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Chapter 8 “Microwomen: US Colonialism and Micronesian Women Activists”

(p87)

Who am I and why am I looking at this issue of US colonialism and Micronesian women activists? Two stories shape my history: one is the story of my mother’s people, African Americans, struggling with racism; the other is the story of my father’s people, Banabans, struggling with colonialism. What emerges from these is my own search, as an African-American/Micronesian woman, for an understanding of power, the forces behind oppression, and ways to overcome them. The stories of Micronesian women empower me. I believe they have exposed the fallacious basis of colonial and male dominance in the region. My theory comes from a wide range of sources, feminist and decolonizationist. I draw from some Euro-American feminist literature and theory for political, anthropological, and historical models of analyses, but my main inspiration comes from writers of color who have experienced colonialism. I have referred to Paula Giddens (1984) for a historical framework; Edward Said (1979) inspired my use of theory; Haunani-Kay Trask (1989) and Laura Souder-Jaffrey (1987) provided guiding lights for the cross-cultural use of feminist theory. The writing of this paper was profoundly influenced by the above works, but I claim responsibility for this particular interpretation of Micronesian women’s history.

I would like to set the background for this paper with a poem by a Micronesian man. A classmate of mine, Kilohana Domingo, came across it in his research of Micronesian literature for a Pacific Islands studies seminar at the University of Hawai’i (UH). This poem illustrates the implicit, possibly unconscious, male chauvinism encouraged by the colonial experience. The poem, titled “Microchild,” does not mention women. The decolonization or “rebirth” of (micro)nations is described as a purely masculine achievement.

Microchild

val n sengebau (*emphasis added*)

In the emerging island nations
Where multi-national footprints
Have crisscrossed the souls
Of the indigenes and the children (88)
In addition to their cultural heritages.
Drowning in the sea of exploitation;
The fruits of the future
Become transplanted in its native soils
As if through artificial insemination.
The native cultures have been marred

With importations and assimilation
Of foreign enigmas.
Within this dissonant milieu
Microchildren are nurtured
With greater hope for tomorrow.
Alas! the abundance of the land and sea
Becomes second to imported luxury
And inferiority complex walk in
And *effeminates* the future heroes
And further mutilates the sacred ground
Of cultural and traditional destiny
Where our *forefathers* consecrated
And affixed and confirmed as a guiding star
To the Micronations.
But the tide of time has been altered
And the children of the island nations
With matured guidance of their elders
And the world around them
Will be able to reach maturity
And will be soundly proud of being islanders
And members of *mankind*
With even greater hope
Of achieving peace and harmony
For the sake of *brotherhood*
Of man and his environment
Old folks only see visions
Of the world that would've been
Youth dreams of things to come.
Because a child is a *father* of a *man*.

For too long Microwomen have been powerless, voiceless “negative spaces” in the literature. I hope this paper helps in the effort to rectify the imbalance.

Micronesian History and Politics: Where Are the Women?

The literature on the history and politics of Micronesia is deafeningly silent on women. Colonialism is responsible for the long suppression and dispersion of women's voices; it is also deaf to the sound of women's voices.

By “colonialism” I refer to the claiming and administering of a territory by a metropolitan power, as well as the apparent economic and cultural dependency enforced by that power on the people in the territory. Colonialism is based on the subjugation of one people’s institutions and values to another’s. This is achieved by the “divide and rule” principle, the first exercise of which occurs in relation to native women and men. Alienating one-half of the native population—the women—from deliberations facilitates the process of colonization and administration. The perpetrators of colonialism made a grave mistake in failing to recognize the power of women.

Since Ferdinand Magellan chanced upon Guam in 1521, Micronesians have subsequently experienced Spanish, German, Japanese, and US whaling, trading, missionary, and colonial intrusions. The whalers, traders, missionaries, and colonialists were male and conducted their business with the Micronesian men whom they had identified as power holders. Firearms, firewater, and venereal diseases were part of the male-associated death, disease, and destruction introduced to Micronesia (Alkire 1977, 1–2).

This paper focuses on the period of US colonialism in Micronesia for two reasons. First, it is the most recent colonial period, and for historical reasons, sources on women are more readily available in this period than in others. Second, I believe that US colonialism, with its nuclear and economic weapons, is by far the most dangerous. But the critical analysis to which the United States is vulnerable is no different from that which may be applied to all other colonial powers. (Because I am focusing on US colonialism in Micronesia, discussion of Nauru and Kiribati is necessarily omitted.)

The US nationals entered Micronesia in the first half of the nineteenth century as whalers, traders, and missionaries (Hezel 1983, 84, 132, 142). These advance agents of US colonialism operated no differently than those of other expansionist nations. US naval ships patrolled Micronesian waters during this period, lending support to their nationals against natives and other colonialists (Hezel 1983, 174), but the full force of the newest imperialist nation was not felt until the mid-twentieth century.

In 1945, world politics and thousands of armed soldiers invaded the islands of Micronesia; world politics and the military were and still are male-dominated forces. After World War II, the former Japanese territories were “entrusted” to the United States of America by the United Nations (Alkire 1977, 2). As the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands, Micronesia was subjected to further abuse: on 1 March 1946 the atom bomb was tested on Bikini Island, and in 1954 the hydrogen bomb, Bravo, was exploded on Enewetak Atoll (Micronesian Support Group 1978). The Bikini and Enewetak Islanders were alienated from their land because of these tests. Inhabitants of the neighboring islands of Rongelap and Utrik suffered severe physical ailments from the testing. Decisions regarding the tests were made by men: from the Office of the President of the United States, the military chiefs of staff, to the nuclear scientists and trust administrators. The first two decades of US administration of the Trust Territory were

90 characterized by a distinct objectification of the native land and culture by policy makers. It was during this period that there was great rivalry among the Navy, State, and Interior departments over which branch should administer the territory. US policy was to interfere as little as possible with the native cultures; it has been proposed that the United States intended to keep the Trust Territory as an “ethnographic zoo” (Gale 1979, 73).

