**MICRONESIAN SEMINAR**
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## Suicide In Micronesia

Suicide in Micronesia today has become a costly epidemic, with one death leading to another. These days, nearly every Micronesian family has been touched by this problem. Just 40 years ago, however, this was not the case. The Micronesian suicide rate is now one of the highest in the world. Why are so many young people turning to this option?

This video examines the problem of suicide in the hope that it will lead people to discuss suicide more openly and find ways to deal with this issue.

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# the "CHUUK PROBLEM"

# At the Foot of the Political Pyramid

Francis X. Hezel, S.J.

Chuuk has gained the reputation of being the stumblebum of FSM, the poor step-sister of the other states in the federation. The recent spate of criminal indictments for misuse of public funds, nearly all against Chuukese, has given credence to the suspicion that political and fiscal mismanagement in the state is endemic. Chuuk has undergone two serious fiscal crises in the last ten years that have required intervention by the national government. Collection of taxes in Chuuk has been so poor that revenues collected in Yap or Kosrae, states with a fraction of the population of Chuuk's, has nearly equaled the amount collected in Chuuk. Moreover, the public education system in Chuuk is notoriously poor in comparison with other states, and its health system has been in need of repair for years. Overall, Chuuk presents the picture of a state hopelessly crippled by ineptitude and corruption. FSM's neighbors seem to share this sentiment, if we may judge by a Palauan saying, "Never tie your boat to a dock where there's a Chuukese boat."

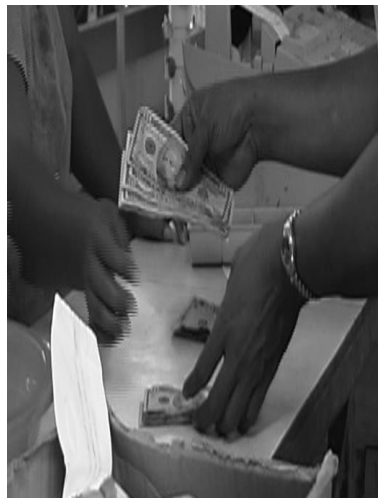
Yet, for all the bad press that Chuuk has been receiving, the place has undeniable strengths. Chuuk's churches are managed responsibly, the buildings are kept in good repair, and church collections are impressively high, especially when compared with sister churches in Yap and Pohnpei. The private sector of the economy is as strong in Chuuk as it is anywhere in FSM, we are told. Stores are usually well stocked and prices considerably lower than in other parts of FSM. Cottage industry thrives in the form of small-scale commercial farming, large open-air markets, and fish exports to Guam. Chuukese provided outstanding leaders for FSM during the first set of political status negotiations and during the early years of the new government. Their statesmanship was critical in the formation of the new nation. Finally, Chuukese as individuals are some of the nicest, most generous persons one can hope to find anywhere. Personally, I am happy to count several Chuukese among my best friends.

So why is the government so hapless and ineffective? Some will attribute this to a simple lack of funds, arguing that the formula for distribution of Compact money does not provide for sufficient funding for Chuuk with its large population. Others



- ## Pushing out to Sea
### "Creating a New FSM Economy"

This video takes a look at the FSM's (Federated States of Micronesia) attempts to build a working economy over the past 50 years, from the TTPI through Compact I. It also outlines the upcoming Compact II and what steps the FSM needs to take in order to promote economic development. What can the FSM expect in terms of jobs, emigration, and Compact assistance over the next 20 years? What does the FSM need to do in order to push the canoe of the economy out to sea? *(2003)*



- ## Smokey Joe

This is a story of Smokey Joe, a good guy with a bad habit. In this video, Joe begins to learn exactly how second-hand smoke affects others and what he is doing to himself. This humorous look at a week in the life of a smoker touches on the topics of second-hand smoke, smoking related health problems, and cessation. *(2003)*

assume final responsibility for governing its people. If its political legacy is an insuperable obstacle to genuine self-government, then Chuuk State must be prepared to step aside and accept the fact that FSM National Government will be the arbiter of the use of funds and the enforcer of policy. If Chuuk can not find a way to broaden the sense of common good and adopt a long view of its needs–if it can not prioritize funds, or allocate land for government use, or collect the revenue due, or establish controls to ensure that needed public services are delivered to its people–then it must look to some other authority to do this in the same way that the US did during the Trust Territory years. But it will have to drop its endless and unfounded complaints about the interference of the national government.

