

Micronesia

Chapter 12: The Indigenous Youths in Micronesia, Pacific: The Movers and Shakers

Sylvia ELIAS (Lien Madolenihmw, Pohnpei)

The Island Nations scattered throughout the northern Pacific that make up the region of Micronesia were discovered by various foreign navigators, and yet the lives of Indigenous Peoples from these islands have remained largely unknown to the outside world. Our tiny island nations and territories are comprised of the Kiribati Islands, Nauru, the Marshall Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia (Kosrae, Pohnpei, Chuuk, Yap), Palau, the Northern Marianas Islands, and Guam. Micronesian Indigenous youth from across the region share common values, beliefs, and practices in terms of gender roles, economic disparity, social pressures, resiliency to trauma, access and appreciation of nature, and profound belief in the spiritual. First, we will begin with the geographical, physical, and historical makeup of Micronesia. Then, we will discuss each of these themes.

The word *Micronesia* is derived from the Greek words *mikros* (“small”) and *nesos* (“island”). Therefore, our region means “small islands.” Sometimes, we’re confused with Polynesia, which means “many islands,” or Melanesia which means “black islands.” And although, like Polynesians and Melanesians, we live *on* islands, how those islands

are formed, their size, and the lifestyles within can be as different and distinct as comparing the lifestyle of an American person in New York versus a Japanese person in Tokyo. In other words, we are who we are—and who we are is not anyone else.

Do you know how large New Guinea is? New Guinea is the second largest island in the world—so it's not part of Micronesia. It's larger than Texas. Do you know how large New Zealand is? It's the size of Colorado, about 280,000 square kilometers. It's also part of Polynesia—so it's not part of Micronesia. Do you know how large Hawaii is? Hawaii is often considered to be a small place, right? Hawaii is about 30,000 square kilometers. Hawaii is *also* part of Polynesia—so it's not part of Micronesia, either. Do you know how large Pohnpei—my island—is? It's the largest island in the Federated States of Micronesia. It's 334 square kilometers of land for the island proper. That's half the size of Washington, DC. And we're the large one! This is because Pohnpei *State* is 343 square kilometers, and the four states that make up the Federated States of Micronesia have a grand total of 702 square kilometers of land area.

What is Pohnpei State? Pohnpei State refers to the main island of Pohnpei and the outer island atolls of Pingelap, Mwoakilloa, Sapwuahfik, Nukuoro, Kapingamarangi, And, Pakein, and Oroluk. (Technically it also includes Minto Reef, but that's an atoll without any islands.) In Pohnpei, we speak Pohnpeian. It's not the same language that

is spoken in Mwoakilloa (Mwoakillese), or in Pingelap (Pingelapese), or in Sapwuahfik (Ngatikese), or in Nukuoro (Nukuoroan) or in Kapingamarangi (Kapingese). Most of these outer island atolls are smaller than one square kilometer. If you don't understand metric, let us put it to you this way: there are no cars on these islands because there is no room for them. If you walk end-to-end on the island Touhou (meaning "New Island" in Kapingese), you will have walked for five minutes. Less if you're faster.

Our islands are more than our homes. They are as equivalent to our identity as a child is to its mother. Our land is of so much importance to who we are that it is embedded in our language; it is embedded in all of our customs; it is at once the single most important part of familial pride and, for the foreigners who wish to control us, the bane to whatever *development* is supposed to be. One may claim we're foolish for not wanting to build *here*, *on this perfect spot*, but that *perfect spot* is the same place where family from generations past lie forever.

What do I mean when I say the land is embedded in our language? Do you remember the name of my island? Pohnpei. *Pohn* ("upon") and *pei* ("an altar"). *Upon a Stone Altar* is not only the name of David Hanlon's PhD dissertation, but also the name of my home. Where does the English word *green* come from? I'm sure it comes from somewhere; I can tell you that in Pohnpei, we say

pohndipw, meaning “upon the bush.” Where does the English word *brown* come from? I’m sure it comes from somewhere; I can tell you that in Pohnpei, we say *pohnpwel*, meaning “upon the earth.” Where does the English word *blue* come from? I’m sure it comes from somewhere; I can tell you that in Pohnpei, we say *pohnmei*, meaning “upon the clear.” What do I mean by *upon the clear*? Well, have you ever seen the ocean? It looks blue, right? Have you ever seen a glass of water? It’s clear.