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the unified Micronesian states began political status negotiations with the United States. Independence was dismissed as a status option from the outset of negotiations. The Micronesian negotiators were predominantly men. Four separate Micronesian states emerged out of these negotiations: the Commonwealth of the Northern Marianas, the Republic of the Marshall Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia, and the Republic of Belau. These four states are still constrained by US strategic military interests in the area and economic dependence on the United States. The collaboration of Micronesian public decision makers with US colonialists is a key factor here. Meanwhile, the lives of Micronesians are affected irrevocably by missile testing, nuclear energy storage, gross consumerism, and substance abuse.

Where were women in all of this? Micronesian women’s appearance in the public arena is rare, as I found in my search through the local Micronesian media from the 1950s to the present. As far as I can ascertain, Micronesian women’s impact on decision-making processes is usually subtle and follows traditional channels of influence and communication. However, on at least two occasions in the last two decades, Micronesian women surfaced as distinct political pressure groups with which to be reckoned.

In 1976 and 1977, the women of Chuuk turned out in force to implement Prohibition (Marshall and Marshall 1990, 8). The problem of alcohol abuse in Chuuk had reached terrifying proportions; under the influence of alcohol, men were committing acts of violence against themselves as well as others (see Marshall 1979). Women in Chuuk challenged their husbands, sons, fathers, and male legislators, and they won; it was the first Islander-imposed Prohibition in the Pacific (Marshall and Marshall 1990, 7). It was also a symbolic reassertion of indigenous sovereignty in the condemnation of a disruptive colonially introduced substance.

In 1988, a delegation of Belau women appeared before a US Senate Committee Hearing and the United Nations Trusteeship Council (Christopher 1988, 30). This was a historic and revolutionary occasion, as the women defied what was believed by some to be their traditionally ascribed roles not just at home, but on an international scale.

This paper attempts first to identify the indigenous (but not precontact) cultural roles of women in the Marshalls, Chuuk, and Belau. The next section describes and interprets the relationship between US colonialism and the generalized roles of women. Marshallese women are included in the first two sections because I believe that their

experiences, specifically with nuclear testing, testify to the oppressive nature of both colonialism and male chauvinism. 91 The experience of Marshallese women has also inspired the antinuclear activism of other women in the Pacific, especially in Belau.

Finally, I describe the Belau case in order to shed some light on the social and political forces which Micronesian women have tackled, despite or because of their cultural constraints. This section traces events in Belau's Compact of Free Association referenda developments. The paper concludes with some thoughts on the status of women in Micronesia as it relates to the region's continued colonized status.

Traditionally ...

In Euro-American tradition, culture is the submission of nature; it has traditionally been man's domain (MacCormack and Strathern 1980, 6-7). Art, literature, science, and government are cultural constructs, and historically, women have been denied participation or recognition in these areas. Culture has been one of women's greatest oppressors.

Ironically, because of their biologically determined roles as mothers, women are called on by men to be nurturers and guardians of traditional culture. Although I argue that patriarchy and androcentric histories have overpowered and overshadowed women, I do not intend to portray women as mere victims. Women have sustained an incredible strength throughout the ages, despite their burdens. They have also cleverly maneuvered and manipulated culture to their advantage. My point is that the so-called cultural traditions that bind women are no longer viable in a world that has permitted male egoism to run amok in the form of neocolonialism and nuclear militarism.

In Micronesian cosmology, there are a variety of prescriptions for women. Although there is cultural diversity within Micronesia, generalizations are still possible. Except for Kiribati and Yap, most Micronesian societies are matrilineally ordered: descent is traced and land tenure is determined through the mother. Thus, women command significant respect. On the other hand, women are generally not expected to display their power in public; men carry the most respected leadership titles and control public decision-making processes.

The following are descriptive analyses of women's present social position in relation to men in the Marshalls, Chuuk, and Belau. My sources and methodology for understanding gender relations differ in each section. This may seem problematic to critical readers; I offer the differing methodologies as experiments in "finding" women in the available literature.

The Private Power of Women in Marshallese Society

In Marshallese society, women are prescribed four functions: nurturing, peacemaking, acting as benefactors, and encouraging. In addition to raising 92 children, women are responsible for establishing clans (jowi) and lineages (bwij). They mediate family disputes and have the final say in decision making. As benefactors, women after marriage are expected to continue helping their family materially and financially. Where women used to beat drums while men went into battle, their role of giving encouragement has been adapted to modern times: women now cheer for sportsmen and assist campaigning politicians (Dibblin 1988, 138).

Women's roles maintain Marshallese culture, but their power has not been immediately evident to observers. The indigenous culture explicitly does not give Marshallese women a subservient position; in fact there is a Marshallese saying, "Ailin kein an kora" (Marshall Islands belong to women) (Dibblin 1988, 145). But it is the chiefly men, alab (lineage head) and iroij (chief), who possess direct control over land issues (Alkire 1977, 70). The alab and iroij were sought out by the traders, missionaries, and colonialists. Nemaira, sister of the king of Ailinglaplap, is one of the few women who makes a distinct appearance in the early ethnography; the Reverend Doctor George Pierson described her in 1855 as a "remarkable woman" who was held in awe by the people (*Micronesian Independent*, 1 July 1971, 5).

Nevertheless, it is the "great men" of the Marshalls, men like Kabua of Ralik and Kaipuka of Ailinglaplap, who are remembered for bringing the society into the "modern" world. It was a man, King Juda, who was approached by US naval officers with the proposal to allow his people's land to become the testing ground for the world's most devastating military weapons (O'Rourke 1986).

