

Part 5: My Government, My Nation: the Path to Self-Government and Independence

Unit 38: Commonwealth of the Northern Marianas Islands, Hayi-hao, *thu*; democracy - what clothes Should We Wear?

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This story on “My nation; My Government” will allow you a glimpse of the struggles and jubilations of the people of the Northern Marianas Islands.

After completing this unit, you will be able to:

- describe the migration pattern of the Marianas people and the inter-island trade of the Carolinians and Marianas people.
- identify the functions of the Trust Territory Government.
- identify the function of the Micronesian Congress.
- analyse the contribution of the Local Representatives and UN Representatives.
- describe how today’s government works

World History; Local History

From the early settlements to the present, the Pacific Islands have gone through very interesting political changes. The Northern Mariana Islands in the north Pacific is no exception. In the old days people were mostly naked, and enjoyed a unique lifestyle and leadership. Then the shores were bloodstained by wars caused by the Spanish right through to atrocities in World War II.

The end of World War II may have been one of the most rewarding periods that the Northern Marianas ever experienced. It provided the people with the opportunity to seek new challenges to better their lives. Eventually as a United Nations trusteeship, the Northern Marianas people decided to chose between self-government, or full independence away from the USA. In 1976, it chose a Commonwealth form of Government in free association with the United States of America. It became known by the acronym, the CNMI.

Pre-European Era

We don't know for sure, but we believe the first settlers arrived over 4,000 years ago. They were the ancestors of the present day Chamorro people in the group of islands called Cani, now called the Marianas, in Micronesia. Most likely these migrations came in different waves from islands west of the Philippines.

At about the same time people settled the other Micronesian Islands - Kiribati, the Marshalls Islands, Kosrae, Pohnpei, Chuuk, Yap, and Palau. Because of the vast distances between islands and their differing resources, each island group developed its own cultures, customs, and languages.

The people who came to live on the high volcanic islands, like the Marianas, were organised in order to protect themselves from invaders and to safeguard their islands bountiful resources. They had everything they needed from the land and sea.

These proud people were called the *Retuugh (Chamorros)*, a Carolinian word for "those northern" people. These people were once great navigators but they did not have to travel far because their new island provided all they needed. As a result they eventually lost their navigational/sailing skills.

The high-island settlers developed well organised societies. They used the beautiful red clays that were found on their islands. The implements were strong and lasted longer than tools used in other parts of Micronesia.

A complex political system kept the people happy. If there were misunderstandings among the people, they were settled easily by their respective Chiefs. For the most part the islanders lived harmoniously.

Others who lived in the low-lying islands to the south maintained constant contact with the Retuugh and traded goods. These people were called *Rematau* (Carolinian), or people of the deep sea. They maintained their navigational knowledge. Pius Mau Pailug, a Micronesian navigator who is famous for reviving Polynesian navigation in the 1970s, is a Rematau.

First European Encounter

Europeans passed through Micronesia looking for the Indies to trade for spices. Some explorers claimed the lands they "discovered" for their country.

In 1521, Ferdinand Magellan, a Portuguese explorer sailing under the Spanish flag sailed out of the Atlantic Ocean on a southerly direction for over two years before he reached the Pacific Ocean. Some of the sailors wanted to go back to Spain. Some were so sick their teeth began to fall out. It took two more months before they reached land in the Philippines.

Spanish influence in the North Pacific lasted for the next 350 years. However, it was not until 1740 that Spain formally annexed the Mariana Islands. By 1898, the Chamorro population had declined, people had joined the Catholic Church, trading with Islands to the South had ended. The Marianas Islands had been “colonised” by the Spanish, and by other Caroline Islanders.

Questions and Activities

1. How did the first settlers come to the islands?
2. Where did they come from?
3. In your opinion/words why did they come to these islands?
4. Why did they need to develop a political system?
5. Write a simple definition of these words:
 - (a) *Chammoro*
 - (b) *Retuugh*
 - (c) *Rematau*
6. What did Pius Mau Piailug achieve?

