



# U.S. FORCES INDOPACIFIC **CULTURE GUIDE**

## Micronesia



## About this Guide

This guide is designed to prepare you to deploy to culturally complex environments and achieve mission objectives. The fundamental information contained within will help you understand the cultural dimension of your assigned location and gain skills necessary for success.



The guide consists of two parts:

Part 1 “Culture General” provides the foundational knowledge you need to operate effectively in any global environment with a focus on Oceania.

Part 2 “Culture Specific” describes unique cultural features of Micronesian society. It applies culture-general concepts to help



increase your knowledge of your assigned deployment location. This section is designed to complement other pre-deployment training.

For further information, contact the AFCLC Region Team at

[AFCLC.Region@us.af.mil](mailto:AFCLC.Region@us.af.mil) or visit the AFCLC website at <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/AFCLC/>.

**Disclaimer:** All text is the property of the AFCLC and may not be modified by a change in title, content, or labeling. It may be reproduced in its current format with the express permission of the AFCLC. All photography is provided as a courtesy of the US government, Wikimedia, and other sources.

[Please scroll over images to view captions.](#)

## PART 1 – CULTURE GENERAL

### What is Culture?

Fundamental to all aspects of human existence, culture shapes the way humans view life and functions as a tool we use to adapt to our social and physical environments. A culture is the sum of all of the beliefs, values, behaviors, and symbols that have meaning for a society. All human beings have culture, and individuals within a culture share a general set of beliefs and values.

Members of a culture also usually assign the same meanings to the symbols in that culture. A symbol is when one thing—an image, word, object, idea, or story—represents another thing. For example, the American flag is a physical and visual symbol of a core American value—freedom. At the same time, the story of George Washington admitting to having chopped down a cherry tree is also symbolic because it represents the premium Americans place on personal honesty and leadership integrity.

### Force Multiplier

The military services have learned through experience the importance of understanding other cultures. Unlike the 20th-century bipolar world order that dominated US strategy for nearly half a century, today the US military is operating in what we classify as asymmetric or irregular conflict zones, where the notion of cross-cultural interactions is on the leading edge of our engagement strategies.

We have come to view the people themselves, rather than the political system or physical environment, as the decisive feature in conflict areas. Our primary objective hinges on influencing constructive change through peaceful means where possible. We achieve this endeavor by encouraging local nationals to



focus on developing stable political, social, and economic institutions that reflect their cultural beliefs and traditions.

Therefore, understanding the basic concepts of culture serves as a force multiplier. Achieving an awareness and respect of a society's values and beliefs enables deploying forces to build relationships with people from other cultures, positively influence their actions, and ultimately achieve mission success.

### Cultural Domains

Culture is not just represented by the beliefs we carry internally, but also by our behaviors and by the systems members of a culture create to organize their lives. These systems, such as political or educational institutions, help us to live in a manner that is appropriate to our culture and encourages us to perpetuate that culture into the future.



We can organize behaviors and systems into categories—what the Air Force refers to as “cultural domains”—in order to better understand the primary values and characteristics of a society. A cross-culturally competent military member can use these domains—which include kinship, language and communication, and social and political systems and others (see chart on next page)—as tools for understanding and adapting to any culture. For example, by understanding the way a culture defines family and kinship, a US military member operating overseas can more effectively interact with members of that culture.

### Social Behaviors across Cultures

While humankind shares basic behaviors, various groups enact or even group those behaviors differently across cultural

boundaries. For example, all societies obtain food for survival, although agrarian societies generally produce their own food for limited consumption using basic techniques.

Conversely, industrialized nations have more complex market economies, producing foodstuffs for universal consumption. Likewise, all cultures value history and tradition, although they represent these concepts through a variety of unique forms of symbolism. While the dominant world religions share the belief in one God, their worship practices vary with their traditional historical development. Similarly, in many kin-based cultures where familial bonds are foundational to social identity, it is customary for family or friends to serve as godparents, while for other societies this practice is nearly non-existent.

### Worldview

One of our most basic human behaviors is the tendency to classify others as similar or different based on our cultural standards. As depicted in the chart below, we can apply the 12 cultural domains to help us compare similarities and differences across cultures. We evaluate others' behavior to determine if they are "people like me" or "people not like me." Usually, we assume that those in the "like me" category share our perspectives and values.

## 12 Domains of Culture



This collective perspective forms our worldview—how we see the world and understand our place in it. Your worldview functions

as a lens through which you see and understand the world. It helps you to interpret your experiences and the values and behaviors of other people that you encounter. Consider



your worldview as a way of framing behavior, providing an accountability standard for actions and a logical explanation of why we individually or collectively act in a certain manner.

### **Cultural Belief System**

An important component of a worldview is our belief system. A community's belief system assigns meaning, sets its universal standards of what is good and bad, defines right and wrong behavior, and assigns a value of meaningful or meaningless. Our beliefs form the fundamental values we hold to be true—regardless of whether there is evidence to support these ideas. Beliefs are a central aspect of human culture. They are shared views about world order and how the universe was physically and socially constructed.

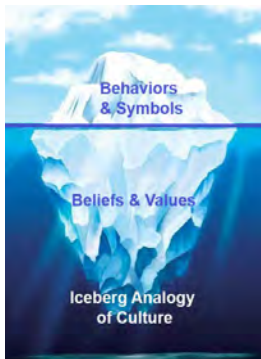
While all people have beliefs, their specific components tend to vary depending upon respective world views. What people classify as good or bad, right or wrong depends on our deeply held beliefs we started developing early in life that have helped shape our characters. Likewise, these values are ingrained in our personalities and shape our behavior patterns and our self-identities. Because cultural beliefs are intensely held, they are difficult, though not impossible, to change.





## Core Beliefs

Core beliefs shape and influence certain behaviors and also serve to rationalize those behaviors. Therefore, knowledge of individual or group beliefs can be useful in comprehending or making sense of their activities. We will use the iceberg model for classifying culture to illustrate two levels of meaning, as



depicted. Beliefs and values, portrayed by the deeper and greater level of the submerged iceberg, are seldom visible, but are indicated / hinted at / referenced by our behaviors and symbols (top level). It is important to recognize, though, that the parts of culture that are not visible (under the waterline) are informing and shaping what is being made visible (above the waterline).

In many cases, different worldviews may present behaviors that are contrary to our own

beliefs, particularly in many regions where US forces deploy. Your ability to suspend judgment in order to understand another perspective is essential to establishing relationships with your host-nation counterparts. The ability to withhold your opinion and strive to understand a culture from a member of that culture's perspective is known as cultural relativism. It often involves taking an alternate perspective when interpreting others' behaviors and is critical to your ability to achieve mission success.



As you travel through Oceania, you will encounter cultural patterns of meaning that are common across the region. What follows is a general description of 12 cultural domains which are used to frame those commonalities.

# CULTURAL DOMAINS

## 1. History and Myth

History and myth are related concepts. History is a record of the past that is based on verifiable facts and events. Myth can act as a type of historical record, although it is usually a story which members of a culture use to explain community origins or important events that are not verifiable, or which occurred prior to written language.

Oceania comprises some 20 sovereign nations, states, and territories that span a large portion of the Western Pacific Ocean, from Australia, Papua New Guinea (PNG), and Palau in the West to French Polynesia in the East. The region is so diverse that experts typically divide it into four sub-regions: Australia and New Zealand, Melanesia, Micronesia, and Polynesia. While the people in each of the sub-regions share certain traits, all belong to the greater Oceania region. Furthermore, Oceania is characterized by distinct cultures that typically have more in

common with each other than with cultures in other parts of the world. While Hawaii is notably a critical part of Polynesia, since it is a US state, it is not included in this guide.

Archaeological evidence suggests early humans first occupied Australia as early as 65,000 years



ago, and parts of PNG and the Solomon Islands some 45,000 years ago. In contrast, humans only reached some islands in Polynesia as recently as 1000 BC. Historians tend to agree that early waves of migrants from Southeast Asia first settled in Australia and Melanesia, and later waves occupied Micronesia and Polynesia.

Many early inhabitants subsisted as seafaring hunter gatherers, typically consuming marine life and island vegetation. These early seafarers domesticated plants and animals, transporting



them between islands. As agricultural techniques became more advanced, residents cleared forests and transformed their island environments for cultivation and raising livestock.

Portugal's Ferdinand Magellan was the first notable European explorer to reach Oceania, when in 1521 he briefly landed on the Mariana Islands. Thereafter, English, French, German, and Spanish explorers sought to trade with and colonize the region. By the late 18th century, traders, whalers, and missionaries had settled across Oceania, bringing disease and weapons from Europe, resulting in the death of many islanders. Meanwhile, European powers and the US began to incorporate much of the region as official territories and colonies – political and social legacies that continue to influence the region today.

During the early 20th century, Japan sought to grow its influence in the Pacific Islands. When Germany withdrew its navy from Micronesia during World War I, Japan



occupied the former German colonies in 1914, incorporating Micronesia into its expanding empire as an agricultural settler colony. In the 1930s, Japan built military fortifications in Micronesia before moving into Melanesia and Southeast Asia during the Pacific War. By 1942, the Japanese military had occupied large swathes of Oceania, which became the site of some of the war's most significant and violent battles. Over 215,000 Japanese, Australians, Americans, and indigenous islanders died in Oceania between 1942-45.

Over the subsequent decades, calls for independence grew across Oceania. While Australia and New Zealand had gained independence from Britain in the early 20th century, the island nations won independence much later. Samoa was the first, gaining independence from New Zealand in 1962. Several other countries achieved independence afterwards, with Palau the most recent in 1994. Others remain US or French territories. Apart from Australia and New Zealand, which joined in 1945,

most of Oceania joined the United Nations between the late 1970s and 1990s, after decolonization processes empowered them with the territorial sovereignty required for membership.

During the mid-late 20th century, many isolated islands in the region became sites for British, French, and US atomic testing and other military operations. The nuclear and missile tests have caused permanent loss of access to traditional homelands,



including the forced removal of some inhabitants, and exposure to radiation causing significant health issues.

In the early 21st century, indigenous groups across Oceania began campaigns to

assert their rights and culture, largely led by Aboriginal Australians and Maori in New Zealand. In recent years, many of the smaller island nations have increased attention to climate change, as rising ocean levels will affect inhabitants of Oceania to a greater extent than other regions. Several nations have joined organizations to combat climate change and promote conservation, often collaborating to amplify the small island states' pro-environment message in global fora.

Nevertheless, the region is not always united. In early 2021, Micronesian nations withdrew from the Pacific Islands Forum, an international organization that focuses on regional issues, due to a dispute over their representation in the group. Despite the recent political clash, as of 2025, Oceania remains largely stable and focused on combating the consequences of climate change, notably the rising sea levels, bleached coral reefs, and localized disasters like increasingly powerful storms and wildfires.

## 2. Political and Social Relations

Political relations are the ways in which members of a community organize leadership, power, and authority. Social relations are all of the ways in which individuals are linked to others in their community. European and Japanese colonial rule drastically changed society in Oceania. Further, the subjugation

of the indigenous population, import of South and East Asian workers, and arrival of European and Japanese immigrants during the 19th-20th centuries permanently altered the region's ethnic and racial makeup, which today varies by location.

While residents of Australia and New Zealand are primarily of European ancestry, those of other nations identify mostly as indigenous to specific islands. Some claim broader identities, as Melanesians, Micronesians, or Polynesians. Some nations such as Fiji and Palau also have significant immigrant populations.

Although all nations in Oceania are nominally democratic, their political structures are varied and relations with former colonial powers continue to influence present-day society. Australia, Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, New Zealand, PNG, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu are sovereign nations. Of these countries, Australia, New Zealand, PNG, Solomon Islands, and Tuvalu are constitutional monarchies with parliamentary systems. King Charles III of the United Kingdom is head-of-state, represented by a Governor-General, and an elected Prime Minister (PM) serves as head-of-government.

Tonga is also a constitutional monarchy led by a hereditary king, who is head-of-state and commander-in-chief. An elected parliament selects a PM, who is ceremoniously appointed by the King. Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, Samoa, and Vanuatu are parliamentary republics. In Fiji, Samoa, and Vanuatu, a PM serves as head-of-government and a President head-of-state, known as **O le Ao Mamalu o le Malo** (head-of-state) in Samoa. In Kiribati and Nauru, the elected President is head-of-state and government.

The Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI), and Palau are Freely Associated States (FAS) under three distinct Compacts of Free Association (COFA) agreements with the US. Each country's COFA outlines its unique terms with the US, while recognizing its sovereignty



and voluntary participation in the COFA, including an independent foreign policy. Under the COFA, among other terms, the US provides visa-free access to the US and payment for access to land for military installations in FAS territories.

Guam, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI), and American Samoa are US territories, though their relations with the US government vary. Guam is an unincorporated organized territory, the CNMI an unincorporated territory and commonwealth, and American Samoa an unincorporated unorganized territory. While residents of Guam

and the CNMI are US citizens, those of American Samoa are considered US nationals, who may reside in the US and apply for citizenship.



Likewise, French Polynesia, New Caledonia, and Wallis and Futuna are French territories, whose

relations with the French government vary. French Polynesia – comprising the Gambier Islands, Marquesas Islands, Society Islands, Tuamotu Archipelago, and Tubuai Islands – is a semi-autonomous overseas country. New Caledonia and Wallis and Futuna are territories known as overseas collectivities.

### 3. Religion and Spirituality

Religion is a cultural belief system that provides meaning to members of a community. Religious and spiritual beliefs help preserve the social order by defining proper behavior. They also create social unity by defining shared identity, offer individuals peace of mind, and explain the causes of events in a society.

Many of Oceania's early inhabitants led rich spiritual lives. While little is known of early religions, many were likely polytheistic. Early inhabitants recognized gods and spirits that constructed the universe and influenced everyday life, believing in connections between the natural and spiritual worlds. Accordingly, many Oceanic people venerated ancestral spirits, which influenced outcomes in agriculture, war, pregnancy, and other events.

When European explorers reached Oceania in the 16th century, they introduced Christianity for the first time. In the 17th century, Spanish Roman Catholic missionaries operating from their base in the Philippines began gaining converts across the northern part of the region. In the late 18th century, British Protestant missionaries began proselytizing in eastern Polynesia. By the 19th century, various branches of Christianity had become well established in Oceania, as Anglicans, Lutherans, Methodists, Presbyterians, Roman Catholics, and Seventh-day Adventists all established missions in the region.



Residents of several nations in Oceania rejected the colonial introduction of Christianity. Some spiritual leaders sought to isolate their communities from Christianity, while others combined local religious traditions with those of Christianity to form syncretic religions. However, in the 1970s, Christian movements opposed to traditional and syncretic religions flourished in the region. Many of these movements were Pentecostal.

Nevertheless, after centuries of colonization and missionary work, today, most people in Oceania are Christian. Over 90% of inhabitants in Melanesia, Micronesia, and Polynesia identify as Christian. Of the small island nations, Fiji is the most religiously diverse. Although most Fijians identify as Christian, over 30% are Hindu or Muslim, primarily due to a large immigrant population. Notably, New Zealand is the only nation in Oceania in which Christianity is not the majority religion, as nearly half of New Zealanders identified with no religion.

#### 4. Family and Kinship

The domain of family and kinship refers to groups of people related through blood ties, marriage, or through strong emotional bonds that influence them to treat each other like family members (often called “fictive kin”).

Family life and relationships are fundamental elements of Oceanic societies. Regional inhabitants tend to maintain strong

connections with family members, supporting them emotionally and financially, while providing physical care for elderly or ailing kin if needed. Although residence patterns differ across the region, multiple generations often reside together in one

household or live in close proximity. In some regions, female-headed households are common.

Most Oceania residents live in urban areas, notably 100% of Nauruans and over 92% of residents of Guam and the CNMI.



However, some 74% or more of residents of PNG, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, and Vanuatu live in rural areas. As such, housing types vary significantly within and between nations. In much of the region, residents tend to live on one or a handful of principal islands, with the rest scarcely populated or uninhabited. Urbanization has changed life in many areas. As both men and women take advantage of the enhanced educational and employment opportunities available in urban areas, family structures have become more diverse.

Due to Oceania's diversity, courtship and marriage traditions vary significantly by group and location. While close family ties mean relatives have some influence over children's choice of spouses, men and women increasingly choose their own partners. Some couples marry in civil, religious, or traditional ceremonies, while others cohabit but remain unwed.

## 5. Sex and Gender

Sex refers to the biological/reproductive differences between males and females, while gender is a more flexible concept that refers to a culture's categorizing of masculine and feminine behaviors, symbols, and social roles.

Some cultures in Oceania recognize a broad range of genders besides male and female. Although the cultures of Oceania tend to be patriarchal (men hold most power and authority) and privilege the male's role as provider and leader, some societies are traditionally matrilineal (inheritance, property, and the family name pass from mother to daughter), where mothers determine

a man's rank and status. In some places, primarily in Micronesia and Polynesia, society is organized into a hierarchical system based on heredity, in which rank and status are determined by sex-defined lineages. Conversely, society is more egalitarian (the principle that all people are equal) in Melanesia, where strong, persuasive men often achieve rather than inherit power.

Despite most countries' progressive gender equality laws and policies, women face continued challenges to their participation in the workforce. In much of the region, women still assume the traditional roles of wives and mothers, often having to balance both domestic duties and employment. Workforce participation rates vary by country. As of 2022, nearly as many women as men were employed in PNG and the Solomon Islands, while the ratio is closer to 50% in Fiji and Samoa.

As of late-2024, women held 46% nearly half of parliamentary seats in New Zealand, over 45% in Australia, and 9% in Fiji. Women occupied 9% or fewer of parliamentary seats in most other countries in the region. Only New Zealand has had multiple women heads-of-state. Women have been historically more involved in traditional than national political affairs.



