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## MICRONESIA: WRITING AND REWRITING THE HISTORIES OF A NONENTITY

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In a 1967 editorial on developments within the discipline of Pacific history, Harry Maude noted the paucity of written histories on the islands of Micronesia.<sup>1</sup> It appeared to Maude that the past of these rich, varied, and complex island societies had been ignored as if by some tacit agreement. Now, more than twenty years later and with the recent publication of several monographs on various topics in Micronesian history, it is perhaps an appropriate time to assess the present state of historical investigations and to consider some of the larger issues involved in the study of the area's past.

A conceptual problem immediately presents itself. There is the story of the American congressman who, when asked his opinion of the future political status of Micronesia, replied, "Mike Who?"<sup>2</sup> The remark has often been cited to underscore America's seeming ignorance of and indifference to the Carolines, Marshalls, and Marianas--a collection of island groups once known more formally as the United States Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands and still the core of the larger Micronesian geographical area that also includes Nauru and northern Kiribati. While an unwitting indictment of American administration in the Trust Territory, the remark also reflects a more fundamental problem in any consideration of the area. "Mike Who?"; indeed, "Mike Who?" The question is a most telling one because Micronesia is, in many ways, a nonentity. For the most part, Micronesia has existed only in the minds of people from the outside who have sought to create an administrative entity for purposes of control and rule.<sup>3</sup>

First used by the French scholar Domeny de Rienzi in 1831 and later promoted by his fellow countryman and explorer Dumont d'Urville, the term "Micronesia," meaning "tiny islands," refers to the more than twenty-five hundred islands and atolls spread over an area of the western Pacific greater than that of the continental United States.<sup>4</sup> At times over the last century and a half, missionaries, traders, colonial officials, writers, social scientists, and modern-day island politicians have all employed the term to designate the physical boundaries of their work or interests. Indicative of only the grossest geographical ordering of the area, the term "Micronesia" actually reveals far more about Euro-American society's concerns for a neat, manageable, efficient, and logical ordering of the world. To be sure, colonialism has been a shared experience for all of the island groups in this area of the world, but colonialism has not created a cultural identity that can be described as "Micronesian." Likewise, the similarities noted by ethnographers in cultural practices or institutions regarding land, kinship, social organization, rank, and political hierarchy do not constitute a culturally homogeneous entity. There certainly do exist historical linkages among the different island groups of the area that hopefully will become clearer through future research and investigation. A first step in coming to a better understanding of the islands' past, however, involves a deconstruction or disassembling of the essentially alien construct that is Micronesia. For purposes of convenience, I will employ the term "Micronesia" throughout the remainder of this essay; readers, however, should remain cognizant of the problems involved in its usage.

Micronesia's inventors, at times, have actually shown little respect for their creation. One early European visitor likened the many small islands to "a handful of chickpeas flung over the sea."<sup>5</sup> William N. Truxton, the commander of the American naval vessel *Jamestown* that surveyed the Marshalls and Carolines in 1870, wrote in his final report that he saw no value to the islands whatsoever.<sup>6</sup> Though brief, these writings revealed much about the larger world's views on the worth and significance of the area. They conveyed assessments that have carried over centuries. With the exception of anthropologists who have made it one of the most studied areas of the world within the discipline of anthropology, most people remain largely ignorant of this small but extremely interesting and vital part of the world.

A question that comes immediately to mind is, why study the islands and their people? The answer is not a difficult one. Embodied within the area's past are many of the major themes that have concerned historians in the Pacific and elsewhere. Issues concerning origins and settle-

ment, survival, power, struggle, the development of complex governing structures, change, acculturation, imperialism, colonialism, resistance, dependency, and independence movements all figure prominently in the past of the islands. The islands constitute a worthy area of study in and of themselves, and because they provide a most illuminating stage within the larger theater of world history. Events often take place on islands in striking relief, especially events between “native” and “stranger.”<sup>7</sup> There is much that can be gleaned about the general nature of culture contact from a study of the events that occurred on the beaches of Micronesian islands and atolls.

If the islands have remained largely hidden from the consciousness of continental populations, governments and individual interest groups nonetheless have found at different times an arena for their expansionist programs. Over the last four centuries, outside forces have consistently sought to exploit the islands. Whalers, China traders, plantation owners, and mining company executives have all endeavored to profit from the area’s resources. Nations from both the East and the West have discovered important political and strategic value in the islands’ general location. In the last one hundred years, five major world powers have exercised at different times formal colonial jurisdiction over the islands. Not surprisingly, major disputes arose between established colonial powers in the area and those nations that sought to supplant them. Spain and Germany almost went to war in 1885 over the disposition of the islands before a carefully arranged program of papal arbitration recognized Spain’s claim to administrative control by right of initial discovery while permitting German trading interests continued access to the area.<sup>8</sup> Following its seizure of the islands from Germany soon after the outbreak of World War I, Japan clashed with the United States over a series of issues ranging from the fate of an important cable station on Yap to American charges of clandestine and illegal fortification of the islands.<sup>9</sup> The islands also served as settings for some of the most crucial and violent battles of World War II. In a real sense, then, the islands are bound closely and importantly to the modern histories of Spain, Great Britain, Germany, Japan, and the United States. There is much to be learned about these nations, their national character, social divisions, domestic economies, and expansionism from their presence and activities among the islands of the area called Micronesia.

The islands’ involvement in larger international considerations persists. Micronesia now figures prominently in a host of critical global issues ranging from the Law of the Sea to nuclear proliferation. The energy the United States has expanded in recent and lengthy political

status negotiations with the emerging governments of the area attests to the islands' persisting importance to American strategic interests. The islands of Micronesia also have attracted the world's attention as part of the new and larger Pacific arena for superpower rivalry. There was considerable international press coverage given recently to Kiribati and its negotiations with the Soviet Union over a fishing treaty. The United States' repeated, intensive, and apparently successful efforts to have the people of Belau amend their constitutional ban on the storage and transport of nuclear weapons and materials through Belauan territory mirrors dramatically the strategic concerns and related issues involving superpower rivalry. In short, the islands of Micronesia continue as an extremely important area of world affairs and world history.