All of this discussion about the size of islands and the names of words is to make it clear that Micronesians, like any group of people, are not a monolith. Yes, we have similar cultures; yes, we have similar languages; yes, we have similar problems; but where one may see *a group that looks the same*, we see endless diversity. And it is that very diversity, I believe, that provides us both strength and, at times, many of our challenges.

Allow an example to clarify what I mean. I want you to imagine three American teenagers who wear glasses and khakis and are in the Science Fiction Club at their high school. To an outsider, these individuals are the same. They look the same, right? They like and talk about the same things, after all. But it’s possible, perhaps even likely, that one of them has particularly heartfelt opinions about *Star Trek*, while another has equally profound views on *Star Wars*, and yet another feels strongly regarding *The Martian*. Diversity can, and

frequently does, include what we look like, how we talk, how we behave, what we value, and what we like—but diversity can also be, or rather *is also*, more than these things. That’s what I mean when I say Micronesians are not a monolith. Four is a sacred number in all of our islands and cultures; it is part of us, but it does not exclusively define us.

With this in mind, while we now discuss the issues mentioned at the start, let’s note that these experiences are mine and those of people I know. Are these *Micronesian* experiences? Well, I’m a Micronesian; but as truthful and transparent and real as I promise to be, and as truthful and transparent and real as those who spoke to me are, I can only say for sure that this is *what I know*, and *what I have seen* as opposed to *this is what Pohnpeians see*.

Let’s talk about gender roles in Micronesia for Indigenous youth. For Pohnpei, gender roles are something that we’re born into; we’re classified; they’re fixed. Girls do the chores, from laundry to cooking to caring for the children. It’s as if we were born and we have a mission to prepare our minds, bodies, and souls to be given away to *potential buyers*—rather, men, our future husbands. I don’t say this aggressively; men are fine. I say this because what I mean is *we don’t own our bodies; the men do*. When I say we raise the children, I mean *the men can abandon us to raise them by ourselves—and that’s “fine.”*

What about gender roles in Chuuk, one of the islands of the Federated States of Micronesia? Chuuk is, by the way, where my grandfather is originally from on my mom's side; and if that sounds like trivia to you, then I haven't been clear enough when I told you before about the importance of our land and its relationship to family. *Family is everything*, which is why *land* is everything; but I digress. Gender roles in Chuuk are like Pohnpei if they were magnified, heightened, strengthened, and so on. I want you to imagine that you are a man, that you are sitting in a chair and you are watching a movie on your television. I am your wife, and I need to walk past you so I can, say, grab you the beer you asked for. What do I do? If you thought I just *walk past you*, then you're wrong. That would be disrespectful. You could beat me for that. You probably would, too. I have to say *Tirow*, which means, "excuse me," and then crawl on my hands and knees not because I might block your view but because, as a woman, I can't be purposefully making myself taller than you *because I am inferior by nature and by design*.

The main idea to get across here is that—whether it's Guam, Saipan, Yap, Palau, Nauru, Tarawa, Pohnpei, Chuuk, Majuro, or Kosrae—if you're a woman, it's a question of what degree of inferior you are to a man, not if you are inferior or not. It's rather a question of how is this inferiority emphasized and shown by the culture.

So, what about boys? Do men have perfect lives, then, as the “superior”? Like girls, boys are born into their roles—and you know what I notice, and what I see? Bear in mind I am a woman—but if I see that boys want to do girls’ chores, like clean and cook and sweep? They’re really not allowed to do it. A boy cannot do a girl’s work; if you do, you’re labelled. And, yes, we have enough Americanisms these days that the label is *faggot*. However, if you’re a girl, and there aren’t enough boys to do the men’s work? Climb that coconut tree, girl—we’re thirsty.