The End of Colonial control

The collapse of the Spanish Empire after the Spanish-American War of 1898 meant that Spanish influence declined. In 1898, the Germans bought the Marianas (except Guam) from the Spanish for four million dollars. Consequently, this led to the separation of the Chamorro people into two groups. In Guam the Chamorro came under the rule of the American Navy (as a USA Territory), and the Chamorro and Carolinians in the Northern Marianas came under German rule.

In the short but very intense German era (1899-1914), the German administration introduced commercial agriculture, modern medical treatment including vaccination and sanitation, land registration and public education. One of the required subjects for all students during this period was the study of the Chamorro language. The Germans also developed Chamorro-German and Carolinian-German dictionaries. The German administration only lasted fifteen years. World War I ended the German era in the Marianas.

In 1914, in an agreement with Great Britain, Japan took possession of all Germany's former colonies north of the equator (except the USA Territory of Guam). Great Britain, Australia and New Zealand took possession of Germany's colonies south of the equator.

As a class C Mandate of the League of Nations, Japan was given the authority to extend Japanese law to all the people. While the Spanish and the Germans had discouraged outsiders from settling, Japan encouraged migration to the islands. Eventually the Japanese out-numbered the local people. The Japanese began to illegally integrate all of Micronesia in their empire.

The Indigenous people were never integrated into the Japanese society. For the most part, they were restricted to three years of elementary school where they learned basic Japanese language and culture, mathematics and a practical trade like carpentry.

Saipan and Tinian Islands began to look like a "Little Japan", and rice growing and other industries were introduced. In 1937, Japan withdrew from the League of Nations, and the Marianas were once again firmly under colonial rule.

At the end of World War II, the United Nations established a trusteeship system. It gave the USA the responsibility to govern the Micronesian Islands. The Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands (TTPI) was a strategic trust territory. The USA had full authority to administer and defend it from outside influence. The TTPI was administered by the High Commissioner and the Navy, based in Saipan.

Questions and Activities

7. List the different periods of colonial rule (showing dates).
8. Make two lists headed "Benefits of Colonial rule" and "Disadvantages of Colonial rule".

The Transfer to Self Government

One of the functions of the United Nations trusteeship system (there were 11 Trusteeships created in 1947) was to prepare indigenous people for eventual self-government or independence. The people of the Marianas indicated very early in the trusteeship period their desire for reunification with Guam but also for eventual American citizenship. Guam however, voted against joining their northern cousins'.

In 1976 the CNMI voted to remain an American territory, and to follow the American political system.

The family as Government

What is government and why do we need it? Many of us think of government as groups of people in Capitol Hill or Saipan – as something to do with politicians. In the Marianas, as well as other parts of the world, we have many different kinds of government. Eventually the Marianas had to decide what sort of government it wanted.

The earliest form of government in world history was the family. The father was the president/king or head of the “family-government” and made the major decisions. It was his responsibility to provide protection, food and shelter for the children and his wife. The mother would maintain the home, teach the children, and work on maintaining a food supply. It is still the strongest form of control in our islands.

Around the world, the family group (sometimes called a dynasty or monarchy) could also be the foundation for a government. A clan or group of families would assume control and protect and support a larger population. A chief or council of chiefs would sometimes be the head of this form of government. Over the centuries, democracy evolved from rule by the strongest, then to rule by a select few, to rule by an elected group with male citizens who owned property having the right to vote.

Today, democracy is based on all adults having the right to vote. They trust their elected leaders to govern on their behalf (called representative government). The CNMI has this form of government, following the style of the USA. Some of our leaders go to Washington to sit in the USA Congress while others govern locally in Saipan. But is it the right style?

Final Questions and Activities

9. Describe the term “Free Association”
10. Describe the term “trusteeship”
11. Would you describe CNMI as an American “colony”? Prepare a short statement arguing for and against this view.
12. What are the major obstacles to all Chamorro people being united under one government?