Despite these weighty considerations, some might cite the islands' lack of size and their small populations as arguments against any extended consideration of their past. Former United States Secretary of State Henry Kissinger is reported to have said: "There are only 90,000 people out there. Who gives a damn!"<sup>10</sup> But the size and population of the islands, far from being a detriment, are in actuality an asset for purposes of study and scholarship. As O. H. K. Spate, the distinguished geographer of the Indian subcontinent turned Pacific historian, has written: "There is an economy of small scale. . . . We have whole congeries of little universes, ready-made isolates for study; each capable, in appearance at least, of being readily grasped as a whole."<sup>11</sup> The importance of the islands in terms of what they can teach us, then, is in inverse proportion to their size. Harry Maude, in a 1971 essay on the study of Pacific history, had specifically in mind perhaps the islands of the Micronesian area when he wrote of a multiplicity of societies that, in varying degrees of distance from each other, have developed a heterogeneous assemblage of social, economic and political systems, of culture traits, complexes, beliefs, values and attitudes that can be observed in detail over time.<sup>12</sup> There exist, then, numerous incentives to investigate the islands' past. Marshall Sahlins, in general reference to all Pacific islands but with direct bearing on the island groups of the Micronesian area, writes: "the heretofore obscure histories of remote islands deserve a place alongside the self-contemplation of the European past,--or the 'history of civilizations,'--for their own remarkable contributions to an historical understanding."<sup>13</sup>

Inquiries into the islands' past, then, should not be seen as esoteric, eccentric, or less rewarding than investigations into other areas of world history. But if the worth, significance, and advantage resulting from a study of the islands' past can be acknowledged, there still remains the

very formidable question of *how*. And that question of how is compounded considerably by the fact that we are dealing with the histories of other peoples in other times. From the very outset of any scholarly endeavor, the outside historian must confront extremely serious questions that involve the definition, nature, and meaning of history in these different island societies. On the island of Tabiteuea in Kiribati, for example, the people of the northern village of Buota recently washed the bones of the famous warrior Kourabi.<sup>14</sup> Originally from Beru, Kourabi, after a life of fighting on atolls and islands to the north, finally settled on Tabiteuea. Following his death, his bones were cleaned and hung in the meeting house (*maneaba*) called Atanikarawa. This bathing of Kourabi's bones involved an elaborate ritualistic ceremony that lasted more than five hours; preparations occupied weeks prior to the actual event. It is a ceremony that takes place periodically and at the command of Kourabi himself. The command is delivered to the leading elder of one of the islands senior clans, the Tekatanrake, through the medium of a dream. Among other things, the washing of Kourabi's bones strongly suggests a different sense of history, a different way of knowing and relating to the past.

During my most recent research on the island of Pohnpei in the Eastern Caroline group, I engaged in a conversation with a Pohnpeian that touched on this same point regarding different notions of history. I tried to explain to this individual the purpose of my work. I came, I told him, to gather as much information as possible in order to write a history of the island. Without blinking, the man asked if I planned to include a history of the reef, forests, mountains, hills, rivers, streams, boulders, and rocks. I knew him well enough to understand that he was not being facetious. On Pohnpei, the activities of human beings constitute but one facet of the island's past. Equally important to the people of the island are the actions of natural and supernatural forces. Indeed, the name of the island conveys a very strong indication of the way Pohnpeians view themselves and their past. The word *Pohnpei*, meaning "Upon a Stone Altar," implies this linkage of the supernatural and natural worlds, between which the people of the island seek to mediate with rituals, ceremonies, and prayers. Because of the nature of their professional training, most Western-trained historians understandably shy away from attempts to discern divine will or chart complex biological processes. Nonetheless, it should be remembered that Pohnpeians and other peoples of the area hold these aspects to be important dimensions of their history.

Geological as well as cosmological elements enter into a consideration

of the islands' past. Any history of an island in the area called Micronesia must take into account the possibilities for and limitations on human activity created by environmental factors. There is William Alkire's point about the special kind of environment found on a coral atoll and the social consequences of the conditions it imposes upon the inhabitants.<sup>15</sup> Thomas Gladwin's study of navigation on the central Carolinian atoll of Puluwat reinforces the importance of environmental considerations in the shaping of the past. Gladwin writes of a people surrounded by a sustaining but sometimes hostile ocean who live by sailing.<sup>16</sup> The ability to sail has kept the Puluwatese in contact with other peoples; it has provided them with new ideas, skills, and technologies and with networks of social, political, and economic ties without which they could not survive. Puluwat's past, then, is inextricably linked to the ocean and to her people's journeys upon it. One of the remarkable things about many existing Pacific Island histories is that they lack any sense of island environment or ecology. Hopefully, future historians of the islands called Micronesia will not neglect a consideration of this critical dimension.

