POHNPEI
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Basic Information

The Land and Climate

Pohnpei, formerly Ponape, is one of the four states within the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM). Part of the Caroline Islands group, it is made up of one large island (surrounded by 25 smaller islands) and eight atolls.

While FSM includes over 600 islands, which collectively represent a land area of 700.8 sq km, only 65 of the islands are inhabited. These are scattered over a very large area of the Pacific Ocean, giving FSM an Exclusive Economic Zone of almost three million sq km (Douglas and Douglas 1994: 132).

Pohnpei Island is 21 km in diameter and 113 km in circumference. It is located very slightly north of the equator (six degrees, fifty minutes) and 318 km west of the International Date Line. This places it roughly 3,700 km northwest of Fiji, 5,000 km west of Honolulu, and 1,700 km southeast of Guam. The island is surrounded by a barrier reef that is widely known for excellent diving. Most of the coastline is forested with mangroves, leaving almost no sandy beaches. It is a volcanic island, with the highest mountains in the Federated States of Micronesia; the tallest mountain, Mt. Ngiriheni, reaches 791 m. While much of the interior is rainforest, the coastal lowlands are covered with strand vegetation. Pohnpei receives an enormous amount of rain, perhaps 10 m yearly in the mountains and half that in the capital, Kolonia. Temperatures vary little, with lows in the mid-twenties and highs in the low thirties most of the year round. Humidity is quite high. While tropical disturbances can develop in the waters near Pohnpei, they move away from the island before reaching great strength, leaving its inhabitants with little threat from cyclones compared to many other islands in that part of the world (Ashby 1993: 5).

Inhabitants think of the land on Pohnpei Island in different categories according to use. Mangroves from the salt-water swamps are used for firewood and construction materials. Freshwater swamp is appropriate for taro cultivation. There are private gardens set aside for other subsistence crops, and there are scrub areas with limited use but where bananas and pineapples will grow. Wood from some of the forested areas can be harvested, but much of the higher land is steep and jagged, and is covered by dense jungle containing little wood suitable for construction purposes (Ashby 1994: 112-3, 116-7). Ashby succinctly sums up land ownership:

To envision land ownership, imagine Pohnpei to be a Stetson hat sitting on a large body of water. Nearly all of its round brim, which is 30,691 acres (12,420 hectares), is privately owned. The larger peaked center of 47,942 acres (19,402 hectares) is uncultivated, mountainous forest...
called public land and controlled by the government. Of the total 78,633 acres (31,821 hectares), subsistence and cash crops occupy 34% of the land and woods and mangrove swamps cover 64% of it. Urban complexes and other functions occupy the remaining 2% (Ashby 1994: 113).

Population

The people of FSM are Micronesians, more particularly Carolinian, but tend to identify themselves in terms of more localized designations such as Chuukese, Pohnpeian, or Mortlockese. It is believed that the original Carolinians migrated from Southeast Asia (Douglas and Douglas 1994: 129).

In 2000 the population of FSM was 107,008 (FSM Census 2000: 3). The population has been growing at a fairly rapid rate – 3 per cent per annum – but emigration is sharp enough to cut net growth to less than one per cent. Guam, Saipan, and the United States (especially Hawaii) receive a high percentage of those leaving FSM. Outward migration is not nearly matched by the arrival of immigrants. The 2000 census identified only 1,265 residents of Asian origin and 432 "Whites." The state of Chuuk has just under half of FSM's population; Pohnpei follows at 33.1 per cent, Yap 10.8 per cent, and Kosrae 7.4 per cent (Douglas and Douglas 1994: 129-30).

English is the official language of FSM, and the medium of instruction in schools, but it serves as a second tongue for most of its speakers. Local Carolinian languages like Chuukese or Pohnpeian are the mother tongues of the great majority of people.

An outstanding feature of the FSM population is its youth. In 2000, 53 per cent of residents were under 20 years of age, and 14 per cent were four years old or younger (FSM Census 2000: 8).

These characteristics of the FSM population largely hold true for Pohnpei. Over two-thirds of its residents are indigenous Pohnpeians. Other groups include Mortlockese (transferred after their island was struck by a great typhoon in 1907), and migrants from other FSM states and Palau. There are a few hundred expatriate contract workers from other countries (Filipinos are prominent), whose presence evokes some controversy. Outward migration serves as a curb on population levels, which are greatly skewed toward the young. Three-quarters of the people on Pohnpei have Pohnpeian as a mother tongue, and it serves as an official state language along with English (Ashby 1993:7-10).

History

Knowledge of the prehistory of the Caroline Islands is not great. Some islands appear to have been inhabited for as long as 4000 years (Douglas and Douglas 1994: 148), but archaeological evidence for Pohnpei dates later. The ancient ruins at Nan Madol, a cluster of 92 man-made islets over an area of reef flat, have received the greatest attention from scholars and tourists alike. At this site the Saudeleurs, who ruled Pohnpei, constructed canals, temples, and walls with enormous crystals of rock. Radiocarbon dating indicates that one of the islet sites was under construction around 1200 C.E., but more recent excavations below the tidal level suggest occupation as far back as 200 B.C.E. (Douglas and Douglas 1994: 155; Ashby 1993: 345).

Pohnpeians, following oral history, divide their past into four time periods, with the final period beginning at the time of first contact with Europeans. The first period is the time when mythic figures used supernatural powers to construct the island. The second
period, the time of the supreme lords, coincides with the rule of the Saudeleurs at Nan Madol. The third period, perhaps beginning around 1625, begins with the overthrow of the last Saudeleur by the warrior Isokelelel who came to Pohnpei from the east. He became the first of a series of paramount chiefs. During that time the island was divided into the political territories that exist today (Ashby 1993: 33-6).