Boys frequently, maybe *always*, need to be mindful of their masculinity. This is measurable. What it means to be masculine is to fish; what it means to be masculine is to plant yams; what it means to be masculine is to plant sakau; what it means to be masculine is to have as many children as you can, and it really doesn’t matter who the woman is. Have four children with four separate women? Congratulations, you’re normal here. Therefore, perhaps it’s worth saying then, that if you *don’t like fishing*, or if you *want to be with only your wife and no one else*, that can be perceived as weird. I don’t know this for certain, but I suspect—and my friends and colleagues suspect—that perhaps that’s why many of those men, then, seek membership in the church. In other words, the men we see—and the men we speak to—who have what the West, and myself, define as a healthy relationship with their partners, are terrifically religious.

Before we move on, I need to share what a friend of mine—we'll call him Sdohsa—said regarding his thoughts on gender roles with Indigenous youth today in Micronesia. “When I take a taxi, nobody messes with me; if it's the morning, they offer me donuts and if it's evening they ask me if I want to drink sakau. But girls, women? If it's my wife and she wants to take a taxi at night, there's a good chance the driver will take her to Dekehtik and try to have sex with her. After this happened twice, I told her to stop taking taxis at night; if she needs to stay with her family after consuming sakau, that's fine.”

Now let's talk about economic disparity for Indigenous youth. Because Pohnpei is so small, if I use real first names—and someone from Pohnpei reads this—they might know who I'm talking about. So we're going to change the names. The word *serapein* means girl, so our examples will be Sera Pein, Sarah Payne, Cera Paing, Jarah Pein, and Jera Payne. And we'll only care about the first names.

If you drive down the road in one of the villages, you come to a section where, on one side, you have Cera. Cera's house is two stories tall; it has a metal gate; it has windows; it has air conditioning; it has multiple large flat screen TVs; it has fast internet, well, relatively speaking; it has a patio; it has multiple cars, none of which are rusted or filled with cockroaches. On the other side of the road, you have Sarah. Sarah's house is about the

size of your living room, or maybe it's even smaller. It's one room. It's one story. It's made of thatch. It has no power. It has no electronics or other goods or materials that anyone in the West—or most of Asia, or maybe in most places in general, I would guess—would classify as high quality or otherwise improving one's quality of life. Cera has five children and they all go to private school, where the average reading score on the 8th grade standardized test is 34/40 reading questions correct per student. Sarah has five children and they all go to public school, where the average reading score on the 8th grade standardized test is 15/40 reading questions correct per student. Cera and her family work in the government and own a business. Sarah works on the land. Cera's food comes from markets—they have ice cream, steak, and cereal, in addition to our local breadfruit, taro, and fish. Sarah's food comes from the land—they have bananas, sometimes, and breadfruit, sometimes, and canned tuna when times are good.

Let me tell you a true story about a young girl I taught and mentored for some years. Her name is Jarah. Jarah lives in an enclosed compound, with a fence, behind a store. In school, she knew who the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles were and she frequently streamed Korean dramas on her computer with her friends. They'd talk on Facebook about school, their dreams, maybe even boys—she may as well be American or British or Australian, right? Jarah had a short walk to school each day, and could walk on sidewalks. In the same class was

Sera. Sera lived miles up in the mountain, deep in the land. She didn't know what the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles were, though she had seen some movies, and she didn't have a computer or internet. She had heard of Facebook, but didn't really know what it was. Sera had a five-mile hike down the mountain, the woods or forest or jungle, to get to school. She was in all respects as bright and as capable as Jarah, but her experiences—and *capacity to experience experiences*—were more limiting. Jarah came from money. Sera came from *wahu*, meaning respect, meaning the traditional lifestyle and the traditional structure of living. I cannot tell you if one of these lifestyles is better than the other, but I can tell you that they are different experiences, and I can tell you that they are equally Pohnpeian and equally Micronesian.

