainder of the budget comes from grants, free will gifts and offerings.

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