The second option is for Chuuk to summon the political will to overcome all cultural obstacles and see itself, perhaps for the first time, as a real political entity so that it can act accordingly. This vision and mindset may need to be cultivated, but they are the essential preconditions for developing the controls that Chuuk needs to advance. This will be a long and painful process, but modernization usually is. There is no reason why Chuuk, which is able to run churches and businesses second to none, can not do the same with its government, as I used to tell people all the time when I lived in Chuuk. The era of the old village boundaries, the age in which the common good meant providing for my lineage, is long past. The state will have to get used to looking beyond the parochial interests of small groups if it's going to make it in the modern world.

Otherwise, Chuuk will remain a crippled state and a burden to the FSM in its quest for development. The people of Chuuk deserve better than this. So does the rest of FSM.

## Videos



claim that people who hold government positions invariably turn bad, as if the government itself were a corrupting force. I find it hard to credit either of these explanations, or most of the others I hear on the street.

I would like to make the case here that Chuuk never had a traditional political system that went beyond the most basic unit. Hence, in its transfer to a modern political system, Chuuk lacked the experience to draw on that other states in the FSM, not to mention the Marshalls and Palau, enjoyed. Chuuk, then, was badly handicapped in the race to develop a working political system, and it should be no surprise to watch Chuuk limping toward the finish line well behind the other states.

### *Chuuk's Traditional Political System*

Chuuk, which was long a hotbed of local wars, succumbed immediately to the first show of colonial force. When the German cruiser *Kormoran* paid a surprise visit to Chuuk in 1901, German officials expelled a dozen Japanese traders who had been selling guns and liquor to the islanders, arrested three local chiefs implicated in murders, and served notice to all that henceforth German policy would constitute the law of the land. Three years later another German warship visited Chuuk to collect all of the weapons and ammunition in the hands of local people. Chuukese complied without any show of resistance. This was surprising in a people who had developed a long reputation as warlike and had taken the lives of several white traders during the previous thirty years. It was almost as if Chuukese had been waiting decades for a show of leadership strong enough to compel their submission. With a collective sigh of relief, they turned to the Germans to provide the political authority that their own society could not furnish. And after the Germans, the Japanese, and finally the Americans.

The basic political entity in Chuuk was the *soopw*, usually translated as village or district. The heart of the village was its founding lineage, with the head of this lineage serving as the village chief. A lineage, which included all the descendants of the oldest living woman through the female line, might number anywhere from a small handful of members to over 30, but its

average size was about 20 members. The Chuukese village consisted of all the members of the dominant lineage as well as those from other lineages that had married into the family. Ward Goodenough, a distinguished anthropologist who worked in Chuuk in the late 1940s, reports that the average *soopw*, or village, contained about 95 residents. The number of villages in Chuuk was numerous. At that time there were 18 on the island of Toloas alone, 11 on Fefan, and 10 on Uman. In all, there were 99 of these villages throughout Chuuk lagoon.

These small autonomous villages were not only the basic political unit in Chuuk; they were the highest political unit as well. Chuuk, then, was composed of numerous tiny political entities that owed no allegiance to any higher authority. These villages collided with one another at times, sometimes leading to warfare. When that happened, they would ally with other villages to fight off their foes. The alliances were normally short-lived. For the most part, however, villages survived by negotiating, since they were unable to appeal to any higher political authority.

If the size of the polity was limited, so were the powers of the chief who ruled over it. He had the right to decide when and how feasts were to be made, he could summon his people for fish drives, and he was feasted three or four times a year as a first fruits ritual. Still, the Chuukese chief had very little jurisdiction over the members of his village. He had no right to interfere in quarrels or feuds and no judicial power; he could mediate but not make binding decisions for his people.