This brief outline of Marshallese gender roles leads us to two questions. First, are public and private power linked, and second, if women had had public power would they have been more effective in preventing the exploitation of their land? The answer to the first question is that public and private power are indeed linked in Marshallese society. As nurturers, peacemakers, benefactors, and encouragers, women make it possible for men to appear on the public stage. This should mean that more actual power rests with women than men. I would argue, however, that human perception of power is often biased toward the visible, that is, the public. And because the history that has been told and written is based on this "misperception" of power it has created a powerful androcentric ideology of its own.

The second question, while being a "what if ..." surmise nevertheless should not be casually dismissed. There have been a few Marshallese women in public decision-making positions. In 1952 the Marshallese Congressional Record showed only one woman member of the House of Iroij, Dorothy Kabua, and no women in the lower house. The records show that the highest representation of women was in 1956 when there were six women in the twenty-eight-member House of Iroij. These women held seats on committees that dealt with issues such as land, law, and public health

(Marshall Islands Report 1978–1979). Unfortunately, the records that indicate representation by gender exist only through 1969 and do not show women’s voting patterns. We do not know how their participation in legislative bodies affected land transactions with the United States, legal issues within the Congress of Micronesia, or public health issues at the time. We cannot judge whether women had a different approach than men in public decision making. What we can ascertain is that very few women, and usually only those of chiefly rank, have participated in the public forum. The majority of Marshallese women are confined to exercising whatever power they have in their private relations with men.

The Opposition of Gender Roles in Chuuk

In Chuuk there is a saying that translates as, “Men have wings, women only have feet” (Marshall and Marshall 1990, 44). The obvious interpretation of this phrase is that men have strengths and capabilities far superior to those of women; they fly while women walk. Alternatively, the phrase could be interpreted to mean that men are less realistic than women; they live in the clouds while women have their feet on the ground. The Chuuk language reinforces the first interpretation while social practice bears out the second.

The Chuuk language distinguishes between *ekiyek pécékkún* (strong thought) or *ekiyekin mwann* (male thought), and *ekiyek pwoteete* (weak thought) or *ekiyekin feefin* (female thought). Strong thought is associated with men: although it is admirable in a woman, it is most essential in a man. Weak thought is associated with women (Marshall 1979, 58). Thus, women are supposed to be acquiescent while men are assertive; women occupy a private sphere while men dominate the public (Marshall 1979, 83).

That Chuuk society is matrilineal presents a paradox for the status of men. It has been recognized that “socially [men] are held to be ‘higher’ than women, and respect and obedience are their just due, but individually each man is in a subservient position to his wife’s lineage” (Marshall 1979, 60). Prior to colonization, Chuuk masculinity was expressed in a warrior culture, which revolved around intervillage battle. The prevailing opinion in scholarly circles is that the increasing influence of colonial forces—beginning with the Germans—forced Chuuk males to cease their traditional battles and adapt their warrior culture to embrace a foreign substance, alcohol (Patton 1983, 56).

Chuuk men now use alcohol as a means for publicly channeling their feelings of aggression and belligerence. Chuuk does not have a history of any narcotic or alcohol use prior to European contact; the majority of Chuuk people resisted alcohol consumption until the mid-twentieth century. The disruptive effects of the adoption of alcohol into Chuuk culture became most evident during the US administration of the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands (Marshall and Marshall 1990, 36). The early

missionaries and the Japanese administration of Chuuk discouraged native consumption of alcohol, but between 1959 and 1961, the US administration removed Prohibition (Marshall and Marshall 1990, 8).

(94)

Alcohol consumption is not considered appropriate for women. The reasons for this speak to the paradoxes of Chuuk culture. "Alcohol is defined by Trukese as a substance that leads to temporary insanity; drunks become irresponsible persons. But women are responsible for home and hearth.... Unlike most masculine tasks associated with food-getting activities and the domestic routine, women's work cannot usually be ignored or put off for long.... Were a woman to go out drinking and carousing and subsequently become 'irresponsible,' what would become of these essential duties? Frequent drunkenness on the part of large numbers of Trukese women would lead to the collapse of domestic life" (Marshall 1979, 88). The irresponsible actions of intoxicated Chuuk males are culturally sanctioned, while women are confined to responsible roles.

This recalls the notion that men have wings and women have feet: men are at liberty to engage in destructive behavior, while women are required to maintain order. It may be argued that by holding responsibility for the well-being of family and society, women are indeed the power holders in Chuuk. But women are exposed to physical violence at the hands of a drunk spouse, father, or brother and are restricted from participating in the decision-making bodies that control alcohol policy.

"Trukese view it as highly irregular and inappropriate for a woman to speak out or in other ways to be assertive in the public realm. Hence, women do not usually deliver speeches at public meetings, nor do they seek political office in Truk" (Marshall 1979, 83).

Chuuk women are mandated to maintain social stability. Their activism in support of Prohibition in 1976–1977, which involved public demonstrations, rallies, and petitions, both fulfilled and flaunted their assigned roles (Marshall and Marshall 1990, 144).

The alcohol issue is by no means the only significant indicator of gender power relations in Chuuk. Anthropological descriptions of marriage, sexual, and other social relations indicate that there is a delicate power balance and tension between Chuuk men and women. Thomas Gladwin described sexual intercourse in Chuuk as a contest in which the object is not to defeat the other, but to not fail oneself (1952, 131); he also indicated that in choosing marriage partners, men and women use the same criteria: productivity and compatibility (1952, 138). The political implications of these aspects of gender relations certainly speak to the Prohibition activism of Chuuk women but cannot be fully addressed here.