Beginning in the early 16th century there is evidence of sightings of Pohnpei by European ships. For the next 250 years, however, contact was very rare. The galleon trade between Spanish colonies in Mexico and the Philippines followed a more northerly route. In the 19th century the presence of ships for surveying, trading, and whaling became more common in the Caroline Islands. As these ships came and went they left deserters, castaways, and beachcombers behind. While many of these led reprobate lifestyles, some were brought into the employ of local chiefs; they proved to be useful translators and bargainers as trade with passing vessels became common. Ships bound for China often traded western goods like tobacco, ironware, or cloth for beche-de-mer, turtle shell, or shark fins. Not all contact with foreign vessels was mutually beneficial; sometimes the results were violent, even tragic. Besides the importation of diseases that killed off well over half of the population of Pohnpei, there were a number of bloody clashes between islanders and visiting crews. The worst episode saw Pohnpeians join with Europeans in the employ of a ship called the Lambton to massacre every male except one on the atoll of Sapwuahfik in 1837 (Douglas and Douglas 1994: 148-9; Ashby 1993: 46-55).

By 1885 both Spain and Germany were claiming authority over the Caroline Islands. The dispute was sent to Pope Leo XIII for arbitration and he ruled in favour of Spain (while granting Germany extensive economic rights in the region). Pohnpei was made the administrative centre with the government in the Philippines given oversight (Douglas and Douglas 1994: 149). Spanish control of Pohnpei lasted less than 15 years and suffered from regular conflict with the local people. Disputes over land acquisition, forced labour policies, intrusion of roads into local areas, and Spanish support of Roman Catholic missions in Protestant areas all led to armed conflict. At certain points the numbers of Spanish killed were counted in the dozens, even reaching 118 during one battle in 1890. Spain’s control of Pohnpei ended at the time of treaty negotiations after the Spanish-American War, with Germany purchasing the Caroline Islands (along with the Marshall Islands and the Marianas, except Guam) (Ashby1993: 66-74).

Germany’s rule of Pohnpei proved to be very much like Spain’s: short-lived and marked by strife. After a relatively calm first decade of German administration – aided by a more gentle approach to colonial governance practised by the first German administrators, restrictions on prostitution and the sale of alcohol to Pohnpeians, and an effort to make peace between the five kingdoms on the island – the Germans began to make the same mistakes as the Spaniards: forced labour, favouritism toward Catholic missions, and an authoritarian administration of justice. Tensions came to a head with the Sokehs Rebellion of 1910–11. After the killing of the German district administrator and a number of his aides, there was a several-month standoff between German forces and rebels from the Sokehs and Palikir areas. This ended when German warships and Melanesian troops came to the aid of the administration. Fighting lasted for weeks but the rebellion was broken and almost the entire populations of the Sokehs and Palikir districts lost their lands and were sent into exile (Ashby 1993: 74-82).
German management of the island did have one lasting and important effect: land reform. Between 1912 and 1914 land was effectively taken out of the hands of traditional leaders and distributed among the then population of about 4,000. Private ownership was entrenched in law (Ashby 1993: 83).

German rule over Pohnpei ended with the outbreak of World War I. Japan and Germany found themselves on opposite sides of this conflict, the former declaring war on the latter in August of 1914. By November, Japan had exerted control over all of the Carolines (Douglas and Douglas 1994: 151). In Pohnpei four Japanese warships arrived one day to dislodge the German colony, which did not even know of the war (Ashby 1993: 86).

Japanese rule over Pohnpei — and the rest of Micronesia, as formalized by the Versailles Peace Conference in 1920 — lasted until the end of World War II. This was a time of rapid economic and infrastructural development for Pohnpei. Large numbers of Japanese nationals moved to the island, eventually outnumbering the locals by a ratio of five to two. Fisheries and agriculture for Japanese commercial (and military) purposes were expanded and much more thoroughly organized. Physical infrastructure and educational and medical services were greatly improved, a benefit to the indigenous population as well as the Japanese (Ashby 1993: 86-91).

While war raged in Micronesia from 1942, Pohnpei was not directly affected at first. There was hardship because of shortages of food, clothing, and other goods, but no fighting. In February 1944 this changed. Allied bombers struck, destroying the capital Kolonia. Bombing continued until mid-1945. A small number of Pohnpeians, perhaps less than two dozen, were killed during the bombing, and Japanese casualties were also low. But this phase of the war was still a great tribulation. The exodus of the Japanese and destruction caused by the bombing left infrastructure and economic and institutional life in tatters. It took decades under American hegemony for standards to return to their Japanese-era levels.

After the war, the US military occupied Micronesia for two years. In 1947 the region (including the Marianas, the Marshalls, and the Carolines) was placed under a United Nations trusteeship, but as this was administered by the US it effectively became an American territory. The trust territory was administered first by the Department of the Navy and then by the Department of the Interior. Economic development during the first decades of this arrangement was slow. Political developments progressed more quickly.

In 1947 116 municipal governments, each with a measure of independence from the regional government, were created throughout the trust territory. By 1953 the Pohnpei Island Congress was established. In 1965 a bicameral Congress of Micronesia was created, giving Micronesians a say in their regional government. The next step was to determine the permanent political status of the region. The US offered to make it a commonwealth with permanent financial and administrative support. This was turned down by the Congress, which had appointed a commission to study its future status. The commission recommended that Micronesia become a self-governing state in free association with the US, or an independent state. Neither of these things happened, as various sub-regions pursued different goals. The Northern Marianas became a territory of the US; the Marshall Islands became a republic; and the Carolines were divided into the Republic of Palau and the Federated States of Micronesia (Douglas and Douglas 1994: 151–2; Ashby 1993: 100–105).

