

Explorations into Micronesian mobility: Transforming family and home across borders – an introduction

Rebecca Hofmann¹ & Dominik Schieder²

¹ University of Education Freiburg, Institute of Sociology, Kunzenweg 21, 79117 Freiburg, Germany,
E-mail: rebecca.hofmann@ph-freiburg.de

² University of Siegen, Department of Social Sciences, Adolf-Reichwein-Str. 2, 57068 Siegen, Germany,
E-mail: dominik.schieder@uni-siegen.de

DOI: 10.23791/580410

Abstract: *This article introduces a collection of essays on Micronesian mobility with a particular focus on family- and home-making discourses and practices. The special issue starts from the assumption that Oceania remains by and large invisible in the broader context of Mobility and Migration Studies despite observations that rural-urban, interisland and transborder mobility feature prominently in the lives of many Pacific Islanders and that existing transnational social fields take at times global scales beyond the Pacific. In this light, the special issue builds on ethnographic explorations and empirical case studies of Micronesian mobility and wishes to open the floor for a renewed discussion on its relevance both within scholarship on Oceania and mobility and migration research more generally.*

Keywords: *Micronesia, migration, mobility, transnationalism, family*

Introduction

The following words by Josealyn Eria from Chuuk serve as a fitting starting point for our special issue on Micronesian mobility:

“The opportunities that migration has offered me have been vast and varied. I was able to get a college degree, see the world through different perspectives, and have the opportunity to choose what I want to do with my life. I’ve worked as a teacher, a social worker, a meat packer, a student advisor, a quality inspector, a research contributor, among many others. I am also a daughter, an aunt, a sister, a cousin, a helpful contributing member of my *einang* (clan) by always showing up for what my family needs. I am thousands of miles away from home, yet my culture and traditions follow me and have shaped how I live my life even while living abroad. I have a foot in both doors: while I navigate the modern world of corporate offices, making decisions that directly impact the output of a high profile company, I learn to take off that hat when I am in my cultural spaces, following traditions of humbleness, gender and age-stratified power. Living my life in both worlds means I have the opportunity to

see both sides as I continue to navigate my place in them. My name is Josealyn Eria, I am Chuukese, I am a woman, and I am an expert navigator in living in two worlds.” (Vignette courtesy of J. Eria, 17.05.2022)

Josealyn Eria’s words vividly depict how ‘culture’ and ‘tradition’ remain present and meaningful for many Chuukese (and other) migrants in the context of transborder mobility, allowing persons like her to keep “a foot in both [and potentially many other] doors” within an ever-growing context of transnational social fields (cf. Go & Krause 2016; Levitt & Glick Schiller 2004). Indeed, the vignette provided above touches on themes which have been at the core of scholarship on transborder mobility and transnationalism – by now established fields of research in various academic disciplines (e.g., Dahinden 2009; Glick Schiller & Salazar 2013; Vertovec 2009) and which this special issue zooms into with a focus on Micronesian mobility.¹

More particularly, the authors of this collection, all of whom relate to anthropology or neighbouring disciplines, follow, and scrutinise Micronesians along their ways of

practicing ‘family’ and ‘home’ across geographical space. In doing so, they aim at contributing to a better understanding of Micronesian ways of belonging in the context of transborder mobility (cf. Hermann, Kempf & van Meijl 2014). The contributions indicate how transnational facets not only saturate the lives of many persons on the move but also those who remain. They highlight that mobility and placemaking, moving and staying are not antagonistic social processes but ultimately closely intertwined both in Oceania and beyond (Keck & Schieder 2015b: 115).

This special issue was born out of a continuing dialogue between the two guest editors on Pacific Islander mobility and two general observations: First, although research on Pacific Islander transborder mobility in its various facets is now firmly established within the narrow(er) field of Pacific Studies and related academic disciplines, especially anthropology and geography, (e.g., Hermann, Kempf & van Meijl 2014; Keck & Schieder 2015a; Lee & Francis 2009; Rensel & Howard 2012; Taylor & Lee 2017), Micronesian mobility remains to play a subordinate role in

the Anthropology of Oceania. In this light, Hanlon identified “Micronesia’s current place within the field of Pacific studies as one of relative absence or, at best, minimal inclusion” (2009: 91). Indeed, there appears to be a bias towards Polynesia in anthropology and related disciplines to this day if the topic of mobility is concerned, albeit the existence of a small but growing body of literature engaging with transborder Micronesian mobility.²

Second, Oceania and Micronesia are by and large invisible in the wider context of Mobility and Migration Studies – for example they hardly, if at all, feature in related academic journals, edited volumes etc. in this field of research.