By way of summary, then, the traditional political structure in Chuuk consisted of a proliferation of small polities, much like the duchies and city-states that dotted the map of Europe before the rise of the modern nation states. Chuukese villages were very small and entirely independent of one another. Moreover, the chief's authority, even in his tiny "kingdom," was quite limited. He was a mediator, never an arbitrator, where clashes between lineages in his village were concerned.

***Higher Chiefs in Chuuk?***

1. Ward Goodenough, *Property, Kin, and Community on Truk (1961),* 129-130).



goals they would not otherwise embrace. Chuukese leaders are very reluctant to impose on the general population in any way.

On a recent visit to Chuuk, I interviewed several well respected persons holding high government positions. While acknowledging the problems that the government is having, and sometimes adding new ones to the list, these individuals were at a loss on how to fix them. The best they could do was to suggest that people had to be educated before things would change. But educated by whom? These leaders seemed to shrug off my suggestion that they themselves might should take the lead in educating the people they serve. Somehow I couldn't imagine government leaders in Pohnpei, Yap or Kosrae letting it go at that.

Therein lies the difference between Chuuk and its sister states. There is no traditional authority system that people in Chuuk can relate to as they make the necessary adjustment to a modern government system. It might help to think of Chuuk as a Melanesian big-man society, while the rest of FSM is decidedly in the Polynesian chiefly tradition. Unfortunately, Melanesian big-man societies are having serious difficulties these days in adjusting to nationhood, as recent developments in the Solomons and Papua-New Guinea reveal. Chuuk is showing some of the same difficulties.

The chronic resistance of Chuuk to what others would call good governance is a cultural problem. Since it appears to be rooted in the lack of any traditional overarching political system, it is also a structural problem. Whatever the extent of corruption in Chuuk and however flawed the leadership, the essential problem in Chuuk goes beyond this. In saying this, I don't mean to excuse either poor leadership or corruption, only to state clearly that a real solution to what many people call the "Chuuk problem" will demand even more radical changes. Chuuk must honestly face the need for such reforms without resorting to the usual host of excuses that it trots out when confronted with its problems–ie, not enough money, political factions, need for further education. The rest of FSM, on the other hand, can help by showing some understanding of the unique political liabilities under which Chuuk labors.

Assuming that Chuuk wishes to continue to make its way into the modern world, it has two choices. The state can revert to the attitude that seemed to prevail in 1901 and let an outside authority

fours"–payments intended for building materials but actually used to pay for family food. Short-sighted and even wrong? Yes, of course. But what else would a society that has always been unstratified do? There was simply no room in this type of political system for setting effective priorities that could cut anyone out of their "share" of the money.

One of the most publicized problems of Chuuk is the difficulty it has in securing land for public purposes. In order to put in a sewer or water line, the government has to be prepared to pay exorbitant amounts of money for trees cut down or access rights to private land. Government lease payments for the land it is using for the airport and its public buildings is costing millions of dollars that the state can not afford. The problem is compounded by the lease payments that the government is forced to make for schools and dispensaries, notwithstanding the advice that the government simply buy out the land it is using for these facilities. The entire problem might have been avoided if, when public land was turned over to the states 25 years ago, Chuuk government had retained the land it needed for its public facilities, as other states did. The simple explanation for this is that other states had a tradition of setting aside land for community purposes– men's houses, landing areas, and the like. Chuuk, on the other hand, did not. Why should it when the village, under the leadership of a single lineage, represented the boundaries of the community? Although eminent domain is written into the Chuuk State Constitution, there is no real tradition of this practice in the state and it remains a dead letter.

***What Can Be Done?***

These examples ought to help us understand that the problems in Chuuk are endemic, not limited to one particular administration or the other. People everywhere, in the other states of FSM no less than in Chuuk, are guided by short-term interests: they want to keep their jobs, get maximum value for their land, provide more for their family. In other places, however, there was a ruling class charged with looking beyond these parochial interests and summoning their people, sometimes screaming and kicking, to act in accord with a bigger vision. In Chuuk the very notion of government seems alien, if we mean by government a legitimate political authority over the entire island group steering the people to



