



Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies

State Society and Governance *in* Melanesia

TRADITIONAL LEADERS AND GOVERNANCE IN MICRONESIA

JOHN HAGLEGAM Let me assert from the outset that contemporary politics and governance in Micronesia are influenced to a large extent by the traditional system which underlies the modern system. This traditional system has given a unique Micronesian flavour to contemporary politics and governance, albeit undemocratic in some cases. With careful nurturing through regular briefings and consultation by government leaders, the traditional chiefs can be relied upon to muster the necessary public support for policy implementation.

The customary power of the traditional chiefs in Micronesia varied from culture to culture. For instance, on Kosrae the power was centralised in a very powerful ruler, while on Yap, the power of the chiefs was decentralised and subjected to elaborate checks and balances built into the customary political relationship. In Palau, the power was vested in the heads of two alliances of villages. These alliances were involved in constant fighting for domination. In Chuuk, the most powerful traditional leaders were the village chiefs. In the Marshall Islands, the most powerful leaders were the two paramount chiefs, one heading each of the two island chains—the Ratak and Ralik. Surprisingly, for low island

chiefs, these two paramount chiefs had absolute power. In Pohnpei, the power of the traditional leaders was exercised by a paramount chief in each of the five kingdoms. However, the exercise of their customary power is checked by the head of a chiefly parallel line whose relationship to the paramount chief is like a father-son relationship, the paramount chief being the father. In the outer islands of Chuuk and Yap, each island had its paramount chief.

In spite of the varied power of the traditional chiefs in Micronesia, almost all of them inherit their position through their mother. In Palau, the senior women in the chiefly clan select the paramount chief. Yap is the exception to this general rule. Both the age of the mother and her son were important determining factors for the leadership position in all Micronesian societies. Quite often a young man who had customary claim to a leadership position would be bypassed in favour of an older man. When this happened, usually the older man served in that position until death, then the rightful holder of the title could assert his right. The exercise of customary chiefly power was the domain of men. In a few cases, women would become chiefs, but the effective power would be exercised by men.

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IMPACT OF FOREIGN INFLUENCE

The Kosraean and Chamorro cultures have been completely destroyed by western influence and the dramatic depopulation that both places experienced in the post-contact period. For the rest of Micronesia, the legitimacy of the traditional chiefs continued in different form and degree. During the Spanish occupation, the Micronesian chiefs were tolerated and often used to inform their people of Spanish policy. In general, the traditional leaders continued to rule their people. When the Germans took control of Micronesia, they found it expedient to govern through the local chiefs. In Pohnpei, the Germans took away the high chief's power to give and take land from the people in his kingdom. This was substituted for a land tenure system that gave freehold title to the head of the family, which in effect destroyed the traditional matrilineal land tenure system, creating a patrilineal system in its place. This had little impact on the customary power of the traditional chiefs in Pohnpei. Like chiefs in other parts of Micronesia, they continued to rule their people as they had before the colonial periods. In fact the German settlement in Kolonia, Pohnpei, was saved during the Sokehs Rebellion by the German governor's appeal for protection to the traditional leaders of the other four kingdoms. In the Carolines, the chiefs were used as the recruiting agents for native labourers to work in the phosphate mine in Angaur, Palau. The Japanese continued this practice of rule through the traditional chiefs in the villages.

THE MICRONESIAN CHIEFS AND THE AMERICANS

The Americans created a three-tier government in Micronesia, then officially known as the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands. At the top of the Trust Territory administration was the High Commissioner who was appointed by the President of the United States and was under the direct supervision of the Secretary of Interior. At the second level were the five district administrations. The boundaries of these administrative districts were drawn along ethnic

and traditional ties which ensured recognition of traditional chiefs. Each district administration was headed by an administrator who was appointed by the High Commissioner and directly responsible to him. At the lowest rung of the Trust Territory administration hierarchy were the municipalities. Like the districts, the municipal boundaries were based on traditional perimeters. Some municipal chief magistrates were elected and others were the highest traditional chiefs.