The constitutional government was installed in FSM in 1979, and Pohnpei became a state of the FSM with its own legislature – leaving its residents with four layers of government:
traditional, municipal, state, and federal (a complicated arrangement for a nation of so few people). American stewardship did not end with independence. A compact of free association was agreed to by the FSM and the US in 1980, ensuring significant levels of continued aid from the US, and the continuation of an American military presence and such services as the US Postal Service and the Federal Aviation Administration. This compact ended in 2001, but a new 20-year compact was agreed to in 2003. This new compact reduces the amount of aid significantly (Douglas and Douglas 1994: 151-2, Pacific Island Report, 13 May 2003).

**Government**

As mentioned above, there are several layers of government in the FSM. The national government is headed by a president who is elected for a four-year term from the national Congress of the FSM. That congress has 14 members: four elected nationally, and ten elected on the basis of population apportionment. The national members sit for four years, the others for two. The national capital is located at Palikir, Pohnpei. The Congress, guided by a constitution, oversees immigration, taxation, currency regulation, trade, banking, navigation and shipping, and the development of natural resources. Defence and national security are provided by the US under the compact of free association. As with Kosrae, Yap, and Chuuk, the Pohnpei state government is responsible for local development, with a particular emphasis on education and health. It has a governor elected by popular vote and a unicameral legislative assembly (Douglas and Douglas 1994: 133).

There is a national supreme court with trial and appellate divisions, located in Pohnpei. State courts attend to matters not within the jurisdiction of the Supreme Court, and municipal courts have authority to deal with less serious civil and criminal matters arising within their municipalities (Douglas and Douglas 1994: 133-4).

A word about traditional governance. While chiefs may not have as dominant a position as they once did in Pohnpeian society, they are still very important. Their authority is given narrative rooting in the story of Isokelele’s overthrow of the ruthless Saudeleurs. Isokelele’s descendants became the first chiefs. A very complex and hierarchical system evolved in all of Pohnpei’s ‘kingdoms.’ Key to this system were the two categories of chief: The *Nahmnwarki* were the greater chiefs (or kings) and the *Nahmkken* the lesser. Within each category there were as many as 12 sub-ranks. Control of land and local governance was delineated by this system, causing great jockeying for the favour of progressively authoritative chiefs. After the land reform forced by the German administration and the establishment of local governments, the stranglehold of chiefs in these areas was weakened, but they still hold considerable sway today. They also continue to be very important culturally and occupy key places in rituals.

**Education**

In the FSM state governments are responsible for the provision of education at the primary and secondary levels, but the national government supports and coordinates efforts nation-wide. Expenditure on education is in the range of 20-25 per cent of the total operations budget, but this may decrease as less money is transferred from the US under the new compact. Curricula differ from state to state, but all educational enterprise is faced with serious challenges: a dispersed population, rudimentary infrastructure, limited materials that were produced for other cultures (mainly the US), instruction in the students’ second or third language, hot and humid classrooms, and so on. At both the primary and secondary
levels, state operated schools are augmented by private schools, many of which are run by religious organizations. Vocational and technical training is integrated into secondary school training (in grades 10 to 12 on Pohnpei). Attendance at school is not compulsory at any level (Douglas and Douglas 1994: 134-5).

Tertiary education is provided by a number of institutions in FSM: The College of Micronesia (which includes the Community College of Micronesia — CCM), the Micronesian Occupational College, the College of Tropical Agriculture and Science, Centres for Continuing Education, and the CCM School of Nursing. The Pohnpei campus of CCM offers teacher training. There is also a Pacific Basin Medical Officers Training Programme located in Pohnpei and administered by the University of Hawaii (Douglas and Douglas 1994: 135-6). The table below indicates educational levels for people over 25 years of age, according to the 2000 census:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1: Educational Levels, Persons Over 25 years</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
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<tr>
<td>Some Elementary</td>
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<tr>
<td>Elementary Completion</td>
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<tr>
<td>Some High School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School Graduation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College Graduation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: FSM Census 2000

**Economy**

Two factors impede a precise reporting on the economy of Pohnpei. The first is that the most recent available sources providing a thorough analysis are about a decade old. The second is that these sources deal largely with FSM as a whole. Data from the 2000 census is reassuring however; it indicates that the analyses of the decade-old sources are still largely accurate, and it shows that, in broad sweeps at least, the nature and state of Pohnpei's economy resembles that of FSM as a whole. The discussion in this section will focus mostly on FSM, with occasional references to the particularities of Pohnpei State.

The economy of FSM has been called an "upside down economy" (Hezel et al. 1997), because the share of GDP attributable to government activity is larger than that attributable to private sector activity. In most countries such a situation would be impossible to sustain (given dependence upon the private sector for the tax base to fund government expenditure). How is such a situation maintained in FSM? The answer lies with financial assistance provided through the compact of free association with the US (and to a much lesser extent with aid provided by other countries). In the mid-1990s, total transfers from the US were topping the 100 million dollar mark (this while the total GDP in 1994 was $200,900,000!). With the exception of the Marshall Islands, the US provides more aid on a per capita basis to FSM than to any other country (Pacific Island Report, 13 May 2003). This level of aid skews the economy in a number of important ways: government expenditure amounting to 80 per cent of GDP; an import/export ratio ranging between 5 to 1 and 23 to 1 in the first half of the 1990s (more recent data unavailable); a disproportionately high level of workers
employed by government; much higher wages paid in the public sector than the private; bloated government bureaucracies; and a population accustomed to a lifestyle that it would have trouble maintaining without great levels of aid (Hezel et al. 1997; Douglas and Douglas 1994: 138-43).