The GDP per capita in the Federated States of Micronesia is about \$3,000 USD per person per year.¹ Of the ten million dollars in the Pohnpei Education Department's budget, all but about \$7,000 come from the United States of America in the form of assistance via the Compact of Free Association.² We don't buy our own chairs, our own books, or even our own toilet paper; well, we *do*, but we do it with American money from the Americans themselves. One of the components of

¹ US Department of the Interior, "Federated States of Micronesia," *Office of Insular Affairs*, <https://www.doi.gov/oia/islands/fsm>

² Richard Clark, Pohnpei Department of Education, interviewed by Sylvia Elias, October 12, 2018.

the Compact is that Micronesians in Palau, the Marshall Islands, or the Federated States can apply for PELL Grants. For Cera, this means she can go to school for free. I went to school for free, too. Our national and state scholarships? They also come from America. But for Jarah, she enrolls in the College of Micronesia not to go to school but to get the refund.³ Her family bought a car with the refund. And if a family has more than one child attending college, that's amazing grace. They get a lot of money. It isn't ours, and every penny we steal hurts us in the long run. But like an addict, it feels good. Why not? Do we have any other choice?

Social pressures. I am talking about my experience as an Indigenous youth, and as an Indigenous woman. If you're young and you're a guy, it's a different story than being young and being a woman. I think the pressure doubles for men, because I'm already dealing with being young⁴ *in general* with limited rights and privileges—and I went to school, received both Bachelors and Masters degrees, and have trouble finding work. And a boy, from the same village? No school—but he gets more respect. He doesn't have trouble finding work. He *knows more than I do*, *prima facie*, and by virtue of his being a male he is

³ These are the excess funds from your PELL Grant after your tuition; so, if Jarah received X number of dollars for school, and tuition was Y number, then Z —the remainder—is what she gets as a refund.

⁴ At the time of this writing, I'm 27 years old—or for fans of numbers, I'm just over 10,000 days old.

simply more qualified for any office job. I'll give you a real example: Sen applied for a job. She got 58 points out of 60 in the interview panel. Dio applied for the same job. He got 46 points. Dio got the job, because the boss in the organization said to his staff, "She's a woman, so in my book she gets a zero." The minimum score was 10. I say all of this to suggest that Indigenous youth, and Indigenous women, have a social pressure to conform to social standards. They cannot possibly measure up to the standards set for men. Let's talk about Pohnpei schools and their principals, for example. There are six private schools in Pohnpei of which three principals, 50%, are women. There are thirty-four public schools; again, there are three female principals, but this amounts to only 8% of the total amount of principals. In our traditional culture, women have the social pressure to not be successful in the *Western* sense of the term.

Social pressures are, above all else, the movers and shakers on all the Micronesian islands. Girls can't go to school because they have to take care of sick children. Instead of going into the *nahs*—the community house⁵—learning about our culture and history, they prepare the *uhmw*, the earth oven, where they spend hours cooking the taro, the breadfruit, the pigs, the *whatever*. Instead of studying, they're pounding sakau (kava) for their elders. Instead of bidding farewell to their loved ones at funerals, they're the ones serving water to

⁵ This is a U-shaped structure where people gather for feasts, sakau, funerals, and other events in the village.

the visiting public. Instead of enjoying their youth, they're already working to provide for their family. Instead of learning to identify and express their feelings, they're sweeping the floor. Instead of choosing what they want to become, who they are is chosen for them.