Surely there were exceptions to this tightly confined political system, you might reply. What about the famous chiefs whose memory is kept alive in Chuukese lore? Petrus Mailo, perhaps the most respected person in Chuuk during the early post-war years, for instance? Ngenimun, the warrior from Uman who led his people in battle against Fefan? Takurar, the chief from Weno whose sketch is shown on the frontispiece of Kramer's famous volume on Chuuk? These are men who have distinguished themselves through accomplishments of one sort or another–mastery of traditional lore (or *itang*, as it is called), possession of magical powers, exploits in warfare, for instance. Through their own accomplishments they were able to achieve a status that extended well beyond their own village. When we hear stories of their authority, we may regard them as every bit the equal of paramount chiefs in some of the Polynesian groups. But they were not. The respect they won was a personal attribute that could not be passed on their descendants. For this reason, those Chuukese figures who achieved renown in the past are more like the Melanesian "big-man" than the Polynesian chief.

**… those Chuukese figures who achieved renown in the past are more like the Melanesian "big-man" than the Polynesian chief.**

Such a rudimentary political structure did not offer much for colonial authorities to work with when they established their rule over the islands. How could any foreign governor hope to work effectively with 99 different sectional chiefs? One of the first things Germany did was to name a "flag chief" for each major island, so that a single village chief would represent, for example, the 11 distinct villages on Fefan. This chief would not have had the authority to enforce government policy anywhere other than in his village–and even there enforcement could be questionable. Nonetheless, the chief could at least represent the island and create the semblance of a politically unified island. Perhaps, given enough time and hollow displays of a power that did not exist, the unity being simulated might actually be created.

Japanese created their own divisions, known as *kumi*, appointing sectional chiefs for each of these. A Japanese *kumi* was usually made up of three to five villages. Later, when the US began to administer the islands after World War II, it created municipalities, one for each island

with a mayor over each. There are now 40 municipalities in Chuuk, with a single mayor–or chief, as he is sometimes called–attempting to exercise authority over an area that comprised as many as 10 or 15 separate villages. The mayor, in rare cases, may be able to pull this off because of personal prestige or education, but he can not count very strongly on his traditional status to help him.

Chuuk never had a traditional hierarchy to build on as it turned toward creating a modern political state. In this Chuuk is very different from its sister states and its neighboring countries of Palau and the Marshalls.

### *The Village: the Base of the Political System*

Political systems everywhere in Micronesia are rooted in the lineage–in nearly all cases, the matrilineage. The descendants of the lineage that first occupied a particular piece of land are the keepers of the flame, and it is they who have dominant rights to that piece of land today. This is why the title of chief is reserved for the head of a single lineage, the lineage recognized as dominant in that place. The rule in island societies is that the chief, who speaks for the land, is chosen from the senior members of the lineage that can trace its ancestry back to those who first had claim to the land.

The village or section chief in Chuuk, as we have seen, was the head of the lineage descended from the founding family on that land. On Pohnpei and on traditional Kosrae (before mid-19th century), the same thing was true. The chief, or *soumas,* of each district (*kousapw*) on Pohnpei was from the lineage that could trace its origin to the initial settlers on that land. On Kosrae, divided at one time into several districts, the same rule seemed to apply. It also holds for Palau and Yap, except that in Yap it is the patrilineal line rather than the matrilineal that determines standing in the village. Thus, in all these places the village or section chief was the head of the lineage that was highest ranked in that place.

Villages were numerous in each of the island groups. Yap, in 1968, had 91 inhabited villages, each with its own political apparatus

2. Sherwood Lingenfelter, *Yap: Political Leadership and Culture Change in an Island Society (1975),* 77-80.
3. Glenn Petersen, *One Man Cannot Rule a Thousand (1982)*, 18.
4. James Lewis, *Kusaiean Acculturation 1824-1948 (1967),* 14-16.



indisputable, the reasons for it are often misunderstood. In Chuuk, with its egalitarian political system, it's necessary to consult the interests of just about everybody before making a decision. In a more stratified political system, leaders can presume to speak for the people whom they represent by virtue of the authority that has been delegated to them. No such assumption can safely be made in Chuuk. If negotiated settlement was the way in which broader decisions were made in the past, it shouldn't be surprising if the caretakers for the modern government revert to the method that they and their people know best.