As preface to the *how* of writing histories, reference has been made to different senses of history and to different physical settings upon which the events of the past have been played out. Another important point to emphasize is that the past (or, more appropriately perhaps, pasts) of these islands extends far back in time. There exists archaeological evidence that places the settlement of the Mariana Islands at about 3500 B.P.; a four-thousand-year sequence has been postulated for Belau, while the earliest data for human settlement in Yap extend back twenty-five hundred years.<sup>17</sup> The earliest dates for eastern Micronesia are found in the Marshalls and go back in time about two thousand years.<sup>18</sup> These islands' pasts do not begin, then, with the arrival of Europeans and neither should their histories. Knowing the precontact past is problematic to be sure. But there are enough data to suggest the existence of sophisticated, complex societies long before the appearance of a European ship upon the horizon. There is, for example, Nan Madol, an extensive complex of ninety-two man-made islets off the southeastern coast of Pohnpei.<sup>19</sup> Nan Madol is called the "Venice of the Pacific" by visitors, one of the Pacific's most unique and distinctive megalithic sites by archaeologists, and sacred by the people of Pohnpei. The site is characterized by immense columns of prismatic basalt rock that form high-walled, rectangular enclosures for the coral rubble used as fill for the islets' floors. Radiocarbon dating suggests the beginning of megalithic construction sometime in the early thirteenth century A.D.<sup>20</sup> Taken as a whole, the

ruins of Nan Madol reveal a former people possessed of a highly complex form of social organization. The “Yapese Empire,” more appropriately known as the *sawei* exchange system, suggests an equally sophisticated past.<sup>21</sup> Reliable data indicate an extensive precontact system of tribute and exchange centered on the island of Yap that extended eleven hundred kilometers east to the atoll of Nomwinuito in the present-day Truk group. In their attempts to understand something of this deep and distant past, historians and archaeologists may rediscover their shared and complementary interests.

Discussion of the precontact past leads to the issue of sources for the histories of the islands. There is much that has been written, pro and con, concerning the use of oral traditions as sources for the study and writing of history.<sup>22</sup> For many Western scholars who rely solely on the written word, histories derived from oral traditions constitute an unsettling problem. General objections to the use of oral traditions in the writing of history focus on their loose sense of chronology, their incorporation of the supernatural, their unreliability due either to deliberate distortion or faulty human memory, and their reference to fundamentally different cultural values and categories not immediately intelligible to outside observers. Problems of transcription, translation, conceptualization, and interpretation as well as the influence exerted by the situational contexts in which oral traditions are narrated all combine to complicate the work of even the most sensitive recorder. There also exist larger epistemological questions and the well-heeded warnings against the dangers of translating the living word to paper.<sup>23</sup> These concerns certainly cannot be dismissed lightly; nonetheless, the fact remains that, on many islands of the area called Micronesia, oral traditions continue to live beyond the confines of bound pages in the minds of the people. It is through this extensive body of knowledge that these islanders know and interpret their past. Oral traditions persist as a principal form of historical expression in Micronesia.

Pohnpeians, for example, know their past through an extensive body of oral traditions that includes sacred stories (*poadoapoad*), legendary tales (*soaipoad*), songs (*koul*), chants (*ngihs*), prayers (*kapakap*), spells (*winahni*), and narrative accounts of more recent events (*soai*).<sup>24</sup> In writing my history of Pohnpei, I relied upon oral traditions that, in speaking of the islands early periods, convey many of the key values that have helped to shape Pohnpeians' involvement with their land and the larger world. The use of oral traditions as a historical source also involves a larger issue. Thomas Spear has phrased the issue directly with the question, “Oral Traditions: Whose History?”<sup>25</sup> Despite the intensity

of the assault upon their oral traditions, Pohnpeians harbor few doubts about themselves and their past. Armed with grandiose theories about Pacific migrations, settlement patterns, and social stratification, many modern scientists have come seeking to fit the island's past into their perfect schemes. Their findings have only confirmed what Pohnpeians already knew. Linguistic research has identified influences from both the south and the east, areas referred to in the island's settlement histories as Eir and Katau, respectively.<sup>26</sup> The discovery of pottery shards at various locations on Pohnpei suggests some form of contact with areas to the west, or Katau Peidi.<sup>27</sup> No test pit or radiocarbon date has yet yielded any information that contradicts Pohnpeians' understanding of who they are. A commitment to the use of Pohnpeian sources leads, then, to a removal of the Western scholarly distinction between history and prehistory as an essentially inappropriate qualification imposed upon the island's past from the outside. Indeed, the vitality of Pohnpeian and other Micronesian oral traditions offers important access to the larger patterns at work in those periods of the islands' past prior to contact with the Euro-American world.

Marshall Sahlins has taken one form of oral traditions, myths, and used it as a source for the writing of Hawaiian history. In his *Historical Metaphors and Mythical Realities*, Sahlins views myth as a historical precedent that shaped the Hawaiian response to the arrival of European forces.<sup>28</sup> Using the case of Cook as Lono, the University of Chicago anthropologist explains the death of the British explorer within a Hawaiian cultural context. Cook's second visit to Hawaii, in November 1778, coincided strikingly with the celebration of the Makahiki, a yearly rite of thanksgiving and supplication associated with the god Lono. The timing of his visit, his movement around the islands, and his participation in certain rituals all supported the identification of Cook with Lono in the minds of certain groups of Hawaiians. When bad weather forced Cook's unscheduled return to Hawai'i in February 1779, the Hawaiians viewed his reappearance as the action of a greedy, rapacious god, not content with the offerings and sacrifices made to him. Threatened by the presence of an insatiable deity, Hawaiians, in accord with the logic and patterns of their past, turned upon the god. Cook's death, then, became a historical metaphor for a construction of reality revealed first in myth. Put more simply, the killing of Cook was the reenactment of an event in Hawaiians' mythic past involving the welcome and dispatch of the god Lono. Sahlins's use of myth (a source of historical expression I think better described as accounts of the more distant past) has added a highly enriching dimension to the study of the

Pacific Islands. In elucidating the cultural structures that helped shape the Hawaiian response to the outside world, Sahlins has created an important vehicle for bringing nonliterate peoples out of the shadows and placing them in the forefront of histories about their islands. His work, as we shall see, is not without influence on the writing of Micronesia's past.

