

Legal aliens: The new face of immigration

ADRIENNE LAFRANCE: FEB 25, 2009 | The Honolulu Weekly

The women are soft and round as pincushions, with tortoiseshell combs pressed into their dark hair like crowns and feet tucked out-of-sight beneath bright hand-sewn dresses. The bold yellows, deep purples and dark pinks of the fabric they wear are the only brightness in an otherwise drab room. It's a tiny, sparse office outside of the entrance to Kuhio Park Terrace, the low-income public housing project better known as KPT and probably best known for its squalor, gang activity and related violence. Unmatched chairs are set around the beige room in a lopsided circle. Six or seven women sit on one side, three men—all chewing gum—sit on the other. They are the members of Micronesians United, one of the only local advocacy groups for Micronesian immigrants, and they meet each Monday in a too-often-futile attempt to find solutions for the many problems they face.

Outside, the group's presence is hardly acknowledged. Even the employees at the adjacent corner store and staff members at a community center down the block have never heard of them. And, in a way, it's all too fitting for members of Hawaii's newest and fastest-growing immigrant group, who—both inside and outside of this bleak little room—are largely ignored and grossly misunderstood.

Coming to America

They're coming here in droves. The 2000 census reported about 13,000 Micronesians living in Hawaii and officials estimate up to 20,000 Micronesians now live in the state, with the vast majority—about 73 percent—living on Oahu. Despite the significant increase over the past decade, it's a figure that many say is still a blatant undercount, due largely to those who stay with family members past the capacity that their leases allow.

"They're scared to get caught," said Julia Estrella, a local advocate for Micronesians. "With public housing, if one person is not on the lease, the whole family can get evicted. Once you're evicted from public housing, you can't reapply for eight years. Unfortunately, that's why the census is never accurate. Micronesians are heavily undercounted and this is outside of public housing, too. It's like being an illegal immigrant but it's not the same because they are legal."

Micronesia, a chain of islands and atolls some 3,000 miles southwest of Hawaii, is composed of a diverse group of cultures that speaks a dozen different languages and is represented by at least seven distinct political entities. Since 1986, an agreement known as the Compact of Free Association between the U.S. and Micronesia—including the Federated States of Micronesia, which entails the islands of Chuuk, Kosrae, Pohnpei and Yap—have allowed Micronesian citizens to travel, work and live in the United States without requiring them to obtain visas. Under the compact, which was renegotiated five years ago to extend through the year 2024, the United States retains exclusive access to the FSM's territorial waters for both civilian and military purposes in return for providing economic and financial aid. While the Chuukese people—who also represent the most populous group in the FSM—are moving to Hawaii in the greatest numbers of all FSM residents, Micronesians from all islands cite the same basic reasons for relocation: they're seeking health care, education or employment opportunities that surpass what's available to them on their home islands.

For many, finding those opportunities remains out of reach upon arrival. Cultural conflicts and language barriers contribute to a high dropout rate for Micronesians. Just over half of Micronesian immigrants complete high school, and fewer than 3 percent earn college degrees. Without adequate education, Micronesians have a difficult time obtaining employment. On average, the labor force participation rate is lower for Micronesians in Hawaii than for any other ethnic group. Back home, though, things are even worse.

Islands in distress

The main industry on Chuuk is tourism driven by scuba diving sunken World War II shipwrecks. Even so, it's hardly home to a thriving industry and Chuuk's struggling economy has been stagnant for nearly two decades. In 2006, just 15 percent of the population in Micronesia was formally employed compared to 47 percent of the U.S. population.

In addition to moving for employment reasons, an overwhelming number of Micronesians come to Hawaii to seek health care, including treatment for diseases associated with radiation exposure from scores of nuclear tests that the U.S. conducted near the Bikini Islands in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

“What people don’t realize is that the U.S. dropped 67 bombs, that is why they are here,” said Estrella. “The U.S. government caused this exodus. We bombed and poisoned their homeland. They have no choice. They have to come here.”

As in many developing countries, hepatitis B and sexually-transmitted diseases like syphilis are prevalent among Micronesians, whose reliance on public funding for local health care compounds a huge financial strain on the state.

“The problems are pretty clear,” said Rep. Gene Ward (R-Hawaii Kai), who, as a consultant to the United Nations on Micronesian issues helped establish an economic development program on Pohnpei that grew the private sector there by 35 percent. “Given the right to move freely between the U.S. and Micronesia, many people have voted with their feet, have come to Hawaii for opportunities, for health care and education, and have decided to stay. It has been the cause of a significant burdening of our social and medical services in many communities. The really difficult thing is that the federal reimbursement is capped at a very small amount of money. It’s \$33 million for Guam, Hawaii and the mainland and we only get a third of that, so about \$11 million back, for the \$90 million spent each year on providing these services to Micronesians. That’s quite a gap.”