Taking these insights as point of departure, the main aim of this special issue is a modest one: it wishes to contribute to make scholarship on contemporary Micronesia more visible and accessible to a broader audience within and beyond academia, showcasing works that in one way or the other ethnographically explore transborder mobility (Eria, Hofmann & Smith; Puas; Walda-Mandel this issue) and issues related to Micronesian mobility more broadly (Kuehling this issue).

More particularly, the contributions to this collection focus on dimensions of Micronesian family and home-making processes, i.e., the manifold ways in which Micronesians constitute being and belonging (cf. Levitt & Glick Schiller 2004) across borders.³ Here, again the observation holds that although the nexus of family and mobility is by now a well explored topic of research in the social sciences and related disciplines, leading to various theoretical models that explore the ways in which family, kinship and mobility are intertwined and potentially (re-)shape each other (e.g., Andrikopoulos & Duyvendak 2020a; Baldassar & Merla 2013; Boehm 2019; Bryceson 2019; Bryceson & Vuorela 2002; Carsten 2020), it is noteworthy that scholarship on island Oceania including Micronesia is by and large absent in this broader literature beyond the narrow(er) field of Pacific Studies. In our view this is an omission, given that the ‘family’ remains at the core of Pacific Islander sociality both within the islands and beyond (cf. Gershon 2007; Toren & Pauwels 2015). Moreover, we see great potential in Pacific scholarship to contribute to transborder studies on family and kinship more generally, given



Figure 1: Visiting family on Tóón, Chuuk, FSM 2011.

Source: R. Hofmann.

that Oceania is a region characterised historically of being in motion (cf. Hau’ofa 1994).

For example, a collection of articles, edited by Lee and Francis (2009; cf. Gershon 2007) reveals how transnational and diasporic social fields that span across island Oceania and beyond are structured by, as Lee fittingly put it, “reciprocity and gift-giving, kinship, identity, work and the ideal of a return ‘home’” (2009a: 2). Drawing on these observations, this special issue contains ethnographically informed contributions that pick up on these themes and showcase Micronesian perspectives on ‘family’ and ‘home’ with a focus on transborder mobility (and Micronesian mobility more generally).

Micronesia

Micronesia is the European name for a variety of islands in the central and western Pacific, encompassing today’s political entities of the Federated States of Micronesia, the Republic of Kiribati, the Republic of the Marshall Islands, the Republic of Nauru, the Republic of Palau, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, and the unincorporated territory of Guam (US).

Especially with respect to emic Micronesian perspectives, it can be generally difficult to pinpoint what ‘Micronesia’ connotes. Ultimately, islanders have different names for themselves and their own ideas of being and belonging which are not so much bound to a national identity but

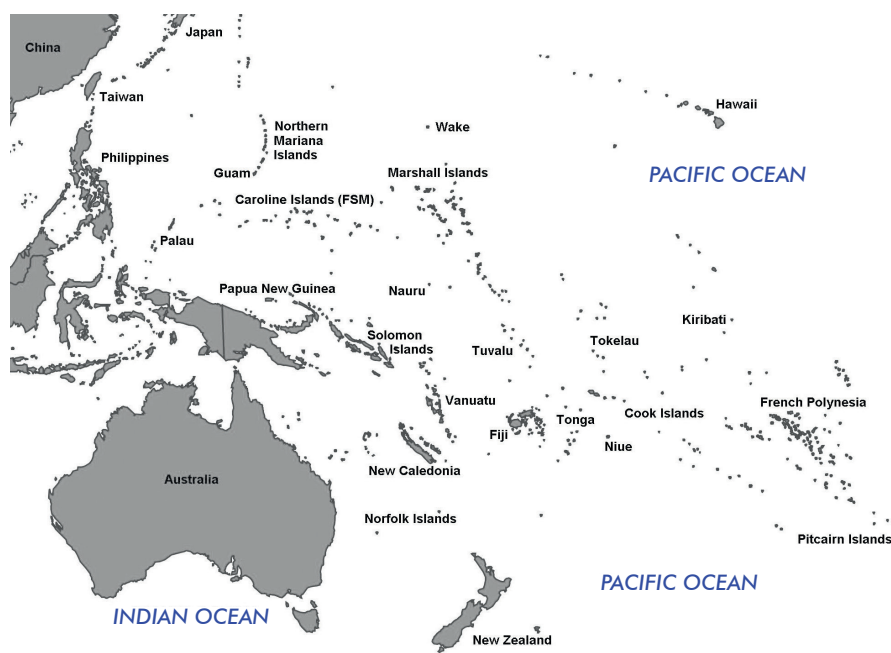


Figure 2: Map of Oceania.