Fertility rates have fallen significantly in recent decades, with Australia, Wallis and Futuna, and Palau averaging less than two children per woman. Women in Solomon Islands, Tuvalu and Guam typically have an average of three children, though the rates have declined by about half since 1960.

Abortion laws vary by country. While Australia's laws are the least restrictive, Palau and Tonga prohibit abortion with no explicit legal exception.

Australia and New Zealand are the only countries in the region that have legalized same-sex marriage. Although same-sex relations are permitted in some cultures, the governments of Kiribati, PNG, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, and Tuvalu criminalize homosexuality.



## 6. Language and Communication

Language is a system for sharing information symbolically, whereby words are used to represent ideas. Communication is defined as the cultural practice of sharing meaning in interaction, both verbally and non-verbally.

Oceania's linguistic diversity is unique, as the region contains more than 1,000 languages – over 20% of the world's total. PNG alone is home to over 840 languages, more than any other country in the world. Despite this linguistic variety, some linguistic groups are spoken by only a few dozen people. Consequently, some regional languages have become or soon will be extinct, as the children of native speakers opt to learn more widely spoken languages and dialects. English is commonly spoken in much of Oceania and is at least one of the official languages (in addition to indigenous languages) in most



states that are not French territories.

## 7. Learning and Knowledge

All cultures require that the older generation transmit important information to the younger generation. This information can be strictly

factual (for example, how to fulfill subsistence and health requirements) or culturally traditional (the beliefs, behaviors, and symbols that have meaning to the community). This knowledge transfer may occur through structured, formalized systems such as schools or through informal learning by watching adults or peers.

While education has improved across the region in recent years, quality and attainment vary. Social instability, poverty, economic inequality, natural disasters, and emigration negatively impact the delivery and quality of education. Generally, children from poor and rural backgrounds are less likely to attend school and more likely to receive a lower-quality education. While literacy rates in much of Oceania are above 90%, they are much lower in PNG and the Solomon Islands.

Public investment in education varies widely by location and does not always correlate to quality educational systems. In recent years, the Solomon Islands government has spent some 10-13% of GDP on education, though about one in four women remain illiterate. Meanwhile, Vanuatu spends below 5% of GDP on education and has a literacy rate of nearly 89%. Enrollment rates also vary widely. While over 96% of students of the appropriate age in Australia, Fiji, Kiribati, and New Zealand are enrolled in primary education, less than 75% are enrolled in PNG, RMI, and the Solomon Islands.



Many countries have 2-year community colleges but lack 4-year post-secondary institutions. Australia, New Zealand, and PNG have several colleges and universities, as do Guam and the CNMI. The University of the South Pacific was founded in 1968 with its main campus in Fiji and now has campuses in several other countries. Still, many residents travel to Australia, New Zealand, Hawaii, or institutions outside the region to pursue post-secondary degrees.

## 8. Time and Space

In every society, people occupy space and time in ways that are not directly linked to physical survival. In most Western cultures, people tend to be preoccupied with strict time management, devoting less effort to relationship-building. While this concept of time remains true for some countries in Oceania, in others, establishing and maintaining relationships takes precedence over meeting deadlines, punctuality, or efficiently accomplishing tasks. The workday tends to run on a similar schedule as in the US, though some businesses keep more informal hours or close for midday breaks, extending their hours into the evening. Social events often start at flexible times, after enough guests arrive.

While concepts of personal space vary by country, keeping an arm's length is the norm. Handshakes are usually the most common form of greeting, though nodding to acquaintances or

kissing close friends and family on the cheek are typical in many places. Conversational touching tends to be minimal except among close friends or family. While direct eye contact is



common in places such as Fiji and PNG, intermittent or indirect eye contact is the norm in Kiribati, Samoa, and among certain groups like Aboriginal Australians.

The rhythm of daily life typically changes during national holidays, many of

which reflect Christian traditions and historical events. As most countries in Oceania were colonies, many people celebrate national independence days with fanfare.

## 9. Aesthetics and Recreation

Every culture has its own forms of creative expression that are guided by aesthetic principles of imagination, beauty, skill, and style. Much of Oceania's art, architecture, dance, music, poetry, and sports reflect the region's Pacific location, colonial history, and modern global trends. Although dress varies by location and group, many people in Oceania follow recent US or European fashion trends and wear traditional attire only for holidays, special occasions, or ceremonies.

Music and dance vary greatly by country. Global rock and pop music, along with local variants that feature folk and country genres, are common across Oceania. Traditional music and dance in Micronesia and Polynesia tend to be connected with storytelling and poetry, while Melanesian dances usually emphasize movement, rituals, and the supernatural world. In Australia, indigenous dances are typically closely connected with music and song.

The most popular sport across the region is rugby, particularly in Australia, Melanesia, and Polynesia. National teams compete in rugby matches internationally and across Oceania. Some locals have relocated to play for international teams, becoming a mainstay of the sport. Some 20% of players in the 2011 Rugby World Cup identified as Pacific Islanders. In Micronesia, sports

introduced by Japan and the US are most popular: baseball in the FSM and Palau, and basketball in RMI. Soccer, known in many areas as football, is also widely played across Oceania. Other popular sports include cricket, swimming, and field athletics.



Traditional handicrafts such as woodcarving, leatherwork, and weaving are prevalent in many parts of Oceania. While literature was primarily an oral tradition in much of the region, popular novelists and poets have recently explored their unique history and cultural heritage. Australia's Patrick White won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1973 for his psychological narrative work.

## 10. Sustenance and Health

Societies have different methods of transforming natural resources into food. These methods can shape residence patterns, family structures, and economics. Theories of disease and healing practices exist in all cultures and serve as adaptive responses to disease and illness.

While cuisine varies across the region based on local products and tastes, residents tend to rely on many of the same staple ingredients, notably seafood, starches like taro, cassava, and yams, and tropical fruits. Many dishes are cooked in coconut milk, and dried coconut is a popular ingredient. Pit-roasted pig, fish, and vegetables are common cuisine for ceremonies and celebrations in much of the region. The consumption of high-calorie, processed foods and Western-style fast food has become increasingly common in recent decades.

Health in Oceania has improved in recent decades as evidenced by decreased infant mortality rates and longer life expectancies. While Australia and New Zealand have more physicians per person than the US, all other countries have far fewer. Accordingly, many residents seek healthcare outside their home nation if immigration policies, personal finances, or government programs allow for treatment abroad. Inhabitants of isolated islands and rural areas face challenges to healthcare access.

Noncommunicable diseases, such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease, cancer, and chronic respiratory disease, account for most of the deaths in Oceania, though communicable diseases account for over 22% of deaths in Kiribati and the Solomon Islands and over 30% in PNG. Indigenous and low-income inhabitants often face more health challenges than their compatriots. Obesity is a significant problem – of the world's 10 countries with the highest rates of obesity, 8 are in Oceania. The availability of imported processed and preserved foods are largely responsible for Oceania's high levels of obesity.

## 11. Economics and Resources

This domain refers to beliefs regarding appropriate ways for a society to produce, distribute, and consume goods and services. It details how countries allocate their resources by sector, trade



with other countries, give or receive aid, and pay for goods and services within their borders.

Prior to colonization, most regional inhabitants subsisted on fishing, farming, and localized trade. In the colonial era, foreign governments and

companies extracted natural resources such as minerals, agricultural products, oil, and fish. Today, tourism is the largest sector in much of Oceania. While Australia and New Zealand have advanced economies and financial markets, most other nations rely on foreign aid. Many inhabitants are also reliant on remittances from relatives living abroad. Economic dependence on foreign governments and organizations has caused many governments in the region to pursue rapid expansion of their tourism and extractive industry sectors.

Australia is by far the largest economy in Oceania, with GDP over \$1.6 trillion in 2024. GDP per capita in Australia and New Zealand is more than double that of other countries in Oceania. Fiji, Palau, Nauru, and the US and French territories tend to have relatively high living standards, with GDP per capita generally above \$10,000. On the other hand, GDP per capita in Kiribati,

and the Solomon Islands is below \$3,500, where many residents live below the poverty line.

From 2020-21, Oceania confronted the collapse of the tourism industry and decreased remittances, largely due to COVID-19 pandemic. With trade and tourism rebounding, experts suggest annual GDP growth will stabilize around 3% in 2025-2027.

## 12. Technology and Material

Societies use technology to transform their physical world, and culture heavily influences the development and use of technology. Roads form the primary infrastructure in Oceania, though quality varies by country and tends to deteriorate in rural areas. Ports and piers are vital for local transportation and trade. Though air infrastructure is substandard in many places, airports are essential for tourism and reducing many islands' isolation.



Despite some investment in solar energy on outer rural islands, Oceania is largely dependent on fossil fuels. Apart from Australia, much of the region has limited energy resources and must import oil and gas to meet growing energy needs. Some countries, notably New Zealand, generate a large share of energy from hydropower.

New Zealand ranks highest in Oceania in a 2024 worldwide press freedom ranking. Observers generally consider media to be free in much of the region, though journalists are sometimes victims of government intimidation, threats of censorship, and eroding independence. Telecommunications infrastructure varies. As of 2022, Palau had the highest rate of mobile phone users at over 133 subscriptions per 100 people, compared to less than 40 in the FSM and RMI. Internet use ranges from about 27% in the Papua New Guinea to nearly 95% in Australia.

Now that we have introduced general concepts that characterize Oceanic society at large, we will focus on specific features of society in the FSM.

# PART 2 – CULTURE SPECIFIC

## 1. HISTORY AND MYTH

### Overview

The easternmost nation in the Pacific Ocean's Caroline Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM) comprises over 600 islands and 4 dispersed states, each with unique cultures and languages. For centuries, local communities traded amongst themselves and with other Pacific islanders. The first notable contacts with the West occurred in the 1830s, when European and American merchants and missionaries sought to trade with and convert the local peoples to Christianity. In subsequent decades, Western nations and Japan colonized the islands. After becoming a United Nations (UN) strategic Trust Territory administered by the US in 1947, the FSM developed its economy and attained independence in 1986. Since then, despite some economic difficulties, the FSM has formed robust democratic institutions as a new nation.

**Note:** The FSM forms part of the greater geo region of Micronesia, which also includes neighboring Palau and the Marshall Islands, as well as Kiribati and Nauru. While this guide refers to the country as the FSM, “Micronesians” refers to FSM citizens, not inhabitants of the greater geographic region.

### Early History

The FSM's four states – Pohnpei, Kosrae, Chuuk, and Yap – consist of discrete island groups that have separate early histories with divergent settlement patterns, societal structures, and governing practices. Nevertheless, archeological evidence suggests certain commonalities among the early inhabitants of these states, particularly their taro root cultivation, copra (dried





coconut) production, advanced navigation and fishing skills, and organization into extended family-based clans or villages (see *Family and Kinship*).

**Pohnpei:** Archeological evidence suggests that Pohnpei's first settlers arrived as early as 2000 BC, likely from the present-day Philippines and Indonesia. While no written sources detail the culture or history of the state's inhabitants for several millennia, oral histories reveal that around 1100 AD, foreign rulers, likely from other Pacific islands or Southeast Asia, arrived and founded the **Saudeleur** (Lord of Deleur, an ancient name for Pohnpei) dynasty. The **Saudeleurs** consolidated control over the islands and governed as autocratic rulers from **Nan Madol** ("Within the Intervals"), an administrative and religious center on eastern Pohnpei.

Local inhabitants used volcanic basalt stones to build some 100 artificial islets that hosted the ceremonial and governmental structures of **Nan Madol**, which served as the **Saudeleur** capital for several centuries. Local legends claim that over time, the **Saudeleur** rulers became increasingly demanding and repressive towards residents. Consequently, a semi-legendary

warrior named Isokelekel overthrew them around the mid-17th century (see "Myth" below). Isokelekel then devolved some power to **Nahnmwarki** (local chiefs), who divided the main island into separate domains, which they ruled with Isokelekel.



**Kosrae:** Likely settled sometime in the early first millennium BC by navigators from the neighboring Marshall Islands, the inhabitants of Kosrae established stratified matrilineal societies (see *Family and*

*Kinship*) whereby residents were divided into varying levels of nobility or serfdom. Around the 13th century, local rulers established Leluh, or Lelu, as a center of political and religious governance (similar to **Nan Madol**). Oral histories claim that chiefs and high-ranking nobles ruled from this location as late as

the mid-19th century, demanding periodic tributes of fish or breadfruit (see *Sustenance and Health*) from commoners.

**Chuuk:** Settlers, likely from Kosrae, moved to Chuuk sometime in the first millennium BC. Few records remain of the history of the state's early inhabitants. Residents of Chuuk's outer atolls (ring-shaped islands at least partly made of coral), likely traded with those of Guam, some 800 mi to the northwest, for access to metal tools and other items that they could not source on the nearby islands. Chuuk's population grew substantially compared to the FSM's other states. People inhabited not only the main island of Weno and neighboring islands that together comprise the Chuuk Lagoon, but also the outer islands and atolls.

**Yap:** While the timeline for human settlement in Yap is unclear, the state was probably inhabited at least 2,000 years ago, likely by settlers from the Malay Peninsula and present-day Indonesia. Residents of Yap established complex social hierarchies, whereby villages' social status changed depending on their success in battle against other groups. Likewise, within each village, residents were grouped into a strict class system.

Over time, the Yapese Empire arose in a political arrangement whereby high-ranking villages received periodic tribute from villages on outer islands. As scholars believe there was limited military coercion from the powerful chiefs receiving this tribute, some anthropologists suggest this system was meant to prevent the hoarding of resources in the case of typhoons (powerful tropical storms) or other natural disasters (see *Political and Social Relations*). Likewise, the residents of Yap developed the use of **rai** (large stone disks) for trade and ceremonial purchases. The *rai*, mined in Palau and brought to Yap on canoes, were valued depending on the difficulty of procuring each individual piece.



### Arrival of the Europeans

Spanish explorers, navigating between their colonies in Latin America and the Philippines, had sighted the Caroline Islands

as early as the mid-16th century. Although there were no notable efforts to contact inhabitants, establish trading posts, or govern the region, the Spanish Empire claimed these islands as part of its larger Pacific holdings.

Contact between locals and foreign traders began largely in the 1820s and 30s. Merchants mostly from Europe but also from Asia and the Americas began to frequent the islands of the present-day FSM, encouraged by stories detailing the region's natural beauty and largely welcoming residents. While some traders stopped temporarily in the region to trade for copra, others established more permanent settlements. These settlers, often known as beachcombers, were typically stowaways, naval or merchant deserters, or criminals, who had escaped capture in neighboring European colonies. Among these beachcombers was Irish-American David Dean O'Keefe, who settled in Yap and controlled trade between the island and Palau during the final decades of the 19th century. O'Keefe also mined *rai* (whose value decreased due to the relative ease in their production and shipment after the introduction of metal tools and larger ships) and established himself as a prominent local leader for years.

Increased contact with foreign traders also brought various negative consequences to the islands. Slave ships, pirates, and raiders at times attacked the Caroline Islands, seeking to take local people and resources by force. Likewise, the introduction of foreign diseases killed nearly all the native inhabitants within

the first decades of foreign contact. By 1852, Kosrae's population had dwindled from around 10,000 to just about 300 people.

**Missionary Work:** In the mid-19th century, different religious groups arrived in the region to establish schools, churches, and preach to local inhabitants

(see *Religion and Spirituality*). In the 1850s, Protestant missionaries from the US arrived to convert Micronesians, encountering friendly chiefs in Kosrae, Pohnpei, and Chuuk.



Later, in the 1880s, Spanish and German Capuchins (a Roman Catholic religious order, see *Religion and Spirituality*) settled to convert locals and enforce their respective country's claims in the region, particularly in Yap and Pohnpei.

By the late 19th century, missionaries had converted most of the region's inhabitants to Christianity. While credited with protecting locals from European raiders and recording native languages (see *Language and Communication*), the spread of new religious beliefs and values had significant impacts on local communities. Residents steadily abandoned traditional family structures, gender roles, and communal living practices (see *Sex and Gender* and *Family and Kinship*), which missionaries discouraged in favor of Western social practices.

**Spanish Rule:** While Spain's claim over the region was mostly uncontested by Western powers for many centuries, the German Empire had begun to stake its claim on the islands by the 1870s. German traders settled in Samoa and the present-day Marshall Islands to the northeast and held more authority over Micronesia than their Spanish counterparts, who nominally ruled the region from their colonial government based in Manila (capital of the present-day Philippines).

In 1885, Pope Leo XIII (the leader of the Roman Catholic Church in Rome, Italy) settled the disputed claims over the Caroline



Islands between Germany and Spain by issuing the Protocol of Rome. The document recognized the territorial claims of Spain over the present-day territories of the FSM and Palau but also allowed Germany to continue its commercial enterprises in the region. Despite this German presence, Spain continued to send Catholic missionaries to the islands, and in 1885, established a religious order at the settlement of Colonia on Yap, as well as a fort on the same site in 1887. On Pohnpei, the Spanish built an administrative capital, Santiago de la Ascensión (present-day Kolonia), during the same period.

However, the Spanish Empire was weak and its influence minimal. In 1898, Spain lost the Spanish-American War and was forced to cede the Philippines to the US. With the loss of Manila and a ruined Navy, Spain could no longer govern its Pacific territories, which included all the islands in the present-day FSM. Consequently, Spain sold them to Germany a year later.

**German Administration:** The islands became integrated into the colony of German New Guinea, governed from a colonial government in Herberstshöhe (present-day Kokopo, Papua New Guinea). Germany used Yap as a communications center, setting up a telegraph station that allowed the German government to avoid the use of British-controlled telegraph lines, as the two European powers competed for access to the region.