It is obvious that such a situation creates an array of problems, but two can be highlighted. The first is that the development of private sector industries has been discouraged by the bloated, high-paying public sector. Skilled and educated people are drawn into government instead of entrepreneurship; and the urgency to develop indigenous industries is slackened. The second problem makes the first more urgent: levels of aid, while still significant, are falling. The new compact of free association assures only a total transfer of $92.7 million per year for 20 years.

These problems are compounded by others: a small amount of arable land, leaving limited opportunities for commercial agriculture; a population dispersed over a wide area, making concentrated industry difficult; the country’s location at great distances from the world’s markets; significant government debt; education levels and infrastructure that are still only of third-world standard despite decades of heavy aid; and the harvesting of fishing resources at an unsustainable rate by other countries.

The economic picture is not all doom and gloom, however. Pohnpeians and other FSM citizens have shown economic industriousness in a variety of ways and have some resources at their disposal. One factor that bodes well for the fending off of deep poverty is the strength of the subsistence sector. Almost every family is engaged in subsistence farming, at least part time. This activity provides over 60 per cent of the food consumed in FSM and subsistence farming and fishing account for over one-third of employment (in Pohnpei almost 50 per cent) (Douglas and Douglas 1994: 139; FSM Census 2000: 73).

Commercial agriculture is less impressive. Pohnpei has one large pepper plantation. Like the other FSM states it produces copra for export, but levels fluctuate greatly from year to year. It also produces modest amounts of kava (kava), livestock, and poultry. Fishing is another story. FSM has ownership of tuna stocks that could perhaps produce a sustainable harvest of 100,000 tonnes per year. At present most of the revenue comes from the licensing of fishing rights to foreign countries (in 1990 over $14,000,000 was paid). Of course much more revenue could be gathered — and by the private sector instead of the government — if FSM were to better develop its own commercial fishing. Following government initiatives there have been efforts in this direction. Results have been modest (Douglas and Douglas 1994: 139-40; Hezel et al. 1997).

The tourism industry in Pohnpei, as throughout the country, exists but is not greatly developed. The ancient site of Nan Madol and excellent diving attract some visitors, but growth in this sector is impeded by the scarcity of beaches, the distance from major population centres, and the great expense of air travel from those places.

The table below, while a decade out of date, provides an overview of the size and growth rate of the FSM economy:

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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>179.1</td>
<td>173.0</td>
<td>177.4</td>
<td>177.3</td>
<td>185.6</td>
<td>199.4</td>
<td>201.9</td>
<td>204.8</td>
<td>200.9</td>
<td>202.6</td>
<td>204.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>-3.4</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>-0.1</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>-1.9</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>2,039</td>
<td>1,910</td>
<td>1,901</td>
<td>1,851</td>
<td>1,891</td>
<td>1,986</td>
<td>1,971</td>
<td>1,967</td>
<td>1,904</td>
<td>1,896</td>
<td>1,887</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>-6.3</td>
<td>-0.5</td>
<td>-2.6</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>-0.8</td>
<td>-0.2</td>
<td>-3.2</td>
<td>-3.6</td>
<td>-0.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 = Real Total GDP, in $Million
2 = Real GDP Growth Rate in Per Cent
3 = Real GDP Per Capita in 1995 $
4 = Real GDP Per Capita Growth Rate, in Per cent

Source: Hezel et al. 1997

A more up to date table can be offered for an overview of the employment picture. What the table does not show is that unemployment is greatly skewed toward the young, with a rate of 24.3 for Pohnpeians under 20 years of age and 19.4 for those between 20 and 24.

Table 3: Employment Rates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>FSM</th>
<th>Pohnpei</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Persons 15yrs plus</td>
<td>63,836</td>
<td>20,468</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labour Force (%)</td>
<td>58.6</td>
<td>57.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed</td>
<td>45.7</td>
<td>50.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formal Work</td>
<td>21.9</td>
<td>26.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture/Fishing</td>
<td>23.8</td>
<td>24.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A/F Subsistence</td>
<td>16.6</td>
<td>14.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A/F Market Oriented</td>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>9.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>12.9</td>
<td>7.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not in Labour Force</td>
<td>41.4</td>
<td>42.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Could have Taken a Job</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Available for Work</td>
<td>37.8</td>
<td>38.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: FSM Census 2000

If we combine the ‘Unemployed’ and ‘Could have Taken a Job’ categories, we get real unemployment rates of 16.5 per cent for FSM and 11.1 per cent for Pohnpei. When the number of families employed only in subsistence activity is added to this, we see that a large number have little cash income. This observation is borne out by income figures: 44.1 per cent of people in FSM and 20.6 per cent in Pohnpei received less than US $1000 income in 2000. While the availability of food from family gardens and fishing must be taken into consideration, these figures still indicate that there are significant levels of poverty in FSM and Pohnpei, a fact confirmed by the first hand experience of those who visit the country. To combat this poverty, economic development in the private sector will be essential. The authors of a report for the UNDP in 1995 identified fisheries, tourism and agriculture as the three most promising industries (Hezel et al 1997). Manufacturing possibilities are limited by population size, skill levels, and dispersal as well as the distance from markets. Given the amount of arable land, agriculture can grow only so much, but its potential is not exhausted. Tourism faces the problems mentioned above, but, given the growth of high-end niche tourism like eco-tourism and the growing number of wealthy people in Asia, there is
potential here too. Fisheries seem to be the best prospect, if a steadily increasing amount of fish can be caught by FSM nationals as opposed to foreign boats, and if over-fishing does not deplete stocks too rapidly.

