

Micronesian conceptions of home and gender in Chuuk and the US: Between the presence of absent islanders and island imaginaries abroad

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Abstract: Chuuk, Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), represents a space altered by transnational migration, reshaping the social lives of both those who enact their mobility and those who stay. While transnationalism has been explored in-depth from the perspective of those abroad, little work has juxtaposed them with how migration reshapes life back “home.” Considering the presence of absent islanders for those who remain in Chuuk and the idealized imagery of those same islands by women living in the US, this paper explores how conceptions of those “home” and “abroad” belong to a liminal and transformational space. Migrants and the families left behind negotiate land tenure, family relationships and obligations, gender norms, and Chuukese identity from differing and fluid perspectives. This manuscript explores how contemporary forms of gendered Chuukese social life are both shifting and reinforced in this transnational context.

Keywords: Transnationalism, Gender, Family-making, Place-making, Remittances

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Introduction

The setting is the airport on the island of Wééné, Chuuk. The air is filled with mourning and excitement as the flight from Hawai‘i brings back the body of a deceased Chuukese woman, accompanied by a dozen family members who will be reunited with their extended family for the first time in years. The plane is arriving within the hour by way of the United Airlines Island Hopper flight. Walking through the small parking lot next to the airport, you can see the crowd of people waiting for the plane. Some of the women are dressed in matching uniforms: white funeral dresses which represent the closest family members of the deceased. Everyone is adorned with mwáramwár¹ [floral head covering or necklaces] and sweat towels, the smell of these delicious flowers and perspiration combining to create a sweetness in the air as people socialize in the hot outdoor waiting area.

The deceased had not returned in over two decades. She was originally convinced to move briefly to help



Figure 1: Arrival of coffin at the Chuuk International Airport.

Source: J. Eria.



Figure 2: Mourning the deceased in her maternal home in Chuuk Lagoon.

raise her grandchildren, but ultimately stayed longer to access better healthcare in Hawai'i as she aged. While she could not pass on in the land she called home, she knew her family would bury her there, laying claim and connecting one last time to the familial property. Waiting with everyone else, Mary², a close relative of the deceased, explained why it was so important for the families to fly them home:

"We connect very much with our land. Even if we migrate to the States, we never stop thinking about our land. We want to return. We want to have a place to stay when we sometimes visit. And we want our bodies to be with our families."

People in Chuuk, especially women, feel related not only to kin but also to their lineage land. This relation is traditionally invoked and made permanent through the life cycle between the burial of a newborn's placenta, an islander's burial upon death, and all the food that has grown in the soil mingling with familial materiality in between.

At the same time and with often a large proportion of family and kin living in the US, some Chuukese migrants have started questioning the embeddedness of "home" in land. Sitting on a bench at the airport that same day, Mary admitted to entertaining the thought of being buried in her migratory home of Hawai'i. She reflected on the high expense of funerals. Indeed, the family spent around US \$10,000 to transfer the body back to Chuuk on this day, not including the food and drink to be provided for their extended kin before, during, and after the funeral. She speculated how she could spare her children

the costs of transferring her body, and also considered that, with most of her children living in Hawai'i, she would have the assurance that they would care for her grave. Additionally, Mary knew that the bodies of the deceased, and the land more broadly, are increasingly underwater due to climate change, shifting the reality of these connections in Chuuk. Her idea to be buried abroad is so outside of the norm, however, that Mary shared this thought in confidence; not ready to disclose it to her children until her decision is made. In particular, she fears the loss of connection to lineage land, and what that means for her children's connection and identity as Chuukese people.

This tension of bodily connections between kin and land, paired with the mobility that has taken Chuukese people further and further away from it is a part of life in Chuuk and the diaspora. Transnational Chuukese women like Mary must negotiate living in transnational spaces, and the impact of their movement in everyone's lives, both home and away. Following the narratives of women like Mary, we consider women's agency (or lack thereof) and motivation to be home or away, and how they make meaning of, experience and embody their roles as Chuukese people, family members, and women in this transnational context.

