

Indigenous Peoples Rights & Movements | Section II

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**Ed Yeichy**

**The Intersectionality of Conflicts in Micronesia and Hawai‘i: Through My Eyes**

Born to two aliens, who each suppose that we do not belong, I roamed the seemingly unfamiliar landscapes of Hawai‘i– desperately searching for a place and a voice. I only ask for one thing: accept me as I am, I certainly do come in peace. Born in Hawai‘i and raised by an alienated family, I was exposed to a number of unique and distinct cultures: Samoans and Tongans performed their own versions of the Haka, Filipinos served their popular chicken adobo dish, and Hawaiians gathered around the lū‘au. Despite being exposed to the unique cultures of Samoans, Tongans, Filipinos, and Hawaiians, I struggled to find a sense of belonging. I felt as though my voice and my culture were not fit to the *local kine* way of Hawai‘i. Enveloped by the rich traditions of the islands, I found myself in a paradoxical position– I was surrounded by the vibrant tapestry of Oceanic cultures, yet I felt like an outsider, a mere observer amidst the diversity. To many, I was labeled as a cockroach, a derogatory term used to disparage Micronesians due to their perceived rapid population growth in Hawai‘i. Micronesians, since migrating to Hawai‘i starting in the late 1980s, are considered to be a fairly new ethnic group. For that reason, we are often misidentified and tossed into other Pacific islander categories. Worst of all, we are often harassed for being too different. This discrimination and harassment only grew worse as time went on, which amplified the already difficult challenge of finding a place and a voice in Hawai‘i. As a result, I grew up not only as a young child dealing with

challenges, but also as a young indigenous youth desperately seeking for acceptance amidst the tumultuous waves of cultural diversity in Hawai‘i.

Sylvia Elias, an advocate for Micronesians from the island of Pohnpei, explored the geographical, physical, and historical context of Micronesia in Chapter 12 of their book titled *Global Indigenous Youth: Through Their Eyes*. Her narrative delved into the common values, beliefs, and practices shared across the Micronesia region and touched on aspects of gender roles, economic disparity, social pressures, resilience to trauma, the connection with nature, and a deep-rooted spiritual belief system<sup>1</sup>. The narrative and insights gained from Elias’ chapter point to the urgent need for greater cultural understanding and inclusion in multicultural societies. For indigenous youths, especially those in diasporic communities like Micronesians in Hawai‘i, these challenges are multifaceted and involve not just cultural preservation but also the struggle against discrimination and for societal acceptance. To shed a more interpretive light on this issue, I will build off of Elias’ narrative and connect the themes of her text to my own experiences as a Chuukese boy that grew up in Hawai‘i.

By sharing my perspective, I intend to build a sense of solidarity across the indigenous groups of the Pacific. First, I will begin with the colonial legacy of Micronesians in Hawai‘i. Then, I will discuss the intersectionality of Hawai‘i and Micronesia in indigenous struggles, specifically focusing on issues of identity, representation, and discrimination. It is my hope that my story and perspective will underscore the importance of recognizing and valuing the unique

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<sup>1</sup> Angel, Dali, et al. *Global Indigenous Youth: Through Their Eyes*. Institute for the Study of Human Rights, Columbia University, 2019.

cultural identities of all individuals, promoting inclusivity, and addressing discrimination to foster a more accepting and understanding society. For Micronesian youths in Hawai‘i and elsewhere, this means not only finding their voice but also having that voice heard and respected. This will ensure that their rich cultural heritage is acknowledged and appreciated in the broader tapestry of diverse communities.

The struggles faced by Micronesians in Hawai‘i can be traced back to the long history of colonialism and its ongoing impacts. Like many other Pacific Island nations, Micronesia was subjected to colonial rule by various foreign powers including Germany, Japan, and the United States. This history of colonization has led to the displacement and dislocation of Micronesian peoples, both within their own communities and across the wider Pacific region. These colonial legacies continue to shape the experiences of Micronesians in Hawai‘i today where they face discrimination and marginalization due to their status as a newly arrived and often misunderstood group. Understanding and addressing these colonial legacies is crucial for building solidarity across indigenous communities and working towards a more just and equitable future for all. The central question of this paper that I wish to address is: how did Micronesians end up in Hawai‘i, and how is their treatment by Native Hawaiians significant in understanding the intersectionality of the struggles between different indigenous groups?