Source: Hofmann 2016: 18.



Figure 3: Food preparation for Micronesian cultural day in Chuuk, FSM 2012.

driven by their relationships to specific villages and islands from where they and their extended families and clans originate as well as to places and stories (re)telling their ancestry (see Kuehling this issue). Additionally, these islanders often differentiate themselves along various other boundaries, i.e. whether they live on low atolls or on high islands, or according to the order in which their ancestors arrived by canoe in those places now called 'home'. It is, however, interesting to note that 'Micronesians' often take on, and identify with the etic or outsider label of 'Micronesian' in the context of transborder migration, especially if family and wider kinship relations as well as discourses of home, being and belonging are concerned (cf. Petersen 2009); an approach which we follow in this special issue.⁴

The populations of the geographical area named Micronesia today, witnessed Spanish, German, Japanese and US-American colonial intruders, in the case of Kiribati also British, in the case of Nauru Australian. After World War II, which rampaged widely in Micronesian waters, islands, and air (Falgout, Poyer & Carucci 2008; Hofmann 2021), the larger part of Micronesia remained under US administration as the so-called US Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands, mandated by the UN in 1947. Indeed, up until 1951, the US Navy was in control before the US Department of the Interior took over.

In 1986, when the US began with the termination of its administration in the region, the formation of states solidified according to regional-specific ideas of independency (cf. Hanlon 1998): While the Marianas became part

of the US Commonwealth and Guam an unincorporated territory, three newly formed states – the Federated States of Micronesia, the Republic of the Marshall Islands and the Republic of Palau – opted for free association (the former two in 1986, the latter in 1994), which these now sovereign states negotiated individually with the US government, regulated by individual Compacts through which the US provides financial assistance and visa waivers in exchange for certain defense rights. In short, in Micronesia, there remains an overwhelming American presence, politically and especially economically expressed in Compacts of Free Associations (COFA).

Expanding on this, Hanlon describes COFA as a form of agreements that created a "neocolonial future" compromising the autonomy of these new nations in return for US financial assistance (2009: 101). At the same time, this "neocolonial future" has also produced large Micronesian diasporas in the US. Hezel, for example, estimate that about every third citizen of the Federal State of Micronesia (FSM) lives in the US (Hezel 2013a: 4), with most Micronesians going abroad moving in with family and kin from previous migratory movements, making chain migration a prominent pattern in the Micronesian case. Hence, COFA with its visa and work allowances serves as vehicle for dynamic yet solid transborder family lives, leading, amongst other, to ongoing flows of (social) remittances (cf. Bertram 2006; Gershon 2007; Hezel 2013a; Levitt & Lamba-Nieves 2011) and persons traversing national borders between the US and Micronesia as well

as the expansion of the ever-growing field of "cyber-transnationalism" (Lee 2009b: 25) and a slowly but steadily solidification of Micronesian diasporic communities. In consequence, and with social media, other modern communication technologies, and the possibility of on-time money transfers bridging distances and time, it seems, the character of remittances also becomes altered. Hezel (2013a: 37) observes that remittances are sent rather "on demand" than on regular basis, which is congruent to what Eria, Hofmann and Smith explore in their paper (this issue) and which possibly could transform Micronesian sociality.

Yet, to this day, the Micronesian diaspora mainly remains firmly based in local ideas and values of what constitutes family and belonging, and the role mobility plays within, as migrant woman Josealyn from Chuuk states: "I am thousands of miles away from home, yet my culture and traditions follow me and have shaped how I live my life even while living abroad" (Vignette courtesy of J. Eria, 17.05.2022).

Family and Home in the (Historical) Context of (Trans-border) Micronesian Mobility

The following words by Petersen serve as a fitting starting point to this section. He explains that "Micronesians have forged systematic human relations within and between communities, ensuring that everyone works consistently at promoting the general welfare. Virtually everything a Micronesian possesses is shared with family and neighbours, and every family and community is connected by a web of strands to many other islands and communities. In this way, everyone is ensured of being cared for and protected when in need" (2009: 2).