Over time, as German administrators introduced land reform policies that were met by local resistance, tensions arose with some communities' chiefs. In 1910, the inhabitants of Sokehs, off the coast of Pohnpei, rebelled against forced labor imposed by colonial officials, killing several Europeans. In response, the German Navy intervened to restore European control of the area. German officials also forbade the inter-village conflict that had taken place on Yap for centuries, effectively freezing the

elaborate and previously ever-changing social hierarchy on the island.



### **Japanese Invasion and the South Seas Mandate**

As early as 1880, Japanese traders had sought to establish their own copra, fishing, and sugar cultivation industries

in the region. In 1914, Germany (together with Austria-Hungary, Bulgaria, and the Ottoman Empire) entered World War I (WWI) as the Central Powers against the Allies (Britain, France, Russia, Japan, and the US). Exploiting Germany's weak hold over its Pacific colonies, Japan invaded the FSM that year. Upon the end of WWI in 1918, the League of Nations (the precursor to the UN) formalized Japan's control over the Caroline Islands in the South Seas Mandate.

Japan unified the South Seas Mandate with its growing empire in East Asia and sent waves of Japanese immigrants, who soon outnumbered Micronesians, to establish businesses, plantations, and phosphate mines across the region (see *Economics and Resources*). The government in Japan paid closer attention to the islands than prior European administrations and sought to impose its culture and loyalty to the Japanese Emperor. Further, Japanese officials established the islands' first mandatory educational program, with instruction solely in Japanese (see *Learning and Knowledge*).

Japan's efforts to expand its influence in Asia and the Pacific soon conflicted with the provisions of the League of Nations. Consequently, Japan formally left the League in 1935. As the number of Japanese immigrants continued to increase over the next several years, Japan began to consolidate and militarize its Pacific holdings, which was particularly evident in Chuuk. The Japanese military used Chuuk Lagoon (see *Political and Social Relations*) as a central naval base for Imperial Japan's mid-century efforts to hinder US advance in the region. Japan's influence in the region is evident in the fact that by 1942, some 96,000 Asian settlers lived in the FSM, compared to about 50,000 Micronesians.

### **The Pacific War**

In 1937, Japan invaded China, igniting the Second Sino-Japanese War that eventually became part of the greater conflict of World

War II (WWII). At the same time, Japan began to rapidly construct military installations in the FSM, before entering WWII in 1940 on the side of the Axis Powers (mainly Nazi Germany and Italy) against the Allies (Britain, France, the US, and the Soviet Union, among others). On December 7/8, 1941, it launched a surprise air attack on US naval forces at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii and other locations across the region. This event triggered the Pacific War, a term that refers to WWII events in the Pacific and East Asia.



With the onset of the war, Japanese subsidies and development funds for the FSM quickly withered. As a result of this reduction of resources, local islanders were often forced to work for the Japanese war effort to provide for their families and supplement traditional farming practices, especially as food requisitions became common during the war. In February 1944, the US conducted Operation Hailstone, a bombing campaign, in Chuuk. Operation Hailstone significantly damaged the Japanese naval fleet in the region, destroying some 400 warplanes and 50 ships, and killed some 4,000 Japanese servicemembers.

Local Micronesians suffered due to the Pacific War, despite US forces (as part of their “island hopping” tactics) not undertaking a land invasion of the FSM in favor of more strategically important targets such as Palau. Air raids and the disruption of shipping routes severely impacted the islands’ food supply, leading to malnutrition and starvation. Likewise, the Japanese military forced many locals to work on repairing damaged installations, often in inhumane conditions and under the threat of torture. By 1945, hundreds of Micronesians had died from US air raids and starvation, and much of the physical infrastructure of the four major island groups had been destroyed.

### Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands

After Japan’s unconditional surrender in September 1945, the Caroline Islands came under US control, and over the next several decades, the US governed the FSM under various



arrangements. Upon the Allies’ 1945 victory, the US Navy administered the islands. In 1947, the newly created UN designated the islands of the present-day FSM and several other regional islands as districts within the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands (TTPI), which the

US would administer. Under the UN guidelines, the US had significant leeway in governance and was authorized to use the TTPI for military purposes, though it also was compelled to submit periodic reports to the UN Security Council.



In 1947, the US created the Island Trading Company, which replaced an earlier government entity, to develop local industries and businesses (see *Economics and Resources*). The US also established schools that used English and local languages for instruction (see *Learning and Knowledge*). In the 1950s and 60s, the US government funded grants and programs that increasingly employed Micronesians, hastening the emergence of a cash-based economy and slowly altering the importance of traditional extended family networks.

To prepare the islands for self-rule, the US convened the Congress of the TTPI in 1964, with representatives attending from the regions of present-day Palau, the Northern Mariana Islands, Marshall Islands, and the FSM. The US tasked the attending delegates with negotiating the terms of the diverse island groups' relationships with the US and the form in which they would organize politically.

During the negotiations, the delegates created a new territorial designation, the Freely Associated State (FAS). The FAS terms gave the US government special military (notably nuclear) rights in exchange for financial aid and other privileges, such as citizens' right to live and work in the US. Not only did the island groups have to decide whether to ratify the FAS compact with the US, but also whether to join together as a political union or as independent nations.



The proposal was controversial across the region. Disagreements between US and the island groups' delegates over foreign policy, maritime boundaries, and fishing rights led to delays in the negotiations. Nevertheless, in 1978, residents of the Trust Territories voted on a proposed Constitution (see *Political and Social Relations*) that won majority approval in Chuuk, Kosrae, Pohnpei, and Yap, while losing approval in Palau and the Marshall Islands. As Palau and the Marshall Islands had rejected the accord, the US continued negotiating

independently with their delegations. For the districts of Pohnpei, Chuuk, Kosrae, and Yap, there was an electoral mandate to proceed with self-rule, as the leaders of each island already had agreed to enter a political union together. Consequently, with the vote, the modern borders of the FSM were drawn.



### Independence

After ratifying the 1978 Constitution, the FSM adopted it in 1979 (see *Political and Social Relations*). Thereafter, the new Congress elected Tosiwo

Nakayama, a representative of Chuuk and former President of the Congress of the TTPI, as the FSM's first President. Nakayama, of Micronesian and Japanese descent, oversaw the transfer of responsibilities from the US to FSM authorities and negotiated the country's Compact of Free Association (COFA) (see *Political and Social Relations*) with the US. In the agreement, the US retained the right to establish and operate military installations in the FSM in exchange for US funding and the right for Micronesians to live and work in the US as non-immigrants. The COFA was finalized in 1986 and took effect on November 3 of that year, today celebrated as the FSM's Independence Day.

**Early Challenges:** Upon gaining independence, the FSM became a member of the UN and sought to develop its economy, particularly by building infrastructure. Nevertheless, financial challenges, notably on Chuuk, which faced high unemployment, led to economic hardship for many Micronesians (see *Economics and Resources*). Many citizens taking advantage of the COFA provisions moved to Hawaii or the US territories of Saipan or Guam to work. In 1996-97, a series of typhoons and mudslides caused widespread damage to the country, an issue exacerbated by serious drought the following year. A cholera outbreak on Pohnpei also led to the death of several residents, compounding the difficulties facing the newly independent FSM.

As financial challenges and differences between the four states mounted, fears arose that the FSM could break into independent countries with the expiration of the COFA in 2003. Nevertheless, a lack of political will to potentially re-negotiate four separate COFA agreements, and an informal power-sharing agreement, whereby Congress rotates the Presidency between states, allowed the country to remain a single nation. In 2004, the FSM renewed the COFA for another 20 years.

### **The FSM in the 21st Century**

In the early 21st century, but especially during its second COFA period, the FSM began to play a more important role among Pacific Island nations, particularly regarding environmental and conservation issues. In 2002, prior to the COFA renegotiation, the Micronesia Conservation Trust was founded in the FSM and aimed to finance projects to preserve the region's environment. In 2006, the FSM joined a Palauan initiative, the "Micronesia Challenge," in which signatories agreed to conserve at least 30% of coastal marine and 20% of terrestrial resources by 2020.

Likewise, President Emanuel Mori's administration (2007-15) highlighted the importance of conservation to Micronesian interests. The President lobbied the UN for more robust climate conservation commitments from large countries and raised the issue of petroleum contamination in Chuuk Lagoon stemming from sunken WWII boats. Mori's successor, President Peter Christian, echoed this sentiment and called for emergency protocols to enforce emissions caps on large countries, citing increasingly extreme weather as a threat to Pacific Island nations.



**Chuuk's Independence Movement:** In 2015, representatives from Chuuk initiated talks to explore seceding from the FSM to form an independent nation. While the Chuukese commission

prepared to study the proposal, which most residents in the state supported, many Chuukese working in US territories were vocal critics of the move, particularly after the US stated it would refuse COFA status to an independent Chuuk. Since 2015, the proposed referendum has been delayed repeatedly.

**Shifting Regional Relations:** Meanwhile, in the late 2010s, the FSM became a central figure in the region's relations with China, highlighted by increased technical and economic cooperation between the two countries (see *Political and Social Relations*). After his election in 2019 and during the initial years of his Presidency, President David Panuelo accepted significant Chinese investment and reiterated his country's close ties with China. He also repeatedly highlighted that their bilateral cooperation did not extend to military affairs and publicly urged

other nations in the region not to host Chinese military bases. By the end of his term, however, Panuelo's relations with China had deteriorated.



In 2021, the FSM joined other Micronesian nations in suspending

participation in the Pacific Islands Forum, an international organization that focuses on regional issues, due to a dispute over Micronesian states' representation in the group. While the move imperiled diplomatic relations in Oceania, in early 2023, Micronesian nations announced that they would not withdraw after their leaders reached a deal with the body's Secretary-General. The agreement formalized the rotation of the forum's leadership between regions in Oceania and promised that the subsequent Secretary-General would be from Micronesia. These accords also designated the FSM as the permanent seat of the Micronesian Presidents' Summit, a multilateral conference between the region's heads-of-state.

In September 2022, then-US President Biden hosted several Pacific Island nations, including the FSM, at a multilateral summit meant to strengthen ties in the region. In March 2023,

the FSM held federal elections. In early May, the new Congress appointed Wesley Simina, who previously served as Governor and Senator of Chuuk, as President, the position he is set to hold until 2027. Later in May, the FSM and the US concluded COFA negotiations by signing an agreement to renew the compact that would extend US economic assistance for development, the environment, and other strategic areas for the next 20 years.

## Myth

In contrast to history, which is supposed to be an objective record of the past based on verifiable facts, myths embody a culture's values and often explain the origins of humans and the natural world. Myths are important because they provide a sense of unique heritage and identity. Many Micronesian myths tell the stories of early Pacific islanders or are semi-fictionalized tales of legendary warriors, who became famous for their bravery during various conflicts. Some of these stories were recorded by *itang* (trained storytellers of oral histories in Chuuk – see *Learning and Knowledge*), who studied traditional myths and folk knowledge.

### The Saudeleur Dynasty:

Myths tracing the origins of the Saudeleur dynasty begin with the arrival of two sorcerers, brothers named Olisihpa and Olosohpa, from a foreign land called Katau, to the west of Pohnpei. According to one myth, the brothers used magic and the help of a dragon to move the large basalt pillars to build *Nan Madol*, which they constructed to worship Nahnisohn Sahpw, their god of agriculture. After Olisihpa died of old age, Olosohpa married a local woman and founded the ruling Saudeleur dynasty of the Dipwilap clan, which conquered all of Pohnpei.

Oral histories state that at *Nan Madol* the Saudeleurs worshipped eels, feeding them ritually prepared turtle meat during important religious events. Myths also relate that the Saudeleurs, who initially ruled Pohnpei fairly, became



increasingly powerful and repressed successive generations. Their repeated transgressions and desire for power offended not only local subjects, but also important deities.

**Isokelekel:** Myths on Pohnpei and Kosrae claim that Isokelekel, the semi-mythical warrior who defeated the Saudeleurs, is the son of the thunder god Nansapwe (or Nan Djapue) and another member of the god's clan. Before his birth, Isokelekel learned



*Sereila-Pafu, Strong Jil.*

that he was destined to avenge his father, who was imprisoned by the despotic Saudeleur chief of Pohnpei.

To fulfill his duty as he came of age, Isokelekel sailed to *Nan Madol* from Kosrae with his warriors and tricked the Saudeleur chief into

receiving them. After the Saudeleurs held a welcome feast in honor of Isokelekel, a fight broke out between the locals and the Kosraean warriors. A battle for control of *Nan Madol* ensued, with Isokelekel's Kosraean troops incurring heavy casualties. To prevent a retreat, Isokelekel stuck a spear in the foot of his deputy, Nahnisen, an act which rooted the warriors to their spot and forced them to fight even more valiantly.

Eventually, the Kosraean forces turned the tide of the battle and ousted the Saudeleur dynasty from *Nan Madol*. To avoid capture, the defeated Saudeleur chief transformed into a fish and escaped into the sea, where he is said to remain. Isokelekel then established a new political order on Pohnpei. He delegated power to other high-ranking chiefs, Nahnisen, and himself. As such, Isokelekel established the *Nahnmwarki* lineages that remain in Pohnpei today.

Isokelekel ruled on Pohnpei as a *Nahnmwarki* for several years, growing old in his position. Myths suggest that Isokelekel also established a lesser class of chiefs, *Nahnkan*, to serve as the *Nahnmwarkis'* deputies, and instituted new social codes for the residents of the entire island. After a long rule, Isokelekel was buried in a crypt on Temwen Island, off the coast of Pohnpei.

## 2. POLITICAL AND SOCIAL RELATIONS

### Official Name

Federated States of Micronesia (FSM)

### Political Borders

Coastline: 3,798 mi

### Capital

Palikir

### Demographics

The FSM, also known simply as Micronesia (see *History and Myth*), has a population of about 99,600 that is growing at an annual rate of around -0.73%. Some 77% of Micronesians live in rural areas (see *Family and Kinship*). The population primarily concentrates on islands in Chuuk Lagoon and on Pohnpei Island in two of the country's four states – Chuuk and Pohnpei. Although the FSM consists of hundreds of small islands, only about 65 are inhabited.

### Flag

Adopted in 1978, the FSM's flag has a light blue background with four five-pointed white stars arranged in a diamond in the center. The blue signifies the Pacific Ocean, and the stars represent the four island groups, and states, of the FSM: Chuuk, Kosrae, Pohnpei, and Yap.



expansive archipelago that also includes Palau. The FSM's total land area is 436 sq mi, slightly larger than New York City, and its islands are scattered over one million sq mi of ocean, an area about one third the size of the continental US. The largest island cluster and state is Pohnpei, comprising a main island of the same name and several others that are home to some 36,896



### Geography

The FSM comprises over 600 islands in the central and eastern portions of the Pacific Ocean's Caroline Islands, an

residents, according to the FSM's 2021 census. The second largest and most populous state is Chuuk, which has 49,595 residents as of 2021. Kosrae is slightly smaller than Chuuk and has about 6,744 residents, while Yap is the smallest and has some 11,597 residents.



The FSM's islands generally divide into four groups based on culture and location.

Geologically diverse, each state except Kosrae has both mountainous volcanic islands and low-lying atolls (ring-shaped islands at least partly made of coral). Yap (also called Wa'ab) is the westernmost state. It consists of four main islands with rolling hills and dense forests connected by man-made bridges and over 130 smaller islands. Chuuk is to the east of Yap and primarily consists of volcanic rock, featuring mountainous terrain encircled by reefs. Most Chuukese reside on islands around Chuuk Lagoon, while about 20% live on "outer islands" outside of the lagoon. Pohnpei is to the east of Chuuk. It has coastal mangrove swamps and hilly tropical rainforests in the interior. Palikir, the country's capital, lies on the northwestern side of Pohnpei Island. Kosrae is the easternmost state and has two mountainous islands connected by a causeway. It is the only state that has no outer islands. Located near the center of Pohnpei, Mount Nanlaud is the FSM's highest point, reaching 2,566 ft.



### **Climate**

The FSM has a hot and humid tropical climate with little variation in temperature, averaging 81-83°F. Rainfall averages about 120-140 in-per-year in Yap and Chuuk. Pohnpei and Kosrae receive some 190-200 in, and some interior areas up to 300 in. Typhoon (known as hurricane in the Western Hemisphere) season typically occurs between June-November, with a drier season from December-April.



## Natural Hazards

The FSM is vulnerable to natural hazards including typhoons, coastal flooding, soil erosion, and extreme heat. While some of the FSM sits outside the normal range of typhoons in the Pacific, these storms hit Yap and Chuuk about nine times-per-year, often causing flooding and infrastructure damage. In 2015, Typhoon Maysak caused extensive damage to many homes in Yap and Chuuk, killing five people and destroying crops and buildings.

## Environmental Issues

The effects of climate change, overfishing, lack of wastewater treatment facilities, and pollution have degraded the FSM's ocean environment. To combat this environmental damage, the government passed the Sanctuary and Wildlife Act in 2011 to protect reefs and mangroves. The law established four protected sites in Pohnpei's protected areas network (PAN), significantly increasing conservation in Pohnpei. Today, each state has its own PAN to focus on conservation. Additionally, since 2006, the FSM has worked with Palau, Guam, the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI), and the Northern Mariana Islands to conserve terrestrial and near-shore marine resources as part of the Micronesia Challenge (see *History and Myth*). In 2019, President David Panuelo shared an update on the progress of the initiative, which has protected over 1,300 fish and hundreds of coral

species. He also announced the Micronesia Challenge's new goal to conserve at least 30% of sea territory by 2030.



## Government

The FSM is a federal presidential republic divided into four states, each of which is led by a popularly elected governor and has a single-chamber legislature. Adopted in 1979 and amended in

1990, the FSM's Constitution separates power among the executive, legislative, and judicial branches, and outlines residents' basic rights and freedoms.

