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MICRONESIAN ROUND-UP

MICRONESIAN SEMINAR 2004

by

Francis X. Hezel, SJ
Micronesian Seminar, Pohnpei

At 32, the Micronesian Seminar ('MicSem') is rapidly approaching middle-age. Begun in 1972 as a research-pastoral institute under the aegis of the Catholic Church, MicSem was founded to help educate the Micronesian communities on issues of vital importance. The church, which had long invested energy and resources in the education of the young, felt that it was about time that it did something for adults. How to accomplish this task was the question it faced. MicSem was the program invented to work out ways to get the job done. From the very beginning, MicSem's methods and the issues it was to address were to depend on current needs and opportunities.

Over the years, the methods have varied nearly as much as the issues. In the early years, there were annual conferences attended by government and business leaders from all over the region. Then, during the mid-1980s, weekend reflection workshops in different island groups. Video productions for broadcast on local channels began ten years ago, with occasional radio programs produced in local languages. Within the last five years, MicSem's website (www.micsem.org) has become a major tool for education, especially through the on-line photo albums and forum discussion.

ISSUES IN 2004

During this past year, MicSem has tried to address three major issues. The first is youth suicide, a longstanding problem in nearly all of Micronesia. With a yearly suicide rate of over 25 per 100,000, the islands have one of the highest composite rates in the world, although caretakers are divided over what to do about the problem. The less public discussion of this sensitive topic the better, many islanders believe, while supporting their position by pointing to the impulsive nature of many of the suicides. To talk about suicide openly is simply to invite more young people to try it, many seem to think. After years of turning out articles on the subject, MicSem finally produced a video on youth suicide, "A Better Way Out," that lays out what we know about the suicide epidemic we are experiencing and what we can learn from how family conflicts were handled in the past.

A second issue, surfacing in the course of work done on contract for Asian Development Bank, is related to land registration in the Marshall Islands. Because of the complex system of land rights in the Marshalls, very little land is currently registered there, even though land registration would greatly facilitate the produc-

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tive use of land and would make it easier to use land as a basis for borrowing. MicSem produced a video, "Beyond the Spoken Word," for local viewing in Marshallese and English language editions. It also scripted and helped produce two Marshallese language radio programs as well as an issue of the *Micronesian Counselor* on the subject.

The crisis of confidence in the government of Chuuk State inspired MicSem to take on as its third major issue what we called, in the *Micronesian Counselor* article on the topic, "The Chuuk Problem." Under two successive administrations, Chuuk State has experienced fiscal crises and a rapidly deteriorating public service sector amid accusations of mismanagement of state funds. MicSem's 45-minute video documentary "For the Love of Chuuk" together with the article attempts to explore the systemic roots of the problem while explaining how Chuuk's traditional political structures differ significantly from those operative everywhere else in Micronesia.

By the end of the year MicSem will also have completed another video, this one a drama on the change in women's work load over the years. In cultures that have always been distinguished by a clear separation of male and female work and a careful balance between the two, women's work appears to have grown disproportionately these days. In all, MicSem has finished four videos and puts out five issues of its occasional publication *Micronesian Counselor* during the year. The latter includes a brief historical survey of health problems in Micronesia over the past two centuries and a case study on business development (commercial clam production) in the Marshalls.

DIGITAL PHOTO COLLECTION

With assistance from the US National Park Service and other funding sources, MicSem has been making a serious effort to expand its photo collection to complement its extensive library of written materials. Each year it contacts dozens of institutions and individual collection holders to obtain copies of select images for its own repository.

Each year an estimated 4,000 photos are added to the MicSem collection. The photos are mounted in albums for display purposes and cataloged in a database, which will soon be presented on-line in a format that may be searched by subject, date and location. Every other month, a new photo album on a historical theme is presented on-line on the MicSem website. Recent photo albums include a photo essay on the 1950s, another nostalgic album on the 60s entitled "Goodbye to the Jeep," a visual description of World War II in Palau, a look at island life as it was lived a century ago, and a glimpse at pre-Christian religion at a time "When the Spirits Roamed."

ON-LINE FORUM

The forum discussion on the MicSem website seems to have become rather popular, especially with FSM citizens in the islands and abroad. The forum, always in danger of taking a slanderous turn, has seen its up and downs in the past year. Interest seems to have peaked in the discussion of the notorious Amnesty Bill introduced by the FSM Congress, although public interest continued throughout a sustained discussion of the Chuuk problems. Recently, the forum has taken up the issue of whether unity among the states of FSM is desirable or even possible.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY AND CONTACT

Francis X. Hezel is a Jesuit priest who has been working in Micronesia for forty years. He spent part of this time as a teacher, principal and director at Xavier High School, Chuuk. He also served as regional superior of the Jesuits in Micronesia. Since 1972 he has been the director of Micronesian Seminar, a Jesuit-sponsored research-pastoral institute engaged in extensive community education work. In this capacity he has organized several conferences on current issues and has written and spoken widely about social change and its impact on island societies. He has also written dozens of articles and five books on Micronesian history, including *The First Taint of Civilization* and *Strangers in Their Own Land*. His latest book, *The New Shape of Old Island Cultures*, explores the extent of social change throughout the region since the end of World War II.

Francis X. Hezel, SJ, Micronesian Seminar, P.O.Box 160, Pohnpei FM 96941, Federated States of Micronesia. e-mail: micsem@micsem.org

