The Possibilities of Violence and the Skills to Avoid It: On Warfare and Its Absence in Traditional Micronesia

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Abstract: This article explores some of the ways in which traditional Micronesian societies used the threat of warfare as an impetus to non-violence or, in other words, as a deterrent. Typically, Micronesians spent a good deal of time preparing for battle; war loomed large in their mytho-history and valour was a key cultural value. But these societies in fact depended heavily upon their dispersed matriclans for a range of alternative options to actual combat. Drawing upon this material, I argue that societies are not necessarily either peaceful or violent and that the appearance of bellicosity can mask deep commitments to avoiding open conflict.

Keywords: Micronesia, violence deterrents, peace, war

Résumé : Cet article explore certaines des manières utilisées par les sociétés micronésiennes traditionnelles pour brandir la menace de la guerre comme incitation à la non-violence ou, en d'autres mots, comme un moyen de dissuasion. Habituellement, les Micronésiens passaient beaucoup de temps à se préparer au combat. La guerre occupait une grande place dans leur histoire/mythologie, et le courage constituait une valeur culturelle clé. Mais ces sociétés dépendaient largement de leurs matriclans dispersés pour offrir une variété d'options alternatives aux combats proprement dits. À partir de ce matériel, j'amène l'argument que les sociétés ne sont pas fondamentalement pacifiques ou violentes et que des attitudes en apparence belliqueuses peuvent masquer un engagement profond à éviter les conflits ouverts.

Mots-clés : Micronésie, dissuasion de la violence, paix, guerre

Introduction

In writing about the ends of war and the causes of peace, one might well begin at the grossest level of generalization, by observing that approaches to war and peace often dichotomize into arguments about whether organized violence is unremittingly inherent in the human condition and thus a natural expression of "man's inhumanity to man" or is instead something humans create out of their cultural capacities (and I gloss over the point that cultural capacities are central to human biology). Again at a level of gross generalization, we confront the timeless dichotomy between Hobbesian and Rousseauian outlooks, notions about some original war of all against all, as opposed to notions about an original golden age that was shattered by the corrupting influences of civilization. From the perspective of those who consider organized violence as "natural," yet another dichotomy distinguishes between, on the one hand, perspectives that see violence as a simple manifestation of certain physiological facts, particularly of testosterone or of neural "wiring" (as being "in our DNA" or, in a phrase I am partial to, "testosterone poisoning") and, on the other, perspectives that view violence as a relatively adaptive (or "reasonable") response to the frustration of drives (i.e., it is "natural" but manifests itself only when survival is at issue).

Most thoughtful scholars interested in such issues are in fact more likely to hold ideas and do research at points somewhere between the polar extremes. Arguments put forward by those whose works occupy various locations along the length of the continuum that links the extremes, however, do tend to place priority somewhere closer to one end or the other than to the middle ground. That is, most scholarship posits that humans are either in some significant measure more naturally prone to violence but culturally capable of avoiding it or more naturally peaceful and only culturally provoked into forsaking our nature. In this article, I stake out an

argument—hardly novel, to be sure, but one that nevertheless calls for endless reiteration—that sees the two alternatives as being more evenly matched. In it, I describe ways in which Micronesians employ capacities for organized violence as deliberate means of maintaining peace.

I realize that I am to some extent talking about what may be called a deterrent and am extremely wary of doing so. In our contemporary world, deterrents consist primarily of weapons of mass destruction and are cause for real terror (i.e., the states that possess such weapons are, in my mind, as culpable of terrorism as anyone else who deliberately seeks to change collective political behaviour by violence or threats of violence). But the fact is that there have probably always been deterrents, just not of the sort embodying such overwhelming threats. One taking an historical look at peace and war needs to keep this in mind.

I see in traditional Micronesian social life tendencies to glorify both male bravado and culturally channeled, organized violence of the sort we usually call warfare.[1] But I have also come to understand that these patterns do not simply portend violence; they also serve to remind Micronesians of what lies in store for those who do not work conscientiously at avoiding armed conflict. And, more pertinently, I see great swaths of Micronesian sociocultural life dedicated to maintaining patterns and relationships that preclude or obviate a need for violence. The main points of this article are as follows.

In Micronesian societies, violence and the avoidance of it are intertwined and the upshot of this is that many warlike behaviours actually result in a marked diminution of organized violence or war. Actual warfare and other forms of violence are by no means absent in traditional Micronesian society, but they are much less prevalent than might otherwise be, if people did not work so hard at avoiding them. As I understand it, traditional Micronesian social organization offers an overarching alternative to organized violence but Micronesians do not suppose that the mere existence of this viable alternative to violence will necessarily prevail, and so they instead prepare quite conscientiously for combat, as a means of ensuring that their neighbours and rivals are more inclined to pursue all the myriad alternatives to it.

I argue that traditional Micronesian societies were both warlike and peaceful. Because considerations of war and peace invite rhetorical excess, it is tempting to say that these two contradictory statements are mutually exclusive and that either one or the other of them must be true or at least truer than the other. I think, though, that many seasoned ethnographers, setting rhetoric aside and acknowledging complexity, nuance and ambiguity, will recognize the absurdity of taking an either/or position here and seek, instead, to understand how two opposing possibilities can and do coexist. The ethnological work of Boehm (2012) and Ferguson (2008) bears this out. My intent is to push this notion further, to consider the ways in which a widespread commitment to appearances of organized violence as a central cultural emblem provides underpinning for an equally serious commitment to peaceful resolution of conflict. And I thus conclude that Micronesians' devotion to warlike activities and demeanours cannot be separated from their intense skill and devotion in avoiding violent conflict as often as they do.