Religion

The story of religion in Pohnpei is a drama of power both spiritual and worldly, a narrative that speaks of secular politics as much as priestly. This is true of the religion that predated Christianity as much as it is of the new religion, brought by white men, that has flourished so broadly. Traditional (pre-Christian) religion on Pohnpei involved gods and spirits of greater or lesser status, priests of various ranks, notions of spiritual power and taboo, intricate ceremonies, and a complex cosmology — characteristics commonly found in belief systems throughout Oceania.

Lesser gods (ani) were associated with households, the stronger ones with larger social areas like villages or districts. Ani were identified with animals, trees, stones, specific places, and so on. At birth every Pohnpeian was dedicated to the care of an ani. These would act in a protective and providential fashion, but they were also capable of bringing harm or death to persons who disrespected them. An example of a greater god was Doooko, the god of thunder and also of sakau and feasting, who enjoyed the most popular cult in Pohnpei. He had 12 priests, and the high priest of this cult was often consulted on important social and political matters (Jimmy 1972: 30-2).

A strong connection existed between chiefly authority and spiritual power. The ani of chiefs were thought to be especially strong protective spirits and ancestral ghosts. When chiefs were disrespected or disobeyed, the spirits became wrathful, ensuring continued chiefly control of the people. The ranking of priests was also connected to the chiefly hierarchy. As a whole, the system of religious belief and practice was inseparable from the system of political governance and served to maintain both this system and the culture that gave it meaning (Nakayama 1987: 366-8).

An interesting aspect of spiritual life in Pohnpei was the phenomenon of possession-trance. Priests placed themselves in a hypnotic trance and then answered questions as part of a public oracle. This kind of practice had died out by the early decades of the 20th century, but involuntary possession-trance fallen into by lay people continues today (Hezel and Dobbin 1996).

Sakau consumption was an important part of the voluntary trance achieved by priests, but this is just one use of the drink in traditional Pohnpeian religion. Its ritual consumption was also an essential element of such important ceremonies as the coronation of a new high chief or the annual launching of new canoes. Its ingestion was seen as the medium for communicating with spirits, as well as for atonement and reconciliation (Jimmy 1972:32, 35, 36). Sakau drinking is still an important cultural activity today, but with the coming of Christianity it has become very controversial. More on this later.

With the increased contact between western trading ships and Pohnpei, it was inevitable that missionary activity would take place. As early as 1837 a French Catholic priest, Desiré Maigret, resided on the Pohnpeian island of Na for six months. The first long-standing missions were Protestant, launched by mission boards in the United States that had learned of the reprobate activities of some western traders and beachcombers in the territory. In the first decades of the 19th century, Congregationalists and others in the United States had established the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions and had begun
activity in Hawaii, among other places. By 1850, following a strong implantation of the church in that territory, the Hawaiian Missionary Society was formed there, and the two organizations began a joint mission to Micronesia. In 1852 three couples were dispatched to Pohnpei.

This was the beginning of the process of the conversion of Pohnpeians to Christianity, a process that took many decades but was extremely successful in the end. Nakayama sums up the process in the following way:

The Ponapeans' conversion to Christianity was by no means because of coercion by the missionaries. It came as a result of a complex process involving struggles among the Ponapeans for political hegemony and the interaction among the Ponapeans, missionaries, beachcombers and traders. Therefore, the acceptance of Christianity at the time was not based on a full understanding of Christian dogmas by the Ponapeans. It was rather an act selected to meet the political and economic objectives of islanders. The conversion could not have taken place unless the people thought that it would be beneficial to them in their efforts to deal with the ever-changing environment (Nakayama 1987:390).

Nakayama is pointing out that economic and political factors were central to the success of missions. This was true from the very beginning. One of the reasons missionaries were welcomed in the first place is that other western settlers — especially beachcombers, ironically — had proven to be very useful in facilitating trade. Chiefs were key beneficiaries here, and had therefore offered their protection to many beachcombers. It was hoped that the presence of the new Westerners would augment the number of ships coming to call at the island.

Initially, relations between the missionaries and chiefs were quite good, allowing the former to establish households, hold worship services unfettered, and generally get their operations underway. Before long, however, these relations deteriorated. Chiefs became disenchanted with the missionaries as they came to realize that the latter would not subject themselves to chiefly authority and were condemning polygamy, tobacco smoking, and the drinking of alcohol and sakeu — all practices the chiefs held as their prerogative. A time of protracted tension between the two groups began, imperilling the implantation of the gospel and the establishment of the church. A number of factors served to weaken the chiefs and strengthen the missionaries, however.

The most dramatic was the smallpox outbreak of 1854. This epidemic reduced the population of Pohnpei by half, a calamitous enough development in itself; but the tragedy also spawned a number of further destabilizing effects: social instability, jockeying for power among the survivors, the rising influence of aggressive young men, and even war between two kingdoms. The authority of the chiefs was severely undercut. The missionaries offered inoculations for the disease, gaining the favour of many people. The power of their medicine served to enhance the perception, already fostered by the appeal of western goods and technology, that the 'white man's religion' was strong compared to that of indigenous Pohnpeians. The perceived spiritual power of the missionaries was further enhanced by the fact that they could break local taboos without suffering supernatural punishment.

Also, the number of beachcombers on the island and the number of ships coming to port declined significantly during the 1850s. As trade with merchants waned, missionaries filled the gap, regularly exchanging western clothing and goods for food. They were becoming key members of society, with regular opportunities for contact and the demonstration of their vigour and usefulness. Conversion to Christianity marched on steadily among commoners and even among the titled classes, if at a slower rate. Some chiefs came into the
fold fairly early and the others eventually had to abandon resistance to the expanding church as its influence grew and grew. In the ever-present jockeying for power, recourse to support among the Christian party became irresistible.