## Executive Branch

Executive power is vested in the President, who is both chief-of-state and head-of-government. An eight-member Cabinet and Vice President (VP) support the President. Both the President and VP are elected and appointed by members of Congress to serve 4-year terms. The President appoints Cabinet Members and Supreme Court Justices with approval from Congress.

President Wesley Simina of Chuuk took office in 2023 during the first regular session of the FSM's 23rd Congress. Following the death of former VP Yosiwo George, current VP Aren Palik of Kosrae took office in 2023.



## Legislative Branch

The single-chamber National Congress consists of 14 members. While citizens of each state elect one Senator to serve a 4-year term, the other 10 Senators are elected in single-seat constituencies by proportional representation of the population and serve 2-year terms. All representatives run as independent candidates. Congress is responsible for enacting legislation, electing and appointing the President and VP, and approving the President's appointments of Cabinet Members and Supreme Court justices by two-thirds majority vote.

## Judicial Branch

The judiciary is based on a combination of common and customary laws. The judiciary's highest court, the Supreme Court, consists of one Chief Justice and a maximum of five associate judges. The Chief Justice and judges are appointed for life by the President and approved by Congress. Other courts are the State Courts and municipal courts.

## Political Climate

The FSM has maintained a democratic system since adopting its Constitution in 1979. The federal and local government structures mirror those of the US as prescribed in the Compact

of Free Association (COFA, see *History and Myth*). Like in the US, each state's Constitution establishes directly elected governors. Additionally, traditional leaders, such as chiefs and elders, influence society, notably at the village level (see *History and Myth*). For example, Yap's Constitution recognizes the Council of Pilung, consisting of 10 chiefs, and Council of Tamol, with 20 chiefs, who oversee traditional and cultural customs and resolve conflict among villages and villagers.

The FSM has no political parties. Rather, politicians run on individual platforms promoting various ideologies. Generally, observers consider elections free and fair. Although women are

free to engage in elections, their participation is minimal (see *Sex and Gender*).



While the FSM maintains an overall stable political climate, some instances of government corruption and secessionist movements have

occurred in recent years. Observers note various instances of corruption, ranging from money laundering to exerting undue pressure on the judiciary. In 2021, some 80% of Micronesians believe government corruption is a big problem and 58% of people had been offered a bribe for a vote. While the Attorney General's Office identifies and investigates corruption cases, unethical officials often experience impunity.

Additionally, periods of political debate occur regarding Chuuk seceding from the FSM (see *History and Myth*). Some Chuukese politicians advocate for Chuuk's independence and cite distribution of funds as a primary motive, though Chuuk does receive significant COFA funding for educational and health programs, among others. Opponents often argue that separation is unconstitutional. In 2012, the Chuuk Political Status Commission was created to study political options for Chuuk's independence. However, due in part to the COVID-19 pandemic (see *Sustenance and Health*), a referendum on independence was delayed several times and rescheduled for 2022. As of

2025, the vote has still not occurred, and the Chuuk Political Status Commission is unstaffed due to lack of funding.

**COFA:** Signed initially in 1986, the COFA outlines the terms of the FSM's special association with the US. The COFA recognizes FSM citizens' sovereign right to self-determination and their voluntary participation in the COFA, among other terms. The agreement allows the FSM to develop and conduct its own foreign and environmental policies and outlines various aspects of its relations with the US. Micronesians are granted freedom of travel to the US without visas for education, residency, and employment. Further, the COFA stipulates that the US will provide financial assistance to the FSM and allows the US to establish and operate military installations on FSM territory. In 2023, the US and the FSM concluded negotiations to renew the COFA, US President Biden signed it into law on March 9, 2024 extending the compact for another 20 years (see *History and Myth*).

## Defense

Since the FSM has no military, the US provides for the FSM's defense and permits Micronesians to join the US military under the terms of the COFA. As of 2019, some 1,500 Micronesians serve as volunteers in the US Armed Forces. In 2021, the FSM and the US reached an agreement to build a US military base in the FSM, though the location is not yet determined. The FSM National Police provide local law enforcement, medical evacuation and emergency relief, and protection of foreign diplomats and government officials.

## Security Issues

### Human Trafficking:

This illegal practice poses a threat to the FSM, especially women. In 2019, American Rachelle



Bergeron, who served as Attorney General on Yap, was murdered. Many observers believe this crime, for which two men were convicted in 2023, was connected to her focus on combating human trafficking in the FSM. Foreign migrant

workers and women are most at risk of sex trafficking and exploitative labor practices. Although forced labor and trafficking are illegal in the FSM, the government fails to protect vulnerable people by providing lenient sentences for trafficking and denying support for survivors. In 2019, a human trafficker was sentenced to only 3 months imprisonment and fined \$100, while two other human traffickers were sentenced to 1 and 7 years. Training for law enforcement and judicial officials is also insufficient.

**Illegal Fishing:** Unlicensed Vietnamese “blue boats” (see *Economics and Resources*) and those from other countries have engaged in illegal fishing in FSM waters, undermining environmental protection. Since 2006, the FSM has cooperated with 24 members of the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission to conserve and manage fish stocks. Even deterrence and cooperative measures fail to prevent illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing. Consequently, this practice continues to threaten FSM security, as police struggle to enforce fishing regulations. Between 2014-16, the FSM arrested roughly 135 fishermen from about nine “blue boats.” The US Coast Guard formally agreed to conduct fisheries enforcement on the FSM’s behalf in 2023, making it the first agreement between the US Coast Guard and a sovereign country in Oceania.



### Foreign Relations

The FSM is a member of international peace and economic organizations, such as the United Nations (UN),

International Monetary Fund, and World Bank. The FSM is also a member of regional organizations, such as the Pacific Islands Forum – a regional cooperative group with 18 member states, among them Australia, the Cook Islands, Fiji, French Polynesia, Kiribati, Nauru, New Caledonia, New Zealand, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, the RMI, Samoa, the Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu. Despite a period of contention over representation and threats to leave the organization, the FSM recently announced its plan to remain a part of the Forum (see *History and Myth*).

In addition, the FSM shares close ties with Palau and the RMI as independent nations protected by US Forces under their own COFAs and as part of the geocultural group of tropical western Pacific Islands collectively called Micronesia (see *History and Myth*). The FSM also maintains close diplomatic relations with the Holy See (the governing body of the Roman Catholic Church at the Vatican in Rome), Australia, Japan, China, and the US.

**Relations with Australia:** The FSM and Australia established diplomatic relations in 1987. Traditionally, Australia's financial aid to the FSM has prioritized economic and educational opportunities for women and girls, disaster relief, and combating climate change. The FSM and Australia share various bilateral agreements and programs, notably in education, economic growth, sustainable development, tourism, and trade. Since 1990, both countries have participated in the Pacific Maritime Security Program (formerly the Pacific Patrol Boat Program) that focuses on regional security for countries in Oceania and Timor-Leste. Since 2016, the FSM has received multiple patrol boats from Australia to help with maritime security efforts.



In addition, the Australian Infrastructure Financing Facility for the Pacific plans to improve Internet connectivity in the FSM (see *Technology and Material*). In 2022, Australia signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the FSM, US, Japan, Nauru, and Kiribati to assist with Internet improvement through submarine cables in the FSM, Nauru, and Kiribati.

**Relations with Japan:** As a former Japanese colony (see *History and Myth*), the FSM's language, culture, and family genealogies still retain significant Japanese influence (see *Language and Communication*). The FSM and Japan established diplomatic relations in 1988. In 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic, Japan provided the FSM with \$3.5 million of Japanese medical equipment. In 2023, then-President

Panuelo and Japanese Prime Minister Kishida Fumio celebrated 35 years of diplomatic relations and confirmed cooperation in maritime security with respect to the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. In 2023, Japan also donated about \$2.7 million for medical equipment and four small patrol boats to help protect the Micronesian coastline.

**Relations with China:** The FSM and China established diplomatic relations in 1989. Despite close relations with the US, the FSM remains neutral regarding various contentious issues, notably China's policy on Taiwan. During his term, President



Panuelo frequently voiced concern regarding the impact of the US and China's strained relations on regional security and stability.

In recent years, the FSM and China have shared close diplomatic and economic ties, collaborating on issues like infrastructure development, medicine, and security. Between 1990-2021, China provided over \$100 million in aid to the FSM. In 2018, President Christian signed an MOU to join China's Belt and Road Initiative, a global infrastructure development strategy. In 2022, China gifted a cargo and passenger ship to the FSM, making it the third ship that China has donated to the country. However, in 2023, then-President Panuelo accused China of "political warfare," noting China's persistent attempts to bribe Micronesian officials. Consequently, Panuelo threatened to switch diplomatic recognition from China to Taiwan, placing significant stress on bilateral relations, though tensions have since decreased.

**Relations with the US:** The FSM's relations with the US government date to the end of World War II when the US administered the FSM (then part of the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands) on the UN's behalf from 1947 until the FSM's independence in 1986 (see *History and Myth*). Since then, the FSM and the US have maintained close diplomatic ties regulated

by the COFA. As of 2021, the US has provided the FSM an average of over \$116 million of annual financial aid, mainly to promote economic development and improvements in education, infrastructure, health, public sector capacity building, private sector development, and the environment. In 2023, the US planned to provide the FSM over \$82 million in financial aid for government operations, health programs (see *Sustenance and Health*), and infrastructure development.

Some FSM citizens live, work, and study in the US – this right is granted by the COFA. Besides serving in the military, Micronesians have attended US universities for decades. For example, President Simina attended the University of Hawaii. Additionally, the US has committed to participate in numerous Oceania regional programs with the FSM, primarily focusing on combating climate change and protecting oceanic resources. Further, the FSM has one of the highest voting coincidences with the US at the UN, a common indicator of countries' alignment on policy and international cooperation.

## Ethnic Groups

According to the FSM's 2021 census, about 49% of residents identify as Chuukese, a term which typically refers to people from Chuuk State. Other ethnic groups include Pohnpeian (30%), Kosraean (6%), Yapese (6%), Yap outer islanders (5%), Polynesian (2%), Asian (1%), and other (0.8%). Most FSM citizens identify as Micronesian, except in the southwestern region of Pohnpei state, on the islands of Kapingamarangi and Nukuoro, where residents are Polynesian and speak a language unrelated to Pohnpeian (see *Language and Communication*).



Micronesians' cultures and languages vary, and most residents identify with ethnolinguistic groups. For example, most Yap Island residents speak Yapese (see *Language and Communication*), while inhabitants of Yap's outer islands have cultures and languages more like the people of Chuuk State. Kosrae is the only state without much ethnolinguistic diversity,



as nearly all residents identify as Kosraean. The FSM is also home to some small immigrant groups, notably from Palau and the Philippines.



## Social Relations

Traditionally, Micronesian society divided along male-female, clan (extended family), and village federation lines (see *History and Myth* and *Family and Kinship*). While these divisions are

less prominent today, the FSM generally remains a matrilineal society in which bloodlines and land ownership are traced through the mother's side of the family (see *Sex and Gender*). Likewise, clan-based relationships that were historically important still play some role in politics today.

Traditionally, Micronesians considered genealogy, age, and title the most important social indicators. While these factors remain important, today, social divisions focus more on income, wealth, and class. Symbols of economic success include Western-style houses (see *Family and Kinship*) and dress (see *Aesthetics and Recreation*), cars, and home appliances. As of 2021, about 41% of the population lives below the US poverty line (see *Economics and Resources*). Poverty rates are highest in Chuuk (46%) and lowest in Kosrae (21%).

In part due to poverty, many Micronesians have left the FSM for education and job opportunities, as well as health services (see *Sustenance and Health*), in US territories and states, such as nearby Guam and Hawaii. As of 2023, more than 18,000 Micronesians live in Hawaii, where they often face prejudice and racism and struggle to find employment. In 2021, Hawaiian police shot and killed a 16-year-old Micronesian boy in Honolulu, sparking public outcry and media coverage. Although the police claimed the boy was driving a stolen car connected to a robbery, many Hawaiian residents viewed the incident as unnecessary police brutality involving racial inequality.

### 3. RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY

#### Overview

The Federated States of Micronesia (FSM) is around 95% Christian, with the Roman Catholic Church and several Protestant denominations present across the FSM's four states. Recent government surveys claim Micronesians are about 55% Catholic and 41% Protestant, while some 3% practice indigenous religions and <1% are members of other religious groups, including Baha'is, Buddhists, Hindus, Jews, and Muslims.

The Constitution defines the FSM as a secular state, recognizes religious freedom, and declares that the government may not compel, prohibit, or hinder the exercise of religion. While the law prohibits religious instruction in public schools, it allows the FSM to provide assistance to "private or parochial" religious schools for "nonreligious purposes" (see *Learning and Knowledge*). The FSM does not require religious organizations to register with the state.

#### Early Spiritual Landscape

Scholars believe that early inhabitants led rich spiritual lives and recognized several spirits and gods, who constructed the universe and influenced daily life. Linguistically and culturally fractured between Micronesian and Polynesian cultures (see *Political and Social Relations* and *Language and Communication*), Micronesians living on different islands tended to have their own unique mythologies.

Generally, Micronesians divided their spirits into various classes, the most important of which were the sky gods – Anulap, Luuk, and Olofat in Chuuk. Beneath the primary deities, Micronesians categorized their secondary deities into the locations of sky, sea,



and under the sea. Secondary deities were likely akin to the Catholic concept of patron saints and included cultural heroes, who brought technology or battle victory to humans. Given the relative isolation of each Micronesian island group (see *Political and Social Relations*), gods with different names often carried out the same functions.

Micronesians also held ancestral spirits in high regard. The most elaborate rituals involved the souls of deceased relatives, whose ambiguous characters could make them either troublesome or helpful to their living relatives. To worship their ancestors, Micronesians offered food and other items of value for guidance, curses, advice, divination, and even inspiration for dance (see *Aesthetics and Recreation*). One custom of ancestor worship is for mourners to wait 3-4 days after a relative's death for the soul to leave the home (see *Family and Kinship*).

Unlike many other religions, early Micronesian spirituality did not include worship at temples. Instead, Micronesians built small shrines, where followers worshipped their ancestors or deities. Occasionally, Micronesians considered a basalt stone monolith (see *History and Myth*) either the incarnation of a founding ancestor or a place for coronation and ritual. On the volcanic islands of Kosrae and Pohnpei, Micronesians built huge basaltic platforms for ceremonies. On Yap, residents constructed such platforms for religious leaders' homes. On Pohnpei, **Nan Madol** ("Within the Intervals") was an administrative and religious



center where locals likely worshipped Nahnisohn Sahpw, the god of agriculture (see of *History and Myth*).

Micronesians performed rituals for crises, rites of passage, and reconciliation. Priests

across the islands hosted elaborate ceremonies in which they sacrificed turtles to appease sacred eel spirits, often represented by real eels, which was meant to yield a plentiful breadfruit harvest (see *History and Myth*). Micronesians held similar practices for coronations and transfers of power. Dancing was

another powerful religious ritual throughout Micronesia, and many dances accompanied the worship of food sources, such as the land or sea (see *Aesthetics and Recreation*).

### Arrival of Christianity

After Spanish explorers briefly visited Micronesia in the mid-16th century (see *History and Myth*), no major contact persisted, and European religious traditions did not take root in the region. In 1852, Protestant missionaries from the US arrived on Pohnpei and Kosrae to establish congregational churches (a sect of Protestant Christianity in which churches are largely self-governed), though a smallpox outbreak limited their ability to spread their religious beliefs. Nevertheless, due in part to the missionaries' persistence, nearly the entire population of Kosrae had converted to Christianity by the 1870s. Throughout the 1880s, European missionaries, specifically German and Spanish Capuchins (a Roman Catholic religious order), sought to expand the Micronesian Catholic communities on Pohnpei and Yap.



With the growth of this European presence on the Caroline Archipelago, in 1885, Pope Leo XIII (leader of the Roman Catholic Church in Rome, Italy) settled German and Spanish territorial disputes with the Protocol of Rome. This document recognized Spain's territorial control over Micronesia and allowed German missionaries and businesses to continue their activities (see *History and Myth*). Spain, having cemented its control over the region, established a religious order at the settlement of Colonia on Yap in the 1880s. Around the same time, *The Manila*, a Spanish steamship, brought six Capuchin missionaries to Yap, who established a school to teach Spanish writing, geography, and math. By 1887, the Capuchins had baptized about 31 Yapese residents, and Congregationalists had baptized 154 Pohnpeians.

In 1892, more Capuchins arrived on Yap, building two churches and several smaller chapels. By 1899, more than 1,000 Yapese

residents identified as Catholics. After Spain lost the Spanish-American War and sold the Caroline Islands to Germany in 1899 (see *History and Myth*), German Capuchins arrived throughout the early 1900s to teach German language classes and translate their religious materials into local languages.

Nevertheless, the German administration was short-lived. After World War I ended in 1918, Micronesia became part of Japan's South Seas Mandate, interrupting missionary efforts (see *History and Myth*). Soon after it consolidated control of the region, Japan allowed missionary work to resume, so long as the missionaries were from a neutral country, not a Central Powers nation (see *History and Myth*). Therefore, Japan allowed Spanish Jesuits (another Catholic order) to preach in Micronesia, but prohibited further German missionary work.

In 1925, Spanish Jesuits baptized a powerful Yapese chief and his family. The chief's conversion inspired many of the remaining non-Christian Yapese residents to convert. More chiefs across the islands followed suit from 1928-32. After World War II (see *History and Myth*), more foreign priests traveled to the region. American Jesuits led the charge, opening Catholic schools and ordaining Micronesian deacons from 1953-75. With local leadership's approval, Catholic and Protestant schools became

centers of economic and cultural life).