My underlying assumption here is that what I am describing as Micronesian cultural choices are in fact rational. The British historian Michael Howard argues in his celebrated essay "The Causes of War" (1983) that, throughout history, war has been a normal means of conducting disputes between political groups. He doubts that this has much to do with innate aggression per se or other drives specified by sociobiologists but is instead largely a consequence of "almost a superabundance of analytic rationality"—that is, leaders are inclined to engage in careful calculations before going to war (14). The odds of victory being what they are, such decisions have about as much chance of being wrong as they do of being right. "Wars begin with conscious and reasoned decisions based on the calculation made by both parties that they can achieve more by going to war than by remaining at peace. Even in the most bellicose of societies this kind of calculation has to be made and it has never even for them been an easy one" (1983:22). In the ethnographic data I lay out ahead, it is my intent to demonstrate that Micronesian calculations are inclined to balance careful preparations for warfare with social practices precluding the need for warfare.

Life and Social Organization in Traditional Micronesian Societies[2]

Most Micronesian islands are fertile and well watered. Breadfruit varieties abound and provide an abundant source of healthy carbohydrates. Most of the islands have extensive coral reefs and large lagoons well stocked with marine resources. Under normal conditions, these are nearly ideal places to live and easily support large populations, relative to their limited physical dimensions. On the other hand, El Niño–driven climatic shifts (more properly the El Niño-Southern Oscillation or ENSO) lead to occasional prolonged droughts. While the larger volcanic islands are not as susceptible to

these, the small coral atolls are easily devastated by them.

Micronesia encompasses the spawning grounds of the North Pacific's typhoons. Its islands are subject to the recurring strikes of typhoons, including some of phenomenal proportions. A direct strike by a typhoon is likely to destroy virtually all the vegetation (and structures made from vegetation) in its path. Coral atolls (i.e., the overwhelming majority of all the Micronesian islands) are especially vulnerable, since the storm surge—the wave of seawater being pushed before the storm—is ordinarily much higher than an atoll, which at its highest is usually no more than 4.5 metres above sea level. When an atoll is struck, it is entirely inundated and its gardens are saturated with salt water and rendered unusable until they have been laboriously rehabilitated, a process that can take several years. The most powerful storms have been known to demolish some of the coral islets that make up atolls. Even on the high islands, such as Guam, Yap and Pohnpei, low-lying taro gardens will be flooded and ruined and breadfruit trees uprooted and overturned.

The frequency and intensity of typhoons vary by location, but the people of every island know that they will be hit. The Central Carolines atolls experience these storms more frequently than other areas at present; some are struck every 20 years or so. Tsunamis can wreak the same destruction, and, again, although atolls are most vulnerable, all islands are susceptible. We have no record of how often tsunamis strike, and they do not occur as frequently as typhoons, but they are certainly to be reckoned with.

The point here is that these small, productive islands are well worth inhabiting but they experience recurring natural disasters. Because most of the islands are widely separated (roughly 320 kilometres on average, though there is considerable variation) and have staggered latitudes and the tracks of individual typhoons are idiosyncratic, devastation on one island does not mean that its neighbours will be equally damaged. These are seafaring people (although the populations of some the largest islands lost many of their voyaging skills over the centuries), and their exceptional navigation skills make it possible for survivors of natural disasters to travel to adjacent islands.

Among the most likely options available to those who have been beset by catastrophe are the following: they can travel elsewhere as indigent supplicants; they can travel elsewhere as desperate raiders; or they can travel elsewhere seeking freely given succor. If they pursue the first option, their vulnerability means they stand a chance of being slain or enslaved (and I am by no means arguing this is necessarily what will happen—it is merely a significant possibility). If they pursue the second option, their weakened condition does not bode well for their success as invaders. Moreover, if this were a regular occurrence, the spotting of outsiders on the horizon would almost invariably mean that an island's population would rapidly mobilize itself to repel the invaders. The third option, however, enables vulnerable people to trust that they will be received kindly and provided with timely aid and comfort and allowed to abide until they have managed to rehabilitate the gardens on the home island they were forced to abandon. This last scenario is what characterizes Micronesian social organization.

On smaller islands, it can be difficult both to produce and to store surpluses, but on the higher islands, feast-making and preparations for feast-making, which are central to the dynamics of lineage and community activities, are almost perpetual concerns; they function not only as aspects of interpersonal relations and avenues for the pursuit of individual and group prestige but also as viable mechanisms for the production of surpluses that can help support families, lineages and communities through catastrophe-induced shortages.

Past generations of Micronesians existed, then, in a world that was not merely threatening and potentially dangerous—catastrophic storms and droughts actually did beset them. Micronesians organized themselves to engage in an array of interpersonal frameworks that provided cultural and moral meaning through acknowledgment of and reliance upon the peoples of other islands. Rather than being disoriented to the point of incapacitation when disaster struck, they instead acted in accord with a host of cultural and social imperatives and moved in with relatives residing elsewhere or invited relatives to move in with them and then went about reconstituting and reconstructing their gardens and homes, their lineages and their lives. I am not suggesting that Micronesians did not experience these catastrophes for the personal tragedies they were. Much of Micronesian emotional life is focused upon fears and worries of deprivation and devastation (Lutz 1988). Rather, I am saying that the tragic force of these events, as they impacted upon both material conditions and psychological states, was an experience that Micronesians dealt with as a part of their social and cultural heritage. To be Micronesian, that is, meant being prepared for the worst.

