

# Serving Micronesians Youth and Families: Culture, Family Dynamics and Social Etiquette

*The following is a summary of some of the shared cultural values and similarities across the Micronesians regions of the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI), and the Republic of Palau (ROP). These were presented by a some Micronesians panelists during the conference entitled, "Serving Youth and Families: Culture, Family Dynamics and Social Etiquette" for service providers in Hawaii County the Hawaii County Office of the Prosecuting Attorney on September 12, 2014 at Imiloa Astronomy Center at the University of Hawaii at Hilo.*

## Culture

Surface culture is easily seen, and is easy for people to change, but they may not want to make changes to adapt to a different cultural system. They can lose identity and self esteem.

Deeper culture is learned early, deeply rooted, not fully conscious and not easily observed. It is also not easily changed. We should not expect people to change their deeper cultural values, beliefs and behaviors just to accommodate our cultures and assumptions, or the dominant culture in which they reside. They will have a very hard time attempting to do so.

Micronesians share some common cultural roots and a common colonial experience.

There is a greater difference within each cultural/language group between people who have been raised in urban centers with exposure to wage labor, paperwork requirements, on-time demands etc, and people from rural areas and remote outer islands where there is still a semi-subsistence life and a daily rhythm centered on sun and tide, not cash and clocks.

## Generosity and Sharing

This means you give and share both within an extended kin group, with people from your home area, and even strangers. That generosity comes back to you through reciprocity. Hoarding and stinginess (ie savings and nest eggs in the western context) can be shameful and even be criticized. This changes toward more individualism and a restriction of sharing as people from Micronesia adopt more concepts and styles of western cultural individualism.

## Family is Everything

Family needs take precedence over individual needs. In rural areas in Micronesia clan affiliation and the role of elders especially on the mother's side is respected, powerful, and not likely to be challenged. The kinship terminology may extend so that parents siblings are like parents and given responsibility over children. Cousins may be called terms like sibling and be treated like siblings. This creates a large support network but can also lead to competition and conflict, especially if only a few family members have been able to find jobs. Visiting relatives should be housed and fed and allowed to stay as needed.

## Competition / Industriousness

People will work hard and long in cultural settings that are rewarding, such as feasts, church song contests, athletic contests. With humble encouragement they will work hard and long in any job where they are adequately trained and treated with respect. Employers, caseworkers, medical personnel need to recognize when there are language difficulties and need to recognize when and how family obligations may take precedence over appointments or work. Transportation difficulties are common, especially when one used car serves a large extended family!

## Humility / Humbleness

Quiet demeanor and mutual respect is highly valued. Deference is given to elders and people in authority. Direct eye contact is only among known and trusted folks, and eye aversion is a sign of respect. Answers are often given in order to keep relationships smooth. Arrogance and bragging are inappropriate, though they may occur among young men.

## Shame / Embarrassment / Cultural Reticence

There is a cluster of core values centering around deeply felt shame and embarrassment whether caused by ones own actions or inactions or caused by someone else's actions, inactions or assumptions. This may center around self perceived inadequate English language skills or even more personal matters. Direct confrontation, scolding, talking at someone loud and fast may be counterproductive and may lead to withdrawal from the situation or from that person causing the embarrassment.

## Family Dynamics

Nuclearized families are becoming more common here, but the extended family network will often spread across a number of houses or apartment units. Movement of individuals between households is common. Temporary "staying over" is common so the number of people staying in a household and contributing income at any one time is quite variable.

Sharing resources between households is adaptive, especially for lower income families. Informal fosterage, especially of younger children by grand parents and aunts/uncles is common, and can create issues with school authorizations, guardianship papers, emergency medical issues etc.

There can be tension and even conflict, especially under severe economic stress, or with alcohol, but those conflicts are more effectively resolved when they are done Micronesian style, through elders, Micronesian pastors etc. Heavy handed police or other agency intervention can be counterproductive. Culture based apology rituals are common and can be effective.

## Social Etiquette

Putting in the effort to learn a little of the history and to understand the rights Micronesians have to be U.S. residents under the Compacts of Free Association can go a long way to improving communication. Showing an understanding of what the Micronesians give up to the U.S. and what the U.S. gains from the compacts (Strategic Denial) as well as the Marshallese Nuclear legacy can improve communication and show respect. Showing sincere interest in learning of their home islands of origin without aggressive probing can also improve communication. Guessing at and missing or mispronouncing the place name can be offensive. Micronesians can have stereotypes of each other.

Showing patience, allowing pauses, giving the person you are talking to time to consider a response, especially if their English skills are limited can improve communication.

Approaching the elders and pastors can help when issues need resolution. Politely refusing food offers is acceptable, but showing disdain will make further communication difficult. Micronesians are very good at reading "body language"!