The influx of Micronesians to Hawai‘i can be directly attributed to the actions undertaken by the United States of America between the years 1946 and 1958. This time period marked a significant turning point as it was characterized by the devastating impact of the U.S. nuclear

testing program, which inundated the Marshall Islands with a destructive force equivalent to the energy yield of 7,000 Hiroshima bombs.<sup>2</sup> This piece of history is often omitted from American history books. My grandparents, who were alive at the time, relayed to my parents stories of how the effects of these American nuclear bombs were extremely catastrophic to the health of Micronesian peoples. Growing up, my Mother and Father, Isabella Poch and Iosinto Edwin, frequently shared tales of the ravages caused by these tests. Specifically, these U.S. nuclear tests resulted in a number of chronic diseases that spread across parts of the Micronesian region. Among these chronic diseases were leukemia and bone marrow cancer.<sup>3</sup> In addition, data collected by the Pacific Regional Central Cancer Registry (PRCCR) revealed that particular areas within Micronesia, following the conclusion of the U.S. nuclear testing program, demonstrate higher rates of specific cancers in comparison to the United States.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, reports emerged detailing instances where women gave birth to infants with various abnormalities, including a condition colloquially termed "jellyfish babies".<sup>5</sup> These infants were born without skeletal structures and presented a distinctive characteristic of having transparent skin. The health consequences of the U.S. nuclear tests in the Marshall Islands were devastating for Micronesian peoples and, as a result, many were forced to leave their homes in search of medical treatment and better living conditions. The forced removal of Micronesian peoples from their homelands

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<sup>2</sup> Hughes, Hart Rapaport, Ivana Nikolić. “The U.S. Must Take Responsibility for Nuclear Fallout in the Marshall Islands.” *Scientific American*. April 4, 2022.

<sup>3</sup> Hughes, Hart Rapaport, Ivana Nikolić. *Ibid*.

<sup>4</sup> Pineda, Eric, et al. “Cancer Disparities among Pacific Islanders: A Review of Sociocultural Determinants of Health in the Micronesian Region.” *Cancers*, vol. 15, no. 5, 22 Feb. 2023.

<sup>5</sup> Yamada, Seiji, and Matthew Akiyama. “‘For the Good of Mankind’: The Legacy of Nuclear Testing in Micronesia.” *Social Medicine*, Vol. 8, No.2, 27 Jan. 2013, pp. 83-92.

was in clear violation of Article 10 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), which states the following: “Indigenous peoples shall not be forcibly removed from their lands or territories.”<sup>6</sup> The United States, recognizing their responsibility for the harm caused, then established the Compact of Free Association (COFA) with the Federated States of Micronesia and the Republic of the Marshall Islands in 1985, which allowed Micronesians to travel and work in the United States without needing to acquire visas.<sup>7</sup> This Compact ultimately facilitated a significant migration of Micronesians to Hawai‘i. Among these migrants, beginning in the late 1980s, were my parents. Consequently, my siblings and I became part of the inaugural generation of Micronesians to be born as U.S. citizens on the island of Hawai‘i.

Around this time, Native Hawaiian peoples had already been engaged in their own struggle against the United States. The displacement of Native Hawaiians, otherwise known as Kānaka Maoli, from their ancestral lands and the suppression of their cultural heritage had been and still is an ongoing issue since the Hawaiian Kingdom was forcefully overthrown by the United States of America in 1893.<sup>8</sup> While efforts have been made over the years to mediate the issues that subsequently followed the overthrow of the Hawaiian Kingdom, many Native

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<sup>6</sup> UN. “United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.” *United Nations*, Sept. 2007, [https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/wp-content/uploads/sites/19/2018/11/UNDRIP\\_E\\_web.pdf](https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/wp-content/uploads/sites/19/2018/11/UNDRIP_E_web.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> UH Manoa. “Micronesians in Hawai‘i: Compacts of Free Association (COFA).” *University of Hawaii at Manoa*, Library, 14 Apr. 2023, <https://guides.library.manoa.hawaii.edu/c.php?g=105631&p=686651>

<sup>8</sup> Sai, David Keanu. *The Royal Commission of Inquiry: Investigating War Crimes Committed in the Hawaiian Kingdom*. Royal Commission of Inquiry, Jan. 2020.

