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## Philosophy in Micronesia

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A native Micronesian might very well doubt the possibility that a non-Micronesian, like myself, could understand or have anything meaningful to say about Micronesian philosophy because cultural knowledge in Micronesian cultures was, and still is to a considerable degree, a form of personal wealth and power. How could a non-Micronesian say anything meaningful about Micronesian culture; who dealt the outsider into the game; who gave the outsider the traditional wealth and power of knowledge? It is this specialization of knowledge which gives me my first insight into Micronesian philosophy.<sup>1</sup> From ancient Greece to modern America, western philosophers have been proposing, like Micronesians, that true knowledge claims are primarily made by trained and proven experts, I argue that there is a philosophy embodied in the cultural practices and ideals of the people of Micronesia.

For the sake of brevity and argument allow me to begin with a few assumptions. First, loosely defined Micronesia is a nexus where at least three culture areas overlap, namely (1) the Palau-Yap = Marianas form one area which has important material and spritual exchanges with, (2) the Kosrae-Pohnpei-Chuuk area which also has important cultural interrelations with (3) the Gilbert-Marshall cultural area.<sup>2</sup> Second, because of the historical and cultural diversity of the peoples of Micronesia, it is

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a misnomer to speak of a Micronesian philosophy just as it is equally a misnomer to speak of American philosophy, or western or eastern philosophy. Although a misnomer, it is unavoidable. To make, and properly understand, generalizations as heuristic models is part of teaching and learning. One such generalization is that western philosophy (from the ancient Greeks 600 B.C. to the twentieth century) is devoted to solving the problem of the one and the many, or the problem of the universal and the particular. In the western philosophical scene, a dominant philosophical question is : what is the one universal substance or form which makes the many manifestations of this world possible? Notice that when social scientists do cross cultural studies, they either show evidence of cultural universals (the one), or difference (the many). It is difficult to grasp the teachings of any one western philosopher--where there is a written text and an established tradition of textual commentary. How much more difficult will it be to gain an understanding of the oral and cultural philosophy of Micronesians? In the study of philosophy, it is important that one gain an appreciation for problems and "dwelling in a problem," rather than answers. Philosophers prefer to think about problems and develop criticism against answers, while most people want solutions or answers. Most people, especially students, want to know what to say, as if mouthing a magic formula of words would bestow knowledge and wisdom. This may not be too surprising because noted philosophers themselves have mouthed such magic formula, e.g. Descartes' *Cogito ergo sum* ("I think. Therefore I am."), or Berkeley's *Esee ess percepti* ("To be is to be perceived."). In a technological culture, one expects true knowledge claims to have a performative or instrumental value. Interestingly enough the performative nature of constructing a symbolic world is an important part of traditional Micronesian ritual, magic, and technical knowledge. What can western approaches to philosophy teach us about Micronesian

philosophy, and what can Micronesian philosophy teach us about western philosophy?

### *Theorizing Myth*

A common approach in attempting to understand cultures or philosophies other than one's own is to discover or invent some commonalities.

This is what I have done above: my academic culture holds that knowledge claims are made by specialists, and this knowledge gives the specialist social, political, economic power, and I find something similar occurring in Micronesian culture. I discover another important link between the performative character of Western philosophical language which has a magical quality of constructing a world through properly phrased utterances--philosophical arguments--and the ritual magical language games of Micronesians.

There is a double-edged danger contained in this quest for similarities. On one side, one might see only similarities, miss or ignore important differences, not perceive the uniqueness of the other, and end up perceiving only reflections and projections of oneself. On the other side, one might see only differences, miss or ignore important similarities, and again end up not understanding the other. Because highly abstract, especially theoretical, constructs play an important role in the philosophy and science of academic culture, and these are not readily found in traditional Micronesian culture, it is tempting to propose that either there was no traditional Micronesian philosophy, in which case my project ends here, or traditional mythology and other areas of knowledge, e.g. navigation, fishing, agriculture, medicine, and magic, do contain implicit theoretical constructs. This is what I mean by theorizing mythology--to read traditional myths *as if* they do contain linguistic constructs which constitute a Micronesian philosophical world view. Although problematic,

this approach has born fruit.

