

German Colonial Heritage in Micronesia

Historical associations with non-Oceanic civilizations have shaped Micronesian states such as the Republic of Palau, the Republic of the Marshall Islands, and the Federated States of Micronesia. Centuries of contact with diverse arrays of colonial administrations, traders, whalers, shipwrecked sailors, and escaped convicts, generated great pressures for cultural change. Some were imposed while others were adopted, some were deliberate and others accidental, but together they have contributed to the formation of today's Micronesian cultures.

Following the Spanish-American war of 1898, Spain withdrew from the Pacific allowing Germany to expand her influence and briefly become a significant colonial power. The 1914-1918 World War saw Japan annex German possessions north of the equator, a move subsequently sanctioned by the League of Nations. Following Japan's defeat in the Pacific War of 1941-1945, the United States assumed control. Micronesians were again denied a significant part in determining their own future as the United Nations ratified America's action and established the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands.

Since the 1970s, America has gradually withdrawn from direct administration and Micronesians have acquired national "independence." These post-colonial processes were not always smooth and conflicts occurred within Micronesia and between Micronesia and America. Nevertheless, self-government was achieved. A consequent, passionate interest in what Micronesians perceive to be their "real" heritage is developing, together with the realization that they must now manage their past on their own terms.

Difficulties are attached to this as the triple conundrum of historic preservation remains—who owns it, who wants it, and who pays for it? From a conceptual viewpoint it seems so easy. If people have the right to determine what elements of the past are to be preserved as their heritage, they need only make their choices, allocate resources, and it is preserved. From a pragmatic viewpoint however, it is much more difficult. Effective preservation of cultural property is

dependent on two critical factors—community interest and political will, and availability of a variety of resources.

How much interest in the vestiges of Germany's Empire exists in these former colonies? What are their national priorities? What resources are available? Where are the money, skilled labor, historically and culturally appropriate materials and methods, and the management and planning experience? Social and political environments where the will to preserve heritage is frequently low, where pressure to provide modern infrastructure is high, and where national resources are limited, are not conducive to historic preservation. Such environments are common throughout post-colonial Micronesia.

Essentially, funds for historic preservation must be generated internally or externally. The first requires a population with disposable income and the second requires external fund providers. Most Micronesian nation-states have very little of the former and a steadily declining amount of the latter. Since 1945, they have become highly dependent on external funds in the form of international aid, most of which comes from the United States. With few exceptions, natural resources are limited and national economies are restrained because of the continuing excess of imports over exports. Consequently, national trade figures are highly unbalanced, economic opportunities are restricted and prospects for near-term improvement are limited.

Oceanic peoples are genuinely proud of their varied and dynamic cultures, frequently focusing on areas that Western cultures tend not to appreciate. For example, Western styles of cultural preservation concentrate on *tangible* historic property. In contrast, Micronesians do not always value tangible historic property highly but show a marked preference for *non-tangible* heritage such as traditional skills and knowledge. This preference seems particularly strong in low coral atoll communities such as the Marshall Islands. Perhaps this may be attributed to factors such as their reliance on less permanent resources for tools and building materials, and the frequency and extent of damage from severe tropical storms.

During the post-colonial era, the focus of preservation in Micronesia has changed from non-indigenous historical property to indigenous cultural heritage. This critical development has increased the complexity of historic preservation management and may also have triggered “adoption” of some historic property that may otherwise have been regarded as colonial heritage. The Likiep Village Historic Site, in the Republic of the Marshall Islands, is a powerful example where historic property associated with the operations of trading companies during the German administrative period has been “adopted” by the Marshallese people.

Without appropriate management, such property deteriorates rapidly as tropical decay processes continue unabated. Despite this outstanding example, a general lack of interest by both Micronesian nation-states and Germany is evidenced in three ways—a lack of funding, a lack of proposals to preserve, and a widespread public lack of knowledge of their shared past. For example, 40 hand-written business books were found decaying in a pool of water and accumulated rubbish in a disused house in Likiep Village. Originating from operations by German (Jaluit Gesellschaft) and Marshallese (A. Capelle and Co.) businesses on Likiep during the period 1908 to 1919, they are historically and culturally significant. Their treatment may indicate a lack of interest in a past considered unimportant or more probably a lack of knowledge of their historical significance.

The conundrum remains—whose heritage is it and who pays? Two projects to preserve the Joachim deBrum house (1976 and 1984) on Likiep Island were funded through the U.S. National Park Service. No funds were obtained from Germany despite its obvious close historic connections.

Marshallese generally feel that satisfying present-day community and family needs is more important than preserving a disused building in very poor condition and apparently without value. For example, a severe tropical storm damaged many homes on Likiep Island and extensively damaged a building comprising the dining room and kitchen of the Joachim deBrum house. Despite being listed in the United States National Register of Historic Places, material from the dining room was salvaged and used to repair some of the damaged homes while the deBrum House din-

ing room and kitchen were never repaired. All that remains are badly deteriorated concrete foundations. Although nominally part of the historic site and despite its high significance from both architectural and historic viewpoints, it was excluded from preservation projects in 1976 and 1984 and left in disrepair. This exclusion strongly implied the building was considered to be worthless and, consequently, when an urgent need for its material arose elsewhere, it was used without qualm.

Preservation of German colonial heritage in Micronesia depends for the most part on these small nation-states receiving sufficient resources from elsewhere. They simply do not have either the finances or the experienced personnel to preserve what remains. If it is to be preserved, then actions need to be taken now because deterioration is accelerating in a natural process. Although it cannot be stopped, it can be delayed sufficiently so that important historic property may be documented appropriately.

The major problem remains one of ownership. Germany displays little interest in extant *in situ* records of her brief time as a colonial power in the Pacific. Micronesians do not generally regard remaining German colonial property as belonging to them. They do not perceive it to be part of their heritage, they feel little sense of ownership or association, and have little desire to preserve it. It is unrealistic to presume they will use scarce local resources to preserve something nobody appears to want. Consequently, preservation strategies and practices that recognise the political and physical realities of a 21st century “Oceania” are needed if remaining heritage is to be preserved and documented.

Joachim deBrum’s dining room can no longer be preserved. Is it also too late for other historic properties? Unless “owners” can be found and funding for preservation provided soon, extant historic property originating during Germany’s colonial administration of Micronesia will disappear from the Pacific as precipitately as did Imperial Germany.

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