A factor that facilitated the winning over of the chiefs was that the missionaries did not deny their authority. An accommodation was made, sorting out the relative social ranks of missionaries, chiefs, and local ministers. At church functions chiefs were shown honour and their social status was acknowledged. Neither did the missionaries demand that all aspects of the old spirituality be purged from the cultural system. It is true that they opposed the use of sakau, but they generally sought to build upon the traditional religiosity of the people. These accommodations were crucial for the establishment of the new social-religious-political equilibrium, which has maintained and reinforced both chiefly and religious institutions in the many decades since. They remain core aspects of Pohnpeian society. This is not to say that the politico-religious battles were over; with the arrival of the Spanish new ones emerged, but they were intra-Christian battles.

The rapid expansion of the Protestant mission and the emergence of a Pohnpeian Protestant church was halted by the arrival of the Spanish in 1886. Not only did the new colonial masters import Roman Catholic (Capuchin) missionaries to compete with the American Protestants, but they also gave great logistical and political support to Catholicism. Roman Catholic missions were established in several regions, sometimes adjacent to the Protestant ones. This provoked strong and sometimes violent responses from the members of the older church, but the resolve of the Spanish remained firm. The governor went so far as to make the conversion to Catholicism of the people in the Nets and Sokehs regions a condition of his pardoning the men from those regions who had rebelled against Spain’s forced labour policy in 1897. In 1890 all Protestant missionaries were expelled from the territory, beginning a decade in which Catholic missions made strong progress. This progress was not accepted meekly by Protestants, however. Catholic missions in various places were attacked by armed groups, who often fended off Spanish soldiers quite well in the ensuing battles. The religious hostilities reached their peak in 1898 with Protestant attacks on the Catholic mission at Awak, launching a two-year period of rebellion that pushed the Spanish rulers to breaking point (Ashby 1993:66-72).

During the first decade of the 20th century, Catholic-Protestant conflict in Pohnpei, which was now under German rule, cooled down to a simmer. Catholics continued to enjoy an advantage over their Protestant rivals in the competition for souls: the colonial administrators specified German as the only language of instruction in the schools, giving German Capuchin missionaries a district advantage over their American competitors (Ashby 1993:74-5). Religious antagonism seems to have been one of several factors in the various uprisings by Pohnpeians against the German colonizers.

During the Japanese period, religious rivalry seems to have cooled. The German Capuchin missionaries were expelled but Jesuits from Spain were permitted to take their place. Japan established and supported Protestant missions (Ashby 1993:87, 91).

The long period of American administration (and then free association) did not see direct intervention in religious affairs, but other changes brought about by the presence of the Americans and the transfer of aid shifted Pohnpeian society in a fashion that has had repercussions for religious life. With the Americans and their money came modernization. Some important modernizing developments were the expansion of communication systems, a great extension in the variety of consumer goods (including cultural goods) available, and
a greater openness to pluralism. Also during this time, various forms of social deviancy — including abuse of alcohol and drugs, and youthful rebellion and pregnancy — seem to have increased. Social mobility of various kinds expanded: migration to the semi-urban centre of Kolonia; migration out of Pohnpei in search of work; abandonment of the subsistence lifestyle for work in government or the business sector. These kinds of social changes appear to be conducive, in a wide-variety of contexts, to the growth of Pentecostal and charismatic churches and other kinds of new religious movements. With the coming and going of Americans, and of Pohnpeians who travelled to the US and other places for work or other purposes, the seeds of such movements were being carried to Pohnpei on a regular basis. Some of these seeds found fertile ground.

The legacy of the history described above has left Pohnpei, in broad sweeps, with the following religious makeup: about 50 per cent of the population adheres to the Roman Catholic faith; about 35 per cent (a number that has fallen in recent decades) adhere to the historic mainline Protestant Church (Congregational — United Church of Christ); and most of the rest of the population adheres to more newly arrived evangelical/charismatic Protestant churches or such new religious groups as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints or the Jehovah’s Witnesses. The remainder of this chapter will be devoted to reporting on these groups, trying to interpret how they are changing and interacting with one another, and seeking to explicate the factors behind these developments.

THE RELIGIOUS LANDSCAPE AND CONTEMPORARY DEVELOPMENTS

The Historic Mainline Churches

The United Church of Christ in Pohnpei (UCC)

The UCC in Pohnpei descends in a direct line from the first missionaries sent jointly by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions and the Hawaiian Missionary Society in 1852. These mission boards were established by the Congregational Church in the US, which later changed its name to the ‘United Church of Christ.’ The Protestant church in Pohnpei, as a branch of the American denomination, incurred the change in name as well.

As related in the Religion section above, the Congregational Church in Pohnpei experienced many attacks from colonial authorities during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Despite these difficulties — or perhaps partly because of them, for history gives us many examples of religion thriving under persecution — the Congregational Church continued to grow, and remained one of the two dominant denominations in Pohnpei. During most of this history, with the notable exception of the period of Spanish rule when the Congregational Church was led by fiercely unyielding locals, foreign missionaries provided leadership and support. The role of missionaries diminished greatly after the church became independent of its American parent denomination in 1964.

This formal separation provided both challenge and opportunity. Independence evoked the possibility of making the UCC a more fully contextualized church through the opening of leadership space for Pohnpeians, but very few had received formal theological training.
The provision of such training, by sending leaders abroad for studies or by extending the in-country training centre, was difficult to accomplish because the separation from the UCC in the US meant a dramatic cut in external funding.