As the state struggles to find ways to afford the growing cost of this expanding immigrant population, many Micronesians remain unable to access services that provide some of their most basic needs.

Homeless in Hawaii

“Housing is only for certain families and it’s not legal to bring in uncles and others and have them stay for a long time,” said Aritae Epeluk, who moved here from Chuuk in 1992 and now runs a once-a-month Micronesian radio program on KNDI that addresses immigrant issues in their native languages. “These are our extended families, but they have no place else to go.”

The housing problem is further exacerbated by the language barrier.

“Even if they can speak a little English, they can’t read,” said Estrella. “They can’t read their lease, so they’ll get evicted for not following the terms they didn’t even know about. The lack of English gets them caught in a spiral where a lot of times they end up evicted unfairly. It starts very innocently because the very first letter from public housing is a warning, but they can’t read it.”

Approximately half of the people who applied for low-income public housing over the past five years have been Micronesian immigrants. And even Micronesians fluent in English are stuck in quagmires created by conflicting cultural attitudes toward land ownership.

“I was homeless even though I was a chief in Chuuk,” said Micronesian advocate Sisan Suda, who moved here about five years ago. “There are so many Chuukese homeless. So many more than anyone says when they count them.”

Suda said he wishes he could live in KPT, but cannot qualify for public housing because he is considered a landowner in Chuuk.

“The land system in Chuuk is different than the Western system,” said Estrella. “So he is the chief of his clan and this means he is considered a land-owner even though he can’t sell that land.”

Research shows that Micronesians make up more than 20 percent of Hawaii’s homeless population, despite comprising only 1 percent of the total state population.

Cultural conflicts

Even those who are able to find food and shelter have a difficult time acclimating to life in Hawaii. Many Micronesians face discrimination—from minor disagreements with neighbors to verbal abuse and threats of physical violence.

At a Monday Micronesians United meeting, the women are laughing, gold teeth gleaming, as one of them tells a story in Chuukese.

“The neighbors complain about them cooking fermented breadfruit,” said Sophie Esah, who runs Micronesians United with her husband, Sekap, and serves as a Chuukese translator in the courts. “That’s one of our favorite foods, even though it has that smell.”

“Even my kids complain about the smell,” laughs Sekap Esah. “They are too Americanized.”

But most problems that come up in the weekly meetings are far more serious. One woman is in blinding pain from a toothache and doesn’t know how to find—or afford—a dentist. Another woman is struggling to pay her \$339 monthly rent at KPT with the \$540 she makes each month. For many, especially those who only speak their native language, Micronesians United is the only place they can go to ask for help.

“Even if they call 911, they don’t know if someone can speak Chuukese,” explains Sophie Esah, who then tells the group what she has just said. They nod gravely and reply back in Chuukese. Again, she translates.

“She said she has no one who can help her besides Julia [Estrella] and Sisan [Suda],” said Sophie Esah, gesturing toward one woman in the group. “The Samoans have Samoan services but the Micronesians have nothing. They have no one to call.”

Another woman speaks up in quiet, thickly-accented English.

“You have to call upon God,” she said.

Even those who are bilingual aren’t free them from facing difficult and often dangerous situations. A group of Micronesian tenants last year filed a complaint against the Honolulu Police Department—who were found in a police investigation to have complied with regulations—for failing to take seriously their concerns over violence at Mayor Wright Housing. Several police reports include accounts from tenants who describe neighbors shouting slurs at them, lighting fireworks outside their doors, and throwing what the victims believed to be gasoline onto their property. One resident’s November 2007 petition for a restraining order includes description of neighbors who had tried to kick her and beat her up, and stood outside her door brandishing knives and other weapons, shouting, “You fat bitch, you fat Micronesians, you fat pig, you fat frog.”

“That’s harassment, still, they doing all that kind of gestures to me,” said Fetu Taua Kolio, referring to a separate incident, in a report filed by the Honolulu Police Commission in December 2007. Kolio described police response to her call about harassment at Mayor Wright. “[The] officer commented to me, ‘Well, that’s what you get when you live in public housing.’ I’m supposed to accept all this kind of threats and harassment by these individuals?”

Indeed, even those who work to protect members of the Micronesian community express disdain at their being here.