Transforming Micronesian Politics and Migration: A Historical Overview

Chuuk is one state of the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), a nation formed after United States (US) administration as post WWII "trust territo-

ries." It is the most populated state of the FSM, divided into five regions with 23 inhabited island units. The high volcanic central islands of Chuuk lagoon dominate politically and economically; many Chuukese from all over the state migrate there, especially to the municipal island of Wééné, for education, work, and health care (Bautista 2010; Marshall 2004). Yet, for many, Wééné is also just a stepping-stone to Guam, Hawai'i, or the mainland US. Micronesian mobility outside of the islands-based nation is primarily through the Compact of Free Association (COFA) with the US, an agreement ratified in 1986 that allows COFA-country citizens to travel, live, and work visa-free in the US with a unique status called nonimmigrant. This post-colonial agreement facilitated the end of the "trust territory" period, but allowed for continued military control of the region by the US in exchange for economic development in the islands. The agreement has been critiqued by several scholars, who noted the intentional dependency it created to maintain long-term military control of this region (see, for example: Hanlon 1998; Lutz 1986). The poor socioeconomic situation in the FSM is often ascribed to the agreement, and migration today is necessary for those who want to obtain adequate health care, higher education, and jobs that pay enough to support food, technology and other needs that cannot be drawn from the land (Bautista 2010; Hezel 2013; Marshall 2004). COFA citizens began moving into the US rapidly after this agreement was enacted. Over the last nearly four decades, Micronesian communities have formed throughout the US, steadily expanding through chain migration. As these networks became more deeply embedded in the US, a tension grew between migrants' transnational identities and connections to their home islands.

Indigenous scholars Gonzaga Puas (2021) and Joakim Peter (2000) argued that Micronesians (and Chuukese in particular) have always enacted mobility through the *einang* (clan) system. Mobility was the way through which people maintained connections between islands and kin. These interconnections have economic, socio-political, and socio-cultural elements, facilitating survival through elaborate exchange and support systems shaped by hierarchies of clan membership, age, and gender.

What changed in these practices were the post-colonial circumstances that facilitated moving (Peter 2000), the global reach of that system, and the ways in which climate change may further shift these patterns (Puas 2021).

Considering the transnational space between Chuuk and the US, we explore how the presence of absent islanders for those in Chuuk and the idealized imagery of those same islands by women living abroad, create a liminal space in which these women imagine and dream of the others' lives. Drawing from the collective findings of over two years of ethnographic research and over one hundred interviews both in Chuuk and abroad, as well as personal experiences, we identified three ways in which mobility shapes discourses between those at home and those abroad. First, it does so by engaging and transforming connections to lineage land; second, it impacts familial obligations, and third, mobility renegotiates discourses of gender, family relationships and Chuukese identities.

1. Transforming familial connections to land

Chuuk has a matrilineal clan-based system in which land is of significant importance and, historically, was predominately passed through the women (Kim 2020). The women with power were eldest females, but only privately, as they worked with their eldest brother who made public decisions for the family. Hierarchies by birth order, generation, and gender shaped connections to the land and social life. Women historically enhanced their status, or power, by having children to inherit the land and grow the clan. Scholars have argued that this importance of reproduction and responsibility for the family made women less able to leave Chuuk, for they were expected to stay near the land they and their children inherited. Men alternatively could go farther to fish and trade because their ties are through the kinship system more than the land itself (Bautista 2010; Kim 2020). This dual and gendered relationship of home-making, however, is transforming. As patriarchal values associated with colonizer values (e.g., Christianity and the US empire) were infused and combined with long-standing traditions in Chuuk, men in many islands and villages began to take leadership roles as guardians of the land. While this may have removed

some of women's power, this also contributed to women's mobility, allowing them to take up new possibilities of education or work abroad. Women now migrate as often as men.

Chuukese women's relationship to land is multi-layered, and both physical and meta-physical in many ways, yet their increased mobility demanded these land connections to be extended far past the physical space. For those abroad, the land inhabited their minds if not their physical being. As one middle-aged Chuukese woman, Rayna, explained:

"You can take this person as far away as you can from her place, but this place will always remain in the heart. (...) You cannot get rid of that."