From 1947 to 1965, the Trust Territory High Commissioner combined the executive and legislative functions making laws for the Trust Territory by proclamation. In 1965, the Congress of Micronesia was established and became the first Trust Territory-wide legislative body. The Congress of Micronesia was a bicameral legislative body, consisting of the Senate and the House of Representatives. However, its authority to legislate was limited in scope.

The American naval administration initially encouraged self-rule through the established traditional political system. This practice continued until the mid 1950s when the Americans required the establishment of municipal governments (the boundaries of the municipalities followed the traditional boundaries which preserve the customary jurisdiction and power of the traditional chiefs).

In the Marshalls, Palau, Pohnpei and Yap, the traditional leaders were given formal roles in their respective island municipal councils. Pohnpei created a legislature that had two chambers: a house of nobles and a house of commons. For the other three island groups, the chiefs who served in their respective legislatures were appointed by their peers. More often than not, the highest traditional leaders were selected to represent their peers. In Chuuk, the traditional political system was too fragmented to forge a consensus for inclusion of traditional leaders in the legislature; there was no traditional basis for including traditional chiefs in the legislature.

In the early 1960s when the district-wide legislatures were created, the Trust Territory government opposed the inclusion of traditional leaders in the legislatures as undemocratic



practice. As a result, the traditional chiefs were excluded from all the district legislatures. However, this ban did not preclude the traditional chiefs from running for election. To have to do so was probably appalling to the traditional chiefs and in general, they stayed away from running for election to the legislature in their respective districts. There was a general consensus among the Micronesian people that the chiefs should not subject themselves to the politics of the election. By birthright, they are chiefs and no one can take that away from them. In addition, they should stay above political wrangling. However, the chiefs used their customary power to support their favorite candidates. In Palau and Yap, the chiefs bluntly told their people whom they should vote for. Sometimes the chiefs would attempt to use their customary power to select the candidates to stand for election. The American district administrators would not always follow their advice but they consulted with the chiefs frequently. This consultation process gave the chiefs a real sense of respect and participation in the governance of their people. It also lent legitimacy to the American administration in the eyes of the people.

There were few traditional leaders who were elected to public office by the Micronesian voters at the district and trust territory level. In Yap, Joaquim Falmog, a high traditional chief, won a seat in the district legislature and served as the speaker for many years. In Chuuk, Petrus Mailo, a high chief from Moen Island, was elected to the Congress of Micronesia and served as Vice Speaker of the House of Representatives until his retirement. In the Marshalls, Amata Kabua, a High Chief, was elected to the Senate and served as president for four years. He was a member of the Senate until the Congress of Micronesia was dissolved in 1979. In Palau, the highest chief of Koror was elected mayor of that municipality which effectively fused his traditional chiefly power with the authority of his elective position. He served in this position for over twenty years.

At the Micronesian Constitutional Convention in 1976, eleven traditional chiefs,

who were appointed by their peers in their respective district, served as fully-fledged members. Surprisingly, the Americans did not object to their appointment and inclusion in the convention. The basic argument for including the traditional chiefs in the convention was to ensure that there were advocates for custom and tradition. The traditional leaders in the convention may not have been able to codify their formal role in the constitution, but they were able to push for the inclusion of two provisions that (1) recognise and protect their traditional rights and privileges and (2) allow each of the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM) to set aside one of its two-year term seats in the congress for the traditional chiefs. The latter was a compromise to creating a separate chamber for the traditional leaders at the national level which also embodies the general feeling among Micronesians that the best place for the traditional chiefs is at the local level. This was confirmed by the overwhelming rejection of a proposed amendment to the FSM Constitution in 1991 to create a separate council of traditional chiefs at the national level. I should point out, however, that no state in the FSM has set aside one of its two-year term seats in the national congress for the chiefs. Given the general feeling among Micronesians that the traditional chiefs should not be part of the government at the national level, I doubt that any state will designate a seat for them. However, the traditional chiefs are not barred from running for the national congress. So far, no traditional chief has taken the opportunity to run.

