

A Micronesian Perspective on Migration to the United States: Salty Feet Among Fellow People of the Sea

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Immigration is a crucial element of relations between the US and the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), one of the [Freely Associated States \(FAS\) established in the Compact of Free Association \(COFA\) treaties](#) with the United States. Immigration benefits individual migrants, the country of origin, and the United States. Here, we examine western and indigenous terms used in discussions of migration to illuminate and facilitate inclusion of Micronesian perspectives in this dialogue.

A [US government report](#) estimates that 94,000 compact migrants live in the United States. The aggregate number of Micronesians living in the United States is relatively small. However, the impact is significant for FAS countries and U.S. jurisdictions with considerable Micronesian populations, such as Portland, OR; Kansas City, MO; Corsicana, TX; and Mesa/Tempe, AZ.

The terms “diaspora” and “Compact refugees” often appear in conversations about FAS migrants, but they reflect foreign worldviews and are in some ways inaccurate. That said, Micronesian migrant communities do have certain qualities of a diaspora. The criterion of “involuntariness” as an attribute of diaspora should not be overlooked. Many but not all diasporic communities were involuntarily created by war, famine, or other calamitous circumstances. The same cannot be said about the Compact-driven migrants. Their decision to leave the FSM to come to America is voluntary and they were not compelled to leave their homeland, although their decisions might have been influenced by push factors, including unemployment, lack of healthcare, and poor-quality schools.

Another label commentators sometimes use, “refugees,” is wholly inaccurate and seems to contradict the applicable provisions of the treaty. If Micronesians are presumed to have the “authorization of the US Attorney General,” how would they be considered “refugees”? This term has negative connotations and conjures images of nomads who are rootless. It does not appear that the intent of the Compact was to cut off the roots of those traveling to the United States or remove their sense of attachment to their homeland. The use of convenient and colorful terms that are not applicable to or do not adequately describe the situation should be avoided.

A more appropriate term that has been used recently, “migrant community,” resembles the indigenous Micronesian concepts of *refanuwarh* and *remetaw*, core elements of Micronesian cultures. These indigenous concepts served practical purposes for Micronesians in both the past and the Compact era. *Remetaw* is a term used more commonly in the outer islands of Yap to mean “fellow people from the sea.” It highlights the mobility of people who could sail the sea from island to island and the appreciation of being connected with other “people of the sea.” *Remetaw* is a safety net for Micronesians away from home. It is an assurance of a sense of belonging in a community of like-minded or similarly situated people. There is no record to show that this concept of *remetaw* was tossed on the COFA negotiating table, however there are observable applications of the *remetaw* ideal in the new concept of Compact migrant community which suggests that it was known to the Micronesian Compact II negotiators. They did not negotiate without some frame of reference; *remetaw* was probably a general guidepost.

James A. Naich, East-West Center Diplomatic Consultant and former Federated States of Micronesia diplomat, & Mary Therese Perez Hattori, EdD, Interim Director, Pacific Islands Development Program at the East-West Center, examine the “western and indigenous terms used in discussions of migration to illuminate and facilitate inclusion of Micronesian perspectives in this dialogue.”

Refanuwarh is a term of affection in the Chuukese language (and in the Carolinian dialects on Saipan and the outer islands of Yap), which means “fellow islanders.” It referred to the people of an island who relocated to other islands due to marriage, adoption, war, or family situations. There are expectations on these informal networks of “fellow islanders” where the “migrated” islanders were expected to serve as greeters and providers to visitors from their home islands. There were communities of *refanuwarh* known to exist throughout Micronesia before the Compact and there seems to be semblance of the concept of *refanuwarh* in the newer concept of “FAS migrants” of the Compact era. Early arrivals in the United States feel obliged to play host to later arrivals, and they usually play that role for some time. Earlier arrivals turn around and invite their families and friends back home to come to America. The existence of *refanuwarh* communities across America is a win-win for all parties – the migrant, his or her home country, and the United States—with collective benefits.

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For individual migrants, there is a safety net of people to help minimize culture shock and facilitate socialization as well as assisting with employment, informal networking, maintaining ties back home, and accessing educational/training opportunities and healthcare. The United States benefits by volunteers for the US Armed Forces—there are more Micronesians per capita than US citizens serving in the US military. Employers benefit from preferred recruitment and employment of Micronesians as they are not required to have a visa or work permit for certain jobs, such as elder care in nursing homes; working on fishing vessels; and doing farm work. Micronesia receives remittances and other informal sources of assistance from migrants, including boosted economic activity, citizens abroad who serve as goodwill ambassadors, cultural cooperation, and readily identifiable clientele for Micronesian goods. Micronesians are a recently arrived *pecheseset* or “salty feet” in America. Seeing themselves as “salty feet” in their new community is an indication of their enduring attachment to the “islands.” Only time will tell when subsequent generations of Micronesian migrants will feel completely at home away from their ancestral lands. The Micronesian extended family system, with notions of *refanuwarh* and *remetaw* embodied in migrant communities, may act as disincentives to completely renounce the “old country.” The fact that Micronesians freely choose to come to the United States and are free to return home, is probably another reason for Micronesians to maintain their ties with their homeland. The “open door” policy is one unique contribution of the Compact.

The immigration provisions may be seen as the personification of the myriad of arrangements incorporated in the Compacts, i.e., defense and security, economic cooperation, technical assistance, regional engagement, and multilateral cooperation. It is unlikely for the other dimensions of the Compact relationship to flourish and remain strong if the provisions addressing the treatment or exchange of people between the treaty partners are weak and not secured in a positive spirit. Furthermore, the immigration provisions must be seen in broader perspectives beyond the traditional purposes of “protecting borders” and safeguarding the “homogeneity” of American values. Positive treatment of Micronesian migrant communities will inherently be part of those values. After all, it is intertwined with other important American interests. The immigration component of the Compact appears most likely to take on increasing importance in the Compact relationships as the geopolitical situation in the Pacific unfolds.

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