The area's larger past is not one of islands in isolation from each other or from the larger world. With the contact period--and that period begins at different times for the various islands--there are available written sources with which most professionally trained Western historians are more comfortable. With the rich interchange between island populations and groups of people from the Euro-American world that begins in the sixteenth century on Guam and intensifies dramatically for the rest of the area in the first decades of the twentieth century, the histories of various Micronesian islands and island groups embody many of the major themes and issues current in the study of Pacific Islands history. Since the beginnings of intensive foreign contact, these islands have experienced wars, rebellions, epidemics, forced labor, land seizures, and colonial domination as well as the less violent but equally powerful experiences of early barter, conversion to Christianity, and the introduction of modern economic practices. As sources to help delineate the complex interaction between Micronesians and those who reached their islands from European and American shores, there are the writings of beachcombers, whalers, traders, missionaries, travelers, and colonial officials as well as the surprisingly detailed and factually accurate accounts of these relatively recent events provided by islanders themselves.<sup>29</sup> The accuracy of the outside observers' descriptions as historical sources suffers from a combination of factors that include the limitations of language, the brevity of direct contact, ethnocentric prejudices, culture shock, and the inordinate attention given to the more exotic aspects of an island's culture.<sup>30</sup> To be sure, these ethnohistoric sources often reveal more about the authors and their times than they do of the islanders being described. Still, in the glimpses and information they provide of the islands during the first decades of contact with the Euro-American world, these writings remain an important historical source.

With their emphasis on straight description and simple narration, investigations into the histories and cultures of Micronesian islands have been generally criticized for their lack of theory. There exist encouraging signs, however, that students of the islands' past are indeed beginning to engage in a more fruitful application of different theoretical

perspectives. Employing a Marxian perspective, David Labby identifies the dialectic between clan and estate as the fundamental distinguishing feature of the Yapese past.<sup>31</sup> In its exhausting but important detail, Labby's work evidences a less paradigmatic, more diffuse Marxism that acknowledges the concept of culture and the advantages of ethnography. Richard J. Parmentier has used Sahlins's notion of structural history to understand the Belauan past.<sup>32</sup> Believing that history is locally ordered and hence cultural, Parmentier attempts to elucidate those principles that have shaped Belauans' understanding of their past. Signs are at the core of his analysis. The meanings of events in Belau's past lie in physical signs that serve as vehicles for the transmission of important, culturally endowed information. These signs mark an event as significant, memorable, and thus historical; they are also invoked, modified, and contested in later social activity. For Parmentier, then, signs function in two ways: as signs *of* history and as signs *in* history. These signs of and in Belauan history include stones, trees, valuables, and customary practices. There are, of course, others. Parmentier, for example, finds the spatial configuration of the Belauan village with its paths, cornerposts, sides, and graded rankings between things large and small as signs that offer a historical diagram of changes in the islands' polity. The history of these signs can be found in Belauan sources of historical expression, most particularly myths.

An exploration of those Belauan myths that reveal the history of signs also adds to a more thorough understanding of the contact and colonial periods. Belauans today, argues Parmentier, view the successive waves of Spanish, German, Japanese, and American colonialism as part of a larger historical pattern first revealed in the myths of the Ruchel gods. Instrumental in the transition of the Belauan polity into a more contemporary form, these deities came to establish a new order but turned instead to the manipulation of local political rivalries, the exploitation of economic resources, and the usurpation of indigenous leadership. What emerges from this intensive scrutiny of the signs in Belau's past is a distinctive, locally defined, and persuasive history of early Belau. Despite the objections that some might raise against the approaches of Labby and Parmentier, the great advantage of these two works lies in their efforts to locate the major determinants of the Yapese and Belauan pasts firmly within Yap and Belau.

In recent years, world-system theory as advanced by André Gunder Frank and refined by Immanuel Wallerstein has achieved credibility as an approach that links the pasts of different areas of the world to the dominant pattern in modern world history; namely, the extension of the

Western capitalist economy to all parts of the globe.<sup>33</sup> Whether or not the islands of the area called Micronesia are best understood as satellites or peripheral areas of the expanding capitalist order remains an open question. The subordination of the islands' past to the role of footnote in a world history dominated by the global expansion of European economic practices and institutions appears to be reductionism of a rather severe sort. To invert Eric Wolf's argument a little, a world-system approach would seem to make peoples with histories into people without history.

There are, then, serious questions surrounding the application of different theories to interpret the past. These concerns over theoretical application heighten when other cultures in other times are the object of study. Foreign theoretical constructions can invite invention as well as exotic, inappropriate, and artificial interpretations. James Peoples has argued that dependency theory alone does not satisfactorily explain the paradoxes and complexities of contemporary economic activities on Kosrae.<sup>34</sup> Peoples rejects capitalist determinism as an explanation that overlooks variations in the motives and styles of exploitation; strategic rather than economic considerations explain the flow of American largesse that has made Kosrae dependent. At the same time, a false dichotomy between traditional and modern Kosraean cultures fails to represent the complexity of change in the island's postcontact and colonial periods. The author concludes that contemporary Kosraean society is best understood as the result of a complex interplay between exogenous and endogenous forces. Peoples's caution is well-taken. On the other hand, the lack of any sense of theory can impoverish efforts to know and understand better what we can of the past. Much of what has been written about the islands has been of an excessively descriptive character. Mere description, no matter how thorough and exhaustive, does not ensure greater accuracy or insight; indeed, there are those who argue that the act of description, in its selection and representation of the subjects considered, is essentially an interpretive exercise. Despite the problems involved, much can be gained from sensitive applications of theory to the islands' past.