Traditional Micronesian societies were, and to a considerable extent still are, characterized by a shared, highly distinctive form of social organization known as dispersed matrilineal clans. The clans were above all else, I suggest, a means of systematizing what I have

described as the third option for survival. Membership in them is primarily, though by no means entirely, based upon birth—an individual is born into his or her mother's clan. With only rare exceptions does one's membership in a clan change—it has little to do with where or with whom one lives. It is viewed as being essentially biological and therefore permanent but nevertheless moral and social in character. Because the clans are dispersed, all individuals and families have relatives on multiple other islands in the region, a point to which I shall return. In times of danger, hardship or disaster, Micronesians are able to pick up and move elsewhere, secure in the knowledge that under most circumstances they are going to be received with open arms.

Embedded in Micronesian culture and social life is an awareness both that natural disasters continually loom just beyond the horizon and that Micronesian social organization provides exquisitely adaptive means of grappling with and surviving these disasters. That is, as long as Micronesians continue to act according to traditional Micronesian precepts, they are prepared to survive. Life in traditional Micronesian societies is organized around a series of principles and practices thoroughly adapted to surviving repeated catastrophes. Micronesian communities are frequently devastated by natural forces. The simple fact of destruction or, for that matter, loss of a substantial part of one's community is experienced as a fact of life, as a tragedy, to be sure, but one that can be overcome in stride, in the existential act of being Micronesian.

These descent groups are organized in a hierarchical, nested fashion. The clans are the largest, most inclusive level and are geographically dispersed, with branches on many islands and in multiple communities on the larger islands. Clans contain multiple subclans, which are usually restricted to only a portion of the geographical range of the larger clan. Subclans in turn comprise multiple lineages, which tend to be highly localized—that is, most members of a lineage are likely to live together or nearby one another. The lineages are relatively small, ordinarily including less than 50 people, and directly control and farm specific plots of land. Members of the larger clan and subclan, of which a lineage is a part, have certain moral rights of access to the lineage's land. Lineages, subclans and clans are exogamous—individuals must marry outside their own lineage, subclan and clan. Individuals who live with their spouse's lineage (frequently, but by no means always, men living with their wives) remain members of the clan and lineage into which they were born but are often casually referred to as members of the lineages with which they reside.

Lineages and their individual members are symbolically, emotionally, morally and cognitively identified with their land. People derive a significant part of their sense of themselves from their land, as well as from their lineage. In some cases, a single term can refer to both a lineage and its land—that is, people and the place where they live are conceptually merged. Because individuals are members of both localized lineages and dispersed clans, they tend to conceptualize themselves as rooted within a specific group and upon a specific plot of land, even while remaining existentially connected to clan mates in other places.

While Micronesians are deeply tied to their lineage's land, the deeply embedded character of an individual's clan ties to people in other places, it should be stressed, also underpins an awareness of and appreciation for the importance of mobility. It is highly likely that an individual will travel elsewhere to live for a time at some point in his or her life and that people from elsewhere will come to live for a time with his or her own lineage. And, while there is a pronounced ideological emphasis on matri-ties in land tenure patterns in many parts of the region, in actual practice, land rights are accessed through both matri- and patrilines.

The relevance of this is that every Micronesian is by birthright a member of both a land-owning, politically enfranchised local lineage *and* a larger clan with lineages dispersed among a multitude of communities and islands. Every Micronesian has the right, therefore, to seek refuge and succor in another community or on another island when catastrophe strikes and the duty to invite clan mates from other islands to reside and work on his or her own lineage's land when they are in need. While this aspect of Micronesian social structure is most directly a product of adaptive processes, it also holds highly significant meaning for the broader flow of all cultural life in the islands.

Micronesian communities feature two closely related and intertwined but nonetheless distinct forms of government, one territorial-based and the other kin-based. Each clan present in a community has a senior or leading lineage, and, according to local political theory, the senior lineage's genealogically senior member (who is usually an older male, but sometimes a female or younger man) is its chief.[3] Each community has members hailing from several different lineages and clans, and one or another of these clans and lineages is conceived to be the senior or leading descent group (though just which one is sometimes a matter of dispute) of the entire community. Everyone in a community recognizes a single territorially based chief but everyone also recognizes

their own kin-based chief. Micronesians are thus led or governed both by the chiefs of their communities and by their own clan and lineage chiefs. Clan chiefs are also recognized as having important political status by members of their clans residing on all the other islands where the clan has a presence.