Power and Gender Conflict in Belau

My understanding of gender roles and power relations in Belau derives mainly from statements submitted by Belau women and men to the US Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources in 1988. The following extended 95 quotes illustrate the conflicting interpretations of gender roles among leaders in Belau:

In Palau, women play an important role in the issues of policy, as I suspect is the case in Washington as well. Women traditionally own and devise [sic] land. We control the clan money. We traditionally select our chiefs. Women place and remove them. Having observed their upbringing closely, we are able to decide which men have the talent to represent us. (Statement by Gabriela Ngirmang, head of the delegation of Belau women who appeared before the US Senate and the United Nations Trusteeship Council [US Government Printing Office 1988, 4])

When the western people arrived, they took away the men's rights in society. They thought that if they took power away from the men they would be able to control the society. But as our society is matrilineal, women play an important part. The women continued to organize, they kept on meeting, they kept the culture alive, as well as the language. So we are one of the Pacific islands which has maintained its language and its culture despite 100 years of colonization. (Statement from an interview given by Belau attorney Roman Bedor to Jane Dibblin [Dibblin 1988, 138])

While it is true that women in a clan select and appoint a chief, their appointment is not recognized or effective until the same is affirmed by the senior male members of a clan, "Rubaks," and accepted and approved by the Council of Chiefs, of the village where the clan resides. Once a senior male member of a clan, "Rubak," becomes a chief, he would be vested with a power and authority to speak for the clan, to manage the affairs of the clan, and to control the land and the other properties belonging to the clan. He alone is permitted to speak in a public place or village meeting house, "Abai," discuss and make decisions for the clan. Women are not allowed under our custom to speak on or for matters concerning a clan. They are not even allowed to sit in a meeting house ... with "Rubaks" where a discussion is conducted on public issues. (From a letter submitted by the governors of Belau to J Bennett Johnson, Chairman of the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources [US Government Printing Office 1988, 119])

"Tradition," like any text, is subject to interpretation (Geertz 1973, 5). The differences between Gabriela Ngirmang's interpretation of Belau tradition and the

governors' indicate some of the conflict in Belau gender relations. Ngirmang's statement on the traditional role of women provides the legitimation for actions: women are ultimately responsible for the government of Belau society; therefore, they must take action when the men who rule seem to be working against them. The governors, on the other hand, while acknowledging some leadership role for women, saw male leadership as the most significant.

Roman Bedor's statement provides a balance to the adversarial views of Ngirmang and the governors. He discussed women's leadership in terms of history and culture and concluded that women provided the force that resisted colonial oppression. His perceptive historical analysis is fundamental to my idea that the colonialist perpetrators' assessment of power relations in the territories was erroneous.

Despite the interpretations of men like Bedor, the textual ambiguities of tradition are most often manipulated by men to disadvantage women. In their letter to Johnson, the governors used the issue of class to undermine the legitimacy of the Ngirmang delegation. They charged that in addition to being a mere woman, Ngirmang was not even of the chiefly rank of women who are allowed to speak in public (US Government Printing Office 1988, 119).

There is more that can be said about gender relations in Belau if one searches through the anthropological literature. Arthur Vidich, for example, described the function of concubinage and the consequence of its disappearance (1949, 37, 46) and the division of land control between men and women (1949, 47). Because I found texts that expressed Belau understandings of their power relations, I prefer to use them.

The US in Micronesia: The Colonial Experience of Women

The language of colonialism is closely related to sexual idioms of male dominance and female subordination. In his controversial text *Orientalism*, Edward Said identified the colonialists' use of masculine, aggressive, and rational terms to describe themselves. He pointed out that the imperialists often described the colony as feminine, submissive, and irrational. For the intellectuals who disseminated knowledge about the colonies, "a certain freedom of intercourse was always the Westerner's privilege; because his was the stronger culture, he could penetrate, he could wrestle with, he could give shape and meaning to the great Asiatic mystery" (Said 1979, 44). "Intercourse" and "penetration" are only a few of the words that colonialism has borrowed from sex-gender discourse.

Micronesia's experience of colonialism has been one which easily translates into a sexual idiom. (The metropolitan nations' colonial practice of administering and exchanging smaller states is very much like the domination and exchange of women identified by Claude Levi-Strauss.) When the US armed forces spilt their blood on

Micronesian shores in World War II, the islands became a prized possession that could not be relinquished.

In his discussion of US policy toward the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands, former Marshallese Cabinet Minister Tony DeBrum used metaphors of sex-gender relations. DeBrum described the United States as having an "I want you" attitude toward Micronesia. He said that the Trust Territory was caught in a US "hug" and referred to Guam's "wedding, marriage into the US system" (1990, 24 April). In this context, the United States was depicted as masculine, coercing the weak and small Micronesians. DeBrum likened the 97 later negotiations of the Compact of Free Association with the United States to "getting into bed" (1990, 13 Feb). In this case it was the United States that was the woman of ill-repute who corrupted the Micronesians. The metaphors subliminally translate into the message that it is dangerous to be weak like a woman, and even more dangerous to encounter the strong woman.

The indigenous roles of Micronesian women have been both reproduced and transformed by colonialism. On the one hand, Micronesian women have adapted and transplanted their powerful or power-sharing roles into the new social and political structures imposed by colonialism. On the other hand, colonialism has imported a brand of patriarchy that has distorted and limited women's participation in decision making. Contemporary Micronesian men have been willing to acknowledge the traditional importance of women as long as male dominance remains the visible reality (Margold and Bellorado [1982?], 1).

Male Micronesian leaders have cooperated with American men to bring about two very significant components of modern colonialism: militarization and urbanization (I am referring to the social rather than infrastructural aspects of urbanization.) Sex-gender power relations and women's lives have been profoundly affected by these forces.