Attention to local conceptions of history, culture, and discourse offer a most critical complement to theoretical perspectives. Greg Dening has written recently:

But it is simple in the extreme to think that power has only one definition and one expression, or that one can understand power without understanding the exchange that exists between

the dominant and the dominated, or that it is of advantage to skip to the last page of the mystery and, say "politics did it" and not know that "politics" was also "age" and "sex" and "genes" and "belief" and "manners" and . . . !<sup>35</sup>

Glenn Petersen, for example, has provided a cultural analysis of why Pohnpei, alone among the four Caroline island states that compose the Federated States of Micronesia, rejected the terms of the Draft Compact of Free Association in a general plebiscite held during the summer of 1983.<sup>36</sup> Most reports of that vote tended to ignore the Pohnpeian decision altogether, focusing instead on the strong majorities of approval for the compact won in each of the other three island states of Kosrae, Truk, and Yap. Those few accounts that did cite Pohnpeians' dissidence over what was essentially a cash for sovereignty deal attributed it to ignorance and greed, a "sour note" in an otherwise harmonious, democratic exchange of goodwill and respect between Americans and Micronesians. Petersen demonstrates convincingly that the Pohnpeian vote against the draft compact resulted not from miscalculations or selfishness but from serious, culturally rooted, long-standing skepticism about the nature of power, authority, responsibility, and dominance. Pohnpeians had passed judgement upon a proffered political status that, as they understood it, threatened the autonomy of their society. An island culture with a long-standing tradition of resisting foreign challenges to its autonomy and integrity had once again adopted a posture of resistance to hostile, alien forces of change.

As the Pohnpeian case intimates, local conceptions of history can be as much about the present as they are about the past. Lin Poyer's work on Sapwuafik Atoll, formerly known as Ngatik, reveals the input that indigenous conceptions of history can have on modern notions of self-identity.<sup>37</sup> Poyer examines how the Sapwuafik people's current understanding of a major event in their past--the 1837 massacre of the atoll's entire adult male population by the crew of the trading schooner *Lambton* for possession of a rumored, ultimately nonexistent, cache of valuable tortoiseshell--strongly informs their sense of themselves. The Sapwuafik people understand themselves as being distinctive from other neighboring island and atoll populations because of this particular historical tragedy. On the surface, the question of identity for the people of Sapwuafik appears extremely problematic because of the influx of whites, Pohnpeians, and other islanders who reached the atoll and intermarried with the surviving aboriginal population of Sapwuafik women in the aftermath of the massacre. In practice, however, a very

distinctive sense of community has developed on Sapwuafik. Poyer argues that the cultural and ethnic identity of the modern-day people of Sapwuafik is defined and chartered through the oral traditions surrounding the 1837 massacre and its aftermath. Foreign intrusion initially meant violence and the obliteration of an indigenous but unenlightened culture. Events since the massacre have brought Christianity, more material goods, and direct blood ties with wealthy and powerful Americans. For the people of Sapwuafik, this version of history distinguishes them from other peoples of the immediate region in ways perceived as positive and desirable. In short, interpretations of the past construct and maintain a unique, special sense of identity in the present.

The works of Labby, Parmentier, Peoples, Petersen, and Poyer underscore the insights to be gained from the application of anthropological understandings to the practice of history in Micronesia. Conversely, Micronesian anthropologists should benefit from a consideration of their own past. The discipline of anthropology is, at this time, grappling with a crisis of representation.<sup>38</sup> There is a growing awareness that ethnography is ultimately more interpretive than objective. An emerging school of anthropological thought now argues that ethnography's claims to be a social science become suspect when considered against the social, professional, institutional, and political contexts from which the alien or outside observer comes.<sup>39</sup> If nothing else, such a position at least invites a reexamination of the early German and Japanese ethnographies as well as a critical look at the more recent work of American and Commonwealth anthropologists.<sup>40</sup> A reconsideration of these works in light of the historical and cultural contexts of the writers would clarify concerns surrounding the selection, representation, and interpretation of those particular aspects of island life chosen for study. Michael Foucault would certainly have found linkages between knowledge and power in the different colonial periods of the Micronesian past.

The histories of the islands of the area that has been called Micronesia are waiting to be done. Another question that asks itself is *who* should write these histories. Maude looks to American historians for a history of the American Trust Territory.<sup>41</sup> Undoubtedly, there will result several histories from American historians attracted by the accessibility of the area, the area's relationship to the larger patterns in American expansionism, or their own personal involvement with the area and its people. At the same time, colonial boundaries that have done so much to shape the nature of past scholarship should not be perpetuated. Kiribati should not remain the domain of Australian or British scholars, any more

than the Carolines, Marshalls, or Marianas should be the exclusive preserve of American-trained historians. There is much to learn from an international dialogue of scholars that presents a variety of perspectives and approaches to understanding this important area of the world.

Admittedly, this essay has focused on outsiders' efforts to understand the Micronesian past. This emphasis in no way seeks to deny or diminish the work of islander historians of the area. There already exists a written body of history produced by the people of the area. There is Luelen Bernart's history of the island of Pohnpei, written between 1932 and 1946 and published jointly in 1978 by the University of Hawaii Press and the Australian National University Press.<sup>42</sup> Masao Hadley has produced an unpublished manuscript on the history of Pohnpei's Nan Madol site.<sup>43</sup> Rufino Mauricio, a professionally trained archaeologist from Pohnpei, has used the oral histories of twenty-four separate clans to reconstruct the early settlement period of the island.<sup>44</sup> Raphael Uag composed, in 1968, an early precontact history of Yap while the Community Action Agency in Belau, under the direction of Kathy Kesolei, completed a three-volume history of Belau some ten years later.<sup>45</sup> Of particular note is the recent publication of La Bedbedin and Gerald Knight's *Man This Reef*.<sup>46</sup> In addition to providing a uniquely Marshallese view of the past, the book also charts the problems and pitfalls involved in the translation and transcription of sacred knowledge to written form.