Another problem that Chuuk confronts is the difficulty in prioritizing the use of funds. If government funds are cut and layoffs imminent, the preference is to reduce everyone's salary by the same amount rather than determine which individuals are performing the most critical work. This is again a problem that it shares with other parts of Micronesia, but Chuuk seems to have been slower in resolving this problem than other states. Perhaps the most glaring example of this occurred at the beginning of Compact 1, when the decision was made to allocate to the municipalities 40 percent of the infrastructure and development funds allocated for Chuuk State. This was done without making any attempt to weigh the needs of municipalities against one another. It was done despite the obvious infrastructure needs of the state and despite the well-founded suspicion that most mayors were incapable of using the funds productively and accounting for them properly. The strategy employed was what Chuukese call *ichietiw* – that is, breaking down something into small pieces so that it can be distributed.

**The strategy employed was...“*ichietiw*” - that is, breaking down something into small pieces so that it can be distributed.**

When the money reaches the municipalities, it is often squandered. Mayors without a vision of what is needed for their island, adopt the same strategy. Often they, in turn, split the money into still smaller sums for distribution to extended families. A few divide the money among their council members, who might set up bank accounts and draw on this account for supposed projects. This gives rise to what might be called the “Ox and Palm two-by-

Arrogance and imperiousness are capital sins in Pacific cultures, which place a high value on a humble deportment and deference to others. The exercise of authority, then, is problematic everywhere in the islands, but more so in cultures without any tradition of a political hierarchy. In an egalitarian society such as Chuuk's, the lack of such a tradition can be a huge obstacle to adapting successfully to the demands of a modern government. Let's consider some examples.

Chuuk State is notorious for its record of poor collections, whether of taxes due the government or utilities bills from customers. Are Chuukese simply more prone to delinquency in these matters than other Micronesians? Based on my experience as director and chief bill collector for Xavier High School for ten years, I would submit that they are not. It was Pohnpeians, not Chuukese, who piled up the largest unpaid debts at the school during my time. Many of them are still uncollected. Perhaps the problem in Chuuk resides in the collector rather than the debtor. Collectors in Chuuk, like collectors everywhere, may have close ties to the people from whom they're trying to extract payment. The difference is that in Chuuk there is far less counter-pressure from the government agency above to make the collection. Demanding money from people for public services requires an understanding of the importance of these collections for maintaining the government. It also supposes that the individual sees himself as possessing legitimate authority to make these demands on others. Perhaps it is fairer to Chuuk to blame the failure to make collections on a lack of real understanding of government rather than on the endemic corruption of its people.

Collaborative decision-making, fine in theory but cumbersome in practice, is used to a fault in Chuuk. For years I have been hearing criticism of the way in which a governor, this present one and his predecessors, will create a large advisory group to act as a shadow cabinet. This practice is criticized because it adds significantly to the cost of government, while snarling lines of authority in the departments. Although the problems with this strategy are

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and an average population of about 50. Pohnpei, in the early 1970s, had close to 100 sections, or *kousapw*, varying widely in population from perhaps 30 to 200 or more. Kosrae's basic political system is unclear, lost in the mist surrounding the cultural upheaval that occurred there a century and a half ago. We are told Kosrae had 57 small sections (*facl*), about 40 of which were inhabited in the early 19th century. These sections, with an average population of about 50, may have been the basic political unit in Kosrae.

We see, then, that traditionally in each of the major island groups there were small villages or districts, each of which was ruled by a chief of some sort. The number varied with demographic shifts and other changes, but overall the population of these villages tended to be quite low, usually in the range of 50 to 100. There appears to have been little variation in the size of these villages from one island group to another. The authority of the chief was no doubt greater in some places than in others. The big difference between the states, however, does not lie in the size or workings of the village system. It is that in Chuuk the village authority was all that existed, while in all the other states villages were merely the basic elements for a hierarchical political structure.