And yet, we Micronesians—boys and girls, men and women—are resilient. The Indigenous youth in Micronesia can go on a field trip to the tallest mountain and, because their mother told them not to get their shirt dirty because church is tomorrow, can get there *clean and sweat-free*. We Micronesians can learn to survive on the island and on the ocean, learn our native tongue on our island, as well as English and other languages at school, and then enter the world at large beyond our homes. We persevere despite the pressures and problems; we, both men and women, are more formally educated (in the *Western* sense) now than we've ever been in the past, and we survive challenges big, small, and obscure to those who don't understand us. The Spanish gave us religion, and turned our land—our identities—into economic crops. But we're still here; they're not. The Germans changed ownership of our lands—that's why the Mortlockese live in Sokehs⁶—and turned us into slaves. But we're still here; they're not. The

⁶ Sokehs is a municipality on Pohnpei largely comprised of Mortlockese (people from the Mortlock Islands) on one side and Mwoakilloa and Pingelap on the other side; to learn why, I recommend you research Soumadau and the Sokehs Rebellion.

Japanese came with their Imperial Navy, turned Chuuk into their Pearl Harbor, Kapingamarangi into an airbase, Pohnpei into a city, Saipan into farms, and we were incredibly outnumbered. But we're still here; they're not. Then the Americans came, and they told us we'd be part of a *Trust Territory*—and we told them we trusted them, but that this is our territory. We're still here, and that's why the Republic of Palau is *the Republic of Palau*, and the Republic of the Marshall Islands is *the Republic of the Marshall Islands*, and the Federated States of Micronesia is *the Federated States of Micronesia*. We're still here. We've always been here. We'll always be here. And it is up to us to manifest our own destiny.

So, what is our destiny, then? I'm not sure that I know, nor that any Micronesians I've spoken with know, and perhaps no one can know. Geography changes over time. Chuuk was once bigger than Pohnpei, but it's 100 million years old and some of the land has eroded or sunk. *Pihl tik kak audeda pillap*: “a small river fills a big river.” Youth are the future, our destiny perhaps, and just as geography changes, so too does culture. But while culture, like a river, is ever flowing and ever changing, easy to see and difficult to control, it is the combination of *tiahk* (“tradition”), *kamarain* (“enlightenment”), and *pihl* (“water”) that makes us who we are. And, if nothing else, we Micronesians know how blessed that makes us with our land.

Our land, as mentioned, is our identity—it's part of our family. Our land is also our food and our medicine. We have dozens of counting systems to determine if an object is long, short, small, fat, tri-cornered, spiky, moving, and so on. This is because before the foreigners came, we required the language to differentiate plants from one another. One may think they're all merely green appendages sticking out of the earth so as to touch the sky, but a Micronesian will know, almost *instinctively*, as in *we learn it so early it's natural*, which trees and which flowers have which names, bear which fruits or medicines, can grow in which soil or demand how much sunlight. Those who laugh at us see the naked children running in the jungle calling us, as so many authors in the 1800s once did, savages at best and prospects for salvation at worst. We believe in God, and take God very seriously; but *Anelap*, the “great spirit,” is more than just God as a figure, but also the earth and every fiber and pebble and leaf and root itself. In other words, *we take nature very seriously*.

Micronesian youth believe in magic. Sometimes this magic is taken very literally; a spirit has possessed you, and that's why you act out or misbehave. You avoid going to a certain place at night, because a woman in red will offer you fruits—and if you eat the fruits, you'll die. I heard from a very good friend in Kosrae that the Kosraens, through Jesus, banished black magic from their island. The magic went to Yap, which is the home of black magic; after all, Pohnpei has the

waterfall *Lihduhdhuniap*, meaning “a Yapese woman bathing,” because of its magical properties.

But increasingly when we say that we believe in magic, we mean that we believe in ourselves. We have pride in our history, culture, and geography; we have courage in the face of adversities from foreign intervention to economic disparity; and we have hope that we can determine our own future, and that such future will be for the better of the *Micronesian family* at large.

So, what does it mean to be a Micronesian? It means everything, and it means nothing. It is both *something* and *not a thing*. No person is a monolith, and no group of people are a monolith. We are not a monolith. We are many things, and I can attempt to tell you what I have seen and what the people I know have seen, and even what we believe, but to summarize it all up in a coconut shell: we are who we are, and we are *from* here, we've *been* here, and we are *still* here.