The foremost effect of militarization on Micronesian societies would be to increase the male population density. The US bases in the Philippines and elsewhere have created large and transitory military populations, which have in turn fostered prostitution and hybridized subcultures. In interviews with researcher Jane Dibblin, several Micronesian women spoke of prostitution as a negative aspect of the US presence (Dibblin 1988, 145, 155). In early contact experiences with Euro-Americans, island women also engaged in trading sexual services for foreign material goods. The power dynamics of prostitution depend to a large extent on the value and significance attributed by the respective parties to the items being exchanged. It seems to me that in prostitution women place more value on the money or goods of the foreign male rather than on their own sexual services, especially as their livelihood is derived from an economy increasingly determined by Euro-American principles. Thus, they operate from a disadvantaged position of power (this is not to say that I believe they should be

denied the choice of “trading” whatever skills or jobs they possess). There is historical and political significance in this persistent characteristic of colonial culture contact.

Perhaps the best illustration of the negative effect of militarization on women’s lives is the nuclear testing in the Marshall Islands. The detonations on Bikini in 1946 and Enewetak in 1954 had a profoundly destructive impact on the reproductive systems of women on Rongelap and Utrik. Between 1946 and 1958, the United States detonated ninety-three bombs (Griffen 1976, 24). The image of Bikinian women waving from the beach as they were about to be alienated from their homes for the sake of world peace is one that recurs in the Micronesian movie media (O’Rourke 1986; Palau Plebiscite 1986). The phallic symbolism of the detonation on Bikini is embodied in the fact that the bomb was fixed to a tower (Moss 1968, 86). Its explosion was an ejaculation, which polluted the skies. As Norman Moss described it, “The big bang of the bomb had a certain boyish appeal, but there was something nasty and insidious about radiation” (1968, 87).

There were four pregnant women on the nearby island of Rongelap at the time of the fallout from Bikini. One of them had a stillbirth, and two of the infants on the island suffered arrested growth (Moss 1968, 89). Nuclear fallout causes thyroid problems, cancers, and birth deformities (see Siwatibau and Williams 1982), and these were largely manifested in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Lijon Eknilang, a Marshallese woman who is now an activist for a nuclear-free and independent Pacific, was a child during the 1954 testing. Lijon has since suffered seven miscarriages and a thyroid tumor (Pacific Women Speak 1987, 17). The United States was reticent about publicizing the havoc that its testing inflicted on the people of the Marshall Islands, but more than that, it intimidated Islanders who attempted to seek compensation (DeBrum 1990, 2 Feb). (According to DeBrum, the United States only recognized four atolls as being exposed to the nuclear fallout: Rongelap, Utrik, Bikini, and Enewetak. Only people from these four atolls could seek compensation, but the United States made all medical records inaccessible to everyone.)

Marshallese men, women, and children all suffered as a result of this colonial rape. But the consequence was worse for women, because Marshallese tradition lays the suspicion of infidelity on women who give birth to deformed children (DeBrum 1990, 2 Feb). Thus, women were further inhibited from seeking compensation from the United States. This is a powerful example of the double oppression to which women have been subjected by colonialism and male chauvinism.

Urbanization has affected women socially and materially: educational and professional opportunities have arisen for them in urban centers, and a consumer society has developed. Under the US Naval Administration of the Trust Territory, women were “given” the rights to vote, equal pay, and freedom from sex discrimination in education or employment (Marshall and Marshall 1990, 42). The colonial legal system touched not only the political but also the private lives of natives. The United States

restored and claimed to be committed to preserving indigenous matrilineal inheritance laws (in Chuuk, at least; see Murdock and Goodenough 1947, 337), and marriages were required to be registered at a colonial office (Gladwin 1952, 142). The 1950s, however, were a relatively stagnant period for socioeconomic development in Micronesia.

The United States intensified its development efforts in the 1960s (Gale 1979, 97). During that time, women occupied approximately half of the elementary, junior, and high school educational positions (UNESCO 1968, 21). The East-West Center in Honolulu—a federally funded Institute for Technical Interchange among nations in the Asia-Pacific region—played a key role in providing opportunities for Micronesian women. In 1966, seventy-one women⁹⁹ attended a two-week seminar on “Family Living” at the East-West Center. The center also conducted a Women’s Development Program through which Pacific Island women received training in nursing, business, commercial sewing and cooking, dining room service, hospital dietetics, librarianship, and barber and beauty management (UNESCO 1968, 13).

For women, the problem with socioeconomic development of Micronesia was that it emphasized domestic skills and conventional careers. In Micronesian newspapers from the 1940s through the 1960s, women were mentioned mostly as wives of US administrators or in connection with marriages, births, and deaths, or if there were women’s club announcements (see *Head & Hands* and *Marshall Islands Observer*). The women’s clubs were particularly popular forums for communication and organization. As Mary Lanwi, organizer of a woman’s handicraft cooperative in Jaluit, told Jane Dibblin, “At that time there weren’t many women in politics and women wanted to learn to do better the things they were already doing to cook, sew, take care of their families. In the last few years I think women have really opened their eyes” (Dibblin 1988, 146). The promotion of these domestic-oriented programs was an insidious colonial reinforcement of women’s supposed traditional assignment to the private sphere. In addition, women were not encouraged by their families to go on for higher education; the standard excuse was that girls might get pregnant while in school and the money their parents invested in their education would be wasted (Dibblin 1988, 156).

Men are the primary income earners in Micronesia, and Rosalie Konou, the only woman lawyer in the Marshall Islands, feels that the cash economy has increased the unequal relations between the sexes (Dibblin 1988, 148). The choices available to women through urbanized education, employment, and organization are limited. Although education and employment have contributed somewhat to the advancement of women, other aspects of urbanization and increasing consumerism have been more immediately detrimental. A conference of Marshall Islands women was convened in Kwajalein in 1978 in order to identify and reduce problems for women, their families, and the society in which they live. Thirty-four resolutions were passed, concerning health, nutrition, childcare, suicide, sex discrimination, youth problems, gambling, drugs, and alcoholic

beverages (see Marshall Islands Report, 5 Dec 1978, 4). Substance abuse and nutrition were key concerns of the women at the conference. In their study of alcohol in Chuuk, Mac Marshall and Leslie Marshall proposed that “men’s unbridled drinking and drunkenness contribute to social problems that perpetuate the subordination of women” (1990, 141). Women and children are targets for the alcohol-stimulated violence of men.