Several individuals have pointed to the relative lack of written histories by Micronesian peoples as an indictment of the American colonial education system.<sup>47</sup> While the flaws of the Trust Territory educational system have been many, the scarcity of indigenous literature and written history may reflect as much the persistence of more traditional and oral forms of preserving and presenting knowledge. Throughout the islands, there still can be found individuals recognized by their own peoples as human repositories of special and privileged knowledge concerning the past. During the course of my own work on Pohnpei, historians such as Benno Serilo, Lino Miquel, Pensile Lawrence, and Masao Hadley took me into Pohnpei's past, allowed me to ask the silliest of questions, and patiently tried to explain to me the meaning and significance of Pohnpeian practices and beliefs that only I found complicated. Too often, the overly general, ultimately pejorative word "informant" has been used by outside scholars to lend credibility to their own arguments while masking the sources of their information. Islander historians involved in the study and interpretation of their past need to be recognized for their significant contributions to an understanding of both Micronesian and world history.

A related problem in the study of Micronesia's past involves the role that Micronesians themselves have played in the making of their past. Recent critical examinations of the Trust Territory administration have focused exclusively on the failures of the American administration.<sup>48</sup> Liberal critics, while expressing considerable sympathy for the islanders as victims, have failed to acknowledge the people as participants, negotiators, and shapers of their own destiny. In their analyses of American misadministration, these critics have tended to regard Micronesians as little more than nebulous shadows falling lightly across valuable pieces of strategic property. The convening of the Micronesian Constitutional Convention, the struggle of the Bikinians and other groups of Marshallese to secure compensation for the devastation done to their lands and life-styles by American nuclear testing, the establishment of the Federated States of Micronesia, and Belauans' struggle to maintain the integrity of their republic's constitution against powerful outside forces all suggest a very active agency on the part of islanders. Future historians of the islands will hopefully recognize that there continues to be much going on in this area of the world that some have dismissed as nothing more than an "American lake."

The publication of Fr. Francis X. Hezel's history of the Marshall and Caroline Islands and Prof. Mark R. Peattie's work on Japanese colonialism in Micronesia are encouraging signs for those concerned with the study of the islands' past. There remains, however, much to be done. We are, in a sense, just starting. There are histories of women, men, individual islands, island groups, precontact exchange systems, culture contact, and colonial periods all there for the doing. There are also such immediate and globally significant topics as the history of American nuclear testing in the Marshalls; Stewart Firth's disturbing study of the superpowers' use of the Pacific as a nuclear testing ground dramatically demonstrates this point.<sup>49</sup> Hopefully, writings on the islands' past will be open-minded endeavors that demonstrate a keen sensitivity to the particular definitions and sources of history among the islands. The writing of histories of the islands should make use of theories and should, where appropriate, borrow from the work of other disciplines, especially the social sciences. Efforts to identify islanders' attempts to manage the intrusion of the larger Euro-American world should not overlook the serious disruption caused during the last two centuries by violent conflicts, epidemics, colonial regimes, global wars, and neocolonial manipulation. There should also be comparative reference to other areas of the Pacific and explicit efforts to relate events in the islands' past to broader issues and themes in world history. In some instances, a deeper understanding of an island or island group's past may require a

decolonization of existing histories. This is particularly true for Guam, where historical accounts of the Catholic Church and of the Spanish and American colonial administrations have combined to suppress a more locally oriented history of the island and its people.

Finally, a study of this nonentity's past should acknowledge the limitations as well as possibilities of the effort. These are difficult times in which to write and reflect upon others' pasts. There are postmodern ethnographers and literary critics who view all written texts as thoroughly historicist and self-reflexive. Words written down ultimately reveal only the determining contexts of the writer; nothing is learned about the subjects of inquiry. On the other hand, more traditional historians plead for a return to an earlier narrative form of writing about the past that avoids the interpretive for the simply factual. In the midst of this debate, I offer a comment on the doing of history. In its attempts to reconstruct the past, the practice of history is, by its very nature, an imperfect discipline. The necessity of including cultural analysis, a process that Clifford Geertz refers to in positive terms as "guessing at meanings," complicates the inherent shortcomings of doing history.<sup>50</sup> We can never begin to approach the totality of the islands' past; and much of what we can do will be guessing at meanings in the Geertzian sense. But the effort will be worth it nonetheless. With the recognition of the diversity, richness, and complexity of the islands and their distinctive histories, we can, like Sahlins, exclaim that suddenly there are all kinds of things to consider.<sup>51</sup>

## NOTES

An earlier version of this paper was first presented to the History Students Association of the University of Hawai'i at **Mānoa** on 27 February 1987. In addition to the members of that audience who provided me with constructive comments, I wish to thank the two anonymous reviewers who read a second draft for *Pacific Studies*. I have drawn also from my recently published work, *Upon a Stone Altar: A History of the Island of Pohnpei to 1890*, Pacific Islands Monograph Series, no. 5 (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1988). The history of this paper involves too the students in my Micronesian History seminar (Hist. 675C). Over the last four years at **Mānoa**, I have found encouragement in their enthusiasm and concern for both the past and present of Pacific peoples. Finally, I make these last revisions having just learned of the passing of a close friend, Mr. Shisenando Seneres of Wone and Awak on Pohnpei. This paper is dedicated to his memory; he taught me a great deal.

1. H. E. Maude, "Editorial," *Journal of Pacific History* 2 (1967): 4.
2. This often-cited quote first appeared in "Micronesia: Trials of Trusteeship," *Time* 77 (23 June 1961): 25.

3. Norman Meller comments on the imposed and artificial ordering that is Micronesia in *Constitutionalism in Micronesia* (Laie: Institute for Polynesian Studies, Brigham Young University-Hawaii, 1985), 11-12.

4. Jules Sébastien César Dumont d'Urville, "Sur les îles du Grand Ocean," *Bulletin de la Société de Géographie* 17 (1832): 5. In this piece, Dumont d'Urville attributes the origin of the term "Micronesia" to Domeny de Rienzi. Norman Meller, *Congress of Micronesia* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1969), 1, writes that Domeny de Rienzi asked for official recognition of the term before an 1831 meeting of the Société de Géographie in Paris. See also Grégoire Louis Domeny de Rienzi, *Océanie ou Cinquième Partie du Monde: Revue Géographique et Ethnographique de la Malaisie, de la Micronésie, de la Polynésie, et de la Mélanésie*, 3 vols. (Paris: Firmin Didot Frères, 1863-1872).