Perhaps the underlying reasons for inclusion of the traditional leaders in the Micronesian Constitutional Convention were that the chiefs still commanded power and respect among their people and it would have been politically imprudent to exclude them; and they could be counted on to lend their support to the constitution in the approval process. In fact the chiefs played a crucial role in the approval of the FSM Constitution. In spite of the language barrier, the chiefs seem to communicate better and understand each other. On the other hand,

the chiefs in the Marshalls played a decisive role in the rejection of the constitution. In Palau where the defeat of the constitution was a foregone conclusion, the supporters of unity who were backed by the two highest chiefs almost pulled off a miracle. The support of the two highest chiefs gave unity supporters the legitimacy they needed. As a result the FSM Constitution was almost approved by the voters in Palau.

FORMAL ROLE OF THE TRADITIONAL LEADERS

The formal role for the traditional chiefs is defined as a formally prescribed function by law or in a constitution at any level of governance. After the approval of the FSM Constitution, all four states convened conventions to draft their constitutions. With the exception of Kosrae which no longer had chiefs, all of these conventions required the participation of traditional leaders in their own right. In Chuuk, the convention produced a draft constitution that created a council of traditional chiefs as a part of the state governance. This constitution was rejected by the voters. The main objection was the inclusion of a formal role for the traditional chiefs in the state government. Chuuk never had a cohesive traditional structure that linked all the islands into a political unit. Even on each island, the highest political units are the villages and each village had its own highest chiefs. The Chuukese felt that the traditional ground of their chiefs' formal inclusion in the government did not exist and that it was better to confine them to their traditional base in the village. In Pohnpei, the state constitution does not make specific mention of a formal role for the traditional leaders. Like Chuuk, Pohnpei lacks the traditional base for a chiefly role within the state borders. The paramount chiefs were, and still are, the undisputed rulers in their kingdoms. The boundaries of the five municipalities followed the traditional boundaries of the old kingdoms. This ensures the authority and legitimacy of the

paramount chiefs remain unquestioned within the municipalities, despite the election of municipal chief magistrates. The traditional chiefs in Pohnpei have created their own council which has allowed them to exert influence on state policy. Perhaps their greatest influence was in reinforcing state policy. For instance, when the public in Pohnpei went into panic mode over the downsizing of the state government, the chiefs played a positive role in calming fear and reassuring the public that the reform was needed to ensure the future of the state.

In Yap, the traditional leaders have formal roles in the government. The Yap state constitution created two councils of chiefs: one for the main islands of Yap and one for the outer island chiefs. These councils are empowered to review and disapprove an act of the state legislature if it violates custom and tradition. They have disapproved a few appropriation bills as violative of custom and tradition. The legislature cannot override the veto of these councils but can incorporate their objection in the bill and return it for their review. So far the councils have used their power sparingly. The councils have also expanded their power to review policy of the executive branch which has forced the governor and his cabinet to justify their policy to the councils. In addition, the whole state administration is accountable to the two councils. They have effectively used oversight hearings to question state policy. The two councils are in essence public watchdogs, making sure that elected officials and bureaucrats are doing their job. However, their effectiveness is limited because the members are relatively uneducated.

The question is whether Yap's inclusion of a formal role for the traditional chiefs in the state government meets the FSMs Constitutional requirement that the states should have democratic government. Among the requirements for a democratic government are popular election and the fundamental right of the people to choose their leaders. Clearly, the inclusion of a formal role of the traditional chiefs violates these fundamental principles of democratic government and thus may



be in violation of the FSM Constitution. However, another provision of the FSM Constitution gives due recognition to the customary rights and privileges of the traditional chiefs. The chiefs have argued that it is within their customary rights to rule their people. There seems to be a contradiction in the FSM Constitution between these two provisions however since no Yapese would dare to challenge the constitutionality of the two traditional councils, it is unlikely that the contradiction will be resolved in the foreseeable future.

