

MicSem Library: From Cartons to Containers to the Cloud

(Talk given at the dedication of the MicSem library on Yap, May 1, 2025)

Beginnings

The MicSem library began modestly—with a dozen boxes of books on the Pacific, a few rusty shelves and a battered Olympia typewriter, all sent to Xavier High School, after the last of the scholastics in the US had been ordained and assigned to return to the school to teach.

That last person would have been myself back in 1969. As I was waited to return to Micronesia after ordination, there was no one left in Maryland to hold the fort, to continue the monthly seminar that Jesuit seminarians held to keep up their interest in Micronesia during their theological studies. The line of scholastics was broken. So I packed the books off to Chuuk in a few cartons and hopped a flight to resume teaching at Xavier High School. There the books were housed with me in one of the smaller faculty rooms at the school.

Over the next few years we Jesuits began serious discussions on what else we Jesuits could do to help the people of Micronesia besides the pastoral work and education we were already engaged in. Pastoral work—that's the primary work of priests anywhere. Education—that's what the Jesuits were reputedly known for. We had our elementary schools and high schools, but how could we reach the adults? After all, the islands were beginning to struggle with the problems of modernization—suicide rates were climbing and motorcycle gangs were starting up in some of the islands. The early generation of island leaders, many of them members of the newly formed Congress of Micronesia, were dealing with big issues: the challenge of economic development in small island societies and the choice of political status as starters.

So it was that a new organization was created to help engage in public discussion on these and other topics. It adopted the old name of Micronesian Seminar as it took its first steps to meet this challenge. The books and other library materials from those cartons were swept into this new organization. Thus was MicSem born in 1972.

Those early years at Xavier, when I was trying to run the school while getting MicSem off the ground, were marked by historical and social research. There was the suicide epidemic of the 70s that triggered it, but other subjects were alcohol and drug abuse among the young, growing rates of psychosis in males, and increased cases of domestic violence. A major theme throughout was the effect of modern life on the physical and mental health of island people. What are all these social changes doing to folks here in Micronesia?

Relocation to Pohnpei

In 1982, when I was replaced at Xavier, MicSem was moved to “downtown” Chuuk, where it expanded its operations over the next ten years. Then, in 1992, MicSem was relocated in Pohnpei. This time it took a small container to ship the growing library and other materials to MicSem's new home, where it soon acquired a new two-story building to house its facilities.

On Pohnpei MicSem exploded. We began an occasional bulletin known as *Micronesian Counselor* that ran for nearly twenty years. MicSem also developed its own media studio that was engaged in the production of educational videos telecast on local channels. Why focus just on print materials when you can make TV for the whole family to watch? Over the years MicSem produced a total of 73 videos, documentaries as well as dramas, dealing with a wide variety of topics—including a seven-hour series on the history of Micronesia.

The computer age had begun in earnest, so MicSem posted its own website and encouraged its followers to weigh in with their own opinions on the major issues of the day. Anything to stimulate reflection and discussion of important questions in our island society!

We were running group discussions on various themes each month, conducting weekend seminars in different islands, distributing our own publication throughout the region, producing programs for television, and continually building up our library as we moved along.

As projects multiplied, the MicSem staff grew—from the two of us who ran the whole show in Chuuk to ten who were employed in 2010. MicSem had come a long way from the one-man show it had been in its initial days in Chuuk.

Showcasing the MicSem Library

By the time its operations were closed in 2012, MicSem had served the people of what was once known as the Trust Territory of the Pacific for forty years. Over this period, the Trust Territory had peeled off into several different political entities: FSM, the Republic of Palau, the Republic of the Marshall Islands, and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands. I'd like to think that MicSem served as one of the foremost NGOs in both research and community education throughout the northern Pacific.

The work of producing public education materials may have ended, but MicSem had acquired lots of resources that still needed to be cared for. When the library collection was shipped back to Chuuk to be cared for at Xavier, and a few years later when sent on to Yap, the resources filled two containers. Excuse me if I boast that the MicSem library was undoubtedly the best resource collection on the region.

The core of this collection was its library of print materials of over 24,000 titles, including the major historical and ethnological works on the region in a half dozen languages. The library also holds a collection of 85,000 historical photos that ranges over the entire expanse of the region and extends back to the last quarter of the 19th century. MicSem's resources also include moving footage, more than 800 videotapes and old films on the region, all of which have been digitized and catalogued. MicSem also has also collected island music of all types: chants, dances, elegies, old love songs, humorous pieces, religious hymns, and modern island music. The music collection already numbers 21,000 tracks.

And here it is now, laid out in its new home here on Yap. Thanks to the generosity of key Yapese government leaders and the efforts of Fr. Rich McAuliff, this collection is able to be housed here in the islands where it belongs. Yet, our concern is that the library not be confined to a single

small island and its population. That's why we are working to ensure that this rich collection of resources documenting the life and history of the islands can be searched on the MicSem website.

For that I would like to thank my good friend Ed Petteys, who introduced us to the wonders of the digital world some forty years ago and has walked with us all the way since then. Then, too, let me offer a word of gratitude to another good friend, Jason Aubuchon, who has guided us in recent years through the development of our website.

So here we are, many twists and turns later, celebrating the formal opening of the MicSem library on Yap. We hope to continue to share with all who need them the resources that have helped power the work of MicSem over the years. But this time we won't be packing them into containers, we'll be transmitting them via the i-cloud. In that way we hope to reach all who might find them useful.

Over the years we've come a long way, on a winding journey—one that has brought us over the years from east coast US to Chuuk to Pohnpei to Yap. Or, as we might put it, a journey that has progressed from cartons to containers to the cloud. And on we go!

Fran Hezel, SJ

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