Today the UCC is Pohnpei’s second largest denomination, and by far its largest one in the Protestant tradition. It has 25 churches on Pohnpei Island, five on the outlying islands, one in Saipan, two in Hawaii, and one in the US state of Missouri (these latter four serving Pohnpeian émigrés). Thirty-six and a half per cent of the population, roughly 12,500 people, are affiliated with the UCC (‘Congregationalist’), according to the 2000 census (this can be compared to 40.1 per cent Congregationalist for FSM as a whole). According to the same census, 40.8 per cent of Pohnpeians belonged to the UCC in 1994. A drop of 0.4 per cent in six years is significant, and may indicate a declining trend that will have serious consequences for the UCC, but it would be good to have this trend confirmed by more data before jumping to conclusions. Anecdotal evidence garnered during my interviews in Pohnpei did indicate that the UCC was losing members.

The in-country congregations of the UCC are currently served by 185 ordained pastors and 175 lay ministers. While these leaders provide ministries of word, sacrament, and pastoral care, a very small percentage of them have received formal theological training. Some are more active than others. Rising to the status of ordained minister seems to follow upon substantial service as a loyal church member or deacon. With only a couple of exceptions, the pastors engage in tent-making ministries — i.e. they are employed in the secular world, often in government, and execute their pastoral duties outside working hours.

Along with its congregations, and its national office, the UCC operates a secondary school at Ohwa, where a post-secondary programme of theological education is also offered. Funds collected for the national church on an annual basis are in the range of US$30,000 (as compared to $50,000 in 1992). Governance of the national church is the responsibility of a Council, which meets twice a year. Besides general administrative issues, the Council attends to the national budget, the approval of ordinations, and church growth and evangelism. The representatives to the Council include ordained ministers, lay persons designated by the congregations, and representatives from women’s associations and youth groups.

Forty years after separation from its parent denomination in the US, the UCC has made some headway in providing training for its leaders, but there is genuine concern that it has not been sufficient. The post-secondary programme in theology and ministry at the Ohwa School is a diploma-granting programme. It covers the full standard range of disciplines studied in preparation for ministry, depending heavily on course materials provided by the extension department of the regional Pacific Theological College (PTC). Students in the programme are keen to continue their studies in degree programmes after graduation, but a lack of funds seriously limits the number who can do so. Since independence, the UCC has been able to send only a handful of ministers to study at PTC, or in the US or UK. The lack of funds also limits the number of ministers who can leave their communities and workplaces to study at Ohwa. As the religious marketplace becomes more competitive in Pohnpei, these factors seem to be placing the UCC at a comparative disadvantage vis-à-vis some of the more newly arrived churches, such as the Assemblies of God, whose leadership is augmented by overseas missionaries, and vis-à-vis the Roman Catholic Church, which benefits from the presence of a number of highly-trained priests.

Despite these challenges, the UCC seems to have found its theological/cultural niche. Its theological locus remains within the Congregationalist sphere, which can be called
'mainline Protestant', although most members would likely fall toward the conservative end of that spectrum. In terms of the relationship between faith and culture, it can be said that the UCC is one of the churches that takes a largely positive view of traditional Pohnpeian culture and seeks to function in harmony with customary patterns of social organization and chiefly leadership. This is not to say that there are no tensions with time-honoured cultural practices. The early missionaries who implanted Protestantism in Pohnpei rejected the drinking of sakau, and the Congregational Church/UCC maintained that stance until recent decades. Today there is debate within the church, with significant numbers falling on both sides of the issue. The church also occasionally challenges cultural practices like elaborate funerals. The custom has been that the family of the deceased expend a great deal of resources, providing guests with abundant food and other goods to be consumed at the time and taken away afterward. The burden of this obligation can seriously affect a family's financial position.

The UCC's mission to society at large tends to focus on evangelism and education. The evangelism is not nearly as aggressive as that practised by some of the newer churches, but occurs through special celebrations, like the one commemorating the coming of the gospel to Pohnpei, through Christian educational gatherings, and through special initiatives at times like Easter. Bible studies and youth groups offer Christian education and guidance to members and non-members alike. The secondary school at Ohwa and a kindergarten also offer instruction in the standard secular disciplines at a very affordable rate. Special visitation initiatives for sick people are also organized.

As modernization processes impact Pohnpeian society and liberal values imported from the West challenge both traditional culture and traditional Christian teachings, the UCC is being forced to respond. Within the denomination there is no consensus, but rather a range of responses—a situation that sometimes provokes strong debate. In recent decades, some of the most controversial issues have been the incorporation of novel practices in worship, including the use of new instruments, the acceptability of divorce, and the relationship between the church and the traditional system of chiefly titles. Senior leaders within the UCC appear to be exhibiting a guarded openness to new social, theological, and liturgical developments, while trying to do justice to the more conservative traditions of both Congregationalism and Pohnpeian culture.

One issue that is in flux is leadership by women. A number serve as deaconesses, and women's groups send representatives to the bi-annual Council, but no women have been ordained. Names have been put forward for consideration, but none have yet been accepted.

Relations between the UCC and other churches and religious groups are of varying kinds. There are no formal ecumenical associations in Pohnpei, but the UCC enjoys good relations with the Roman Catholic Church. In the past there has been co-operation on projects such as the translation of the Bible. There continues to be co-operation in social and cultural events, and leaders in the two denominations meet informally. Relations with other Protestant groups, new religious groups, and para-church organizations are sometimes more strained. More will be said about this in subsequent sections. Here it is enough to note that some of these groups have been aggressive in evangelizing, leading some UCC leaders to accuse them of 'sheep stealing.' Also, the rigidly negative view of traditional cultural practices that some of these new groups hold is discordant with the UCC approach.

In sum, it can be said that the Congregational Church in Pohnpei has had enormous social and cultural sway during the last century and a half; that it is still a very important denomination with strong influence on government and society, but that its place in society
may be on the wane because of problems in providing full-time, highly trained leadership. For some reason, its membership looks to be especially fertile ground upon which new groups can harvest converts. It is much too early to signal the end of the UCC’s position as one of the two principal churches, however. The nature of future social change and the response of the UCC to crisis are both wildcards yet to be revealed.