Hermi Lang, a twenty-one-year-old Marshallese woman interviewed by Dibblin, said that she thought domestic violence occurs in four out of ten homes. Lang attributed this to the influence of television: “There used to be more respect for women. Men are more powerful nowadays. I guess it’s because 100 women don’t know they have rights” (Dibblin 1988, 125). Alcohol and the visual media are only two of the cultural influences distributed by the colonialist United States that have aggravated sex-gender problems in Micronesian cultures (see Nero 1990, 77, 85, on the influence of Western ideals on romantic love and on the relation between alcohol abuse and domestic violence in the context of social changes resulting from the colonial experience).

Nutritional problems have received more attention in studies and forums partly because the issues involved are less sensitive than those in domestic violence. The United Nations volunteer-funded Pacific Women’s Resource Bureau engaged in a number of nutritional training workshops in the early 1980s. The Resource Bureau’s newsletter carried many articles on health and nutrition. In 1983, the Republic of the Marshall Islands declared the 15th to the 19th of August as “Nutrition Week.” This was done in response to findings that nutritional deficiencies accounted for 7 percent of total infant deaths in the previous six years (Pacific Women Resource Bureau 1983). Four main nutritional problems have been identified among infants in Chuuk—malnutrition, poor sanitation, dental caries, and obesity—and the low nutritional levels of the infants have been linked to the changing roles of women (Fritz 1982, 18). With new employment opportunities, mothers are relying on US-imported convenience foods. Valentine Fritz proposed that malnutrition results from low nutritional content of convenience foods and that obesity develops when this diet is combined with a sedentary urban lifestyle; dental caries are caused by high sugar content of convenience foods; and poor sanitation occurs with bottle feeding (1982, 8–13).

The importance of health issues for women stems from women’s “traditional” roles as caretakers of the family. There is nothing fundamentally wrong with women having that role; it is when women’s interests and concerns are confined to that sphere that gender inequity exists. Responsibility can be tantamount to oppression; as Jane Margold and Donna Bellorado stated, “Women cannot grow if they’re overburdened with these kinds of responsibilities and family expectations” ([1982?], 13–14). The colonial experience has burdened women by adding more problematic dimensions to their responsibilities.

Micronesian women have voiced their concerns in a number of forums. In the history of Micronesian legislative bodies, the number of women representatives stands at two women elected to Palau Congress in 1950, one woman appointed to Palau District Legislature in the mid-1900s, two women elected to Truk District Legislature in 1966, and one woman in Truk District Legislature 1975–1986 (Marshall and Marshall 1990, 42), in addition to the Marshallese women representatives in the House of Iroij, to whom I referred earlier. Only one woman has served in the Congress of Micronesia, Carmen Bigler of the Marshall Islands (Green and Simon-McWilliams 1987). The US colonial presence encouraged the native-male dominance of colonially constructed political institutions that had begun with contact.

(101)

During the US administration of Chuuk, for example, additional levels of chiefly positions were created: “Since the area and higher chiefs have been vested with judicial and administrative powers for which the local culture has yet developed no adequate system of controls, the new complexity in political structure has created potentialities for corruption and despotism [read also, sexism,] which constitute the principle threat to the success of the present administrations [read also, women’s participation]” (Murdock and Goodenough 1947, 335). Recognizing the similarity of their situations under colonialism and male-dominated politics, Micronesian women have maintained a dialogue with other women by attending regional and international conferences. At the Pacific Conference of Women in Suva, 1976, a Micronesian delegate identified the struggle for decolonization with the struggle for women’s rights:

The greatest need that I see is to break the oppression of colonialism, militarism and imperialism with a new system of nationalism, complete independence, and socialism. Otherwise we will never be free nations.... We are gathered here because we are convinced that unless we, as women, speak and do for ourselves, no one is going to act for us. For a long time we have blamed the society and in particular, men, for the various discriminations we suffered, when in fact ... we were unwilling to give up our domestic security for the improvement of (our) status.... No longer can we blame the colonizers for our lack of progress or their failure to fulfill their obligations. If we cannot help ourselves, most certainly the colonizers would not give a damn about helping us. The time is fitting and proper for us women to do something about this. (Griffen 1976, 102–103)

The Micronesian delegate was not so much exonerating colonialists and men, as exhorting women to take up a public role of activism.

Micronesian women have also responded to issues of importance to women in the United States. At an International Women’s Year (1976) Conference in Texas, Micronesian women voted in support of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA),

abstaining on gay and abortion issues (*Micronesian Independent*, 9 Dec 1977, 3). An anonymous Micronesian letter writer responded antagonistically to the delegates' support of the ERA: "What is ERA in Micronesian? It is nothing but sin. Micronesia is not ready for ERA ... it is best to pick ladies from the outer islands and villages, not from the district centers as participants in the conference. The outer island ladies know the real problems of women such as how to raise their children to be law-abiding citizens. Let not the Congress of Micronesia pick women who are interested in divorcing their husbands and having abortions!" (*Micronesian Independent*, 9 Feb 1978, 11).

This reaction indicates the opposition that contemporary Micronesian women activists face. This was an instance where Micronesian women allied themselves with a group of women from the colonial power. The letter writer called for more "traditional" women to represent Micronesians; is it

(102)

coincidence that this tradition that is hearkened to contains the same gender-power dynamic as the colonialist metropolis?