Within Micronesian sociality, the 'family' holds particular relevance. In the vignette that introduces this collection of essays, Josealyn Eria addresses her 'culture' and 'tradition' as anchors to her life, specifying that she is "a daughter, an aunt, a sister, a cousin, a helpful contributing member of my einang (clan) by always showing up for what my family needs". Consequently, one fruitful way of exploring Micronesian mobility and sociality is to focus on the advantages and obligations that come along with being a family member. These are illustrated well by way of remittances

and the ways they are deliberately invoked by those who leave as well as by those who stay. Put differently, remittances are embedded in what anthropologist Mac Marshall identifies as a “general set of themes from which local social forms developed” (1999: 107) throughout Micronesia, namely in siblingship; kinship and descent; adoption, fosterage, and ritual kinship; and the nexus of kinship, land, and food. These themes are reflected in Josealyn’s statement and are dealt with (in different ways) in the papers of this issue (mostly with, sometimes without a transnational perspective).

Generally, throughout Micronesia the women are the custodians of home, the rightful owners of their mothers’ land, collectively maintaining it with their sisters before passing it on to their daughters. Matrilineal, landholding residential groups have been labelled (in academia) as lineages, which represents best what Micronesians mean when they talk about family: “When we talk about *ailang* [matrilineal clans], we should know all our clan members – even down to those living in the Central Carolines. All those people make up our families, not just a husband and wife and children” (Olopai 2005: 41). Matrilineages are constitutive segments of larger clans. Clan members might not necessarily know each other but recognise members of the same clan as kin (descending from one female, at times mythical ancestor). For example, once common clan-membership has been established, property rights can be consolidated. Historically, being able to establish clan-relations served as social insurances against temporary destructions common to the region (due to natural calamities such as typhoons, droughts, landslides, but also in the aftermath of war-raids), some of which became institutionalised lines of trade and support (see Alkire 1999; Lessa 1950).

The continued effect of this becomes, for example, evident in a conversation the corresponding author had with the late master navigator Manny Sikau about the endless repetition of clan allegiances and allotted hierarchies during his apprenticeship. He stressed how vital clan knowledge is because he could rely on the support among kin whether he purposely or accidentally landed on any island along his journeys. He joked how Micronesian navigators must be expert



Figure 4: Japanese artillery from World War II on Paata, Chuuk, FSM, 2012.

Source: R. Hofmann.

sociologists regarding the set-up of each island they come across and how puzzled he was at first about the many canoe journeys that are undertaken simply “to assure novel contact” (conversation with Manny Sikau, 21.07.2012; see Hofmann 2016: 166). Indeed, as Sa’ili Lilomaiava-Doktor attests elsewhere: “People share and re-establish social links by moving” (2009: 15). Expanding on this, she continues that social links can also be restrictive, because in the collective societies of Micronesia “kinship and other social connections define who travels, when, and where” (ibid. 16).

The contributions to this special issue address the above by specifically focusing on lineage membership as matrix within which the disposal over land and political titles, but also over money and even children and personal prestige are organised. For example, while this set-up bestows the individual

with a sense of personal identity and belonging, the urge to fit in and to serve one’s family also leads to felt and exerted pressures by family members, be they at the home islands or someplace else (see Eria, Hofmann, Smith or Puas, this issue). This resonates also in co-author Josealyn Eria’s opening vignette in musing how “[t]he opportunities that migration has offered me have been vast and varied”. Scrutinizing remittances from this angle, Hezel summarises in his book “Making sense of Micronesia” (2013: 26) that “[i]ndeed, all that any islander had ever become would have stemmed from this social identity, and so group maintenance was always to be preferred to individual achievement”. As such, remitting must be seen as an act of reciprocity, maintaining the remitters rights back home (access to landholdings and titles, etc.) ceded to them by blood and genealogy, upheld



Figure 5: Family gathering in Guam.

Source: J. Eria.



Figure 6: Departure from gathering, Chuuk FSM, 2012.

and continuously claimed in their name by their kin during their own absence. The remitter, on the other hand, can gain social position as the money pays off socio-cultural debts or allows for extra contributions for Churches, family festivities, etc. and mobilities therefore become „determined by events and situations at home“ (Peter 2000: 255; cf. Eria, Hofmann, Smith; Walda-Mandel, this issue).