In Palau, a council of traditional chiefs was created to serve as adviser to the president. So unlike their counterpart in the FSM, the Palauan traditional chiefs have a formal role at the national level, albeit in advisory capacity. However, the council has complained that the president ignores their advice on policy matters. We should keep in mind that the power to advise does not carry with it the power to modify or formulate policy. So the Palauan traditional chiefs' power to influence public policy is minimised by granting them only advisory power. In the Marshalls, the traditional leaders are accorded a formal role in the national congress. As members of the national parliament, the Marshallese chiefs have a direct impact on policy and governance.

TRADITIONAL LEADERS AND MODERN POLITICS

In this section the informal role of the traditional chiefs and their influence on the political process in Micronesia is described. Their role is informal in the sense that it is not formally prescribed by law or constitution. The traditional leaders can seek election to municipal, state, or national office. So far only a small number have won election to national office. This reflects the prevalent attitude that the traditional chiefs' place *vis-à-vis* politics at the local, or state and municipal levels. They will be more effective at the local levels because of the legitimacy of their traditional leadership role at these levels. The exception to this general rule is the Marshall Islands. The first president of the Republic of the

Marshall Islands was one of the highest chiefs who had served in the Congress of Micronesia. Although his administration had been described as authoritarian and corrupt, he brought stability to the Marshalls and was widely respected and revered by his people. His legitimacy to govern was enhanced by his traditional role as a high chief.

It should be kept in mind that the customary power of the traditional chiefs in the Marshalls was absolute. Only the Kosraean highest chief was known to possess such an absolute customary power in Micronesia. In addition, a previous holder of this particular chiefly title was recognised by the Germans as the paramount chief of the Marshall Islands. Furthermore, the customary power of the Marshallese chiefs could expand or shrink depending on personal bravery, cunning, or other personal attributes. So in the view of the Marshallese leaders, the first president had the traditional base and legitimacy to the highest office. No wonder he governed the Marshalls unchallenged. The record of the few traditional leaders who occupied elective offices elsewhere in Micronesia is mixed. Some turned out to be good leaders, well respected and loved by their people. For example, Petrus Mailo of Chuuk was well respected throughout Micronesia. Others have been corrupt and totalitarian in their style of leadership. For instance, a traditional leader who was elected municipal chief executive emptied out the treasury for his own personal use. When the municipal council removed him from office, he appealed in court asserting his immunity as a traditional chief. Fortunately, the court upheld the municipal council's action.

Few politicians can win election in Micronesia without the support of traditional leaders. The power of the traditional chiefs to influence the outcome of an election varies from state to state. In Pohnpei, the traditional chiefs can still play a crucial role in swaying election results in favor of a particular candidate. Every candidate seeks blessing and support of his traditional chief(s). It is definitely better to enter a race with the

support of at least one's own chief(s). In the 1995 election for the FSM Congress, the traditional chiefs in Pohnpei told one of the candidates who had previously never lost an election to withdraw, but he ignored the chiefs' injunction and lost the race by a wide margin. Certainly, his loss was due to a combination of factors but the traditional chiefs' lack of endorsement may have proved decisive. In Yap, the support of the two councils plays a very important role in the election of the governor and the lieutenant governor. Since the implementation of the state constitution in 1984, the two councils have essentially selected the candidate for governor and lieutenant governor and stopped others from opposing them. The effect is that the councils' preferred candidates for the two top elective offices always run unopposed. Some traditional chiefs in the outer islands have been known to cast votes for people who stayed away from voting. They were observed opening ballots for voters and instructing them to vote for certain candidates. The chiefs feel that it is their right to instruct their people which candidate(s) they should support and vote for. Only few Yapese expressed opposition against the traditional councils and individual chiefs' involvement in the election. Most take an ambivalent attitude and laugh it off as practical joke. This attitude is an expression of a deep-seated feeling that voting is a foreign concept imposed on the Yapese by the outside world. They do not consider voting as a right of every Yapese. The councils, individually or jointly, have forced members of the state legislature to resign. In one instance, a particular member who had made a public remark against the traditional chiefs was forced to resign by one of the councils. The traditional chiefs' role in governance in Yap is so important that a popular joke, perhaps with a lot of truth, has it that no Yapese will miss the governor and the lieutenant governor if they get lost at sea.

