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Priest hopes to widen understanding of Micronesians

By Susan Essoyan

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Father Francis X. Hezel, above, a Catholic priest who has lived in Micronesia for decades, visited the East-West Center last week. He is in town to promote his latest book, "Making Sense of Micronesia."



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Fifty years ago, when Jesuit priest Francis X. Hezel arrived in Chuuk to teach at Xavier High School, the native New Yorker knew little of island life — not even the fact that bananas grow "upside down," as he puts it.

Since then Hezel has lived in the Federated States of Micronesia and become an authority on the area, working as a high school principal, founder and director of the Micronesian Seminar and prolific author.

His latest book, "Making Sense of Micronesia," just published by the University of Hawaii Press, aims to help Americans decode Micronesian customs and attitudes as more migrants make their way to Hawaii and the mainland. Written for people unfamiliar with Micronesia, it lays out vignettes of cultural collisions, then analyzes their roots and the logic behind them.

"The book is about cultural misunderstandings, about my mistakes," the self-effacing 74-year-old scholar said in an interview Thursday at the East-West Center. "It's a journey of me jumping from one mistake to another."

Something as basic as a telephone courtesy, for example, can become a flash point. A Micronesian caller might demand "Who is this?" when placing a phone call, even before identifying himself as the caller.

An American would find that rude, figuring, "You called me. You're supposed to identify yourself!" he said.

But the Micronesians needs to place the respondent in the "social map" of a close-knit island community to speak appropriately, Hezel explained, wanting to know if the person is kin or nonkin, older or younger, and social status.

The book also delves into why Micronesians are "so generous with food and so guarded with information," what might lie behind a smile or silence, the hidden power of women and the measured pace of interaction with strangers.

"While an American is asking, 'When are we going to get down to business?'" Hezel said, slapping the table for emphasis, the Micronesian is engaged in "a dance, a slow dance, trying to figure out where this person is coming from, and how am I supposed to relate to him?"

The Buffalo-born priest was in town last week as a visiting scholar at the East-West Center to launch the book and his policy paper, "Micronesians on the Move: Eastward and Upward Bound," that will appear this week in the center's publication, Pacific Islands Policy. From 1982 to 2011, Hezel worked full time as director of the Micronesian Seminar, a research and pastoral institute with a comprehensive collection that includes 23,500 titles, 760 videos and 58,000 photos.

Hezel and demographer Michael Levin, formerly of the U.S. Census Bureau, were contracted by the Federated States of Micronesia to conduct a survey last year of its migrant population in the United States. FSM includes Yap, Chuuk (formerly Truk), Pohnpei and Kosrae, spanning hundreds of islands in the Western Pacific. Under the Compact of Free Association, which took effect in 1986, Micronesians enjoy free entry into the United States in return for U.S. military access to the region, once the site of U.S. nuclear testing.

The survey revealed that one-third of its citizens now live outside the Federated States of Micronesia, including those born abroad. The authors put their numbers in Hawaii at 7,948 last year, up from 5,091 in 2003, with about 450 new arrivals each year. It also found that many Micronesian migrants are now heading farther east, with an estimated 24,408 living on the mainland last year, arriving at a rate of about 1,200 a year, including some coming from Hawaii.

"Micronesians have now discovered the mainland United States," Hezel said. "We find more and more of the people coming in to Hawaii seem to be leaving for the mainland U.S., where they could do much better."

The average household income among migrants on the mainland was \$63,000, 50 percent higher than their two-thirds in Hawaii, although household size was the same at four people in both places, the survey found. Nearly two-thirds of Micronesians age 15 and older had paying jobs on the mainland, compared with

35 percent in Hawaii, according to the report. And Hawaii's cost of living is higher.

Many new arrivals in Hawaii find they can't earn enough to cover rent, and some end up at homeless shelters. People from the Federated States of Micronesia accounted for 15 percent of clients served at shelters in the state, according to the report.

But the survey saw signs of progress, including rising incomes.

"What we found was that the percentage of people below the poverty line has decreased significantly," Hezel said, falling to 38 percent last year from 67 percent in 1997.

"What I urge people to do is remember previous migrations," Hezel added. "People are just getting used to Micronesians here. Their status will improve, and they'll become as accepted as Samoans and Portuguese and Filipinos and Chinese and Japanese and everyone else."

Hawaii remains attractive to Micronesians because of its proximity to home, island culture and its advanced health care. The survey found that 9 percent of migrants said they came to Hawaii principally for medical reasons, including access to kidney dialysis and chemotherapy unavailable back home.

The state's congressional delegation has been pushing for more than a decade to restore Medicaid eligibility for Micronesians, who originally qualified for the federal program under the compact treaty before welfare reform legislation excluded them. U.S. Sen. Mazie Hirono successfully added a provision to the immigration bill passed by the Senate, and U.S. Rep. Colleen Hanabusa has introduced a bill to do the same in the House.

"That is a legitimate expense, and it ought to be taken care of," Hezel said. "If you don't want to do it with Medicaid, then handle it in some other way, such as direct payments" to the state.

Gerard Finin, resident co-director of the Pacific Islands Development Program at the East-West Center, said the contributions of Micronesians tend to be overlooked.

"Micronesians are increasingly contributing to American society through the taxes they pay and their involvement in the larger community," he said. "The other part of the picture that is often missed is their disproportionate commitment to the armed forces. During the week we talked about the number of Micronesians who have sacrificed for the United States in Iraq and Afghanistan."

Micronesians volunteer to serve in the U.S. armed forces at about twice the rate of Americans, according to the State Department.

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