Hawaiians argue that these efforts have fallen short. The overthrow of the Hawaiian Kingdom has had detrimental repercussions that have continued to cause pain and suffering for the Native Hawaiian community to this day. One of the most significant challenges that Native Hawaiians face is the deprivation of their land rights. This is a poignant issue that resonates with the principles enshrined in the UNDRIP. The UNDRIP acknowledges the fundamental rights of indigenous communities, including their right to self-determination as well as their right to control their own lands, territories, and resources. The loss of land rights experienced by Native Hawaiians is in clear violation of these fundamental rights, which impedes their ability to maintain their own cultural traditions, maintain their ancestral connections, and preserve their unique identity. This violation is particularly evident in Article 10 of the UNDRIP, which affirms indigenous peoples' rights to their lands and territories, while prohibiting their forced removal without free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC).<sup>9</sup>

The mass arrival of Micronesians to Hawai‘i only further angered Native Hawaiians and added to their list of grievances against the United States government. Reflecting on my upbringing in Hawai‘i, I often encountered a prevailing belief, one echoed by my high school history teacher, that the United States views the Hawaiian islands as nothing more than a dumping ground for Micronesians, many of whom were forced to flee their homelands following the U.S. detonation of multiple nuclear bombs on their indigenous territories. The rhetoric often used is that Micronesians are a drain on the already limited resources in Hawai‘i.<sup>10</sup> These

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<sup>9</sup> UN. “United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.” *United Nations*, Sept. 2007.

<sup>10</sup> Blair, Chad. “No Aloha for Micronesians in Hawaii.” Honolulu Civil Beat. June 10, 2011. <https://www.civilbeat.org/2011/06/no-aloha-for-micronesians-in-hawaii/>.

resources may include jobs, housing, healthcare, and other basic needs. The situation described here highlights the importance of the principle of FPIC, which is also enshrined in the UNDRIP. The United States' decision to conduct nuclear tests in the Micronesian region without the well informed consent of the indigenous communities living there resulted in severe consequences for their health and well-being. Similarly, the mass migration of Micronesians to Hawai‘i without proper consultation or consideration of the impacts on the receiving community, in this case being the Native Hawaiians, violates the principles of FPIC. Indigenous peoples have the right to be informed and to provide their consent to any decision that may affect them, their lands, or their resources. This right is essential to ensure that their sovereignty, self-determination, and cultural integrity are respected and protected. In accordance with this right, Native Hawaiians often argue that they should have been consulted before the U.S. decided to give Micronesian peoples free and legal access to any of the fifty American states, including Hawai‘i. The resentment initially directed by Native Hawaiians towards the United States has, unfortunately, been projected onto Micronesian communities, which has fuelled an enduring cycle of violence and discord that persists to this present day.

As a result, Micronesians have become targets of discrimination and have since faced challenges in integrating into Hawai‘i’s society. Even as a Chuukese boy that was born and raised in Hawai‘i, I was not exempt from the horrible treatment that many Micronesians faced. Growing up, I witnessed my Micronesian classmates being bullied and ostracized simply for being different. In my tenth grade U.S. History class, my teacher, not knowing that I was

Chuukese, referred to Micronesian peoples as “radical monkeys.” I had no choice but to ignore his racist comments in order to avoid being graded unfairly for the remainder of the school year. The pure hatred for Micronesians in Hawai‘i is disheartening, and it is something that needs to be addressed. Even as a child, I knew that this type of treatment was not right. It was difficult to see my friends and classmates being treated so unfairly solely because of their ethnicity. It was even more difficult to experience this same type of treatment myself.

As I grew older and learned more about the history of Micronesians in Hawai‘i, I began to understand the root of this discrimination— the colonial legacies left behind by the United States. I realized that the way I was being treated by Native Hawaiians was eerily similar to the way that they, themselves, were treated by Americans. For instance, in his book titled *The Royal Commission of Inquiry: Investigating War Crimes Committed in the Hawaiian Kingdom*, Dr. David Keanu Sai, a prominent activist for the rights of Native Hawaiians, highlighted the ways in which the United States sought to denationalize Kānaka Maoli through a process of Americanization. Under a policy titled, “Programme for Patriotic Exercises in the Public Schools”, the United States banned the Hawaiian language in schools and replaced it with the English language.<sup>11</sup> This meant that if Hawaiian students spoke their own language rather than speaking the English language, they would be punished. The suppression of the Hawaiian language, along with other acts of denationalization, immediately resulted in a significant loss of cultural identity and contributed to a major decline in Hawaiian indigenous practices.