In Chuuk, the traditional chiefs have little influence on the governance and politics of the state. Traditionally, the basic political power in Chuuk was, and still is, the head of the lineage.

Members of a lineage are usually the children of females of closely related families. The head is usually the oldest son of the most senior ranking female in the group. The heads of the lineages have more influence on the voting process than the highest ranking village chiefs. Generally, the lineage heads control elections in Chuuk and decide their outcomes. Each might specifically instruct the members of his lineage regarding which candidate they should support. Sometimes he would divide his lineage support between two or more candidates. The factors that can prompt lineage support are: personal, social, traditional, and other relationships to the candidate(s); and a promise of support, usually financial, by the candidate. A candidate who garners enough support from the lineage heads usually wins. This reduces the influence of the traditional chiefs on voting in Chuuk. It has also polarised and fragmented politics in Chuuk and prevented the emergence of consensus among state leaders. These problems make governance difficult and utterly chaotic. Chuuk is now the most problematic state in the FSM in term of good and responsible governance. Since 1979 the state administrations have failed to provide adequate education and health services. Police protection does not exist. Gang violence is so rampant that it is dangerous to venture out at night. This problem might not have occurred had Chuuk had a strong cohesive traditional leadership base to assist the state administration.

For the leaders who occupy political office in Micronesia, dealing with the traditional chiefs can be quite difficult. It requires skill and patience to deal with them. They cannot simply be dismissed. These chiefs guard their traditional privileges very jealously and an apparent encroachment will be met with great uproar both from them and their people. The best way to deal with these chiefs is to invite them to every major party and ceremony that can keep them in the public eye. They like public exposure more than anything else. As for policy consultation, they are usually uninterested but it is prudent to touch base with them from time to time. It gives them a feeling of being



involved in governance and it keeps them happy. As long as they are happy, the task of governance is much easier.

CONCLUSION

Two patterns seem to be emerging with regard to the influence of the traditional chiefs on governance in Micronesia. First, in the areas where no consolidated traditional leadership exists the chiefs are excluded from the government. I am not suggesting that the traditional chiefs have no impact on governance in these areas. They still wield considerable power in local and national elections. Second, the Micronesians have incorporated the role of their traditional chiefs as a part of the formal governmental structure where a strong, cohesive traditional leadership foundation exists. In these areas, the chiefs either serve as advisers or active participants in the government. In this case, they are a formal part of the government and at the same time they can still exert influence on the voting process. Perhaps it is an understatement to say that the chiefs 'still exert their power in the voting process'. In Yap the chiefs have literally 'appointed' the governor and the lieutenant governor and the voters only formalised it. The Marshall Islands is an extraordinary case. One of the highest traditional chiefs has served as the head of government and head of state. Thus, he has not only influenced governance, he has governed.

Although the Micronesian traditional leaders' influence on modern governance has varied in form and degree from state to state, they will continue to be a powerful force in politics and to a lesser extent on contemporary governance. The traditional chiefs' ability to influence the political process is attributable mainly to their close customary affiliation with the people and the fact that the most Micronesians are still culture-bound to follow orders from them. On the other hand, they lack the education and to be major players in policy formulation and governance in general. The chiefs are generally uninterested in policy matters. Even in Yap, where they are formally incorporated into the government, the chiefs'

councils have only limited impact on state governance. This might have something to do with the general view among Micronesians that policy and modern governance are outside the customary power of the chiefs. However, it is a prudent policy to provide briefing and consult with them on a regular basis regarding policy and governance. Recently, the chiefs have assisted in implementing crucial public sector reform. I have already described the role the Pohnpeian chiefs played in reassuring the public that the reform was necessary to keep the state out of financial trouble. In Yap, the two chiefs' councils played a positive role in getting grassroots support for the public sector reform policy. In Chuuk, the traditional chiefs' support of similar policy was divided and thus may have contributed to that state's inability to implement it. The cases cited above show that the traditional chiefs can make a positive contribution to modern governance. However, this support must be carefully cultivated through regular briefings by, and consultation with, public officials.