5. Francis X. Hezel, S.J., *The First Taint of Civilization: A History of the Caroline and Marshall Islands in Pre-Colonial Days, 1521-1885*, Pacific Islands Monograph Series, no. 1 (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1983), xi.

6. William T. Truxton, "Report of the Transactions of the USS *Jamestown* among the Caroline and Marshall Islands," 3 July 1870, Record Group 45, Naval Records Collection of the Office of Naval Records and Library, Subject OM, U.S. Naval Archives, Washington, D.C.

7. I am borrowing here from Greg Denning's endorsement of a cross-cultural approach to the study of history in the Pacific; see Denning, Review of *Marists and Melanesians* by Hugh Laracy, in *New Zealand Journal of History* 12 (1978): 82.

8. For a history of the Caroline Islands controversy between Spain and Germany, consult Richard J. Brown, "Germany, Spain, and the Caroline Islands, 1885-1899" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Southern Mississippi, 1976); see also Hezel, *The First Taint of Civilization*, 306-313.

9. Regarding the specifics of the Yap controversy, see Sumitra Rattan, "The Yap Controversy and Its Significance," *Journal of Pacific History* 7 (1972): 125-136; and Timothy P. Maga, "Prelude to War? The United States, Japan, and the Yap Crisis, 1918-1922," *Diplomatic History* 9 (1985): 215-231. Mark R. Peattie provides a very effective summary of the larger, long-standing Pacific tensions between Japan and the United States in his *Nan'yō: The Rise and Fall of the Japanese in Micronesia, 1885-1945*, Pacific Islands Monograph Series, no. 4 (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1988).

10. This 1969 remark was attributed to Kissinger, President Richard M. Nixon's then assistant for national security affairs, by then Secretary of the Interior Walter F. Hickel; see Hickel's *Who Owns America?* (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1971), 208. The comment is also cited by Donald McHenry, *Micronesia, Trust Betrayed: Altruism vs. Self-Interest in American Foreign Policy* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1975), 98.

11. O. H. K. Spate, "Islands and Men," in *Man's Place in the Island Ecosystem: A Symposium*, ed. F. R. Fosberg (Honolulu: Bishop Museum Press, 1963), 253.

12. H. C. Maude, "Pacific History--Past, Present, and Future," *Journal of Pacific History* 6 (1971): 4.

13. Marshall Sahlins, "Other Times, Other Customs: The Anthropology of History," *American Anthropologist* 25 (1983): 534. This essay is also included in Sahlins's *Islands of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 32-72.
14. Batiri Bataua, "Bath of Bones for Kiribati Warrior Hero," *Pacific Magazine* 9 (September/October, 1984) : 30-31.
15. William Alkire, *Coral Islanders* (Arlington Heights, Ill.: AHM Publishing Corp., 1978).
16. Thomas Gladwin, *East Is A Big Bird: Navigation and Logic on Puluwat Atoll* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970), 34-35.
17. John L. Craib, "Micronesian Prehistory: An Archaeological Overview," *Science* 219 (February 1983): 922-923.
18. Ibid., 924. Charles R. Streck, Jr., reports a date of 4000 B.P. for the earliest human activity in the east in a paper entitled "Prehistoric Settlement in Eastern Micronesia: Archaeology on Bikini Atoll, Republic of the Marshall Islands." If correct, Streck's date would necessitate a major revision of the existing settlement sequence for Micronesia. The paper was presented to the Micronesia Archaeology Conference held 9-12 September 1987 on Guam.
19. For reports of recent archaeological investigations at Nan Madol, see J. Stephen Athens, *Archaeological Investigations at Nan Madol: Islet Maps and Artifacts* (Guam: Pacific Studies Institute, 1980); and William S. Ayres, Alan E. Haun, and Rufino Mauricio, "Nan Madol Archaeology: 1981 Survey and Excavations" (submitted by the Pacific Studies Institute, Guam, to the Historic Preservation Committee, Ponape State, Federated States of Micronesia, and the Historic Preservation Program, Saipan, Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands, May, 1983). Athens offers an extremely valuable and concise summary of research at Nan Madol over the last century and a half in his *The Discovery and Archaeological Investigations at Nan Madol, Ponape, Eastern Caroline Islands: An Annotated Bibliography*, rev. ed., Micronesian Archaeological Survey Report, no. 3 (Saipan: Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands, 1981).
20. Joyce E. Bath and J. Stephen Athens, "Prehistoric Social Complexity on Pohnpei: The Saudeleur to Nahnmwarki Transformation" (Paper presented at the IPPA-UOG Micronesia Archaeology Conference, Guam, Mariana Islands, 9-12 September 1987), 13.
21. For descriptions of the *sawei* exchange system, see William A. Lessa, "Ulithi and the Outer Native World," *American Anthropologist* 52 (1950): 27-52; and William Alkire, *Lamotrek Atoll and Inter-Island Socioeconomic Ties*, Illinois Studies in Anthropology, no. 5 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1965).
22. The literature on the uses and abuses of oral traditions as sources for the study of history is quite extensive. For a consideration of the issues as they relate to Pacific history, see P. M. Mercer, "Oral Traditions in the Pacific: Problems of Investigation," *Journal of Pacific History* 14 (1979): 130-153.
23. Greg Denning, *Islands and Beaches: Discourse on a Silent Land, Marquesas 1774-1880* (Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1980), 42.