Generally speaking, Micronesian mythology, similar to Indonesian, Polynesian and Japanese mythology, justifies social political stratification of people based on a story of "divine" ancestral origin of the upper ruling strata who remember and can recite their ancestry. By "divine ancestors" I mean primordial beings who used magical and natural powers to construct the sky, islands, ocean, life, and the lineage of the upper caste of traditional society. In Micronesia, the divine ancestor origin is usually associated with the sky world in general or particular stars, and this is undoubtedly due to the fact that migration in traditional Micronesia was accomplished by star navigation. The primordial inhabitants of Micronesia sailed out of Malaysia, Indonesia and Melanesia. Once they established island communities, the story of their migration was mythologized into a cosmogonic act of divine origin.<sup>3</sup> Not surprisingly similar stories are told in Southeast Asia. As Aristotle pointed out, mythology contains the beginning of philosophy in its attempt to search for first principles to explain the origin and structure of the known world.

"Knowledge is power" is the adage of western, especially European thought since F. Bacon pronounced it. Micronesians adhere to a similar notion. They take the idea that knowledge is power so seriously that they tend to keep knowledge secret. Knowing the traditional myths of one's island or atoll is power. One who knows the myths can explain and justify the ancestral lineage, which justifies the social, political and economic stratification. The myths justify property and land rights, and can hold and who can gain access to specialized types of knowledge (agriculture, navigation, canoe building, house building, fishing, making war, making medicine, making magic, and so on). This specialization of knowledge bears a strong resemblance to the western approach to technical knowledge. From the point of view of similarity, Micronesia and the West

share hierarchic systems of specialized knowledge.

An important difference between the western and the micronesian world view is the western tendency to split the world into dualistic opposites, while the Micronesian world, like most traditional Pacific-Asian cultures, especially Indonesian, Malaysian, Filipino, and Japanese, is constructed on a bipolar nondual relationship obtaining between opposites. The tendency in the West, especially in Plato and Descartes, and in the religions of Manicheanism, Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, is to separate reality into two opposite and opposing forces: good/evil; heaven/hell or heaven/earth; God/human; body/soul; true/false; right/wrong. The problem with dualism is that once one has split the world into two parts, then one has to explain how the parts fit back together again; for example, how the two worlds connect; how the spiritual soul interacts with the material body; how the soul leaves the body and lives in another world (heaven) in an afterlife. The Micronesian world view is best described as nondual. Their world is not a monism; monism proposes that the world is one material or spiritual force; plurality, the many, is either an illusion or reducible to the one force. For example, modern science is a monism. It may appear as though the world is made up of both matter and energy. But in fact matter and energy are interchangeable. The Micronesian world view is not a dualism; the opposing forces are not split into separate realms. In the Micronesian world view opposites interact, interconnect, interpenetrate into and through each other. The root of the nondual world view of Micronesia originates in Southeast Asia.<sup>4</sup> In the nondual world, life and death are intimately interconnected; of course everyone discovers that life leads to and ends in death, but few westerners can complete the loop and see that death supports life here in this world. In dualistic fashion, religious westerners expect an afterlife very different from this one. In part this

explains why for traditional Micronesians, the dead ancestors are considered to be part of this world and members of the living community. The traditional spirits do not leave this world for another world beyond or transcendent of this one. The traditional Micronesian attempts to live in harmony and balance between the interaction of opposing forces. The opposing forces, high/up/right/east/south/male and the low/down/left/west/north/female, interact. The male and female generative forces (Polynesian: *mana*, Chuukeas and Ponapean: *mana-man*) constitute a hylozoistic (living) world. These forces procreate the next generation; likewise the male and female forces commingle and generate the sky world above and this island-sea world below; they are not two separate worlds--like male and female, they intermingle. Consider the traditional cosmogonic myths which relate how a primordial brother and sister, husband and wife, or male and female created or rather procreated the world together.<sup>5</sup>

In traditional Micronesian religious beliefs, the spirits or gods are either forces of nature or ancestors; their spirit powers are localized with limited powers. The Micronesian gods and goddesses are not supernatural beings dwelling beyond this world. They are part and parcel of the natural world, bestowing a sense of the sacred here and now.