Micronesian women have voiced a strong commitment to ending colonial and sexist injustices. Their public activism is necessitated by colonialism's intrusion on their private lives as women and natives. Although they do come from a matrilineal tradition and thus have a distinct vantage point on sex-gender relations, they are facing essentially the same patriarchal power structure as women in other societies affected by Euro-American colonialism.

Presumptuous Women and the Plethora of Plebiscites in Belau

On 6 February 1990, the people of Belau went to the ballot box for the seventh time in seven years. The issue at stake was the Compact of Free Association between Belau and the United States of America. In that last referendum, the vote was 60.8 percent in favor of the compact (*Palau Gazette*, March 1990, 10; compare Wilson 1990, 18–19, which cites 59.8 percent in favor). The Constitution of Belau (Article II, Section 3) requires a 75 percent majority vote before the government may enter into any treaty, compact, or agreement that entails the storage or disposal of nuclear, chemical, or biological weapons in Belau. The full approval of the compact is inhibited by certain clauses within the Constitution of Belau; these are the focal points of the debate on whether, when, and how to change political status.

A significant minority in Belau opposes the compact. This minority has mobilized to block the compact at every referendum, despite the Belau government's desire to exit Trust Territory status. A US-sponsored analysis of the first plebiscite cited male Belau leaders and foreign antinuclear groups as the principal opponents of the compact (Ranney and Penniman 1983, 33). However, as the media and analysts chose to overlook, opposition to the compact has been voiced outstandingly by Belau women.

Women have provided the most constant presence in the anti-compact movement. The aspects of the compact to which the women object are those that would require amendments to the Constitution of Belau. Their key concerns are about storage of US nuclear weapons, waste, and energy, and use of land in Belau (Christopher 1988, 3).

The activism of Belau women against the compact exemplifies the relationship between the struggle against colonialism and subordination of women. The women are decolonizers in that they assert the sovereignty of Belau: they refuse to accept changes in their constitution for a compact that could compromise their environmental well-being. They assert a type of feminism by pursuing a cause that most of their male leaders oppose or have abandoned.

Since the first plebiscite for the compact was called in 1983, there have been four class-action suits filed in the Belau courts against the President of Belau and the Political Education Committee (Ranney and Penniman 103 1985, 1). Women, groups, and individuals were significant actors in the legal proceedings. The plaintiffs in the 1984 court case called themselves Ogobel Belau, the Save Palau Committee. They consisted of the Ibedul, or High Chief of Belau; the governor of Airai, Romu Tmetuchl; the Catholic Women's Group; and a local antinuclear group, Klal-Rengl (Klal-Rengl 1984, 16). They objected to the plebiscite because they claimed it was timed so as not to give voters sufficient information on their options. At a rally on 2 September 1984, women speakers exhorted listeners to question their government and the compact (Klal-Rengl 1984, 17). There were many issues for which Belau people could call their leaders to task.

Before Lazarus Salii was inaugurated as president of the republic in October of 1985, he signed a treaty with US Ambassador to the Trust Territory Fred Zeder. The treaty provided that a simple majority instead of a 75 percent majority would be required for amendments to the constitution. In addition, the United States agreed that it would "not store, use, test, or detonate harmful substances in Palau except the authority to transit" (Palau Gazette, 1 Nov 1985, 4). The treaty was put before the Belau legislature for ratification. But there was still the issue of the constitution; the people would have to vote on the compact again.

After the 1986 referendum and the compact was endorsed by only 66 percent, another civil action suit was filed (Appeal #8-86, Civil Action #101-86, in the Supreme Court of the Republic of Palau). The plaintiffs were Ibedul Yutaka Gibbons, Mrs Gabriela Ngirmang, James Orak, and Rikrik Spis; the defendants were President Salii and the Political Education Committee. Again, the issue was inadequate voter education and the constitutional legality of the compact.

An editorial in the Palau Gazette of 22 December 1986 carried a skit that criticized opponents of the compact. In the form of a discussion among three people, a government official, a worker, and a supervisor named Miss Fancy Toe, the editorial went as follows: Government official: "Miss Fancy Toe, the President brought in \$141

million in the Compact, but 34% of the voters did not want it. Where do you suggest the President go for additional money?" Miss Fancy Toe replies, "Santa Claus." The worker, Jack, asks where Santa Claus is, and Miss Fancy Toe answers, "Washington, D.C." Jack then asks Miss Fancy Toe how old she is. Miss Fancy Toe: "Young man, I'll have you know that I am a respectably married woman. Why, the impudence, imagine asking for my age!!" Jack: "I am sorry Miss Fancy Toe. But for a while there you talked like my eight-year-old daughter."

This editorial was intended to alert the public to the job layoffs that were predicted as a result of the delay in compact approval by the Belau public. However, the editorial also called attention to the role of women in opposing the compact. Miss Fancy Toe was a caricature of the Belau woman activist; she was depicted as irrational and naive, the principal hindrance to the nation's progress.

The women who opposed the compact were anything but naive and irrational; in several video interviews they showed themselves to have farsighted concerns. Safila Seid, a nurse, called the compact a "sell-out" (Palau Plebiscite 1986). Bernie Keldermans, a grassroots organizer involved with voter education, said that the compact process was "not a democratic system." Philomena Temengil spoke about how important land was to women and children, and an elderly woman said that the compact threatened the birth of Belau people (Braun and Heddle 1989). Indeed, the compact would allocate one-third of Belau land to US military use, and the women felt that "transit" of nuclear energy was no less dangerous than "storage" (US Government Printing Office 1988, 24). The people of Belau were getting tired of voting, but the opposition maintained its stand.

