



Change in the Pacific: *A Jesuit Response*

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The *times were a-changing* during the 1960s, as Bob Dylan told us in song and CBS Evening News showed us in full color. But the US was not the only place being rocked by rapid change. The islands of Micronesia, then a US trust territory and a mission of the New York Province, were lurching through profound changes of their own.



When I first arrived in Chuuk in 1963 to begin regency at Xavier High School, wisps of smoke rose from the cook fires everywhere on the island as pounded breadfruit and roasted fish were prepared for the evening meal. There were no more than a couple dozen vehicles on the island, most of them second-hand jeeps and rusting pickup trucks, along with a handful of old motorcycles. Even then, the traditional thatched huts were giving way to shacks built of surplus tin and odd pieces of lumber, but concrete houses were still a rare sight.



of its colony a model of development. The annual subsidy doubled and then continued escalating, while thousands were added to the government payroll and newly affluent islanders pulled ever more sacks of rice and cans of Spam off the shelves of the stores that were sprouting in all the towns. To complicate matters even more, the islands acquired their first territory-wide congress and soon began pursuing the dream of political self-government.



Talk about change! Micronesia was making a transition from food gathering to a 9-5 work day. From a large kin group clustered around a cook house to small family dwellings. And some years later, the islands evolved from a single territory to three independent nations, each with its own constitution and flag. Meanwhile, the changes have produced fallout, including growing suicide rates, increased domestic violence and youth alienation. On top of all this, there are the usual problems of economic development and nation-building.



All that began changing in the early 60s, the coldest days of the Cold War, as the US began a massive build up in the islands to make

The Jesuit response to this, back in 1971, was to create an educational institution, not another formal school, but one that would engage in



social research and community education. The immediate result was a work known as Micronesian Seminar, with a name inherited

from our old Woodstock College days and a director still heavily involved in high school teaching and administration.

Today, 35 years later, MicSem (as it is often called) is middle-aged and its only director is well beyond that. Its mission remains to help island people cope with the change that modernization brings, usually by linking the past to the present. Take suicide, for example. With a large database on the 1100 suicides that have occurred over a 40 year period, we've been able to show that the suicide epidemic of recent decades is rooted in changes in the family structure, due in the long run to the impact of the cash economy. Or consider the four women whose lives have been lost at the hands of their husbands over the past ten years. Some might simply call this spouse abuse part of a global phenomenon, but we'd hope to show how it springs from structural changes in island social organization. After all, the deeper people's understanding of the problem, the better prepared they are to deal with it.



The search for jobs is luring Micronesians in great numbers to the US. An estimated 70,000 islanders, or one out of every four, now

reside abroad. With Micronesians emigrating to the US to live and work, we decided to document their life in their new surroundings. The result is an hour-long video - the 49th produced by MicSem in the past 12 years - for airing on all the local TV channels in the region. For those

living abroad with high-speed Internet access, it will also be posted on the MicSem website. A print companion piece on the subject appears as an issue of our Micronesian Counselor series, which is mailed to 800 people and posted on our website (www.micsem.org).

We've done research on a number of topics, covering everything from suicide and alcohol use and mental illness to emigration and remittances. Of course, it's one thing to do the work on a topic, but quite another to get the results out to people



in an understandable form. That's what led us into the production of TV programs (and now and then of a radio program in one of the local languages)

as well as the development of a website that offers full-text articles, historical photo albums and a forum discussion, among other things. There are also the more conventional outlets - formal presentations and journal articles. All this means that we have enough media outlets to saturate the islands with a message. If the audience doesn't read the article or hear the oral presentation, they have a better than even chance of catching the TV program or at least hearing the radio drama on the topic.

For people buffeted by relentless change, as islanders have been, a sense of cultural identity and awareness of their history is more than just a



luxury. That's why a large part of MicSem's mission, like that of Jesuits in Asia and Latin America centuries ago, has been to salvage those materials that can be used to celebrate the past. MicSem's library on the islands, over 50 years in the making, is one of the very best world-wide. Besides the print materials, it contains 50,000 photos gathered from all over the world as well as 500 films and videos. Next up is music - from early chants and nose flute recordings up to reggae and rap versions of island songs. As Fr. Jeff Chojnacki reminded me during his first provincial visitation, music expresses the soul of the people. There must be thousands of homesick Micronesians in Orlando and Pasadena and Portland who might appreciate a bit of soul that they could never find on Napster.



MicSem might have had a single now-aged director throughout its 35-year history, but he has had plenty of help. Elsa Veloso, the doyenne of the place, has been managing the office and keeping financial records for nearly as long, while two other Filipinas maintain the library and photo collections. Two young Micronesians have begun editing videos under the guidance of Erik Steffen, our master filmmaker, and Eugenia Samuel takes charge of the outreach programs that MicSem runs. Together their work constitutes the response of one Jesuit-founded institution to the challenges of change in a handful of small island societies.