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<sup>11</sup> Sai, David Keanu. *The Royal Commission of Inquiry: Investigating War Crimes Committed in the Hawaiian Kingdom*. Royal Commission of Inquiry, Jan. 2020,



Similarly, Native Hawaiians today often seek to denationalize Micronesian peoples by forcing them to abandon their own languages and cultural practices in order to assimilate into Hawai‘i’s society. In Hawai‘i, many Micronesians, myself included, are often ridiculed for speaking their own native tongues and even for dressing in their own traditional clothing. This is a clear violation of the principles of self-determination and cultural integrity, which are recognized in the UNDRIP. By forcing Micronesians to assimilate into Hawaiian culture and society, their own cultural identity and traditions are threatened, and their right to self-determination is undermined. As I matured, I quickly recognized that this indigenous on indigenous violence was not the answer to the colonial legacies that Micronesians and Native Hawaiians both face. It was through this recognition that I began to understand the extent to which colonial legacies continue to shape the experiences of indigenous peoples, not just in Hawai‘i or Micronesia, but around the world. This recognition also led me to realize the great importance for Micronesians and Native Hawaiians to work together in solidarity to address the root causes of their struggles. This solidarity is not only necessary to address the issues faced by these two groups, but also to recognize the intersections with other indigenous communities facing similar challenges around the world.

This is where the intersectionality of indigenous struggles becomes apparent. The struggles faced by Micronesians in Hawai‘i are not unique to them alone, but are part of a larger issue faced by all indigenous peoples. The displacement, marginalization, and discrimination that Micronesians face are all symptoms of the ongoing legacy of colonialism, which has affected indigenous communities all over the world. In this case, the colonial legacy that is

perpetuated onto the Micronesian peoples by Native Hawaiians is a byproduct of the United States of America, which was and continues to be one of the world’s most violent and dominant colonial powers.

As an indigenous youth with connections to two distinct indigenous communities, Micronesia and Hawai‘i, I have been given a unique perspective on the importance of fostering solidarity among different indigenous groups. Growing up in Hawai‘i as a Chuukese boy, I learned that the intersectionality of Hawai‘i and Micronesia goes beyond just cultural and identity issues. Both regions have a shared history of colonization and the ongoing impacts of settler colonialism. Indigenous peoples in Hawai‘i and Micronesia have experienced similar forms of exploitation, displacement, and cultural erasure at the hands of colonial powers. This shared history of oppression creates a unique opportunity for solidarity and cross-cultural collaboration in the struggle for indigenous sovereignty and self-determination. In fact, the UNDRIP acknowledges this form of interconnectedness by calling on states to respect and promote the rights of indigenous peoples, and to work towards addressing the ongoing impacts of colonization. The struggles faced by Micronesians in Hawai‘i, along with the struggles of other indigenous communities, are a reminder of the importance of addressing these colonial legacies and working towards a more just and equitable future for all. To aid in this quest for liberation and solidarity, it is important to recognize that the principles of FPIC and the UNDRIP provide a working framework for indigenous communities to assert their rights and sovereignty, and to ensure that their voices are heard and respected in decisions that affect them. I truly believe that it is only through collaboration, respect, and understanding that we can truly begin

to work towards a future where all indigenous peoples are able to thrive in their own cultural identities and practices, and are able to exercise their right to self-determination without facing discrimination, marginalization, or violence.

With this paper, I hope to inspire indigenous groups, not only in the Pacific, but all over the world to escape the confines of the settler colonial relationship that have been imposed onto them by colonial powers. Breaking free from the settler colonial relationship is no easy feat, but it is necessary in order to preserve and protect indigenous sovereignty, self-determination, and cultural integrity. One way to achieve this is by building solidarity and allyship among different indigenous groups, and to recognize the common struggles that they face. It is also important for each indigenous group to reclaim their own ancestral knowledge and practices, and to assert their indigenous rights to land, resources, and self-governance. By following these guidelines, indigenous peoples can begin to successfully resist and challenge the structures of oppression and domination that have been imposed onto them for generations.

Furthermore, it is important to hold colonial powers accountable for their past and present actions, and to demand justice and reparations for the harm that has been done to indigenous communities. This can involve legal action, public awareness campaigns, and grassroots organizing. It can also involve engaging with international human rights bodies, such as the United Nations, to ensure that indigenous peoples' rights are protected and upheld.

In conclusion, the struggles of Micronesian peoples in Hawai‘i highlight the ongoing legacies of settler colonialism and the importance of indigenous self-determination and sovereignty. By recognizing and directly challenging these structures of domination and

oppression, indigenous peoples can work towards reclaiming their cultural heritage, their lands, and their dignity. As a Chuukese boy that was born and raised in Hawai‘i, I am proud to stand in solidarity with Native Hawaiians and other indigenous peoples in their quests for liberation and justice. However, before anything else, it is imperative that we cease battling amongst ourselves and instead unite our efforts towards addressing the root of our collective struggle.

Understanding that our strength lies in solidarity, we must come together as one. As my Chuukese elders would wisely counsel, “*sipwe angang fengen*” – let us collaborate and work in unison. Only together can we achieve our goals.

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