Clan-membership – as a “person’s passport” (Hezel 2013b: 27) – hence, allows clan- and family networks to secure survival in the islands, and enables movement beyond. Indeed, mobility has been the prerequisite for the settlement of Micronesia and continues to be central to literally almost all Micronesian families, although it has been of a dynamic nature, witnessing challenges, confinements, alterations, and expansions, starting from colonial

curtailment of customary navigation routes to economically and politically motivated relocations of islanders masked as disaster help (Marshall 1979); from the seizure of whole islands for nuclear and other weapon tests (DeLoughrey 2013) to a fleet of young islanders leaving to become educated in US colleges in the 1960s and 70s when US federal education grants were opened to Micronesians (Hezel 1979).⁵

Building on the historically grown framework of movement between the islands, the US, and beyond, several contributions highlight changes in Micronesian sociality in the context of transborder mobility. For instance, while family (and wider kinship) networks remain integral socio-spatial units that enable, guide and sustain Micronesian mobility to date, findings by Eria, Hofmann & Smith (this issue)

and Walda-Mandel (this issue), indicate that core discourses and practices of the ways Micronesians engage with and embody mobility, namely the element of ‘planned return’, loses some of its priority for people off island as migration leads them further away from their home islands, and as more time passes by with people not returning. Some migrants even “seem to have found ‘a home away from home’” (Walda-Mandel 2016: 189).

Developments like these could potentially have far-reaching consequences leading, for example, to the isolation of women from their families especially in the context of domestic abuse and family violence, or to the discontinuation of remittances. More generally, returnees might find it increasingly difficult to reconcile their experiences abroad (individualism, outspokenness, etc.) with the communal norms and values at the core of Micronesian sociality. As such, some Micronesians see in migration no longer an inherent part of their cultural being, but a threat to it; one that is counteracted by sending back children or young adults to have them “educated” the proper Micronesian way as part of what Lee termed “involuntary transnationalism” (2009b: 28).

Put differently, in the Micronesian context, where belonging (so far) is much connected to the ownership and usage of land (see Eria, Hofmann & Smith this issue and Kuehling this issue), mobility potentially influences the ways ‘family’ is constituted and might even transform expectations, norms and practices of home-making in destination places as well as migratory decisions in the first place. Whether (or not) this can be attributed to a (historically-)growing embeddedness of Pacific Islanders into diasporic contexts or to threatening scenarios of climate change and environmental hazards and their impact on island societies, remains to be explored and examined more deeply elsewhere.

Overview of contributions

The contributions to this special issue expand on the existing body on scholarship on transborder Micronesian mobility. Consequently, they engage in various ways with the nexus of mobility and family as well as space and place-making discourses and practices which often take the shape of preserving, maintaining



Figure 7: Wedding on Éét, Chuuk FSM.

or (re)creating 'home' while navigating transnational social fields.

In their paper, Eria, Hofmann and Smith explore at the one side the imaginaries that migrant women construct in the diaspora and how they make meaning of, experience and embody their roles as Chuukese people, family members, women and migrants in this transnational context. On the other side, they talk about how migrants continue to impact the lives of those who stay behind, for example, by conditions they attach to their remittances. Their findings thus provide a salient example of the ways in which new meanings of lineage land, family obligations, and gender are produced, contested, and stratified across transnational boundaries. Consequently, the authors explore the ways in which absent islanders are present back home, and how those who stayed are present abroad.

In similar vein, and based on her multi-sited ethnography, Stephanie Walda-Mandel's contribution explores discourses and practices of 'home' among Sonsorolese transnationals in the context of migration. Building on ethnographic research in Oceania and the US, she describes how migration impacts on Sonsorolese cultural identity and language. Expanding on this she reveals the transnational social networks which lie at the heart of many Sonsorolese families and communities and the ways the diasporic lifeworlds of many of these islanders who originate from a remote area even by Micronesian standards relate to cultural identity and heritage. Here, the author vividly depicts how projects that aim at the revitalisation of 'culture' (as source of belonging and identity) remain meaningful to many Sonsorolese abroad.

Indigenous scholar Joakim Peter states that being lost, i.e. not knowing the names of places (of origin) and thus being unable to make a connection to land and kin, ranges as one of the biggest fears amongst Micronesians. In her paper, Susanne Kuehling elaborates how names place Carolinians into a social position (as part of their lineage line) within their physical surroundings and structure movement. As "invisible belongings", Kuehling argues, the knowledge of names – along with associated history, property rights, titles, and codes of conduct – allows Carolinians to re-create family ties and to re-build place a-new or somewhere

else, for example in the diaspora.