### Religion Today

After more than a century under colonial rule, today, Christianity is a core component of many Micronesians' spiritual identity. Further, many Christian groups



credit their missionary work with ending hostilities between rival villages (see *History and Myth*) and perceive their religion as a necessary precursor for peace and unity in the FSM. While the FSM is a predominantly Christian nation, since becoming independent and signing the Compact of Free Association with the US in 1986 (see *History and Myth*), it has welcomed many religious minorities from other countries. A few foreign residents

practice the Baha'i Faith (a religion that combines aspects of Islam with a belief in the unity of all religions and humanity), Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, and Islam.

Some Micronesians claim that across various Christian groups "competitive church building is a national sport" because rival churches seek to expand their membership across the FSM's small population. Many Micronesians combine Christian beliefs with traditional indigenous practices. To alleviate any inter-faith tensions, the FSM hosts the Interdenominational Council, which manages social issues and encourages cooperation across Micronesia's various religious groups. Although the government generally upholds religious freedom, the country's small Muslim community faces significant discrimination from Micronesians, and Muslims accuse FSM police of not responding to their safety concerns. Even though religiously affiliated education is not offered in public schools, some residents attend private religious schools.



**Catholicism:** More than half of Micronesians are Roman Catholic. The most Catholic islands are Yap and Chuuk, where over 60% of residents identify as Catholics. Based at the Cathedral of the Immaculate Heart of Mary in Chuuk, the Catholic Diocese of Caroline Islands manages Catholic religious life across the FSM and Palau. In the FSM, Micronesian spirituality has merged with Catholic practices to form an array of unique cultural traditions. In some communities in Yap, **doloolow** (public wailing) is a practice that originates in indigenous funeral rituals. Today, some women sit around the image of Jesus Christ and wail to recount and mourn his passing. Likewise, some Micronesians incorporate traditional indigenous dances into some of their Catholic practices, such as recounting Easter and Christmas stories through dance. In addition to the Micronesian Catholic community, the FSM is home to around 1,000 Catholic Filipinos.

**Other Christian Groups:** Most Micronesian Protestants belong to the United Church of Christ, which has roots in congregational churches. Other Christian groups are Baptists, Assemblies of God, Pentecostals, the Apostolic Church, the Salvation Army, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Seventh Day Adventists, and Jehovah's Witnesses. Nearly all Kosraeans and about half of Pohnpeians are Protestant.

Traditional Micronesian customs influence local Protestant practices and celebrations, such as Christmas and Easter feasts, with a ***mwiich*** (a lengthy gathering where young people present dramatizations of each feast's events). The FSM's congregational churches rotate pastors once or twice per year, with residents providing new pastors with gifts from their communities. Another unique Christmas tradition is Operation Christmas Drop, a US Air Force humanitarian aid training mission in which Air Force volunteers distribute gifts to the FSM and other countries in Oceania. Many Fijian people are part of Protestant communities on Chuuk and Pohnpei, and the



Philippines-based ***Iglesia Ni Cristo*** (Church of Christ) has a location in Pohnpei.

### **Indigenous Religions:**

While only about 2,000 Micronesians report their primary religion as indigenous, many practice

indigenous religions along with their Christian beliefs. The FSM has no unified traditional religious beliefs that span all the islands. While often similar, the residents of different island groups still tend to have their own deities, beliefs, and customs. Today, indigenous religious practices typically include ancestor worship and dances that portray local mythologies.

**Other Religious Groups:** While the number of adherents is unclear but probably less than 1,000 people, the FSM is likely home to several hundred Baha'is. Islam is also present in the FSM. The 45-person Ahmadiyya Muslim community manages at least one building on Pohnpei and is present in Kosrae. Although religious schools are a prevalent institution across the FSM, the country has no non-Christian religious schools.

## 4. FAMILY AND KINSHIP

### Overview

Clans (extended families) are the foundation of Micronesian society, and most trace their ancestry through the mother's side of the family (see *Sex and Gender*). Clans typically serve as economic, social, and emotional support systems for relatives.

### Residence

Only about 23% of Micronesians live in urban areas, primarily on the main islands in Chuuk and Pohnpei (see *Political and Social Relations*). Housing conditions tend to vary by income level. Traditionally, houses were made of wooden posts with earthen floors, thatched roofs, and woven pandanus (screw pine, a palm-like plant) mats as interior walls. Today, the use of modern building materials is increasingly common. Many families live in cement houses with glass windows and flat tin or cement roofs. Traditional **pe'ebai** (community meeting houses, see *Aesthetics and Recreation*) are still popular gathering spaces for community events.



Between 2000-22, access to electricity in urban areas rapidly increased from about 70% to 99%. During the same period, rural electricity access increased from around 39% to 79%. Due to widely available electricity, many urban residents have electric stoves and other appliances such as rice cookers (see *Sustenance and Health*). Many homes also have modern kitchens and bathrooms. In rural areas and on outer islands, bathrooms and cooking areas tend to be in buildings separate from the main house. Rural residents often cook on kerosene stoves, in earthen ovens, or over open fires in shared cookhouses on family plots of land (also called family compounds) or in villages. Family compounds also typically include an open-air house for gatherings and social events, as well as for relaxing and sleeping on hot nights.



## Family Structure

Familial relationships are an integral aspect of Micronesian daily life and social organization. Extended family members often live in the same household, on shared property, or nearby in the same neighborhood. Most traditional communities, except for on Yap and some smaller islands in Pohnpei, maintained a matrilineal structure, whereby ancestry, identity, and property are acquired through women. Accordingly, family structures placed the mother as head-of-household. However, today, the father is more often the breadwinner and head-of-household in many families (see *Sex and Gender*). Micronesians tend to

highly respect their elders and often care for their elderly as they age. After marrying, many men move to their wife's village or neighborhood.

## Children

Historically, Micronesians had many children, but today, usually just 2-3

(see *Sex and Gender*). Extended family members typically assist with raising the children, some of whom live with relatives, such as aunts and uncles. Many families expect boys and girls to contribute to maintaining the home from an early age. Boys often learn to fish, while girls typically weave and assist in caring for younger siblings. Parents, relatives, and community members often discipline children by evoking shame or occasionally using corporal punishment.

**Birth:** Due to historically high infant mortality rates (see *Sustenance and Health*), Micronesians typically do not celebrate the birth of a child until at least 1 year after birth. While mothers are usually the primary caregivers, older siblings, fathers, extended family, and neighbors often assist in infant care. Many infants sleep in the same bed with their parents. Breastfeeding is also common. Although recent data is unavailable, as of 1999, about 60% of children breastfed, similar to nearby Palau (59%) in 1995 and significantly higher than the Philippines (38%) in 1998.



**Rites of Passage:** Micronesian Christians (see *Religion and Spirituality*) mark life's milestones with various rites of passage. Christian families tend to baptize babies within a few weeks of birth. Some children celebrate communion and confirmation into the Catholic community (see *Religion and Spirituality*). On Yap, many boys partake in a hair-cutting ceremony, which marks the end of adolescence. Women's houses traditionally provided a gathering and living space for menstruating women, although fewer women use them today.

Historically, men and women practiced tattooing to mark early adulthood or puberty. Traditional tattoos were made with soot and represented status, strength, and personal preference. Today, traditional tattoos have become increasingly rare.

**Dating & Courtship:** Micronesians often date discreetly, as many residents consider public displays of affection inappropriate (see *Time and Space*). Traditionally, men in Chuuk carved "love sticks" and pushed them through the walls of a courted woman's home. The woman knew her suitor by the stick's elaborate carvings and accordingly decided whether she would join him outside as a sign of her interest. Today, some Micronesians still perform "night crawling," whereby men go to the window of a woman's home to ask her out on a date. Many Micronesians meet potential partners through friends in their community.

## Marriage

Marriage is an important rite of passage in Micronesian society. In the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), each state determines the legal marriage age. Micronesians typically marry in their 20s and consider marriage not only a union between two individuals, but also between their families and clans. Yap has no minimum legal age for marriage. In Chuuk and Kosrae, the minimum age is 18 for males and 16 for females, with girls under 18 requiring parental consent. In Pohnpei, the legal marriage age is 18 for everyone. Nevertheless, Chuuk and Pohnpei lack a minimum age for



customary marriages that often are not registered with the government, which disproportionately affects the protection of girls from child marriage.



While reported child marriage is uncommon, a review in 2017 by the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women recommended the FSM raise the national minimum legal marriage

age to 18 for girls and criminalize child marriage.

**Weddings:** Some Micronesians marry in traditional, or customary, weddings. Traditional ceremonies often comprise an exchange of money, gifts, and food between families. Today, some couples opt for a church ceremony followed by a large reception at which guests share dinner.

### **Divorce**

While precise figures are unknown, divorce in the FSM is relatively uncommon and highly stigmatized. Instead, family members typically try to help resolve the married couple's issues. The FSM also has insufficient family laws covering related issues, such as grounds for divorce and child custody.

### **Death**

Funerals are one of the most important events in traditional Micronesian society. Micronesians expect extended family members to help with arrangements by contributing food and money to cover the expenses. The family typically keeps the deceased's body in their home for 3-4 days, so that relatives and friends can visit to mourn before the burial. Unlike in daily life (see *Language and Communication*), emotional displays of sadness and despair are common at funerals. Typically, the deceased is buried on the family compound or at a nearby cemetery. On some islands, family members traditionally buried the deceased on the land where they were born or the mother's family's land. For some families, the mourning period continues for months. Micronesians commonly celebrate the anniversary of a death with a feast shared among the family or community.

## 5. SEX AND GENDER

### Overview

Historically, the Micronesian social system was matrilineal (inheritance, property, and the family name passed from mother to daughter). While much of society remains matrilineal, centuries of foreign occupation (see *History and Myth*) have somewhat changed this paradigm. Today, society is more patriarchal than it was in the past, as men hold most positions of power in government and business.

### Gender Roles and Work

**Domestic Work:** Women were historically the heads-of-household and primary decisionmakers in family affairs, though this structure has changed in recent years (see *Family and Kinship*). Women typically remain responsible for domestic work, such as cleaning, cooking, childcare, and managing the finances, while men usually work outside the home, performing manual labor like fishing. Although Micronesian men's share of household work has grown recently, women often remain the primary homemaker, and a strict division of labor is common.



**Labor Force:** As of 2014, about 46% of women worked outside the home, lower than the US rate (57%) and that of neighboring Palau (56%). Women are relatively underrepresented in the Micronesian economy. As of 2014, women held some 18% of managerial positions, significantly lower than in the US (39%) and Palau (36%). Studies indicate that women have more difficulty than men finding work after having children.

### Gender and the Law

Although the Federated States of Micronesia's (FSM) federal and state Constitutions (see *Political and Social Relations*) guarantee gender equality, protections against employment discrimination only apply to public service employees. The FSM lacks national laws for equal pay. Pohnpei is the only state with

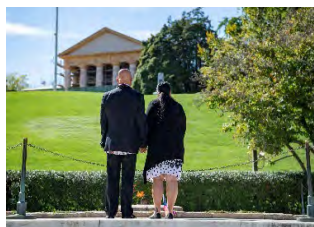
legal protections against a gender wage gap. Legal provisions for parental leave are also lacking. Since 2021, maternity leave for national government employees is 12 weeks, and Micronesian law does not guarantee maternity leave in the private sector or provide for paternity leave.

The FSM has neither national legislation against sexual harassment nor comprehensive laws covering sexual assault. The law does not recognize spousal rape. Each state has legislation on sexual relations and assault, though these laws tend to be inadequate by global standards. Although the FSM is a member of the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, it was non-

compliant on about 61% of legal compliance indicators in a 2004 review.

### Gender and Politics

Micronesians first gained the right to vote in 1978, a year prior to the country's first presidential election (see *History and Myth*). To



combat women's underrepresentation in elections (see *Political and Social Relations*), the government introduced a bill in 2012 to guarantee four seats for women in Congress. However, the bill was unsuccessful. In 2021, Dr. Perpetua Konman won a seat in Congress, making her the first elected woman in the FSM. As of 2023, women comprise 2 of 14 seats in Congress (14%), higher than Palau (6%) and the Marshall Islands (6%), but much lower than the nearby Philippines (27%) and the US (29%).

### Gender-Based Violence (GBV)

Although minimal data exists for GBV and domestic violence, the FSM's 2014 Family Health and Safety Survey found that about 33% of Micronesian women experienced sexual violence or physical abuse from an intimate partner at least once in their lifetime. According to the survey, nearly 63% of women agreed that women should obey their husbands and about 65% agreed that physical violence from a husband was acceptable in some situations. In 2014 and 2017, two states, Kosrae and Pohnpei, respectively passed laws to protect survivors of GBV. However,

the FSM fails to provide comprehensive legal protections for GBV survivors and sufficient public services, such as shelters, legal assistance, medical treatment, and psychological counselling.

Primarily due to cultural sensitivities and social stigma, child abuse and incest are underreported. To combat child abuse and sexual assault, the governments of Pohnpei and Chuuk passed the Age of Consent Law in 2019, raising the age of sexual consent to 18. Kosrae and Yap maintain the legal age of sexual consent at 13, increasing the risk of sexual abuse and violence among children.

### Sex and Procreation

The FSM's birthrate declined from 5.8 births per woman in 1960 to 2.7 in 2022, equivalent to the Philippines (2.7) but much higher than the US (1.7). While contraceptives are legal and available for free at health facilities (see *Sustenance and Health*), reported use of contraceptives is about 50% as of 2019, lower than the East Asia and Pacific region average (76%). However, the FSM's birthrate suggests that contraceptive use is likely underreported. Although the maternity mortality ratio declined from 154 deaths per 100,000 live births in 2000 to 74 in 2020, it remains much higher than the US (21), but lower than the Philippines (78). Micronesian law permits abortions only to save a woman's life.



### Homosexuality in FSM

The FSM decriminalized same-sex sexual conduct in 1986, though it recognizes neither same-sex marriage nor civil unions. Although laws protect against discrimination based on gender and sexual orientation, they lack recognition of gender identity. Due to social stigma, many homosexual persons conceal their sexual orientation to avoid conflict.

At this time, the US State Department does not have a Status of Forces Agreement in place for FSM. Service members will be subject to local laws with regards to this topic.

## 6. LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION

### Overview

The Federated States of Micronesia's (FSM's) official language is English. The FSM also recognizes four regional languages as co-official with English in their respective states – Chuukese, Pohnpeian, Kosraean, and Yapese. While English is the principal language of international business, government, and education, many Micronesians use their native language in personal and some professional settings. The four co-official indigenous languages are not mutually intelligible, so speaking one does not mean you can understand another. Therefore, English often serves as a *lingua franca*, or shared language, among the country's residents. The FSM's formal educational system uses some combination of the five co-official languages for class instruction, depending on the school's native speakers' languages (see *Learning and Knowledge*). The country is also home to 13 other indigenous languages spoken among smaller communities.

### Chuukese

This language is of the Austronesian language family that is indigenous to and spoken primarily in Chuuk, the country's most populous state (see *Political and Social Relations*). Chuukese is the first language of about 48,200 Micronesians (or some 48% of the population) and is present in Chuuk's local government, entertainment, and schools.

Christian missionaries transliterated Chuukese using the Latin alphabet in the 19th century (see *Religion and Spirituality*), creating a complete phonetic coding of the spoken

language. Chuukese has 9 vowel sounds – a, á, e, é, i, o, ó, u, and ú – and 23 consonant sounds, 12 of which do not exist in the English alphabet – ff, ss, kk, mm, mw, mmw, ng, nng, pp, pw, ppw, and tt. Some sounds that exist in English, such as b, d, g, and h, do not exist in Chuukese. Unlike many other



languages, Chuukese has the unusual element of word-initial double consonants that lengthen consonant sounds and change word meaning, such as in ***mach*** (to stink) compared to ***mmach*** (to ripen). While researchers believe that the common ancestral language of most Western Micronesian languages had this double consonant feature, Chuukese is one of the remaining few that continues its use.

### Pohnpeian

Some 29,000 Micronesians (29%) speak Pohnpeian, a Micronesian language of the Austronesian language family that is indigenous to Pohnpei, the FSM's second most populous state.



In the late 19th century, German missionaries transliterated the Pohnpeian language using the Latin alphabet and published the Bible

in Pohnpeian. In this way, the Germans created a Pohnpeian written language system in the same fashion that missionaries created the Chuukese written language. Because the FSM had so many colonial influences (see *History and Myth*), Pohnpeian employs many loanwords from Spanish, German, Japanese, and English. Most of these loanwords are neither spelled nor pronounced the same as their source language. For example, Pohnpeians translate the English word “ice” to ***ais***. Additionally, Pohnpeian uses honorifics, including both a high and low language that have distinct grammar and vocabulary, to convey social standing and respect for conversational partners.

Compared to English, Pohnpeian lacks some consonants, has an additional vowel sound – *oa*, pronounced “oa-h” – and three added consonant sounds – *mw*, *ng*, and *pw* – as the German transliterators were unable to fully classify every Pohnpeian spoken sound into existing vowels and consonants. Pohnpeian also prominently features reduplication (the doubling of part of a word) to convey emphasis or quantity, such as reduplication of the word ***tep*** (to kick) as ***tepitep*** (to kick off).



## Kosraean

Some 6,620 Micronesians (7%) speak Kosraean, which is also a Micronesian language of the Austronesian language family and indigenous to Kosrae, the FSM's least populous state.

Unlike Chuukese or Pohnpeian, Kosraean did not include a written component prior to the early 1970s. Kee-dong Lee, an American anthropologist and linguist, published the *Kusaiean Reference Grammar* in 1975 to document his research on Kosraean, building upon US Peace Corps volunteers' accounts of the local language (see *Learning and Knowledge*).