I want to expand this into a broader point. In modern European history and among most of the contemporary world's countries, variants of the so-called Westphalian system of international relations are in effect. This is a system of sovereign states. People who reside within the borders of these states are conceived of as constituting a single nation. Thus a "nation state" is thought of as a single political system organized around both a specific place—that is, the state—and a specific group of people—that is, the nation; the nation and the state are thought of as one.[4] The allegiances of all the people within the state, it is widely held, should be directed, first and foremost, to the state within which they live. But in traditional Micronesia, this is not the case. People live in and belong to a place or community and recognize and participate in its government; but everyone also belongs to a dispersed descent group and recognizes and participates in its own chiefly system. All Micronesian societies, then, have two related, but separate, systems of government. Everyone has dual allegiances and two distinct political systems to which they are responsible and upon which they may call when in need.[5]

Furthermore, within these communities there are multiple kinds of chiefs and multiple ways of becoming chiefs. Some are purely hereditary, some are organized around military or religious or political roles, some are based upon age and gender and some are based upon competitive, meritocratic criteria. These different systems of chieftainship sometimes run parallel to one another, and sometimes cross-cut one another. And communities also possess councils. In some, the right to a voice in matters of state is allocated to representatives of lineages; in others, everyone has a right to speak. But in every case, chiefs are expected to listen—to other chiefs, to lineages and to respected individual older men and women. There are, moreover, hierarchically organized, multiple levels of chiefly government—that is, there are chiefs of smaller portions of a larger community (local chiefdoms) and chiefs of multiple communities (paramount chiefdoms or federations). These nested, hierarchical levels are quite similar in organization and function to federal systems. There is a central government and there are local governments and endless discussions about who is in charge of what. As a consequence, Micronesian societies have many political offices and roles and clearly manifest aspects of what political theorists term mixed government and extensive systems of checks and balances.[6]

I have thus far stressed the peaceable aspects of Micronesian political systems. To some extent they worked as well as they did because Micronesians were always willing to go to war.

Micronesian Warfare

It was always possible, of course, for members of one community or one island's population to invade another community or island and seize and occupy their land. Many Micronesian mytho-historical accounts describe such invasions, and there are several historical accounts of these as well. Important aspects of the Micronesian social-cultural repertoire are in fact organized around martial ideas and practices. The clan and lineage system itself is organized around chieftainship. Chiefs have many roles and serve many functions, but one of their most important tasks is to serve as the focal point for the military organization of the community. Chiefs are often elderly and are not necessarily great warriors themselves, but their prestige, influence and supernatural status (mana)[7] are all central to the task of ensuring that the community is appropriately organized to defend itself from invasion.

This said, however, it is equally the case that, while the threat of attack is never far from people's minds, most social activity is actually focused on non-violent means of moving people from areas of resource shortage to areas of resource availability. Patterns of both land inheritance and adoption, as well as great flexibility in post-marital residence, made it possible for most people to gain access to land through peaceable means. Micronesians respect warriors and battles and martial skills, to be sure, but they have far greater admiration for generosity of spirit, the congenial and efficient discharging of one's duties to one's kin and the ability to produce food stuffs and other goods in quantities that make gift-giving and feasting possible. On Pohnpei, doing service as a warrior is known as *tautik* or "little service," while doing community service, providing labour and feast goods year in and year out, is honoured as *taulap*, "great service."

While concerns about armed conflict played a notable part in a wide range of Micronesian sociocultural activities, in the current context the significance of these activities lies in the role that continual awareness of the possibilities for violence played in motivating Micronesians to pursue means of avoiding open outbreaks of hostilities, both within and between communities. A warrior ethos permeated the fibre of Micronesian social

and cultural life, and participation in combat was expected of all mature men. Warriors were full-grown men and active political players, not youths. Indeed, young Micronesian men today sometimes assert that they seek to serve in combat with the U.S. military for just these reasons. Nevertheless, warfare was not nearly as prevalent as it is often portrayed, nor was it always as violent as it is made out to be when it did take place. But always there was potential for real havoc.

Accounts of traditional warfare must be understood within local contexts. Pohnpeians, for example, explain that in the old days combatants often faced off against one another, but did little more than exchange insults and abuse and hurl occasional spears and sling-stones. And on Yap the outcomes of combat were sometimes prearranged. This is not to say that there were no episodes of homicide but, rather, that a battle did not necessarily entail much violence. And because of the emphases upon warrior codes of honour, non-combatants were rarely endangered, except in specific, individual acts of vengeance.

The role of chief was very much focused on channeling the aid of the supernatural world (including deities and ancestral spirits) to defend the community from external threats, whether natural or human in origin, and to provide it with the appearance of a socio-political hierarchy effective enough militarily to successfully defend the community from invaders.

This appearance of order was intended especially to convince outsiders who might threaten a community with possible attacks to reconsider. It had its internal or domestic purposes as well, but these were in some ways subordinate to the larger purpose of generating propaganda for external consumption. Virtually every fine-grained ethnography of Micronesian societies provides evidence that, although people readily acknowledge and celebrate the potency of their leaders, they are also inclined to ignore their chiefs when they disagree with them or find their strictures burdensome. Most Micronesians are quite capable of insisting upon the sacred character of their leaders and upon their readiness to obey their own chiefs unhesitatingly, even while nonchalantly going on to do quite as they choose.[8]

Because traditional Micronesian political process was highly participatory, it was in fact difficult to order warriors into battle. Why, then, the discrepancy between earlier reports of authoritarian, warlike societies and the analyses of modern ethnographers? I should note at this point that the traditional society of the Marshall Islands, Micronesia's easternmost archipelago, has in fact been subjected to analysis as part of an attempt to establish the mathematical truth of the "democratic peace hypothesis." Unfortunately, the ethnologists who contributed to this effort were unable to provide any context for the data taken from early German accounts. They uncritically report that the Marshalls' "chiefs (along with the nobles) controlled the land and its products and provided 'dogmatic' leadership. Both paramount chiefs and the lesser chiefs were described as having autocratic powers and the power of life and death" (Russett 1993:113). As I have noted elsewhere (Petersen 2007), the outlooks of many of these early German scholars (some of whom were missionaries) were highly compromised; recent, more nuanced ethnographic work has made it abundantly clear that the term *autocratic* has no merit whatsoever when applied to Micronesian political process.