### *Climbing the Political Pyramid*

In traditional Pohnpei and Kosrae a paramount chief stood at the pinnacle of the political pyramid. Pohnpei was divided into five chiefdoms, at least in historical times, each headed by a Nanmwarki and Nahnken, while in Kosrae there was a single Toksra assisted by a titled person whose position appears to have corresponded to the Nahnken's. Each of the sections owed allegiance to one or other of these paramount chiefs, who exercised residual rights to all the land in his chiefdom. In return for granting people the use of their land, the paramount chief could make demands on the resources and labor of his subjects. The chieftainship was hereditary as in Polynesia, not dependent on the personal achievements of the person holding that position as in the "big-man" societies of Melanesia. Chiefs could and did order their people to work on public projects, to gather food for some major event, to wage war on an enemy. They were also expected to adjudicate in community disputes, even exacting punishment when necessary. In feudal societies such as Pohnpei and traditional Kosrae, people were well accustomed to

being ruled.

Yap, although much more stratified than Chuuk, never had the paramount chieftainship that Pohnpei and Kosrae possessed. Yap compensated for this to some extent through its tighter authority system at the village level, for village chiefs enjoyed real power to adjudicate and arbitrate disputes between households and family estates. Traditionally they could seize land, banish individuals from the village, and even have a subject killed. A village was also linked by a network to other villages, all of which were ranked. At the head of this network stood a high-ranked village to which the other villages owed tribute. The chief of the head village in the network was expected to preside over decisions that touched on the relations between villages.

The contrast in traditional political systems is striking. Villages in these other places, although as small or smaller than Chuuk's, were subsumed into a higher political order, whether in the form of a full Polynesian-like chiefdom, as in Pohnpei and Kosrae, or an elaborate network of ranked villages headed by a superior village, as in Yap. Chuuk, on the other hand, had a radically fragmented and egalitarian society in which no village was superior to any other. Even within the Chuukese village, as we have seen, the chief possessed limited authority by comparison with his counterpart in other places. While it is probably going too far to call Chuuk a democratic society, it was certainly much closer to one than any other part of Micronesia with the exception of the atolls of the Central Carolines.

### *In the Absence of Chiefs*

In the absence of what might be called genuine rule, the power of persuasion counted more in Chuuk than anywhere else. The family of a young man in Pohnpei who had killed someone might bring sakau to the Nanmwarki and ask for his intercession in effecting a reconciliation. Yapese who caused disruption in another village might be punished by their chief after the matter was taken to higher authorities. If land were needed for a project or labor was required to build a wharf that would benefit several villages, high chiefs might arrange for this. All this was impossible in Chuuk, for there were no higher authorities. Almost everything–from resolution of land disputes, to punishment of offenders, to raising a force of warriors



for battle–was the product of negotiation. Accordingly, Chuukese became accomplished negotiators and looked to this method to resolve problems that in other places would simply be left to an authority to decide. This trait remains pronounced in Chuuk up to the present.

Personal achievement, while an important avenue to recognition everywhere in the islands, is especially important in Chuuk. There it is the only way in which an individual can rise above the modest authority conferred on him by his status as village chief. "Big-men" emerged from time to time in Melanesian fashion, but their accomplishments invariably died with them. They left no palaces, no heirs to their authority, no empires.

**They left no palaces, no heirs to their authority, no empires.**

Finally, the political vision of village chiefs was limited to their sphere of influence. They pursued their own interests, usually in response to the needs of their own lineage. There was no dream of unifying the ethnic society in a new age of prosperity for people whose political world was so confined. Chuukese in pre-colonial times, after all, had no experience in subordinating the interests of their village to a higher polity, as did most other Micronesians. With the common good so narrowly defined, there could be no understanding of what it meant to govern, as we understand the word today.

When imported firearms made warfare more dangerous in the late 19th century, Chuuk found itself without the political structure to work out a solution to this problem. A collective decision to abandon this sort of warfare would have meant campaigning in a hundred different villages to secure a binding agreement to surrender firearms. Even then, there would have been no effective sanctions to enforce the decision. It's no wonder that, when the German cruiser steamed into Chuuk in 1901, the people happily turned in their weapons to what they saw as a superior authority. Ever since then, Chuuk has gladly submitted to foreign rule as a means of escaping the political impasse in which its people found themselves.

### *The Link to Present Problems*