Like English, Kosraean consists of a subject, verb, object (SVO) word order that is subject to change depending on the context and emphasis of a sentence. For example, **Kuh kom mas?** (Are you okay?) has an SVO word order, but **Kuh kom fuhkah?** (How are you?) does not. Kosraean, much like Pohnpeian, uses reduplication to emphasize or alter the meaning of a word. For example, **lahs** (coral) can become **lahs-lahs** (lots of coral). Due to Kosraeans' contact with the FSM's colonial languages, it also employs loanwords, particularly from English and Japanese. For example, Kosraeans use the word **nappa** (cabbage), derived from the Japanese word for same vegetable.

## Yapese

Nearly 5,130 Micronesians (5%) speak Yapese, which is indigenous to Yap and locally known as **Wa'ab**. The language is only distantly related to the three other major indigenous languages, as it is not part of the Micronesian language group. Largely because Yapese has proven so difficult to classify, only some scholars agree that Yapese emerged from the Admiralty Islands language group, spoken largely on islands of the same name to the north of Papua New Guinea.

Yapese first appeared as a written language in a Spanish missionary's report titled **Primer Ensayo de Gramatica de la**



**Lengua de Yap** (First Essay on the Grammar of the Yap Language) in 1888. The Spanish-based spelling system endured until 1972, when the Yapese Orthography Committee created a new one. Today, Yapese retains influences from Spanish, German, Japanese, and English.

Although Yapese shares many letters with English, it has its own distinct consonant and vowel sounds, including short vowels – like a, ä, e, ë, i, o, ö, u – and long vowels – aa, ae, ee, ea, ii, oo, oe, and uu. Yapese also uses reduplication to emphasize or alter meaning, such as in the phrases **toey chop** (to chop) and **si toey chop** (to chop a little). Additionally, Yapese is distinct from the other official languages due to its use of glottalization (change in vocal fold vibration, as in the pause in the middle of “uh-oh”), which writers mark with either a “q” or an apostrophe, such as in the word **naqun** or **na’un** (home). Yapese glottalization is like the British English glottalization in the word “water,” whereby a British English speaker drops the “t” sound.

## English

Some 61,320 Micronesians (62%) speak English. Schools throughout the FSM teach the language, as many Micronesians consider English proficiency necessary to participate in global commerce. Due to the Compact of Free Association between the FSM and the US, many Micronesians also learn English to

facilitate their relocation to the US or its territories, such as Guam (see *History and Myth*).

## Other Languages

The FSM is home to 13 additional indigenous languages, many of which are spoken on the four states’ outer



islands. The other indigenous languages with the most speakers are Mortlockese (5,900 speakers), Pingelapese (4,500), Kapingamarangi (3,000), Woleaian (1,630), Puluwatese (1,500), and Pááfang (1,320). Some elderly FSM citizens speak Japanese due to Japan’s administration of Micronesia from

1914-45 (see *History and Myth*). Although some of the FSM's community of Filipinos speak Tagalog at home, many speak English in public and to converse with Micronesians.

### Communication Overview

Communicating in the FSM requires both knowledge of English and the ability to interact effectively using language. This notion of competence includes paralanguage (rate of speech, volume, intonation), nonverbal communication (personal space, touch, gestures), and interaction management (conversation initiation, turn-taking, and termination). These forms of communication ensure statements are interpreted as the speaker intends.

### Communication Style

Micronesians tend to be friendly and typically seek to maintain harmony and stability in their social interactions. Many Micronesians use polite language and avoid vulgar jokes. They also often avoid public displays of affection, which they consider a disruption to conversational harmony (see *Time and Space*). Further, Micronesians' conversations reflect their nonassertive and respectful behavior. In public, Micronesians tend to speak cautiously and avoid confrontation with others. Nevertheless, gossip is a common conversational topic and serves as an ever-present check on disrespectful or inappropriate public behavior (see "Conversational Topics" below).



Nonverbal communication is also essential in the FSM. Because many Micronesians consider sustained eye contact during conversation disrespectful or a sign of aggression, they usually look down or in another direction (see *Time and Space*). Many Micronesians indicate respect regarding family, gender, age, and political rank through nonverbal communications. Members of the same gender may hold hands as a sign of friendship, but members of different genders tend to avoid physical contact in public spaces. Similarly, wives show respect for their husbands by walking behind them or serving them first during meals. When

considering age or political status, many Micronesians serve food first to the elderly and then to those of the highest social status (see *Sustenance and Health*).

## Greetings

Micronesians consider these gestures as important means of conveying acknowledgment. While standard greetings vary by region, most are equivalent to the English “welcome.”



Regardless of greeting type, Micronesian greetings tend to be casual, simple, and friendly.

Since the FSM has one official national language and four co-official regional languages, greetings

vary by state and island. Most greetings are accompanied by ***Ran annim*** (“hello” in Chuukese), ***Kaselehie*** (“hello” or “goodbye” in Pohnpeian), ***Lenwo*** (“hello” in Kosraean), or ***Mogethin*** (“hello” in Yapese). Similarly, the FSM’s residents may greet one another with ***Ifa usum?***, ***la iromw?***, ***Kom fuhkah?***, or ***Ke us rogom buoch?*** (“How are you?” in Chuukese, Pohnpeian, Kosraean, and Yapese, respectively).

While some Micronesians greet others with a handshake, this Western custom was adopted recently and is not widespread. Instead, bowing one’s head is more common (see “*Gestures*” below). To greet in passing, many Micronesians make quick eye contact and nod. When greeting a Micronesian from a distance, one might shout, “ooh,” as a way of saying, “I am here.”

## Names

Micronesian names typically consist of one first and last name. Some Micronesians also have a middle name. The first name is an individual’s personal identifier, while the last name is usually their father’s surname. Many Micronesian names are either Biblical or foreign, reflecting the FSM’s long history of foreign occupation and administration. The most common first names in the FSM are Mary and John, both names of Biblical origin.

## Forms of Address

In the FSM, adults often address each other with the terms for “man” or “woman” in any of the country’s indigenous languages or English. Similarly, children typically address aunts and uncles with the native words for “mother” and “father.”

Some of the FSM’s languages contain a high and low language. Micronesians reserve high language for speaking with someone of high social rank, such as a government official, chief, elder, or religious leader. The FSM’s most widespread language with this distinction is Pohnpeian. Its high language has its own grammar and vocabulary, which most Pohnpeians do not use in their everyday interactions. In Pohnpeian, the words **Menlau** and **Kalahngan** (thank you, in the low and high language, respectively) have the same literal meaning but convey different levels of respect.

## Conversational Topics

Micronesians typically converse about the wellbeing of each other and their families (see *Family and Kinship*). Common conversational topics are food, health, and local gossip, which often includes news about romantic or familial relationships. Sports, especially those included in the Micronesian Games (see *Aesthetics and Recreation*), are usually also a popular.

To avoid offense, foreign nationals should not comment on the FSM’s more traditional practices, particularly gender roles (see *Sex and Gender*) or marriage traditions (see *Family and Kinship*), as Micronesians may interpret the commentary as judgmental of their culture. Micronesians typically appreciate invitations to meals (see *Sustenance and Health*), as they consider eating together a sign of respect and openness.

## Gestures

Micronesians use body language to convey feelings and signs of respect to those around them. Micronesians often raise their



eyebrows to signify “yes” and lower them for “no.” They typically summon others by extending a hand with the palm facing down while waving their fingers.

Bowing is an important Micronesian gesture. Besides greetings, Micronesians bow to apologize when walking between two other people in conversation, often adding “excuse me,” while holding a hand behind their back. Many Micronesians also bow to signal respect, especially on more traditional islands such as Kosrae’s, Yap’s, and Chuuk’s outer islands. Kosraean and Yapese women often bow as they walk past men, squat or hunch over when a man passes them, bow to male relatives, and only approach male relatives when the men are standing.

### Language Training Resources

Please view the Air Force Culture and Language Center website at [www.airuniversity.af.edu/AFCLC/](http://www.airuniversity.af.edu/AFCLC/) and click on “Resources” for access to language training and other resources.

#### Useful Words and Phrases

English	Chuukese	Pohnpeian	Kosraean	Yapese
Hello	Ran annim	Kaselehie	Lenwo	Mogethin
Goodbye	Kone nom	Kaselehie	Kut fwa osun	Kefel
How are you?	Ifa usum?	Ia iromw?	Kom fuhkah?	Ke us rogom buoch?
I'm well	Ngang mei pochokum	I kehlail	Nga ku na	Kab fe'l rogog
Please	Kose mwochen	Mahs	Nunakmuna	Weing ngom
Thank you	Kinisou	Kalahngan	Kulo	Kam magar
Yes	Wuu	Eng	Aok	Arrogo'n
No	Apw	Soo	Moohi	Danga
Excuse Me	Tirow	Wiepeikid	Sislah koluk	Siro
What is your name?	Ifa itom?	Ia edomw?	Su inem an?	Minii' e fithngam?
My name is...	Itei...	Edei...	Inek pa...	Fithngag ea...

## 7. LEARNING AND KNOWLEDGE

### Literacy

- Total population over age 15 who can read and write: 90.4%
- Male: 91%
- Female: 88% (2000 and 2010 estimates)

### Early Education

Before the arrival of European and American colonists in the mid-19th century (see *History and Myth*), most regional inhabitants informally transmitted values, skills, beliefs, historical knowledge, and a sense of community to younger generations. Micronesians educated their children at home or during community gatherings through legends, stories, and moral lessons, emphasizing the importance of humility and the traditional clan (extended family) hierarchy (see *Family and Kinship*).

In Chuuk, skilled educators trained some men and women as **itang** (oral history storytellers), who

recorded local legends, religious myths, historical events, and traditional medicinal practices (see *Sustenance and Health*) in complex dialects spoken only by *itang*. They often ranked highly in village hierarchies (see *Political and Social Relations*) and served as religious, political, and diplomatic leaders. *Itang* trained subsequent generations in their skills, preserving local traditions before the introduction of written text with the arrival of Western traders.



### Education in Colonial Micronesia

In the 1830s, various Christian missionaries began traveling to Micronesia to preach to the region's inhabitants (see *Religion and Spirituality*). Many of these religious groups established schools to educate local youth and facilitate the religious conversion of Micronesians. Institutions founded by the Boston-based American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions

focused on promoting Protestant values and helped record local languages in written form (see *Language and Communication*). Spanish Capuchins (a Roman Catholic order) (see *Religion and Spirituality*) founded their own schools, particularly on Yap, where they converted locals to Catholicism and taught the Spanish language. Both groups were often in conflict with each other. As a result, local chiefs favored either Protestant or Catholic schools, depending on political changes and perceptions of shifting power dynamics on the islands.

Nevertheless, many Micronesian youth did not participate in formal schooling. Instead, they followed traditional educational practices through the late 19th century. *Itang* remained particularly prominent as educators and leaders in Chuuk, founding various schools of thought and playing a critical role in society that at times outranked chiefs. *Itang* retained their status until the arrival of Japanese colonists (see “Japanese Education” below), when many stopped training subsequent generations.

After Germany assumed control of the Caroline Archipelago in 1899 (see *History and Myth*), colonial officials allowed religious education to continue on the islands but established separate schools with more robust curricula. German schooling was largely secular and focused on reading, writing, and basic arithmetic. The German colonial government also established rudimentary homemaking courses for girls, the first time that girls had taken part in formal education.



### Japanese Education

During their colonial administration (1914-45), the Japanese introduced mandatory primary public education to Micronesia (see *History and Myth*). The Japanese public school

system was segregated by language ability: children who could speak Japanese were sent to **shogakko** (primary schools) for 5 years, and students who did not speak Japanese went to 3-year **kogakko** (public schools). All teachers were initially Japanese,



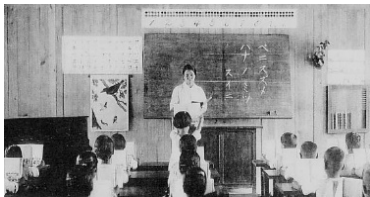
but over time, some Micronesians trained to teach at *kogakko* or served as classroom aides. Japanese officials occasionally offered scholarships for a select number of gifted native students to enroll in an additional 2 years of education in other Japanese colonies in Oceania. The only other educational opportunity during Japanese rule was for Micronesian men to apply for a highly competitive entrance exam to attend a woodworking school in neighboring Palau.

Japanese primary education emphasized morality, obedience, pride of Japan, and respect for the Emperor. Instruction included courses in the Japanese language, arithmetic, trade skills and ethics, delivered as part of a larger process of assimilation aimed at ensuring the success of social and economic programs. Japanese was the sole language of instruction, corporal punishment was common, and some teachers punished their students if they spoke native languages at school (see *Language and Communication*).

### US Education

Soon after the US victory over Japan in World War II (see *History and Myth*), the US Navy began to administer education in the FSM. The US constructed schools across the islands and relied on local leaders for advice. While Micronesians educated under the Japanese system ran primary schools, the Navy managed secondary schools and funded teacher training programs. In 1947, the United Nations designated the FSM as part of the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands (TTPI) to be administered by the US (see *History and Myth*). This change placed the responsibility for managing the islands' educational system on the US federal government, which did not invest heavily in the region during the initial decades of the TTPI.

Increased international attention on the region during the 1960s led the US government to build a more robust educational system in the TTPI, particularly during the administration of President John F. Kennedy (1961-63). President Kennedy established the Accelerated Elementary School Program, which



doubled the TTPI's educational budget. With increased funds, teachers were hired for a full year, paid to attend training courses in the summer months, and were eligible for grants and funds to study at US colleges. The FSM also received an influx of US Peace Corps volunteers, who helped expand the school system so that some 30,000 students were enrolled in primary school by 1970, almost double the enrollment rate a decade earlier.

### Education After Independence

When the FSM won independence in 1986 (see *History and Myth*), responsibility for education fell to various government entities until 1992, when the Department of Education (DoE) was created. At this time, the FSM also invested in the creation of an adult educational program, which aimed to increase literacy, especially in English, among adults who had not received a primary education. Despite these additions, the FSM has largely

retained the educational model inherited from the US during the TTPI period.

### Modern Education

Today, education remains under the purview of the DoE, which is divided into four subsections of curriculum development and testing,

secondary education, vocational education, and community and foreign assistance. The DoE oversees some 250 schools throughout the country, most of which are pre-primary and primary institutions. Education is compulsory for a minimum of 8 years for all children beginning at age 6. As students must test into secondary school (the equivalent of US high school) at the end of grade 8, enrollment at this level declines considerably.

Some private, fee-based religious schools, such as the prestigious Jesuit Xavier High School, also operate in the country. While these schools have traditionally catered to wealthier Micronesian families that can afford the tuition, private schools must receive a DoE charter to operate and conform to government-set benchmarks. In 2020, some 11% of primary-age



students were enrolled in private institutions, compared to 20% in the neighboring Marshall Islands and 22% in Palau.

Despite advances in educational attainment, the FSM struggles with high levels of truancy (children not attending school), particularly at the secondary level. The FSM's linguistic diversity has necessitated the use of English, many students' second language, as the language of instruction (see *Language and Communication*). This policy has led to difficulties ensuring all students have an adequate level of English comprehension to understand lessons and meet benchmarks. Likewise, the geographic distance between the main and outer islands makes ensuring regular attendance, particularly past the primary level, difficult. As such, the enrollment rate between different states and islands varies widely, with national averages at times diverging from individual state data.

As of 2014, about half of students in the poorest 20% of the population did not complete any formal education, and 25% of all Micronesians between ages 6-21 were not enrolled in school. In 2024 27% of students of the appropriate age were not enrolled and-out-of-school. While the FSM has established more schools on outer islands in recent years, some residents must travel from their home to a secondary school on a different island.



**Pre-Primary:** The DoE manages pre-primary schooling for children aged 3-5 under the Early Childhood Education (ECE) program, which is modeled after the US Head Start program. The FSM has a public network of about 70 pre-primary schools, many of which focus on providing specialized attention to children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (see *Political and Social Relations*) to prepare them for entry into primary school. Some private religious schools also offer fee-based pre-primary care. As of 2024, some 22% of children of the appropriate age were enrolled in pre-primary education.

**Primary Education:** This educational level is mandatory and comprises eight grades starting at age 6. The FSM has a public network of some 155 elementary schools, where students take courses in English, math, physical and social sciences, and physical education. While religious education is prohibited in public institutions, the government provides some financing to private religious schools for educational purposes (see *Religion and Spirituality*). Educators assess students on a letter scale that ranges from A-F, equivalent to the US grading system. As of 2024, some 82% of children of the appropriate age were enrolled in primary education.

**Secondary Education:** This level is optional for Micronesian students and comprises four grades generally starting around age 15. The age ranges of secondary students enrolled in public and private institutions varies significantly, as many applicants have repeated years in primary school, and students must first pass a primary school leaving exam before enrolling. The curriculum is generally a continuation of primary schooling, although some advanced students take courses at the College of Micronesia-FSM (COM-FSM) to gain college credit. As of 2022, some 76% of Micronesians over age 21 had completed secondary education.



**Post-Secondary:** The COM-FSM is the only post-secondary institution in the FSM, though each state has a regional campus. The institution

began as a teachers' college in 1962 and mostly offers 2-year associates degrees, along with some accredited 4-year bachelor's degrees. It also has a Fisheries and Maritime Institute on Yap, as well as a Career and Technical Education Center in Pohnpei. If they can afford the tuition, some students attend 4-year universities, often in the US mainland, Hawaii, Guam, or to a lesser extent, Australia. Regardless, attainment of post-secondary or vocational degrees is rare – as of 2015, only about 11% of Micronesians attained this level of education.