These early accounts came, for the most part, from the reports of outsiders representing powerful and potentially disruptive forces, including explorers, traders, missionaries, the military, colonial administrators and anthropologists. Micronesians believed it crucial to convince these outsiders that their communities were well organized and capable of defending their interests.[9] Thus, the older data available to us tend to emphasize the authority of chiefs, which is why we encounter repeated assertions that the word or the rule of the chief is "absolute" in early ethnological accounts of Micronesian societies. Moreover, the autonomy provided by land tenure systems that place most direct control over lands in the descent groups that occupy them ensures these groups access to resources that enable them to disregard or even defy the local chief. Claims of successfully authoritarian chiefs and frequent violent combat do not at all accurately portray the political dynamics of these societies.

It is also important to emphasize that, despite the important roles chiefs played in the defence of their communities, they were not themselves warriors or war leaders. In most Micronesian societies they tended to be rather elderly and many of these societies possessed special war leaders: in the Marshalls, for instance, there were *leatoktok*, in Chuuk *itang* and in Yap *tagac*. Warfare in Yap has been described as "a method of political maneuvering" used by leaders to consolidate political power and giving "chiefs powers that the ideology of Yapese culture denies." Thus, chiefs did not themselves commonly engage in combat but instead "prearranged the war's outcome" (Lingenfelter 1975:110, 171, 175).

Given the prevalence of storms and droughts, life was already precarious enough in the islands, and Micronesians did not deem it a good idea either to kill those

upon whom they might later need to depend or to lose potential allies who might in time help defend them. Instead, cultivating warlike demeanors coupled with effective means of defusing and preventing or at least limiting war seemed more effective. This does not mean, of course, that such strategies always succeeded, or were unfailingly pursued.

Micronesia does abound with accounts of institutionalized, culturally esteemed warfare. Mytho-historical legends of great battles, invasions and extraordinarily heroic warriors are recounted everywhere. Many of the mytho-historical charters for chiefly descent groups are rooted in conquest. And, perhaps most tellingly, dance performances from all over Micronesia rely extensively on martial themes. Among the earliest accounts we have of the Carolinian atolls are detailed descriptions of elaborate spear and stick dances (Barratt 1988:71). Much of Micronesian aesthetics and recreation is focused on these dances, which are basically choreographed hand-to-hand combat, and, in some communities, they provide one of the readiest forms of release for pent-up or repressed emotions. In societies where a great premium is placed on disguising or concealing hostility and other negatively charged emotions, as most Micronesians societies do (Lutz 1988; Petersen 1993), occasional frays or more frequent dance practices and performances provide an important emotional outlet. Indeed, it might be argued that some of the emphasis laid upon the warrior ethos is intended to accomplish precisely this—to allow a channel for repressed interpersonal conflict.

Pohnpeians, like other Micronesians, also possessed spells meant to bind up ruptured social relations and restore calm, even where injured sensibilities still remained. I know directly of one case, several decades ago, when a particularly ugly murder led to a near outbreak of violence; local elders successfully enlisted a sorcerer, whose strong binding spells restrained people from pursuing quick and deadly vengeance. And perhaps most significantly in this context, Pohnpeians today maintain that in the past, when a community member was killed by someone from another community or part of the island, the culturally approved practice was to determine the clan membership of the perpetrator, select someone from the victim's community of this same clan and then have him avenge the killing by taking the culprit's life. This was done deliberately, to have the act of vengeance carried out between members of the same clan, thus bringing the dispute swiftly and directly to closure. Similar tactics were employed elsewhere in the region.

Pohnpeians continue to place great importance on a sort of fierce stoicism. Men are expected to be able to undergo great physical pain without showing any awareness of it, and various aphorisms refer to men's readiness to throw away their safety and even their lives when duty calls. Other maxims warn about dangers of underestimating individuals whose demeanor is understated; one is the saying, "*Nennen sarau kommwad*," which might be translated either as "the quiet of the fierce barracuda" or "the bravery of the quiet barracuda." Pohnpeians say that while they respect sharks, they fear barracudas, which are given to hanging motionless in the water and then striking suddenly, without warning. Quiet persons should not be taken lightly—there may be much more to them than meets the eye.

This cultural emphasis on stoicism is by no means limited to male behaviour. Maureen Fitzgerald was told "that for Pohnpeian women it is a sign of honor not to cry or make a noise during labor and delivery; other women may cry out but not Pohnpeian women ... If a Pohnpeian woman cries out it will bring great shame to the family" (2001:77). Many years ago I drove a young member of the Pohnpeian family with whom I lived to the island's hospital, over what were in those days very difficult—at times seemingly impassable—roads, where she gave birth just a few minutes after we arrived. When I later expressed to her my surprise at how quickly she delivered, since she had been so calm and collected during the drive, she replied that she wished she could have been screaming, the way American women do. And as Marshall (1978), Lutz (1988) and Throop (2010) have shown, this stoic theme appears widely in contemporary Micronesian societies.

