

INNOCENTS ABROAD



For Sale: English, Cheap.

by Tom Bentley

What if rulers from a far-off land insisted that all subjects eat an allegedly beneficial imported cheese with a complex, challenging flavor? And what if a good percentage of the subjects were indifferent to eating it, or ate it only reluctantly, or refused to eat it entirely? And what if there were conflicting information about whether the cheese was even good for you at all? Peculiar metaphors aside, that's how I saw my 2004–2005 year of teaching college English on the Micronesian island of Kosrae, a country with (for me) uncomfortable dependencies on the United States. Micronesia's history has been marked by foreign occupation. A part of the U.S. victory in the Pacific Theater of WWII consisted of evicting, sometimes forcefully, the Japanese from their strategic occupation of a huge swath of Micronesian territory.

In 1947, a UN Trust Territory declaration gave the U.S. formal administrative rights over the islands of Chuck (then called Truk), Pohnpei, Yap and Kosrae. Upon the signing of a shared constitution in 1979, the four island groups became the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), with the U.S. controlling its relations with other countries and retaining exclusive military access. Through various agreements (now formally called The Compact of Free Association) over the next 25 years, the FSM kept sovereignty, but the U.S. continued to administer many aspects of government, all the while pouring in vast sums of money.

Today, U.S. funds are the only sustained source of island income, and most of the goods purchased there are imports. One of those imports has been English. An FSM constitutional provision requires that English be used for legislative proceedings. Underlying continued U.S. dollars allocated for FSM education funding is the presumption that English is to be taught in the schools.

By default, the island has had English instruction of some kind on and off for more than 150 years, starting with missionaries in the mid-19th century, to the Peace Corps in the 60s, to the pervasive instruction now at the grammar, high school and college levels. The difficult part is determining if all that money, and all that teaching, has done the island, or the U.S., much good.

My teaching experience on Kosrae was possibly the strangest job I've ever had. I'd been warned that the Kosraeans were quiet in the classroom, but "quiet" doesn't begin to describe it. It wasn't simply that students would not respond to my lectures. Most would not even respond to direct address. On many occasions, when I asked students to read from the written answers to class questions I saw on their desks, they

would slip their papers under their books, pretending they didn't exist. Repeated pleas to just read anything they'd written often got me only a characteristic lifting and squinching of eyebrows instead of speech. At my requests for participation, some students would shift nervously about, some scowl, or some grin with embarrassment, but only rarely would any venture an answer. Requesting oral participation in class goes against the Kosraean notion that youth shouldn't speak freely to adults (and, perhaps, white male adult teachers all the more), or shouldn't try to stand out in groups, but I never got used to it.

At first, I thought my students would adjust to me and loosen up as the semester progressed. Wishful thinking: I taught a full year, with many students enrolled in several of my courses both semesters, and the silent misery of my classrooms never relented. More than a handful of my students never spoke a word in English. Surely, you'd think, I'm some kind of curmudgeon, a dry, imperious sort who intimidates his students, choking their ease and creativity. No, I'm a person who delights in learning, in discussing literary ideas and style, and in seeing the creative spark hit its target. Try as I might to convey my enthusiasm for the written word, however, my classes invariably held the dead air of my voice, and my voice alone.

Despite my admonishments, for a fair percentage of students, attendance was casual. If they did come to class, many frequently arrived 20 and 30 minutes late. It was difficult to communicate the necessity of sustained, concerted individual effort—and consequent individual achievement—to students for whom customs were more group and family-oriented. There are many family obligations on Kosrae: working on the family farm, taking care of smaller children, the elderly, the ill,

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attendance at religious ceremonies, funerals, feasts, and more. And it seemed that if some students took off for something one day, they would often add a day or two on to it for good measure.

My teaching discouragement left me much to consider about the product I was offering, the cheese mentioned in the opening paragraph. Despite all that English poured into Kosrae over the years, my time on the island showed that most people I knew never seemed to develop a thirst for it. On a practical level, English proficiency is a tangible benefit for those rare students who aspire to the limited range of FSM government jobs on the island. Of course, most work off the island would have even more stringent English requisites. But Kosraean life seems at odds with the rigors of school schedules, commitments and achievements.

I suspect that, for a significant percentage of Kosraean students, the only incentive for attending is the Pell grant, U.S. funding that offers students a \$1,000 per semester grant, additionally paying for registration and other fees. Because many Kosraean families subsist on no more than three or four thousand dollars a year, the grant is a substantial incentive to keep students in school. Students may fail classes multiple times and continue to receive funding.

Despite long acquaintance with English, Kosraeans have few incentives to learn it. Television, which has been on the island for only a few years, is one motivator, as is a small library shared by both the college and the high school. I saw only scattered evidence of people reading for pleasure, though, and in the Kosraean homes I visited, few books were to be seen. There are hardly any materials in native Kosraean as well—the scant instruction in the mechanics of their native language has undoubtedly colored the deep difficulties with English grammar I saw repeated in my students' papers. Simply put, most Kosraeans would rather speak Kosraean. And who can blame them?

Part of the blame has to rest with an essentially hands-off U.S. policy of fund administration for many years. Until the negotiation of this latest Compact, our government simply released large grants of monies for various divisions and programs of the FSM government, without requesting much in the way of accountability or return. Thus you have situations like the appalling circumstances of the island's only high school, where leaking roofs, no classroom air conditioning, jutting spikes of exposed rebar and piles of rotting books belie the U.S. monies long directed its way. The only hospital's conditions prompt the same question: "Where has the money gone?" Very few U.S.-sponsored programs to promote local entrepreneurship have borne fruit; again, it seems as though the *laissez-faire* attitude of our administration to the outcome of its investments, and an island entropy that slowly lets such investments be frittered away, take their inevitable toll.

Despite opening up the U.S. for easy immigration for Kosraean citizens, we've failed to make it clear to them how to maximize the possible opportunities, including developing a deep interest in English-language skills. But I can't dismiss out of hand my students' efforts. Some, despite their verbal nervousness, displayed in their essays a respect for learning and a declaration of motivation toward academic betterment. (As an aside, I was often amazed by the contrast between my students' in-class reticence and their remarkably frank expression, in essays, of personal troubles and aspirations.) For some, I could see modest development in the labored efforts to put their English skills to use.

What to do? The new Compact calls for stricter accounting of how money is spent, which could help direct real dollars toward young minds. Perhaps more attention could also be paid to developing strong grammatical instruction much earlier; the majority of students just don't grasp grammatical fundamentals. In

addition, educational "marketing" could be turned toward Kosraean parents, who do declare that they want their kids to learn English and move ahead, but who don't seem to strongly promote academic responsibility in their offspring. Finally, island leaders could work more closely with US administrators to preserve and combine traditional teachings with English instruction so that there is an alliance of educational structures and goals to encourage a higher regard for learning in general.

But of course, the genie's out of the bottle, and the island can't go back to what it was—notwithstanding some antique shade of colonialism in the suggestion. Somehow, we've got to serve the cheese differently. And to all my former Kosraean students: please say something to your teachers now and then—they'll cherish every word.✍

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