“I try to be really understanding but my experiences with Micronesians have not been good,” said a social worker who has Micronesian clients and asked not to be named. “I try to have an appreciation for what they’re going through. But there are some things, for instance, I go to Goodwill. I have seen them walk out of the store with huge amounts of goods. I can’t imagine they think you can go out without paying. Do other groups do it? Probably. But what I’ve seen with my own eyes is that they do it more than other groups. Is the need greater? Is it because of the need being greater and we forgive them for it? I don’t know. Then you look at KPT. You walk down the stairway and seeing lots of feces and urine. I can imagine things are very, very different in Micronesia but when it goes beyond common decency, that attitude is just cocky.”

The social worker represents a 25-year-old mother of three who is embroiled in an attempt to get back

custody of her toddler, who was turned over to the state, then to foster care, after being admitted to Kapiolani Medical Center showing signs of severe malnutrition. While the social worker said she can't discuss the case due to confidentiality issues, Estrella is speaking out for the rights of the mother, Dora Ten.

"They took the baby away because of health issues, not because of abuse," said Estrella, who suggests it's yet another situation in which Micronesians are taken advantage of due to their lack of English language skills. "The system is rotten. It's really busted. Dora's baby was placed with a Caucasian family. They don't speak Chuukese. So they're saying that the baby cannot be transitioned back to the mother because the baby doesn't speak Chuukese or understand and they don't know whether the child can interact with the mother anymore. It wasn't her fault that she was poor. She has other children who are healthy and she's a good mother."

Ten's sister said that she and her family have no idea what will happen with the baby.

"My sister's boy, we don't know about," said Ansinia Alon with a frown. "Because some people say they help my sister. But we don't know if they help or what. It's hard. My sister doesn't know [if] she can get the kid back."

Moving forward, not back

The reality is, for all the problems Micronesians face in adapting to life in Hawaii, none of these hardships have kept them away. With the numbers of Micronesian immigrants continuing to increase and the Compact of Free Association in effect for at least another 15 years, the state would be best served by finding solutions to their problems.

"They have the right to be here," said Ward. "The cliché is that you flower where you are planted, but it's true that we can get productive Hawaii-based citizens out of the Micronesians who are here. That's what we're in the process of doing. Each new wave of immigrants that comes, it's another cycle. Hey, Hawaii's been in the cycle of importing, assimilating and flowering immigrants for hundreds of years. This is a challenge, but we're pretty good at gardening when it comes to caring for people and raising them up in our nursery here."

Despite his optimism, Ward's vision is still a long way off. Back at the Micronesians United meeting, participants are still going around the circle, bringing up concerns and issues so that the group can help tackle them. A quiet woman speaks up in soft Chuukese. This is her first time at Micronesians United. She looks up at the ceiling in an attempt to stave off the tears that keep coming anyway and fidgets with her hands under the dark sweatshirt she's wearing. Her voice is soft and occasionally cracks with emotion. After minutes of talking, she finishes with a sigh.

"She has been living in Kapiolani Park for two years," Sophie Esah explained. "She had a baby and the baby was not doing good. The baby died. She is here for help. She is appealing to see if people can help her get shelter. Her husband was stabbed as a result of trying to interfere in a fight between young boys. Fortunately, the knife did not hit the backbone but the husband has been sick for two months."

The woman pulls from her backpack a letter that says she is on the waiting list for housing at KPT. Sophie Esah tells her what the letter says, and agrees to accompany her to the housing office the next day in an effort to move her up on the list.

It's hard to imagine that this woman, who is homeless, living in violence and coping with the death of her newborn child, could have known before coming here that life in Hawaii would be so hard. But her story is not uncommon.

"They came here to find paradise and this is what happens to them," said Sophie Esah. "These are the problems: No electricity back home, not enough food, no education and no jobs. So they come here and the baby dies, the husband is stabbed, they live in the park. They don't know it will be so expensive here. It is so hard but, compared to back home, it's still paradise."

Directions:

- *Annotate – show evidence of close reading (see “article annotation” handout for expectations)*
- Answer the **questions**. . .

I: Immediately after reading the article, write a 30-50-word reaction.

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II: Agreed, this is a long article, 2697 words to be exact. For those who wouldn't want to read the article, construct a well-written, 200-225-word summary of the article. Embed two to four passages from the article in your summary and do this correctly and grammatically. This summary must be typed and include a word count.

Up to 30 points extra credit.

Due the first day you return to Murdock's class, October 15th at the latest.

Only accepted in person, not accepted via email or in my office box.