While Micronesian governments were to some extent organized around warfare and related activities, then, and Micronesian culture celebrates aspects of the warrior's role, the fact is that traditional Micronesian societies possessed a full repertoire of ways in which violence and open warfare could be staved off. My central point here is that the extensive means of avoiding open hostilities at Micronesians' disposal, coupled with the elaborate cultural emphases on warrior roles, make it clear that violence was always perceived as possible and not always avoidable but force was not the primary manner through which governments conducted their community's political affairs.

Foreign Relations in Micronesia

To the extent that war, as Clausewitz famously maintained, is the continuation of politics by other means, Micronesian chiefs were responsible for that which warfare continues: foreign relations. This is not the sort of terminology ordinarily applied to political practices in small island societies, but there is no good reason to

deny them the respect due their diplomatic skills. In Micronesia, foreign relations were almost by definition as much the province of descent groups and their leaders as they were the mandate of territorial chiefs. The very nature of Micronesian societies, organized as they were around lineages nested hierarchically within clans and subclans, hinged upon the notion that interactions among groups of people living in different places were simultaneously the task of dispersed branches of descent groups and of territorial leadership. When these relations are managed by members of different branches of the same extended descent group, we tend to speak of them in terms of kinship; when they are dealt with by territorial leaders, we lump them with politics. Both sorts of interactions, however, were utterly crucial to survival in the islands, and both can rightly be referred to as foreign relations.

At the core of everything essentially Micronesian is the web of ties between and among communities and societies spread across their seas.[10] Relations linking together dispersed branches of descent groups ensured individuals, families and lineages that they would be able to obtain aid and succor from kin residing in areas less affected by storms, droughts and other sorts of trials, whether visited upon them by natural or social forces. On the other hand, foreign relations in the charge of the chiefs of places—of communities or islands—were focused more upon defence of the entire community; they were intended to demonstrate that a community or island was capable of coordinating the efforts of all its localized descent groups in an effective enough manner to repel outside attempts at invasion or conquest.

In dealing with these foreign relations—relatively large-scale, formalized interactions between communities or islands—chiefs were not viewed as the heads of specific descent groups but as leaders of entire communities. They were, in the terms of international relations theorists, sovereigns and were treated as such in the course of interactions between island societies. On many islands paramount chiefs were explicitly charged with the conduct of external or foreign relations as their principal responsibility—for example, Ettal (Nason 1974:126) and Ulithi (Lessa 1966:34; Figirliyong 1977:12).

Such relations could be quite complex, inasmuch as members of one or another of a community's localized descent groups might find themselves in a position of being expected to defend the community from an invasion by distant relations—that is, members of their own clan. But it was precisely this interweaving of multiple sorts of ties that provided Micronesian societies with bonds strong enough to ensure survival in often-tenuous environments. By having two complementary sets or sorts of social organization, one based on co-residence in a specific place and the other on kin ties among people residing in widely separated places, they provided themselves with enhanced opportunities both to reach out to communities in other places when in need and to defend themselves from other communities when they were threatened.

What is more, these two discrete but relatively complete and competent sets of socio-political relations served equally to establish checks against any who might seek to abuse their authority. As Alkire points out in his discussion of Lamotrek's complementary chiefly systems, "even though the rights of a chief derived from the multiple sources of kinship and territoriality, the decision of one chief would not often come into conflict with that of another" (1989:68). The dual systems did not ordinarily overlap but, instead, enabled individuals and lineages to play one off against another when they believed it to be in their interest.

Nearly every aspect of Micronesian leadership involved some degree of duality or multiplicity of chieftainship. Despite the hereditary aspects of chiefly succession and the powers ascribed to the chiefs, Micronesians managed at every turn to place checks in the way of anyone who would abuse his authority. Foreign relations were likewise conducted along these two tracks. Much of what needed to be done was accomplished by localized lineages maintaining relations with members of the same clan or subclan residing elsewhere. The entire community benefited from these relations because goods and services circulated constantly through communities. At the same time, however, all the localized descent groups in a community, in recognizing a common chief of the place, guaranteed themselves the means of mounting a coordinated defence in times of danger.

In short, Micronesians well understood that their dispersed clans and chiefly politics provided them with the best chance they had to survive the exigencies of island life in the home of the typhoons. Perhaps there is something we can learn from them.

Peace, Democracy and Pacific Islands Politics

This Micronesian material can be set in a more comparative framework by drawing on several key concepts drawn from classical republican theory.[11] First, aspects of pluralism—that is, mixed governments and separation of powers—have long been viewed as providing some of the important checks and balances that simultaneously empower a community's leaders and yet prevent them from abusing their powers. Second, systems of land ownership that ensure groups security of tenure

make it possible for them to resist central authority. Third, where nearly every adult male is a warrior—that is, much of the population serves as members of the militia—the people are even more empowered to resist abuses of authority. These precepts have traditionally been seen as central to securing participatory democracy.

I would like to think that the Micronesian examples I have been describing are evidence that democracy can take many forms and that traditional societies with histories quite distinct from the precedents of the classical Greeks have been able to maintain political systems that functioned democratically, even if they appear on the surface to be entirely different from what we have come to expect of democracies. Ballot boxes and written constitutions are what we anticipate, and in their absence many are inclined to see nothing but blind tradition or, as one writer put it, "traditional society, in which vast masses live an unpolitical life, embedded in customs and usages they need not understand" (Merkl 1967:208).