The western tendency leaning toward dualism places value in abstraction, higher ordered, structured systems of belief which have led westerners to identify with abstract belief systems rather than localized social interactions. The westerner's identity is rooted in a religious dogma, a political ideology, a scientific methodology. The Micronesian identity is rooted in one's lineage; it is through the ancestors that one is related to the environment. The lineage establishes one's totem relation to the fish in the ocean, the land on the island, and even the stars in the sky.<sup>6</sup> Hence the importance of family, clan relationships, and totem sib relationship with

the environment. The world is living and humans share kinship relationships with natural objects or animals--totem practices regulate behavior. Instead of rigid structured belief systems; the Micronesian world is based on a rigid structured family-social system. Relationships of interdependency and exchange define who and what one is--not one's abstract beliefs about the world, the state, or God.

### *Mythologizing Theory*

By comparing similarities and contrasting differences between western and Micronesian philosophy, I hope to develop some understanding of each respectively. Above I sought to employ mostly western concerns to highlight elements in Micronesian thought. Here I want to turn the table: what can Micronesian philosophy instruct me regarding my western heritage? What if I think of the western tradition of philosophy as a type of narrative mythology? In fact something like this has been done by J. Lyotard in his *The Post-Modern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Lyotard argues that science is a specialized language game which cannot verify itself by its own rules, and that western philosophy has failed to construct a metanarrative or grand narrative to explain how everything fits together. At best philosophy and science are narratives or language games; they too, like traditional mythologies, are stories; stories which cannot be told by just any one. Philosophy and science are stories of power and power relationships. In telling the story the teller constructs and performs a world.<sup>7</sup> This is what I mean by mythologizing theory--coming to see the mythic story contained in western philosophy and science.

People, especially professors, with a scientific bent will most likely not be too enthused about this idea of mythologizing theory. Many people are still prisoners of the scientific myth that scientists understand

the real laws of nature that they understand the relationship between cause and effect, while the magico-mythical world view of Micronesians or any other traditional society for that matter, does not grasp the laws of nature, especially not cause and effect. The myth of Newtonian mechanics (that absolute knowledge is possible) was exposed with the advent of Relativity Theory (observations are relative to the velocity, place and time, of the observer), Heisenberg's uncertainty principle (that an observer cannot be certain of both an atomic particle's speed and location), and Gödel's proof (that a logical/mathematical system cannot justify all of its propositions). The lesson of science is not merely found in the stories it tells, but there are important points to be learned in who gets to tell the story, and the type and amount of power (social, political, economic) vested in the story teller.

Two other important areas in which Micronesian philosophy can teach westerners something of importance are: (1) the role ritual plays in the achievement of personhood; and (2) the importance of framing political constitutions in the context of organic relationship, i.e. culture--what I call, for lack of a better term, the "organic contract."

The West has in part lost sight of the importance of ritual, especially rites of passage, in the development and achievement of personhood. Westerners tend to think of ritual as a restriction and restraint on one's exercise of free will; they tend to ignore or down play the importance of ritual in daily life despite the highly ritualized behavior of personal hygiene, domestic chores, health care, seasonal and yearly celebrations, educational, political and religious gatherings. As cultural beings, one's personhood is a dynamic on-going process of achievement.<sup>8</sup> Traditional Micronesian cultures place emphasis on the rites of passage which make this achievement process possible. The individual becomes a person by means of rituals. The rituals may even begin before one's

birth.<sup>9</sup> The processes of developing personal identity and power, and the fulfillment of the need to belong was traditionally achieved through ritual and has been overlooked in secular western society and may in part account for social deviancy, especially gang behavior wherein one can find a semblance of belonging. The West might learn something about the importance of rites of passage and other rituals of achieving personhood.

In contemporary political philosophy, the social contract theory, that political states are organized under an explicit or tacit compact, is founded on a myth or story about the "state of nature." The state of nature is typically described as a "state of war". The state of nature is employed by social contract theorists as a hypothetical starting point to describe the need for a social contract to mediate conflict between individual interests. Not only is there no evidence of there ever being such a state of nature, but the social contract theory paints a pessimistic image of human nature as one of savage conflict. What one can learn from a study of Micronesian philosophy is that the physical and social worlds are constituted out of a balance of conflicting forces resulting in interdependency, and the constitution of the Federated States of Micronesia attempts to further institutionalize organic elements of traditional culture in its social contract. The fact is that humans always live in cultural groups. Social and political order are organic or natural to human nature. The "organic contract" theory, I propose, sees culture as primary. If one wants to write a social contract or constitution, then one must begin with the political foundations already present in traditional, social and political relationships.