## 8. TIME AND SPACE

### Overview

Micronesians view interpersonal and family connections as key to conducting business. Generally, Micronesians have a casual approach to time but tend to be punctual for business meetings.

### Time and Work

The work week typically runs Monday-Friday, and work hours vary by establishment type. Business hours are usually 8am-5pm, with an hour break between 12-1pm for lunch. Government offices and post offices generally adhere to the same schedule. Many retailers are open on weekends from 8:30am-1:30pm, although in some more religious communities, particularly on Kosrae, businesses usually close on Sunday. Restaurants and bars remain open later than other businesses, frequently closing at 10pm on weekdays and weekends. In rural areas, operating hours tend to be more informal, varying according to owners' preferences.

### Working Conditions:

While the standard workweek is 40 hours, the Federated States of Micronesia's (FSM) labor laws stipulate neither a maximum workweek nor overtime pay. The law prioritizes hiring Micronesians over foreign nationals (see *Political and Social Relations*). Each state has its own minimum wage laws, which typically mandate a higher minimum rate for government jobs than those in the private sector. Most wage earners work in the public sector through US government funding and programs. In 2022, the government estimated that about half of the labor force was engaged in informal employment, mostly in the farming and fishing sectors (see *Economics and Resources*). In these and other informal sectors, government enforcement of labor and workplace standards tends to be lax, and many workers earn well below the government-mandated minimum wage.



**Time Zone:** The FSM has two time zones. Yap and Chuuk adhere to Chuuk Time (CHUT), which is 10 hours ahead of Greenwich Mean Time (GMT) and 15 hours ahead of Eastern Standard Time (EST). Kosrae and Pohnpei are on Kosrae Time (KOST), also known as Pohnpei Standard Time (PONT), which is 11 hours ahead of GMT and 16 hours ahead of EST. Since the FSM does not observe daylight saving time, CHUT is 14 hours and KOST/PONT are 15 hours ahead of Eastern Daylight Time (EDT) during part of the year.

**Date Notation:** Like the US, the FSM uses the Western (Gregorian) calendar. Unlike Americans, Micronesians typically write the day first, followed by the month and year.

### National Holidays

- January 1: New Year's Day
- March 31: Micronesia Culture Day
- May 10: Constitution Day
- October 24: United Nations Day
- November 3: Independence Day
- November 11: Veterans Day
- November 23: Presidents' Day
- December 25: Christmas Day

Any holiday that falls on a weekend is observed on the closest weekday.

### Time and Business

Generally, Micronesians tend to have a relaxed approach to time, considering schedules and deadlines less important than social obligations and relationships. However, business meetings often begin on time, and workplaces are usually hierarchical. Subordinate staff typically need to acquire management's approval or go through pre-approved channels for government business, which may prolong negotiations and decision-making. The maintenance of interpersonal relationships, both professional and familial, are typically an integral part of business. As a result, rapport-building activities and social gatherings are common, and business dealings may unfold at a slower pace compared to the US.

## Personal Space

As in most societies, personal space in the FSM depends on the nature of the relationship. Friends and family generally maintain less personal space than acquaintances or strangers.

**Touch:** In business settings, greetings usually include minimal touching beyond the initial handshake (see *Language and Communication*). Micronesians usually reserve physical affection for family and friends. Close friends of the same sex sometimes hug or grab each other's forearms when greeting, but Micronesians generally discourage public displays of affection.

**Eye Contact:** Many Micronesians avoid sustained eye contact, which they consider an attempt to intimidate or assert superiority (see *Language and Communication*). However, some Micronesians maintain eye contact during conversation, considering it evidence of interest and confidence.

## Photographs

Some churches, museums, landmarks, and other private areas prohibit photography. Foreign nationals should acquire a Micronesian's consent before taking his photo. Explicit permission is particularly important when photographing children.



## Driving

While roads are often well-maintained, lit, and marked with adequate signage in urban centers, road quality in rural areas varies significantly.

Many of the country's roads are unpaved (see *Technology and Material*) and difficult to traverse at night or under inclement weather conditions. Likewise, the lack of adequate road lighting can make nighttime driving dangerous. Nevertheless, the FSM has some of the world's lowest rates of road traffic accidents, recording no related deaths between 2016-20 compared to 11 deaths per 100,000 people in the US during the same time span. In 2021, both FSM and the US recorded 14 deaths per 100,000 people. Like Americans, Micronesians drive on the right side of the road.

## 9. AESTHETICS AND RECREATION

### Overview

Micronesian clothing and art forms reflect the country's blend of indigenous traditions, history of colonization, and robust US influence.

### Dress and Appearance

**Modern:** Micronesians tend to dress in casual warm-weather clothing throughout the year. Women often wear dresses or blouses with colorful long skirts or pants. Because women's attire is rather conservative, short skirts are uncommon. Men usually wear shorts or pants with t-shirts or button-down shirts. In business settings, men typically wear pants and button-down shirts with patterns and floral motifs. Women often wear longer patterned dresses or shirts with pants. In formal business settings, suits and other formalwear are also common.



**Traditional:** Micronesians typically wear traditional dress in remote villages and on the outer islands of Yap and Chuuk. Most of Yap's outer islands ban Western-style dress. In Yap and on Chuuk's western islands, men traditionally wear a **thu** (loincloth) around their waist. In Pohnpei, some women wear the **urohs** (traditional colorful skirt with floral patterns and designs), while women in other states often don **lavalavas** (Yapese wraparound skirts). Some young women and girls wear long skirts made of coconut palm leaves. Generally, neither men nor women wear clothes above the waist, and **zorries** (plastic or rubber flipflops) are common throughout the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM). Micronesians often wear colorful floral head garlands, which are also common welcome gifts for special occasions.

### Recreation and Leisure

Micronesians tend to spend their free time with family and friends hosting barbecues, attending ceremonies, watching TV



(see *Technology and Material*), and playing video games. Primarily on Yap, gatherings and events at **pe'ebai** (community meeting houses) (see *Family and Kinship*) are also common and comparable to town halls in the US. Some men meet at **faluws** (men's meeting houses) (see *Religion and Spirituality*) near the shore to relax and work, though they typically do not permit women near the *faluws*. Some young girls weave with banana

or hibiscus fibers. Water activities like swimming, boating, and canoeing, as well as climbing coconut trees and planting taro (a starchy root vegetable) are also popular pastimes.



### Holidays and Festivals:

Many Micronesian holidays and festivals (see *Time and Space*) reflect the country's recent history, cultural celebrations, and US influence. Independence Day commemorates the FSM attaining independence from the US on November 3, 1986 (see *History and Myth*). Festivities typically include parades, music, dance competitions, and flag-raising ceremonies. Similarly, on Constitution Day, Micronesians commemorate the May 10, 1979 ratification of their Constitution (see *Political and Social Relations*). Each state also hosts its own Independence Day to commemorate their respective Constitutions. While festivities in each state are similar, in Kosrae, celebrations often include dancing, music, sharing large meals, fishing tournaments, and wrestling matches.



On United Nations Day, the FSM hosts speeches, educational events, and public exhibits. Due to the FSM's close historical ties and compact agreement with the US (see *History and Myth* and *Political and Social Relations*), some

states recognize Thanksgiving as a federal holiday, though few Micronesians celebrate it.

Because most Micronesians are Christians (see *Religion and Spirituality*), Christmas and Easter are national holidays. Many Micronesians celebrate with church services, feasting with family and friends, and recounting Easter and Christmas events through dance and dramatizations (see *Religion and Spirituality*).



### Sports

Micronesians participate in a wide variety of sports, such as baseball, swimming, kayaking, softball,

soccer, volleyball, and basketball. Local track and field competitions are popular. The FSM also holds local competitions in fishing and boating. Although the FSM has participated in the Olympics since the 2000 Summer Games in Sydney, Australia, it has not medaled. The FSM also participates in regional competitions with other nations in Oceania, such as the 24-event Pacific Games. The FSM's four states compete individually against Guam, the Marshall Islands, Kiribati, Palau, Nauru, and the Northern Mariana Islands in the Micronesian Games. This competition features traditional and modern events, ranging from baseball and beach volleyball to spearfishing and coconut husking. In 2018, Yap hosted the Micronesian Games in which Pohnpei won fourth place, ranking the highest of the FSM's states.

**Baseball:** Likely due first to Japanese and then American influence (see *History and Myth*), baseball is a particularly popular sport, which both children and adults play recreationally. The FSM's national team has had some regional success, winning bronze in the 2005 South Pacific Games, which the present-day Pacific Games were called until 2007.

### Music

Traditional Micronesian music is rooted in storytelling and mostly relies on chanting and singing. Traditionally, Micronesians rarely

use instruments, but instead chant songs to provide a beat and rhythm for dances, which often feature complementary sounds of stomping and knocking sticks together (see “Dance” below). Micronesians of all ages and genders perform harmonic singing of church hymns. Although typical during church services, singing church hymns in a four-part harmony is also common at various secular gatherings. Today, Micronesians listen to an array of music, such as pop, hip-hop, rap, and reggae, among other genres. Some Micronesians also produce Western-style music with various instruments such as guitars and keyboards.

## Dance

An important part of Micronesian culture and expression, dance historically was used to welcome visitors to the country and for many celebrations.



Traditionally, men and women perform separate dances, which typically include rhythmic standing, stomping, and walking. Today, men and women perform a few dances together. In Chuuk, the moonlight dance, performed only during a full moon, is one of the few dances in the FSM in which women and men dance together, traditionally as an opportunity to find a spouse. Notably, the village chief must provide prior approval for the dance to occur. In Yap, men and women perform the **churu** dance in separate groups, chanting and hitting bamboo sticks together. Dancers wear traditional woven skirts and often rub their bodies with coconut oil and turmeric to make their skin a golden color.

In Pohnpei, men and women typically wear grass skirts and **mwaramwar** (headdresses with leaves and flowers) and, as in Yap, rub their bodies with coconut oil for dances. **Lehp** (marching dance) is a common dance in which performers sing and march, creating the song's rhythm and beat. Another dance in Pohnpei is a stick dance, similar to **churu**, called **kepir** for male performers and **tokia** for female dancers, whereby dancers hit sticks together in pairs as they swing the sticks and move their hips.

## Literature

The FSM does not have a long history of written language, as Micronesian languages were historically spoken, not written, and storytelling was an oral tradition (see *Language and Communication* and *Learning and Knowledge*). Much of traditional Micronesian literature consists of legends or myths transcribed after the arrival of European colonists (see *History and Myth*). Protestant and Catholic missionaries first introduced written language to the FSM, and by the mid-1800s, they had produced written forms of some local languages. In recent years, Micronesian literature has tended to center on themes of national and cultural identities and life under foreign occupation. The FSM's first published book by a Micronesian author, *The Book of Luelen* (1977), written by Luelen Bernart, is a compilation of myths, songs, and stories of Pohnpei. In 2008, Emelihter Kihleng's *My Urohs* became the first published collection of poetry in English by a Pohnpeian poet. Her poems explore historical and social themes of island life.

## Folk Arts and Handicrafts

The FSM has a rich collection of arts and crafts. Weaving is one of the country's most notable traditions. Across the FSM,



Micronesians use pandanus (screw pine, a palm-like plant) or coconut leaves to construct mats often used for sleeping. On Yap, women typically weave *lavalavas*.

Canoe building is another important tradition. Historically, people in Yap produced about six types of canoes, each for a different necessity, such as cargo transport or local navigation. Today, canoe building is still an important feature of Yapese culture and common on Yap's

outer islands, where elders teach the youth navigational skills. Yap hosts the annual Canoe Festival to demonstrate the history and importance of canoe building. Other Micronesian handicrafts are shell jewelry, colorful sewn clothing, garlands, and woodcarvings.

## 10. SUSTENANCE AND HEALTH

### Sustenance Overview

Shared meals with friends and family are often important social events in the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM). Micronesian culinary traditions vary among states and exhibit an array of Pacific and global influences, while incorporating fresh, locally grown and carefully seasoned ingredients.



### Dining Customs

Micronesians typically eat three daily meals and snack throughout the day. Breakfast is often the smallest meal, while the mid-day and evening meals are usually more substantial. While men provide fresh fish or other animal proteins, women traditionally prepare the food, cultivate important staples such as taro (a starchy root vegetable or tuber common in some Asian-Pacific cuisines), and collect crabs. Today, many urban Micronesians cook on modern stoves, though traditional **uhmw** (or **umw**, underground ovens from Pohnpei) are common in rural areas and for special occasions, particularly **kamadipw** (traditional celebratory feasts). Micronesians eat some meals with their hands, using their fingers and thumb to scoop food into their mouths, though the use of cutlery is more common.

While the FSM has distinct cuisine and dining customs, decades of US presence (see *History and Myth*) has influenced many Micronesians' daily dining practices. Accordingly, a growing number of Micronesians, particularly in urban areas (see *Family and Kinship*), have adopted US culinary habits and dietary preferences, and many residents increasingly rely on processed or canned food imported from abroad.

### Diet

Although Micronesian cuisine varies somewhat by island, it typically combines local ingredients with Japanese and US

influences (see *History and Myth*). Dishes tend to highlight starches, fresh seafood, and fruits over meat and dairy products. Taro is prominent in many traditional dishes and is served steamed, boiled, roasted, or fried. Rice and breadfruit are also important components of many Micronesian meals, often used as side dishes or mixed with a protein and vegetables. Other common staples are coconuts, yams, bananas, pumpkins, and pandan (a sweet, aromatic leaf used for flavoring).

Seafood is the most common source of protein in traditional Micronesian cuisine, with clams, crabs, yellowfin tuna, grouper, red snapper, mahi mahi, octopus, shrimp, and longtail snapper featuring prominently. Much Micronesian seafood for local consumption is found in shallow waters close to coral atolls. The FSM usually sells deep-water fishing rights to foreign fisheries that typically export much of their catch (see *Economics and Resources*). In the 18th century, European and American colonists (see *History and Myth*) introduced Micronesians to

pork and chicken, which feature prominently in European, Asian, and US-style dishes.

Breadfruit, dragon fruit, mango, pineapple, papaya, guava, starfruit, passionfruit, rambutan (a small, spine-covered fruit like



lychee), and soursop (a large, green fruit with a soft, sweet interior) are popular and widely available fresh fruits.

### Popular Dishes and Meals

Common breakfast foods include various breads and cereals accompanied by fresh fruit juice and tea or coffee. Traditionally, some Micronesians have **uht sukusuk** (mashed bananas covered in coconut milk and served on a palm leaf) for their morning meal. Served in the early afternoon, lunch generally features seafood paired with starchy side dishes or vegetables. Chicken curry is also a popular option, in which chicken stews with onions, peppers, ginger, garlic, coconut milk, and curry

powder, and then is served on a bed of white rice. A similar dish is Chicken Micronesia, chicken marinated in canned pineapple juice baked with pineapple chunks and grated coconut. On Pohnpei, **koahpnoair koakihr** (diced and ground yams steamed in coconut milk in an **oampwoat** – an iron pot) is a specialty. **Fahfah Erah**, a traditional dish made from pounded taro mixed with banana and lightly covered with coconut milk, is a common option in Kosrae.

Dinner features similar lunch dishes. Other popular options are **pihlohlo mwehng** (ground taro shaped into oblong pieces and coated in a coconut sugar syrup), **mahi uhmw** (breadfruit cooked on hot stones in an underground oven), or **kón** (breadfruit or taro paste blended with coconut milk). For special occasions, particularly large traditional feasts on Pohnpei, locals bake pigs and chicken in **uhmw**, along with taro and yams. Village leaders then distribute the best pieces of the meal to participants according to family rank and age. For dessert, fresh fruits are common, although Micronesian pudding (vanilla, sugar, butter, coconut milk, and corn starch whipped and served alone or over vanilla cake) and **uter** (boiled balls of mashed taro combined with shredded coconut) are also popular.

### Beverages

Due to the FSM's tropical climate, fresh fruit juice and smoothies, which are often milk-based, are available year-round. Soda, tea, and coffee are popular non-alcoholic beverages. Some Micronesians, especially in Pohnpei, consume **sakau**, a traditional drink prepared from the **kava** root, related to pepper, and known for its mildly intoxicating effects. In Chuuk, the government in Weno prohibited alcohol sales in the 1970s. Today, its consumption and limited sale are tolerated.

### Eating Out

Restaurants in Kolonia, Weno, and other towns range from upscale establishments specializing in international cuisine to inexpensive, casual eateries and fast-food restaurants serving



Western-style dishes. Small towns typically have a few casual restaurants that serve Micronesian or Japanese food, or street stalls that sell snacks or fresh fruit. Some small, open-air cafes serve fresh fish, seafood stews, and other local fare. As many Micronesians consider hospitality an important component of their culture, they do not encourage tips.

## Health Overview

Micronesians' overall health has improved in recent decades. While life expectancy increased significantly from 56 to 70 years between 1960-2000, recent advances have largely plateaued. Between 2000-22, life expectancy increased from 70 to 71 years, higher than the 2022 average of the Pacific Small Island Developing States (PSIDS) (70) but lower than the US (76). Between 2000-23, infant mortality (the proportion of infants who



die before age 1) decreased from about 31 deaths per 1,000 live births to 21, a rate slightly higher than the 2020 PSIDS rate (20) and much higher than the US (5).

## Traditional Medicine

This treatment method consists of the

knowledge, practices, and skills that are derived from a native population's beliefs, experiences, and theories. Traditional Micronesian medicine centers on the use of prayer and herbal remedies to identify and treat illnesses. While many Micronesians have access to modern Western medicine, some, particularly on outer islands, still use traditional medicinal practices such as massages with botanical extracts, particularly if seeking treatment at medical centers is overly burdensome.