It is my contention that the characteristic Micronesian system of dispersed descent groups, however quaint it may seem, provides us with a worthwhile example of what small-scale, traditional societies can tell us about some of the lesser-known possibilities for peace and democracy. It is not that they did not know war—clearly they did. But they used organized violence sparingly, as a means of reminding themselves of what could happen when they did not make good use of the options their ancestors developed as adaptations to the uncertainties of life in their islands. Their political systems intertwined one single kind of governance, chieftainship, in two distinct realms. At home, within communities, chieftainship provided the focal point for a wide variety of culturally meaningful activities that integrated nearly everyone into participatory roles. But chieftainship worked equally to link together people in communities dispersed over a wide region. Micronesians used a single, albeit nuanced and complex, political model to accomplish two distinct tasks, both making communities work efficiently and assuring them of security vis-à-vis their neighbours.

Ideas about hierarchy and martial organization are central to chieftainship, and provide stable templates for connections among island communities. At the same time, however, chieftainship entails so much participation and good will in its day-to-day operations that it actually promotes a high degree of equality, participation and peace. This is hardly peculiar to Micronesia.

Peace and War Can Occupy the Same Space

Questions about the nature of war as a general phenomenon in human history and, more specifically, about its character in societies without centralized political organizations (i.e., "states") to monopolize the use of violence or armed force have long concerned anthropologists, even if they have rarely occupied the discipline's centre stage. I turn now to a brief consideration of how my Micronesian perspectives intersect with broader anthropological theory. I draw here on two representative works, out of the greater sweep of anthropological literature.

Writing in 1903, in a classic essay simply entitled "War," William Graham Sumner observed that 18th-century thinkers saw the primitive state of humankind as one of peace, joy and contentment, while in the 19th century, humans' original state was thought to be one of universal warfare. Believing himself to be an objective student of the available ethnographic data and unswayed by currents of popular opinion, Sumner surveyed "the least civilized men" still surviving in the contemporary world and found that "they are not warlike and do not practice it if they can help it" (1965:200). Marshalling pages of rather unsystematic ethnological examples, he found the data "show we cannot postulate a warlike character or a habit of fighting as a universal or even characteristic trait of primitive man" (1965:204). Placing this material in historical perspective, Sumner concluded that "militancy and peacefulness have existed side by side in human society from the beginning just as they exist now" (1965:224). In Sumner's view, then, the issue is not whether humankind is inherently more warlike or peaceful; he instead focuses on the interrelationship between the two extremes.

In *War before Civilization*, Lawrence Keeley also points to the broader climate of intellectual and popular opinion, arguing that in modern anthropology a central tendency reflects a widespread notion in contemporary western culture that warfare is not the natural human state.[12]

> In intellectual and popular culture, war has come to be regarded by many as a peculiar psychosis of Western civilization. This atmosphere of Western self-reproach and neo-Rousseauian nostalgia is prevalent in the views espoused by many postwar anthropologists.
>
> The pacification of the past now epidemic in anthropology is just the latest turn in the long struggle between the myths of progress and the golden age, between Hobbesian and Rousseauian conceptions of the nature of primitive societies and the prehistoric past. [1996:23]

To the extent that anthropologists do acknowledge the existence of war in the ethnological record, he continues, they downplay its importance, attempting to "save the Rousseauian notion of the Noble Savage, not by making him peaceful (as this was clearly contrary to fact), but by arguing that tribesmen conducted a more stylized, less horrible form of warfare than their civilized counterparts waged" (1996:9). According to Keeley's reading of the literature, anthropological views of "the pacified past claim or imply that peaceful societies were common, fighting was infrequent and active participation in combat was limited among prestate people." But, he concludes, "on the contrary, the available evidence shows that peaceful societies have been very rare" and "that warfare was extremely frequent in nonstate societies" (1996:25–26).[13] He repeatedly emphasizes this view that it is only fashion that blinds anthropologists to the data in front of their collective noses and concludes that technology aside, warfare in human societies has always and everywhere been both prevalent and seen as a scourge.

> The facts recovered by ethnographers and archaeologists indicate unequivocally that primitive and prehistoric warfare was just as terrible and effective as the historic and civilized version. War is hell whether it is fought with wooden spears or napalm. Peaceful prestate societies were very rare; warfare between them was very frequent. [1996:174]

Keeley does acknowledge that "if it were not so difficult to design social systems" that fostered it, "peace would be a far less scarce commodity" (1996:178).

There is, to my mind, a critical semantic issue here, one that lies close to the centre of the issues I see myself grappling with in this article. As I have already explained, my understanding of traditional Micronesian societies leads me to the conclusion that terms like *peaceful* and *warlike* (or whatever synonyms one wishes to employ, such as *pacifistic* or *bellicose*) may not be useful guides to true comprehension of any given society's character. This is partly because peoples' values and actions do not necessarily coincide and because peoples' views of themselves do not necessarily correspond to others' perspectives. This is by no means peculiar to Micronesian societies. Distinguishing between violence and aggression, Karl Heider describes the Dani of western New Guinea as "peaceful warriors." He acknowledges the "apparent paradox if one contrasts the picture of the individual Dani as gentle, nonaggressive people who withdraw from conflict, with the picture of their warfare, which demands instant engagement and often homicide on the part of these same people" (1997:115). In *The Anthropology of War*, Keith Otterbein discusses "peaceful societies," which by his definition, "lacked both military organizations and war" (2009:57), but such an extreme position, it seems to me, makes being "peaceful" almost by definition impossible. In a similar vein, many contemporary American citizens see no contradiction between their deeply held beliefs that the United States is the most peace-loving nation state on the planet and the fact that their government spends more on its military budget than do the rest of the world's governments put together.