In his research note, indigenous scholar Gonzaga Pua from the Mortlock Islands in Chuuk State, FSM, delves into how adoption in his home community is understood to function as social glue in otherwise transforming realities characterised by transnational mobility. With adoption, he picks up an important aspect of Micronesian (and other Pacific) family practices, however one that is not easily transferred across (legal) jurisdictions as he illustrates. The insights of his autoethnographic research note will be a fruitful contribution to the broader academic discussion on adoption and care in transnational settings.

Acknowledgments

Our profound thanks go to Michael Waibel und Matthias Kowasch for the opportunity to put together this special issue and for their collegial cooperation, as well as to the reviewers of the individual papers – and, of course, to the contributors themselves!

Endnotes

¹ For our discussion, 'mobility' serves as an umbrella term that incorporates various forms of movement including migration. Consequently, 'transborder mobility' particularly relates to the manifold ways in which persons (along with visible and invisible belongings) cross national borders.

² See Keck & Schieder 2015b for an overview. For Micronesia, a whole number of studies exist that, congruent with our argument in this introduction, emphasise that mobility has a strong home-based aspect coming to the fore, for example, in remitting behaviour, but also in (not always voluntary) return mobility. Earlier work thereby focuses on the impact of migration on cultural identity and social relations (amongst others, Flinn 1982 and 1994; Marshall 1975), with plenty of intriguing examples for the complexities and realities of Micronesian transnationalism that can be found in the numerous articles published – and often also written – by Francis X. Hezel for the Micronesian Seminar (<http://micsem.org/publications/articles/>). In recent years, there is an observable increase in studies rich with ethnography that cover mobility and relations between home-islands and new places (e.g. Bautista 2010, 2015; Hezel 2013a;

Hofmann 2015; Marshall 2004; Peter 2000), while others focus more on the lives of Micronesian migrants abroad (Falgout 2012; Grieco 2003; Smith 2019) or on new aspects to Micronesian mobility such as climate change (Hermann & Kempf 2019; Hofmann 2016; cf. Eria, Hofmann, Smith and Walda-Mandel, this issue) to name but a few.

³ Ethnographic and theoretical explorations of place and place-making remain central to anthropological (and other social scientific) research. An excellent overview of anthropological analysis of place-making with a particular focus on Oceania, highlighting its dynamic nature and interrelatedness with mobility, is offered by Kempf, van Meijl and Hermann elsewhere (2014: 5-10). Similarly, 'kinship' has been at the core of the anthropological endeavor from its outset. While the study of kinship gradually declined from the 1980s onwards, amongst other because of its Eurocentric and structural functionalist connotations (cf. Carsten 2010: 2), there is a renewed interest in the subject more recently (cf. Bamford 2019), evident, for example, in the growing body of literature on kinship and family in the context of mobility and migration. In this collection we have opted to particularly focus on (doing or making) 'family' as just one of many ways kinship materialises. Being aware of the limitations of the conceptual framework of 'family', we follow its wider use in migration studies (cf. Andrikopoulos & Duyvendak 2020b: 303) and acknowledge that in Micronesian societies, family is never restricted to immediate kin, but follows the 'classificatory' system in which collateral kin (i.e., children of ego's mother's sisters) are categorised the same way as lineal kin (i.e., sisters and brothers) (cf. Pua this issue).

⁴ See Hanlon 1999 and Petersen 2009 for critiques of the concept of Micronesia.

⁵ While the Compacts had facilitated frequent mobility between the US and the islands since their instalments in the 1980s onward, this transborder mobility has come to an abrupt halt with the COVID-19 pandemic. In April 2020, the government of the Federated States of Micronesia closed its borders completely, leaving many FSM citizens stranded while visiting US

family, or who otherwise had planned to return. Only in late 2021 did they begin allowing citizens to return, and only with a full two-week quarantine (personal information by J. Eria, June 2022; <https://fm.usembassy.gov/covid-19-information/>, 08.08.2022).

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Corresponding Author: Rebecca Hofmann [rebecca.hofmann@ph-freiburg.de] is an anthropologist with a large interest in mobility studies, including climate change induced mobility in the Pacific as much as refugee students in Germany. She teaches at the Institute of Sociology at the University of Education, Freiburg/Germany.