## Modern Healthcare System

Micronesia's Constitution (see *Political and Social Relations*) designates healthcare as a right for all citizens and names the national government as the entity responsible for ensuring quality care. The central government delegates the provision of healthcare services to the state governments, each of which



manages a public hospital in its jurisdiction. Along with the four public hospitals, the FSM has five smaller public clinics, which generally offer outpatient care and are located in rural areas that are less easily serviced by the state's hospital.

The FSM has inherited much of its healthcare system from the arrangement that was in place during the country's time as a US-administered Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands (see *History and Myth*). Today, the government uses US financing as part of the Compact of Free Association (COFA) (see *Political and Social Relations*) to cover most healthcare expenses. As such, the FSM currently has no health insurance scheme, and Micronesians only pay a nominal fee at the time of service. For complex procedures that cannot be properly addressed with the limited medical resources in the FSM, healthcare providers refer patients to receive care in the US, usually either in Guam or Hawaii.

For those who can afford it, the FSM has five private clinics located in Pohnpei and Chuuk. Because the government does not subsidize these healthcare centers, their providers may expect cash payment for treatment. While all Micronesians have a right to access healthcare, inhabitants of rural areas or small outer islands often face significant financial and logistical challenges in getting medical attention. Consequently, this lack of access often forces residents to delay necessary medical care and leads to unbalanced health outcomes between urban and rural residents (see *Family and Kinship*).



## Healthcare Challenges

The leading causes of death are chronic and non-communicable “lifestyle” diseases, which accounted for about 79% of deaths in 2019. Of these, diabetes, cardiovascular and respiratory diseases, and cancer are the most common. Preventable “external causes” such as suicides, car accidents, and other injuries, resulted in about 7% of deaths, slightly higher than the

US rate (6%) and equivalent to the PSIDS rate. About 13% of deaths in the FSM are from communicable diseases, prenatal or maternal complications, or nutritional conditions, higher than the US (5%) but lower than the PSIDS rate (15%).

Dining habits, which increasingly incorporate consuming highly processed foods imported from the US or Asia, have contributed to a high rate of obesity in the country, leading to elevated levels



of diabetes, heart disease, and stroke. Likewise, the FSM suffers from a high suicide rate, with some 28 suicides per 100,000 people as of 2019, higher than the US (16) and PSIDS (14) rates. Young men tend to be the group most at risk for suicide.

In addition, public health experts point to the FSM's underdeveloped healthcare sector as an obstacle to the provision of necessary care for its citizens. As the government depends on funding from the COFA agreement to cover expenses, the country is reliant

on foreign grants, which are liable to expire or otherwise change, potentially leaving the entire system underfunded. Likewise, the lack of robust financing has led to shortages of necessary medical equipment and prescription medications.

Due to the FSM's lack of land borders and imposition of strict lockdown procedures at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, the country did not record any COVID-19 cases until July 2022. However, the rapid spread of the virus upon its introduction led to masking and social distancing mandates. As of late-2023, the FSM has reported over 26,400 cases that caused some 62 deaths. To encourage vaccination, the government threatened to withhold federal funds from businesses and individuals who did not follow public health guidelines. As of 2024, about 70% of Micronesians are fully vaccinated, and about 27% have received an additional booster dose.

## 11. ECONOMICS AND RESOURCES

### Overview

For centuries, most Micronesians subsisted by foraging, fishing, and farming. Some early Micronesians on Yap used *rai* (large stone disks) to buy and sell items of great value, like tracts of land (see *History and Myth*). In the early 19th century, Micronesians traded local products for European tobacco, metals, fishhooks, and lighters. In the mid-19th century, they also bargained with Chinese and Japanese traders for cloth, apparel, and manufactured products. The Chinese and Japanese exchanged their products for Micronesian sea cucumbers, turtle shells, shark fins, and other precious goods.

Pohnpei had a reputation as the best island in the Pacific for the turtle shell trade, and local artisans produced some 500 lbs of shell each year. Whale shipping also contributed significantly to the Federated States of Micronesia's (FSM) early economy, as European and Asian whale shippers used Pohnpei and Kosrae as resource replenishment ports. At its peak between 1840-60, whale shipping brought about 40 vessels to Pohnpei each year. The copra (dried coconut) industry also supplied income to the islands' pre-colonial residents. As European, American, and Australian firms sought to monopolize local copra cultivation, they gave Micronesians commission from copra sales, as well as rifles and tobacco as gifts to gain their loyalty.



In 1885, Spain established a colony over the Caroline Archipelago (see *History and Myth*), which includes the FSM. However, Spain's involvement in Micronesian commercial affairs was minimal, allowing European companies, most notably German firms, to continue business as usual. Spanish authorities tried to restrict firearms sales on the islands but were largely unsuccessful due to their limited local economic control. During this period, two large German firms oversaw most trade in Micronesia and later merged into the Jaluit

Company, a joint-stock business that controlled nearly 80% of Micronesian economic activity. After the Germans acquired the Caroline Islands from Spain in 1899 (see *History and Myth*), they extended the responsibilities of the Jaluit Company to manage all Micronesian affairs.

During German colonial rule, rival empires, most notably Japan, established trading posts in Micronesia. Between 1890-1906, Japanese traders set up operations throughout the islands that eventually developed into the **Nanyo Boeki Kabushiki Kaisha** (South Seas Trading Company, or NBK). Unlike the Spanish, Germany expelled the Japanese traders, who were selling rifles and alcohol to Micronesians. To further assert their authority over the region, German officials built channels, bridges, and roads across Micronesia's most populous islands. Germany also legislated and enforced the regular planting of coconut trees and introduced various livestock to its colony's major islands.

In 1908, the increasingly successful phosphate mining industries in neighboring Palau and Nauru supplied a new market for Micronesian labor. While the FSM had no such mines, between 1908-14, the Germans hired at least 800 Micronesian laborers per year to mine phosphate on other Pacific islands.



Following Japan's occupation of Micronesia in 1914 that resulted in annexation as a League of Nations Mandate by 1920 (see *History and Myth*), Japanese firms expanded agricultural output across the islands. NBK developed some 20,000 acres (slightly larger than Newark, New Jersey) of sugar plantations. It then

partnered with another Japanese trading company to expand commercial fishing operations employing about 8,000 Japanese and 9,000 Micronesians across the region. Japanese companies also continued the copra trade; farmed root vegetables like tapioca, arrowroot, and sweet potatoes; and introduced new species of trees to foster a lumber industry.

After World War II, the US Navy assumed administration of Micronesia (see *History and Myth*). Under the Navy, the FSM

adopted development policies aimed at limiting extractive industries and the exploitation of its people. Just 6 months after the Naval administration began, the US created the US Commercial Company (USCC) to oversee the region's economic development and reinvigorate the copra, fishing, and agricultural sectors that World War II had halted. In 1947, the Island Trading Company (ITC) replaced the USCC, filling similar functions for the newly designated Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands (TTPI), which included the FSM and other Micronesian islands (see *History and Myth*). The ITC also supplied loans and subsidies to local businesses, and under its oversight, the FSM hosted 325 locally owned retail stores and exported goods worth nearly \$2 million from 1947-54. However, the US dissolved the ITC in 1954, just 7 years after its founding (see *History and Myth*).

During the 1960s, the FSM's economy was stagnant. In response, the US government dramatically increased its appropriations to the TTPI, which grew from



\$13 million in 1963 to over \$60 million in 1971. The Micronesian administration applied its share of these funds to social spending programs, distributing at least 40% of its annual budget to health (see *Sustenance and Health*) and education projects (see *Learning and Knowledge*). Local governments tripled their workforces and collectively became Micronesia's largest employer. However, while the annual value of imports had reached \$20 million by 1970, exports remained at 1950s levels. To foster the growth of local industries, the US granted the FSM \$120 million for capital improvement projects between 1974-79. This influx of funding helped increase Micronesian exports to nearly \$16 million per year, with most of the growth in the coconut oil, copra cake, and tourism sectors.

Since the FSM finalized its Compact of Free Association (COFA) with the US in 1986 (see *History and Myth*), the country's GDP per capita has nearly tripled to \$4,039. However, because the

COFA allows FSM citizens to live and work in the US without restrictions, many people have left the country, limiting economic growth. To help improve its economy, the FSM has undertaken various financial reforms to decrease its reliance on US aid. The Public Sector Reform Program, in conjunction with the Asian Development Bank, has improved foreign investment practices and cut government spending. Nevertheless, COFA grants still account for around 66% of the FSM's revenue, underscoring the country's continued dependence on US aid.

## Services

Accounting for at least 67% of GDP and about 94% of the labor force in 2023, services form the economy's largest sector. Key subsectors are government and tourism.

**Government:** The FSM's public sector comprised at least 40% of GDP and over 60% of the workforce in 2018. Due to the COFA and high levels of grant aid, the FSM has an overstaffed public workforce that manages the country's elevated levels of social welfare spending. The public sector includes many teachers, other public servants, and some construction and aid workers, among others.



**Tourism:** Accounting for about 4% of GDP and 2.5% of the workforce in 2019, tourism generated some \$18 million and is a vital part of the economy.

Between 2012-19, international tourism arrivals fell by 50% to 18,000-per-year due to airline service reductions (see *Technology and Material*). The FSM's reefs, lagoons, and wildlife are key attractions for visitors from the US, Japan, and Australia, who are attracted to diving and snorkeling, as global rankings place the FSM as one of the world's top diving sites.

## Agriculture

As the second-largest sector of the economy in 2023, agriculture accounts for some 23% of GDP and in 2023 1% of employment. The sector mainly consists of fishing and farming.

**Fishing:** The FSM hosts commercial and subsistence fishing, which are vital to many Micronesians' livelihoods. Subsistence fishing produces an annual catch of between 1,000-5,000 tons of seafood, primarily skipjack and yellowfin tuna, snapper, and grouper for local consumption and sale.

Commercial fishing accounts for nearly \$20 million-per-year, or about 5% of GDP. Foreign firms harvest an average of about 150,000 tons of seafood and perform much of the associated labor, paying the National Fisheries Corporation for licenses to operate within the FSM's exclusive economic zone of over one million sq mi (see *Political and Social Relations*). However, Vietnamese "blue boats" (unlicensed fishing vessels) (see *Political and Social Relations*) and other illicit foreign boats often enter FSM waters, costing the state thousands-per-year in unpaid fees. The FSM is a member of the Micronesian Association for Sustainable Aquaculture, which in 2019, helped the country adopt an aquaculture strategy to increase domestic fishing investment. Global warming and overfishing directly affect the FSM's fisheries, with international organizations citing a loss in biodiversity that could disrupt the local fish supply.

**Farming:** Only about 2% of the FSM's land is arable. Almost 46% of Micronesians engage in subsistence agriculture as their secondary economic activity, which official workforce statistics typically do not capture. Most farms in the FSM are on small plots that produce taro (a starchy root vegetable), breadfruit, yams, or bananas for local consumption. Livestock is also a vital component of subsistence farming. Some 80% of households reported owning a pig in 2014. The FSM has limited commercial farming, though it varies by state. Pohnpei accounts for about 36% of agricultural output.



## Industry

As of 2023, industry accounts for about 5% of GDP and in 2013 5% of the labor force. Key subsectors are fish and copra processing.

**Fish Processing:** This activity is the FSM's largest industrial subsector. At its peak in the 1990s, 11 fish-processing firms operated across the FSM's four states. Today, only two fish processing plants continue to operate. The remaining firms, based in Pohnpei and Kosrae, are joint ventures alongside international firms, mainly from Japan, which also perform much of the commercial fishing in the country.

**Copra Processing:** Earning nearly \$1.8 million in 2021, copra processing is the FSM's second-largest industrial subsector. The FSM's only copra processing facility is on Pohnpei, which produces crude coconut oil and animal feed. Vital, the government corporation responsible for copra-processing management, plans to expand the sector with the construction of a new facility on Chuuk that can process over 50,000 coconuts-per-day and produce virgin coconut oil, a higher value product. The FSM estimates that copra-related exports will earn

nearly \$8 million over the next 5 years.

### Currency

The FSM uses the US dollar (\$) as its currency.

### Foreign Trade

The FSM's imports,

worth about \$126 million in 2023, mostly consisted of poultry meat, broadcasting equipment, and other prepared meat from the US (35%), China (21%), and Japan (13%), Chinese Taipei (6%), and Philippines (4%). In the same year, exports totaled some \$190 million and consisted of non-fillet frozen and fresh fish to Thailand (64%), China (16%), the Philippines (11%), Japan (5%), . Notably, many exports that foreign firms process do not contribute to the FSM's GDP.

### Foreign Aid

In 2022, the FSM received \$10.3 billion in foreign assistance. Top donors were Japan (\$597.1 million), Germany (\$347.4 million), US (\$282.4 million). aid In March of 2024, the COFA agreement was approved to deliver \$6.5 billion in assistance over the next 20 years starting with \$3.3 billion in FY2024.





## 12. TECHNOLOGY AND MATERIAL

### Overview

While the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM) has improved its physical and telecommunications infrastructure in recent decades, today, it is challenged by economic, geographical, and environmental barriers. The FSM's laws protect media freedom, allowing news media to operate without political interference. Further, the FSM has a relatively diverse media landscape with a few small, privately owned outlets.

### Transportation

Micronesians' travel habits tend to vary by their residence and socioeconomic status. Most Micronesians do not own personal vehicles but rely on family or friends who do. As of 2024, the FSM's registered vehicle ownership rate is about 97 per 1,000 people, higher than nearby Kiribati (31) but much lower than the US (850). Local taxi services supply rides around the FSM's most populous islands (see *Political and Social Relations*). Some Micronesians own motorbikes, which are often cheaper than cars. None of the four states has bus services. Ferries and flights connect major and outer islands, although supply is limited, and they can be expensive. Some Micronesians ride bikes, but poor road maintenance (see *Time and Space*) and a lack of designated paths typically make biking difficult or inconvenient.



**Roadways:** Only about 44 mi of the FSM's 240 mi of roadways are paved. The FSM's geographic isolation makes travel by road

between regions or to remote parts of major islands difficult. Almost all paved roadways are circumferential (roads that go around the perimeter of an island), compared to the unpaved roads of islands' interiors. To help mitigate infrastructure damage caused by climate change and related natural disasters, the World Bank provided some \$40 million to improve the FSM's roadways infrastructure in 2021.

**Ports and Waterways:** The FSM has no navigable waterways or river ports. The country's 3,798 mi of Pacific coastline are critical to trade, with major seaports in Dekehtik (Takatik Island, Pohnpei), Colonia (Tomil Harbor, Yap), and Weno (Moen, Chuuk).



**Airways:** The FSM has 7 airports, all of which have paved runways. Located on Dekehtik Island in Kolonia, near the capital, Palikir, Pohnpei International Airport is the country's main hub and serves seven flights each week. The FSM currently has four operational airlines at its airports. Although the country does not have a national flag carrier, US-based United Airlines is its top service provider, with six regional destinations. Caroline Islands Air, a Pohnpei-based charter airline, also provides flights across the country and the greater Micronesia region (see *History and Myth*), with nine distinct destinations but only five planes and a limited schedule.

## Energy

As of 2024, the FSM generates about 92% of its energy from fossil fuels. The government plans to expand renewable energy production, as the FSM has untapped potential for hydroelectric, wind, and solar power. Today, most of the country's renewable energy comes from solar power generation. In 2019, the FSM is tied for the world's lowest per-capita electricity usage with Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands, among others. Further, the country has neither oil nor natural gas pipelines.

## Media

The FSM's laws protect freedom of expression, though they do not specifically refer to speech or press. Journalists typically face neither threats nor persecution, allowing for a robust and transparent media landscape. Resource constraints, especially when broadcasting important meteorological forecasts, limit the press. For example, Chuuk's radio station can only broadcast from 7:30am-4:30pm and is unable to broadcast vital weather

information after hours. Though uncommon, one journalist cited his experience with a traditional Yapese council's criticizing his reporting on traditional practices. However, the government supported the journalist and refused to entertain the council's requests for intervention regarding the issue.

**Print Media:** While the FSM has a few print media outlets, none publish daily or weekly newspapers. The national and state governments publish biweekly bulletins and newsletters. *The*



*Kaselehlie Press* is a Pohnpei-based media outlet that publishes a newspaper every 2 weeks.

**TV and Radio:** TV is a popular source of news and entertainment. The FSM has three major national TV networks, none of which are state-owned. Some Micronesians buy multi-channel cable packages and get international programming via satellite or Internet TV. Radio is a popular and vital source of information. The FSM has at least 13 radio stations that offer news,

religious, and entertainment content. Most programs broadcast in English, though some local stations offer regional language content (see *Language and Communication*).

## Telecommunications

Although the FSM's telecommunications network covers most of the country, some remote islands lack coverage. In 2022, the FSM had only 6 landlines per 100 people – one of the lowest densities in Oceania. In the same year, the FSM had 19 mobile phone subscriptions per 100 residents. Despite this relatively low rate, many Micronesians share phones. The government has made network expansion a priority, as many Micronesians communicate and access the Internet via mobile devices.

**Internet:** About 40% of Micronesians access the Internet daily. The FSM has some 5 fixed broadband subscriptions per 100 people. Although Internet access is unrestricted, high-speed connections are only available on Pohnpei. The other states use satellite-based connections that can be slow and unreliable.



For more information on  
the Air Force Culture and Language Center visit:  
[airuniversity.af.edu/AFCLC](http://airuniversity.af.edu/AFCLC)

For more information on  
Pacific Air Forces visit:  
<http://www.pacaf.af.mil>



## **CULTURE GUIDE**

Access all of the AFCLC's expeditionary culture field  
guides in our mobile app!



GET IT ON

**Google Play**



Available on the iPhone

**App Store**



DoD Enterprise Mobility

**Personal Use  
Mobile Apps**