An organic contract theory assists in clarifying some key issues, namely the ambiguous role of nature and custom in the social contract position, and the weak role of reason and human artifice in the organic theories.<sup>10</sup> I develop an organic contract theory to ground social political

theory in a comprehensive (social) scientific hypotheses, taking into account the historical and archeological evidence which shows that our ancestors were living in social groups for the past four to six million years. The organic contract theory acknowledges the spectrum of archeological, historical, and social science evidence concerning human life, especially in social political arrangements. The organic contract theory is based on both the natural organic origin of political society and the historical role of reason in fine tuning the constitutional apparatus of a society. These two points are united in arguing for the organic natural basis of reason in culture .<sup>11</sup>

An organic contract theory acknowledges the natural biological and environmental factors which make humans gregarious creatures. It holds that these biological and environmental factors coupled with the gregarious nature of humans leads to the *natural* development of culture--a repository of understanding and relating to the world and others in a sociopolitical manner--which is intimately part and parcel of language, both natural and artificial. Various combinations and interactions among culture, language, and persons generate science, religion, philosophy, and art.

Confining the discussion to the social political dimensions, in the natural extended family loosely practicing exogamy, the small group or band is the first sociopolitical arrangement, and in a sense the small group is the fundamental arrangement in any society regardless of its overall size--all large societies are composed of smaller social units or groups. The extended family or band creates and maintains the context into which the individual is raised, and the individual re-defines the group by participating in the social network. As the basic political unit grows in complexity and diversity through history, these participating persons find it necessary to re-define or to create new definitions of themselves, their

culture, and the world. That is to say, it becomes necessary, because of chiefly environmental, economic and social conditions, and socio-biology cannot be ruled out, for people to construct, restructure or even create new social structures, arrangements, roles, institutions, and professions. For an organic contract position, social contracts are a natural development in restructuring or creating new forms of political interaction; the social contract grows organically as a natural human activity of reformulating and reinterpreting culture as a response to environmental, economic, social, and other factors.<sup>12</sup> The emergence of the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, the Republic of Palau, the Federated States of Micronesia, and Guam's attempt at achieving self-determination out of the Trust Territories serve as recent examples of relatively small isolated cultural groups entering international politics their recently designed constitutions.

An organic contract theory, then, overcomes the oversight of "reason" in many traditional organic theories, and it clarifies the ambiguous role of "nature and culture" in the social contract theories. For the organic contract position, human life is basically natural, but humans have a strong tendency to manipulate their natural environment and capacities through culture. In a sense, culture itself is the organic contract, for to some extent culture is biologically and environmentally influenced, but to a large degree it can be contrived by human activity and reasoning. As far as we can tell at this time, only humans have fully developed cultures, but human cultures are unique and various. That is, one must be born human to fully participate in a culture, but simply being a genetic human does not guarantee one admittance to human culture and recognition as a person with civil rights.<sup>13</sup> One's role as a person is achieved through participating in culture, and yet culture is not fixed and unchanging--by participating in culture, one alters and redefines it. The

organic contract theory attempts to account for all of the natural, cultural, and rational capacities of humans which play a role in creating new social arrangements. For the organic contract, humans qua humans have always live in some social and political arrangement, and historically those arrangements have been renegotiated in different instrumentalist, contractual, formats. The organic contract theory is already bearing fruit in Micronesia where constitutions are being developed or redefined with cultural values in mind.

The study of both traditional and contemporary Micronesian philosophy embodied in customs and cultural ideals is a prerequisite to understanding current concerns, and for planning for the future of Micronesia.

#### Notes

1. Suzanne Falgout, "Hierarchy vs. Democracy: Two Strategies for the Management of Knowledge in Pohnpei," *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, 23 / 1, March, 1992, 30-43.
2. Douglas Osborne, "Archaeology in Micronesia: Background, Palau Studies and Suggestions for the Future," *Asian Perspectives: The Bulletin of the Far-Eastern Prehistory Association*, V / 2, 1961, 156-163. Alkire, W. *An Introduction to the Peoples and Cultures of Micronesia*, (Menlo Park, CA: Cummings Publishing, 1977). Douglas L. Oliver, *Oceania: The Native Cultures of Australia and the Pacific Islands*, (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1989), vol. 2, ch. 18.
3. Komatsu Kazuhiro, "A Sketch of Chieftainship on Pulap: Island Community and its 'Exterior'," in *Anthropological Research on The Atoll Cultures of Micronesian, 1988*, ed. by Iwao Ushijima, (University of Tsukuba, Japan: Committee for Micronesian Research 1988, March, 1990); "The Changing of the Chiefly Clan in Pulap--a look at history in folklore," in *Cultural Adaptation to Atolls in Micronesia and West Polynesia*, ed. by Eikichi Ishikawa, (Tokyo Metropolitan University: Committee for Micronesian Research 1985, March, 1987); and his, "Two