If the people of a community or a polity spend the overwhelming majority of their time and efforts engaged in activities meant to avoid or curtail organized violence and only a small portion of their time engaged in actual fighting, are they "peaceful" or "bellicose"? If they are kind and gentle with those with whom they interact most of the time—that is, their family and neighbours—but occasionally fierce in dealing with outsiders, are they "aggressive" or not? If they espouse humanitarian principles in their rhetoric but treat others ruthlessly, how do we categorize them (beyond acknowledging their hypocrisy)? If they speak softly but carry a big stick, or vice versa, what conclusions can or should we draw about them?

Conclusion

As I said at the beginning, organized violence in traditional Micronesian societies can be seen as a deterrent. That is, occasional warfare can serve to bring about and preserve peace in the longer run. In modern urban, industrial societies, especially those possessing weapons of mass destruction, the concept of a deterrent may strike terror into the hearts of some and yet there are those who would point to the efficacy of these armaments. "Society may have accepted killing as a legitimate instrument of state policy," writes Michael Howard, "but not, as yet, suicide." It is for this reason that he doubts the abolition of nuclear weapons would be an unmixed blessing. "Nothing that makes it easier for statesmen to regard war as a feasible instrument of state policy, one from which they stand to gain rather than lose, is likely to contribute to a lasting peace" (Howard 1983:22). In an era when thoughtful, rational people view the existence of nuclear weapons as a welcome check to the ambitions of leaders, the notion of violent deterrents rightly unsettles us. But under other conditions, in other times and places, the existence of deterrents may be a more complex matter.

The title of this essay, "The Possibilities of Violence and the Skills to Avoid It," reflects my sense that this is

precisely what traditional Micronesians were up to. As Sumner observed over a century ago, "Make up your mind soberly what you want, peace or war, and then to get ready for what you want; for what we prepare for is what we shall get" (1965:234). Micronesians were adept at preparing for both, and in doing so, it seems, managed to spend considerably more time at peace than at war.

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Notes

1 A common framework for organizing social life proved so successful that it was adopted throughout the area and retained for a very long time. It is this shared pattern, characteristic of all Micronesian societies in the 19th century, when most European contact got underway, to which I refer when I speak of "traditional Micronesian social life."

2 This is perhaps no more than an old man's grumpiness, but I've come to think that in the past couple of decades Micronesia has been increasingly dismissed or at least forgotten as an integral part of Oceania. To that end I am providing a summary of some basic aspects of Micronesian ethnology; those who have a more classical training will know all of this already, but I suspect it may provide a useful introduction to at least some of you. Data in the following account are fully referenced in *Traditional Micronesian Societies* (Petersen 2009).

3 In reality, a good deal of practical politics is involved in establishing who will be chief, but Micronesian political ideology almost invariably states that the chief should be the group's genealogically senior member.

4 It is for this reason that countries with multiple acknowledged language groups, say, for instance, Belgium or Canada, are widely thought of as somehow peculiar and countries with many language groups, say India or virtually any African country, are thought to be at a distinct historical disadvantage when it comes to "nation-building."

5 Imagine, if you will, that Kurds were legally, officially allowed to be equally attached to the Turkish or Iraqi state and to all their fellow Kurds, wherever they live.

6 The title of my book *One Man Cannot Rule a Thousand* comes from the comment of a chief who was explaining to me why his community had split apart into two chiefdoms. There were just too many people (in reality a little over two hundred) and not enough chiefs, he said, and the community broke in two in order to create positions for many more chiefs (Petersen 1982).

7 Nuclear Micronesian languages possess some cognate form of *mana*; on Pohnpei, for instance, it is *manaman*.

8 I am hardly suggesting that this is in any way peculiar to Micronesians.

9 I recognize that there are situations where some may think that taking a dependent or supplicating role or position might work to their advantage.

10 The preamble to the Federated States of Micronesia's constitution states in part, "The seas bring us together, they do not separate us."

11 I have elaborated connections between republican theory and Micronesian socio-political life elsewhere, including Petersen 1990, 1995 and 2009:146–147.

12 Keeley hedges. He writes, "War has come to be regarded by *many* as a peculiar psychosis of Western civilization" (1996:23, emphasis added), but his book is grounded on the premise that this negative attitude on war is central to contemporary thought. In the wake of the reactions to the September 11, 2001, attacks on New York's World Trade Center and the U.S. Defense Department's headquarters in the Pentagon and the subsequent invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, I find it difficult to believe that this is so. Douglas Feith, undersecretary of defence for policy in George W. Bush's administration and one of the primary architects of these invasions, expressed the outlook of official Washington succinctly: "The kind of people who put bumper stickers on their car that declare that 'war is not the answer,' are they making a serious comment? What's the answer to Pearl Harbor? What's the answer to the Holocaust?" (Goldberg 2005).

13 Michael Young, commenting on a 1936 Bronislaw Malinowski lecture, "Culture as a Determinant of Behaviour," pointed out that in his preparatory notes Malinowski reminded himself to " 'indicate how the craving for the singular and exotic and romantic leads us to over-emphasize these elements' and neglect the humdrum, the dullness of daily life" (Young 2010). I would suggest that the prevalence of warfare is likely to be exaggerated in ethnographic data precisely because of both informants' and ethnographers' desires to accentuate "the singular and exotic and romantic."

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