**The Roman Catholic Church**

With the arrival of the Spanish colonial administration in 1887, the Roman Catholic Church was the second denomination to be implanted in Pohnpei, and has since grown to be the largest national church. As described in the History and Religion sections above, this implantation sparked intense rivalry between Catholics and Protestants, lasting almost a century. Their conflicts frequently drew in (or were caused by) political authorities and sometimes catalysed armed struggle.

In 1899, following a turnover of the colonial administration to Germany, German Capuchins replaced the Spanish missionaries. The Germans built a magnificent church at Kolonia, only the tower of which survived the bombing during World War II. They also gave priority to the establishment of church-run schools. During World War I, the Capuchins, like all Germans, were expelled by the Japanese administration. In 1921 their work was picked up by Spanish Jesuits, under whose leadership the church experienced significant growth — especially in the 1930s and early 1940s. Like previous administrations, the Americans replaced expatriate missionaries with those of their own nationality, also from the Jesuit order.

Despite the fact that the Roman Catholic denomination serves half of Pohnpei’s population, it has only nine parishes. Each parish has a church and a *Nahs* (traditional hall). Some also have a western-style church hall. Pastoral work is also performed at out-stations. Church leaders would like to significantly expand the number of parishes, but are restrained by a lack of personnel. Currently, eight of the nine parishes are served by deacons instead of ordained priests. The deacons are assisted by the seven Jesuit priests assigned to the Island, but only two of these devote themselves to parish work on a full-time basis.

The Jesuits also offer leadership at a secondary school, the agricultural and trade school, and the Micronesian Seminar. This latter institution, which serves greater Micronesia, is one of the most important NGOs in the region. Established as a research and pastoral institute in 1972, its stated purpose is to “stimulate people to reflect on current issues in their societies.” Led by the prolific Fr Francis Hezel SJ, MicSem (as it is commonly known) has produced an impressive body of books, print resources, and videos on topics ranging from the historical to the social, scientific and pastoral. These materials are archived at the seminar’s library, with many available online. Seen in its totality, the contribution of the Jesuit order to education, research, and civil society in Pohnpei is impressively substantial.

A challenge for the Catholic Church in Pohnpei is the fostering of indigenous leadership. Micronesians have been joining the priesthood since 1977, but the number of local men accepting vocations has been greater in the sister states of Yap and Chuuk than in Pohnpei. Of course leadership is not confined to the ordained. In Pohnpei there is a mobile team of catechists who hold educational events dealing with family issues and social problems. They make use of case studies produced locally and written in the vernacular. A final leadership challenge worth mentioning is that most of the deacons are among the elder part of the
population, and few have strong English skills. If the needs of a socially and demographically shifting population are to be met, a new generation of indigenous leaders will have to be called and nurtured.

According to the 2000 census, 53.5 per cent of Pohnpei’s people identify themselves as Roman Catholics. This is up from 52.4 per cent in 1994. When asked about these numbers, church leaders do not seem overly impressed. They respond by asserting that they are more concerned with the quality of people’s relationship with the church. Nominal adherence does not necessarily indicate a depth of engagement. Still, at a time when new religious groups are making inroads throughout Oceania, often drawing members away from the established churches, the statistics for Pohnpei’s Catholic Church are noteworthy.

While census statistics may be reassuring to Catholics in terms of maintaining adherence, they offer a challenge as well. The figures for age distribution in the population show a dramatic skewing toward the young. With roughly half of all Catholics not yet having reached adulthood, the needs for religious instruction and youth programmes are substantial. Church leaders admit that these needs are not being fully met. Preparation for Confirmation seems to be strong, but afterwards many young people receive little spiritual formation. When youth events are held, the response from the young people is very positive, showing a hunger for more, but human resource limitations make feeding this hunger difficult.

As with youth, church leaders feel that more must be done to actualize the spiritual and leadership potential of women, but they are pleased with recent progress. Younger women are less reluctant to accept positions of responsibility than their elders; and the numbers of women are increasing among lay readers, parish council members, and helpers who give communion during mass.

Members of ethnic minorities, such as the Chuukese, tend to cluster for spiritual care in particular parishes. Migrants from other countries gather for Saturday evening mass in English at the Kolonia Church.

As mentioned in earlier sections, Pohnpei has no formal ecumenical associations, but the Roman Catholic Church has been on good terms with the UCC for at least a quarter century now. A tradition of regular or semi-regular meetings between Catholic deacons and Protestant ministers has faded out, but not through lack of willingness to get together: as human resources in both churches get stretched thinner and thinner, other times demands have taken over. It also appears that there was more co-operation in projects like Bible translation and youth work a decade or two ago. This weakening trend, both in terms of human resources and ecumenical co-operation, is worth flagging for further attention below as we speculate about the relative prospects of the historic mainline churches and the new religious groups in coming decades.

Roman Catholic Church leaders are clearly aware that the modernizing processes of secularization and religious revival are both present in Pohnpei. With regard to secularization, they point to changes in dress (‘more thigh, less breast’ was the observation of one recently returned priest), the engagement by youth in new activities like disco dancing, the ‘Americanization’ or democratization of governance, and a greater willingness to speak out on issues. One cultural shift saddens long-serving priests. This is the ever-increasing amount of time spent in front of the television. In the past, young people (and others) would have spent much time listening to their elders, especially grandmothers, telling the stories and legends that shaped Pohnpeian culture and identity. Now these narratives are not being passed on. Noting a ‘pre-occupation with the visible’, church leaders are worried that younger