There were two more referenda in 1987; the fifth referendum was held on 23 June 1987 (Palau Gazette, 5 June 1987, 1). The sixth was held on 21 August and resulted in a 73 percent vote "yes." It was still 2 percent short of the constitutionally required majority (Palau Gazette, 1 Sept 1987, 3). On 28 August, Civil Action 139-87, titled Merep versus Salii, came before the Belau judiciary. The plaintiffs, Belau high chiefs and women, challenged the legal validity of the compact (US Government Printing Office 1988, 18). Within four days of the filing of the suit, the Palau Gazette was able to report that "in accordance with a memorandum of understanding between the constitutionally elected President of the Republic, Lazarus E. Salii, and the highest ranking traditional Chief of Belau, the High Chief Ibedul of Koror, Yutaka M. Gibbons, a reconciliation of the opposing views was achieved" (Palau Gazette, 1 Sept 1987, 3). The High Chief Ibedul would later declare before the United Nations Trusteeship Council in 1989, "I now turn to the United States, the Administering Authority, with a spirit of genuine friendship" (Palau Gazette, 16 June 1989, 5). There were allegations that some of the chiefs involved in the suit had been intimidated by the government into dropping it (US Government Printing Office 1988, 25).

Women who signed the Merep suit were also subjected to harassment, but instead of capitulating to the government and the United States, the women filed their own suit. Ngirmang versus Salii was brought forward by twenty-nine women (US Government Printing Office 1988, 61); Gloria Gibbons Salii, the Bilung (sister of the lbedul) and wife of Salii's brother, was one of the women who refiled the suit (Pacific Daily News, 1 Sept 1987, 1). This suit challenged the constitutional amendment pursuant to the compact. The harassment continued even though the president had promised the women police protection (Pacific Daily News, 1 Sept 1987, 83).

In January 1988, Gabriela Ngirmang, her interpreter Isabella Sumang, and a delegation of two other women, Yosiko Ramarui and Rafaela Sumang, took their cause to the US Senate and the United Nations Trusteeship Council. Salii was chagrined and the high chiefs were outraged by the women's assertiveness. The US Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources had in fact 105 invited the women to testify at its hearings. The governors of Belau wrote to Senate Committee Chairperson J Bennett Johnson: "The United States may invite anyone in Palau to come and speak of the facts surrounding his or her experience. But, for the United States to invite any women in Palau to speak on major national issues and disregard a decision by the two paramount chiefs of Palau does not only undermine our traditional customs, it is insulting to the traditional chiefs and leaders of Palau" (Pacific Daily News, 1 Sept 1987, 120).

Anthropologist H G Barnett once observed that Belau men "are disposed to be quite generous in their acknowledgement of women's worth if the admission does not alter the fundamental reality of male dominance" (quoted in Margold and Bellorado [1982?], 1). Ngirmang and her companions had engaged in revolutionary action. They had embarrassed their male chiefs by demonstrating that they would not stop pursuing what they felt were the sovereign interests of Belau.

In March 1988, the US Senate approved the compact despite the divisions of opinion in Belau (Palau Gazette, 29 April 1988, 1). In April, a Belau Supreme Court judge declared that Salii's constitutional amendment of 4 August 1987 was "null and void" (Palau Gazette, 29 April 1988, 3). Later in 1988, Lazarus Salii committed suicide under the pressure of serious corruption allegations (Pacific Daily News, 21 Aug 1988, 1). After the 1990 plebiscite, Belau people are faced with a very critical dilemma: the US refuses to renegotiate the existing compact. The United States is pressuring the island nation into compliance by denying its two-hundred-mile economic zone and denying residency rights of Belau citizens in other US territories.

Have the women been defeated? No. They have consolidated their forces into Otil A Beluad, a nongovernmental organization, which was nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize in 1989 (Tok Blong SPPF 1990, April, #31, 20). In addition, the women are active in the International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA 1986, 81). The failure to approve the compact in the 1990 referendum indicates that Belau women are still a force with which to be reckoned.

Conclusion: Decolonization and Feminism in Micronesia

Women's assertion of their interests is very much a part of decolonization. The women of the Marshall Islands, Chuuk, and Belau are trying to right many of the wrongs perpetrated by the colonial administration: the wrongs of nuclear arms shipment and testing, the wrongs of land alienation, the wrongs of economic dependency.

Micronesian women seem to believe that power should be shared between the sexes. This once was the case, according to their interpretations of their history and tradition (they do not, however, claim a past "equality" in the Euro-American sense); but the relentless force of colonialism has affected a profound distortion of gender roles in Micronesia. The men who deal with the United States have accepted the power they have within the colonial system. The United States as colonial power, and Micronesian men as receivers of the most benefits from the system, operate by ignoring or downplaying the power and relevance of women in or to political affairs. Their power is based on an illusion. Some women are fighting to achieve a real balance of power—not only between the sexes but between nations. Their power ultimately lies in their recognition of the vitally political aspects of even their private lives, especially when it comes to nutrition and substance abuse. Their fight has brought them into the public arena.

Many Micronesian women, however, still prefer to work within what is called in the Euro-American tradition "the private sphere." Margold and Bellorado pointed out that, to Belau people, the "domestic and public spheres are not separable"; for example, "seemingly domestic/familial decisions about what food will be brought to a feast have much wider economic and social repercussions" (Margold and Bellorado [1982?], 4). The definition of activism, then, needs to be broadened to include these assertions of women's power in the private sphere.

A woman-centered view of history and politics is vital for an accurate understanding of the power dynamics and change involved in colonialism.

Originally published in *Pacific History: Papers from the 8th Pacific History Association Conference*, edited by Donald H Rubinstein, 125–141. Supplement to the inaugural issue of *Isla: Journal of Micronesian Studies*. Mangilao: University of Guam and Micronesian Area Research Center. Copyright 1992 University of Guam Press. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved.

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