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IN MICRONESIA, A GNAWING DOUBT AMID THE PALMS

By CLYDE HABERMAN, Special to the New York Times

MOEN, Truk Islands— A few years back the Municipal Assembly banned all alcohol sales on this craggy island in the western Pacific.

Prohibition has worked about as well as it did in the United States 60 years ago. Now people break the law to drink.

Moen's police chief decided he would not even pretend to enforce the rules. His defiance so upset Mayor Fichita Bossy that he opened his own jail for liquor violators. Unfortunately for the Mayor, Truk state officials closed down his operation for sanitation-code infractions.

This might be dismissed as mere comedy were it not for the seriousness of alcohol abuse, not only in Truk but throughout the vast, 2,000-island Pacific chain known as Micronesia. From the highest official on down, Micronesians list drinking as one of their most debilitating social problems and the chief cause of nearly all violent crime.

Trukese say that Moen's liquor ban has cleared the streets of many drunkards prone to knife fights. But it has also created a new category of lawlessness and has basically failed, they say. Can Aid Be Habit-Forming? Some people then add as a postscript: just like so many other ideas borrowed from the United States.

Having spent the last 38 years as an American trust territory, Micronesia is now an assortment of young governments looking for limited political autonomy. The transition process has been arduous, bogged down in disputes with Washington over conditions for home rule.

But even if the wrangling vanished overnight, Micronesians agree, with little dissent, that long American rule has failed to prepare them to stand on their own. It is not just that they have come to expect United States aid, totaling more than \$110 million a year for about 135,000 people; they are no longer able to survive without it.

Stories are similar on most of the 100 or so inhabited islands. Planned fisheries somehow never open. Copra mills open, but quickly close. Chicken-raising projects fail because necessary feed cannot be flown in on time.

The only growth industry is politics. The only significant employers are the many national, state and municipal governments, whose budgets consume most of the American aid.

A Kind of Welfare

At least half the salaried workers throughout Micronesia hold government jobs, which pay far better than the relatively few private sector positions that are available. In a sense, Micronesians say, government employment itself is a form of welfare.

"The Americans have been successful at making us politicians," Ignacio Anastacio, a member of the Palauan Congress, said. "But in terms of giving us economic development, I would give them a big F."

On the island of Ponape, a longtime American resident agreed: "We just don't make very good colonialists."

A few people look back almost wistfully to the 30 years of Japanese domination that ended with Japan's defeat in World War II. Japanese troops had plans to execute entire island populations, older people recall, but at least they ran thriving sugar-cane plantations and built roads.

Some places appear to have given up entirely. Were it not for its palm trees and tranquil lagoon, much of Moen, the main island in the Truk group, could easily be mistaken for the South Bronx.

The Old Skills Are Lost

Everywhere the walls are covered with graffiti, occasionally obscene. Stores and small buildings lie abandoned. Dozens of rust-eaten cars litter the roadside. A once-vibrant church-affiliated school, Mizpah, has sat empty for a dozen years, gone to tall weeds.

What worries both Micronesians and Americans is that a permanent "dependency mentality" may have developed. Yet the same people who complain that the United States flooded the islands with welfare programs, starting in the 1960's, also fret that American funds might decline.

Micronesians have lost basic skills that enabled them to survive for centuries. They live on lush islands, surrounded by waters thick with tuna, yet they prefer canned fish and fruit brought in from abroad.

Exports are negligible. According to a study by the Rev. Francis X. Hezel, a Jesuit priest who has lived in Micronesia for many years, fishermen in Palau hauled in an average of 8.9 million pounds of tuna a year during Japanese rule in the 1930's. The official figure for 1983 was 930,000 pounds. Why Go Fishing? "People have been taken care of for so many years that they're used to it," said Bernard Helgenberger, a Ponapean who is Secretary for Resources and Development in the Federated States of Micronesia, one of four governments within the trust territory.

"For fishing," Mr. Helgenberger said, "you've got to get up at 2 or 3 A.M. and stay out there in the heat and rain all day long. You've got people saying, 'Why do this?' It's easier to eat breadfruit and coconut."

Unhappiness with Micronesia's plight is hardly new. Some Micronesians say that if they could only export the many reports churned out by consultants and analysts over the years, they would enjoy a healthy trade surplus.

The trust territory contains the Marshall Islands, Palau, and the Federated States, an association of the Caroline island groups of Truk, Ponape, Yap and Kosrae. A fourth element of the trusteeship, the Northern Mariana Islands, elected in 1976 to become a commonwealth.

For the last six years, the non-commonwealth states have formed their own governments. But the trust territory cannot be dissolved until they and Washington settle a long-negotiated arrangement that would continue United States aid in exchange for American military primacy in the region.

Americans Seem Proud

United States officials do not agree that their stewardship of Micronesia has been as bleak as island leaders say. On Saipan, Janet McCoy, the Trust Territory High Commissioner, points to new airports and communications equipment, and to American-fostered health programs, schools and police training.

Equally important, Mrs. McCoy says, is political development. "It is a feather in our cap," she said. "They all came out as democracies, and there are not many places you can say that about."

But many Micronesians see, instead, few paved roads, unreliable power systems and indoor plumbing that tends to be a wishful thought.

Somehow, even the best plans often seem to go wrong.

Water mains laid on Ponape sprang leaks, and the only way to locate cracks without tearing up a newly paved road was to hire American specialists in sonar detection. But the experts arrived during a severe drought two years ago, so there was no leaking water to detect.

"Forty years is a long time to take pride in a small thing like a new airport," President Lazarus Salii of Palau said. "What we are recommending is that you give us the money. We will do a better job than you have shown yourself to be capable of."

photo of villagers in Moen (NYT/Kathy Jones)