24. Hanlon, *Upon a Stone Altar*, xvii.
25. Thomas Spear, "Oral Traditions: Whose History?" *Journal of Pacific History* 16 (1981): 133-149.
26. Kenneth L. Rehg, with the assistance of Damian G. Sohl, *Ponapean Reference Grammar*, PALI Language Texts: Micronesia (Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1981), 7. For a consideration of the concept of Katau or Kachaw on a pan-Micronesia level, see Ward H. Goodenough, "Sky World and This World: The Place of 'Kachaw' in Micronesia Cosmology," *American Anthropologist* 88 (September 1986): 551-568.
27. Athens, *Archaeological Investigations at Nan Madol*, 53.
28. Marshall Sahlins, *Historical Metaphors and Mythical Realities: Structure in the Early History of the Sandwich Islands Kingdom*, Association for Social Anthropology in Oceania (ASAO) Special Publications, no. 1 (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1981). For refinements and revisions in this initial argument, see Sahlins's "Captain James Cook; or The Dying God," in *Islands of History*, 104-135.
29. A positive assessment of Micronesia oral traditions as sources for the study of more recent historical events can be found in Roger E. Mitchell, "Oral Tradition and Micronesia History: A Microcosmic Approach," *Journal of Pacific History* 5 (1970): 33-41. Mitchell demonstrates convincingly the compatibility between the written record and Trukese oral accounts concerning a nineteenth-century conflict between the atolls of Losap and Nama.
30. For an examination of the problems associated with the use of ethnohistoric accounts in reconstructing the contact histories of island societies, see Greg Denning, "Ethnohistory in Polynesia: The Values of Ethnohistorical Evidence," *Journal of Pacific History* 1 (1966): 23-42.
31. David Labby, *The Demystification of Yap: Dialectics of Culture on a Micronesia Island* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976).
32. Richard J. Parmentier, *The Sacred Remains: Myth, History, and Polity in Belau* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987). See also Parmentier's "Mythical Metaphors and Historical Realities: Modes of Transformation of the Belauan Polity," *Journal of the Polynesian Society* 95 (1986): 167-193; and "Times of the Signs: Modalities of History and Levels of Social Structure in Belau," in *Semiotic Mediation: Sociocultural and Psychological Perspectives*, ed. Elizabeth Mertz and Richard J. Parmentier (Orlando, Fla.: Academic Press, 1985), 131-154.
33. André Gunder Frank, *World Accumulation, 1492-1789* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1978); and Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World Economy in the Sixteenth Century* (New York: Academic Press, 1974). For an anthropological perspective on the world-system approach that includes a very brief analysis of European trade among the Pacific Islands, see Eric R. Wolf, *Europe and the People without History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).
34. James Peoples, *Island in Trust: Cultural Change and Dependence in a Micronesia Community* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1985), 184.

35. Greg Derring, *The Bounty: An Ethnographic History*. Melbourne University History Monograph Series, no. 1 (Melbourne: History Department, University of Melbourne, 1988), 110.
36. Glenn Petersen, "A Cultural Analysis of the Ponapean Independence Vote in the 1983 Plebiscite," *Pacific Studies* 9, no. 1 (1985): 13-52.
37. Lin Poyer, "The Ngatik Massacre: Documentary and Oral Traditional Accounts," *Journal of Pacific History* 20 (1984): 4-22.
38. Two recent works that pay particular attention to the nature of modern ethnographic discourse are James Clifford and George E. Marcus, eds., *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986); and George E. Marcus and Michael M. J. Fischer, *Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).
39. This argument is advanced most clearly in James Clifford, "Introduction: Partial Truths," in Clifford and Marcus, *Writing Culture*, 2.
40. For a bibliographical essay on the current scholarly literature dealing with Micronesia, see Robert C. Kiste and Karen Peacock, "Micronesia," in *Pacific Islands Studies: A Survey of the Literature*, ed. Miles Jackson (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1986), 61-114. Other helpful bibliographies on Micronesia include Mac Marshall and James D. Nason, *Micronesia, 1944-1974: A Bibliography of Anthropological and Related Source Materials* (New Haven: HRAF Press, 1975); and Stephen C. Woodworth, *Navigating the Micronesian Culture Area: A Guide to Source Materials* (Saipan: Trust Territory Historic Preservation Program, 1980).
41. Maude, "Editorial," 4.
42. Luelen Bernart, *The Book of Luelen*, trans. and ed. John L. Fischer, Saul H. Riesenberg, and Marjorie G. Whiting, Pacific History Series, no. 8 (Canberra: Australian National University Press; Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1977).
43. Masao Hadley, "A History of Nan Madol," trans. and ed. Paul M. Ehrlich, unpublished manuscript, 1981. Copies of the English and Pohnpeian versions of this manuscript are in my possession.
44. Rufino Mauricio, "Peopling of Pohnpei Island: Migration, Dispersal, and Settlement Themes in Clan Narratives," *Man and Culture in Oceania* 3 (1987): 47-72.
45. Raphael Uag, *A Legendary History of Yap*, ed. Frank Molinski (Yap: Good News Press, 1968); and Palau Community Action Agency, *A History of Palau*, 3 vols. (Koror: The Agency, 1976-1978).
46. La Bedbedin and Gerald Knight, *Man This Reef* (Majuro, Republic of the Marshall Islands: Micronitor, 1982).
47. Ron Crocombe, "Pacific History: Perceptions from Within," *Pacific History Association Newsletter* 12 (December 1985): 4.
48. A good example of the liberal critique of American Micronesia is David Nevin's *The American Touch in Micronesia* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1977). On the failings of the liberal critique, see David Hanlon, "Myths, Strategies, and Guilt in Micronesia," *Perspectives* 3 (Summer 1982): 23-27. Though somewhat dated, the best single history of Ameri-

can Micronesia remains Roger W. Gale, *The Americanization of Micronesia: A Study of the Consolidation of U.S. Rule in the Pacific* (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1979).

49. Stewart Firth, *Nuclear Playground*, South Sea Books (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1987).

50. Clifford Geertz, "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture," *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 20.

51. Sahlins, "Other Times, Other Customs," 534.