Tales from the Sacred Island of Central Carolines," in *The 1983-'84 Cultural Anthropological expedition to Micronesia: An Interim Report*, ed. by Eikichi Ishikawa, (Tokyo Metropolitan University: Committee for Micronesian Research 1983, March, 1985).

Karen M. Peacock, "Micronesian Folklore Concerning Voyaging," no publisher, in the University of Hawaii Pacific Collection, 1975.

4. William H. Alkire, "Concepts of Order in Southeast Asia and Micronesia," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 14/4, September, 1972, 484-493. Although Alkire presents a good case for the Southeast Asian origin for Micronesian concepts of order, he misinterprets those concepts as dualistic.
5. The Chamorros of the Mariana Islands tell the cosmogonic myth of the primordial sister, Fau'una, who creates the cosmos out of the corpse of her brother, Puntan. The Palauans relate how the islands are the remains of a giant. The peoples of the Caroline islands relate various versions of how the islands were fished up out of the ocean by primal culture heros, or how rock and soil was piled up on the coral reef.
6. J.L. Fischer, "Totemism on Truk and Ponape," *American Anthropologist*, 59, 1957, 250-265.
7. Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Post-Modern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, G.Bennington and B. Massumi trans., (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).
8. Eliot Deutsch, *Personhood, Creativity, and Freedom*, (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1982), chs. 1,3, and 5. Deutsch has revised that material and included new essays in *Creative Being The Crafting of Person and World*, (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1992).
9. Celio Ferreira, *Palauan Cosmology: Dominance in a Traditional Micronesian Society*, (Gothenburg, Sweden: Acta Universita Gothoburgensis, 1987), ch.5.
10. The problem is that many Euro-American social and political theories and especially practices, for the past four hundred years, have been based on an instrumentalist or social contract theory which denies or ignores the natural organic basis of political society. This is a peculiar point in contract theory since the contractarian is aware that no actual society

was ever solely formed by a contract. Even the United States, which would be the most likely candidate, was not formed out of a pre-contractual state of nature, or some version of a hypothetical pre-historic or a-historic "original" position. It too had its cultural tradition, environmental factors, and predispositions which loosely conditioned the constitution--in particular the early colonial Township and church charters which established a tripartite division of powers. Although contemporary contractarians, like John Rawls, have attempted to sidestep this historical applicability problem by positing a hypothetical "original position" before the contract is made, nevertheless other problems concerning political obligation and morality arise because of their faulty starting point. See, A. John Simmons, *Moral Principles and Political Obligations*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), pp. 101 ff, and 143 ff.

11. An organic contract position recognizes strong and weak points in conservative and liberal, and organic and instrumental theories. It attempts a syntheses by uniting the strong points and dissolving the weak ones.
12. For example, the development of social contract theory in Europe and America can be seen as a reaction to social changes brought on by economic and scientific revolutions, and ideological and religious reformations, and in turn the contract position, as constitutionalism, creates the contemporary social order. We could, like Nietzsche and others, easily oversimplify the whole of contract theory as a political application of the merchant's business contracts, which allowed for the great trade boom of Renaissance Europe. There was also a great deal of concern to eradicate any deep rooted religious or otherwise biased ideology from politics, especially state persecution of religion, and the contract theory could guarantee that.
13. Recall the examples of human children raised by non-human animals, and the great, if not impossible, task of reintroducing them into human society. The Tarzan myth is part of the Romantic image of the noble savage ideal--that uncultured and untutored humans living alone as rugged individuals in the jungle can achieve true humanity. There is no anthropological evidence that this ideal is achievable. In fact, the evidence shows that without appropriate human contact psycho-sociopathologies, or at least anti-social behaviors, develop.