Yet, with each generation, it seems, the importance of lineage land slowly erodes, not merely physically due to climate change, but above all symbolically, due to migration, along with the position of women as guardians of the land; Mary revealed this erosion in her consideration to be buried in Hawai'i. Similarly, Stacy, a young Chuukese woman living in Oregon shared her perspective, reflecting on the generational differences of connection to ancestral lands. She shared how she and her cousins of the same generation live and work abroad, with little to no thought of their ancestral lands, and indeed minimal consideration of whether or not they will ever return and live on those lands. Yet, her elders continue to hold on to them, stressing the importance of having a land for which to return. In their absence, extended family members are appointed stewards of the land by elders. In some families, this creates generational tensions. For example, Rosalie and her mother, middle and elder-aged Chuukese women, respectively, had different ideas about the importance of land to their family's future. Rosalie lives in Hawai'i and regularly tries to convince her eighty-year-old mother to join her there. Yet her mother refuses to leave the land to which she is connected in Chuuk. While Rosalie understands this tie to the land, she admits to no longer educating her own daughters about the connection:

"My mum is 80, so now I'm stepping in as the guardian of the land. But I'm 60 – how many more years do I have? And my daughters are all US citizen, thus they cannot sufficiently take care of it!"



Source: J. Eria.

Figure 3: Encroaching seas in Chuuk Lagoon.

In considering her daughters' lack of bond to the land, Rosalie also appealed to the legal differentiation between FSM and US citizens.

Many family members abroad are US citizens, raised in Hawai'i, Guam, and mainland US. Because the FSM constitution does not recognize dual citizenship, the legal rights to the lands may be taken away from this younger US-born generation. Culturally, however, titles originate in blood lines; that is in lineages and not in the place of birth. At the moment, the lands are recognized by others to belong to particular families because the elders, parents and grandparents who were born and raised in Chuuk are still alive and able to exert ownership. But with entire branches of families living abroad, the generation born outside of Chuuk may encounter legal deprivation of their ancestral lands.

Those who stay are expected to care for the land, even if they are in another part of Chuuk. Kathy, a Chuukese woman in her thirties, lives with her husband and family in Fáyichuuk, the western part of the lagoon. Whenever possible, she visits her home village in Nómwoneyas, the eastern part. Yet, going there does not only serve her own longing of feeling wholesome, but is a mandate given to her by her mother who lives in Hawai'i, the eldest woman in the family and as such, the actual owner of the land: "My mom sometimes asks me



Figure 4: Empty houses on Paata, in Chuuk Lagoon.

on the phone to go to my village and pick breadfruit, you know, so that people see that we are still using the land.” When she visits the village, she airs her mother’s house, has a look at the garden, and has her children harvest some taro. By being present, she reclaims her family’s tenure of the land, protects it, reconnects with her ancestry, reassures her own idea of self and belonging. But it is not the land full of relatives her more distant kin imagine. She explains:

“I only feel home on Chuuk on these islands, in my village. My heart feels at home only here. I wanna live in my village. (...) When I’m in my village and see the many empty places there, I become very sad. It hurts me to see them empty. Only my mum’s cousin is there to take care of the place. When all my family left, he suggested to live there and to take care of it. But he’s not immediate kin. Still, that was a good idea, because people in my village are crazy. You know, whenever there is land that is empty, other villagers would come and claim it for themselves. When my youngest aunty once came back from the States and when she started to clean out the house, the villagers came and hurled rocks at the house! One day, I wanna live on our land, but that’s just another dream, maybe one day...”

Thus, gendered connections to land are shifting, allowing women to be more mobile, and as a result, “home” is a space conceptualized by those abroad, or even in different Chuukese islands in very different ways than it was experienced by those who remain. Differences between those abroad and those in Chuuk also lie in their conceptions of obligations to each other.

2. Transnational Reciprocity

Remittances are substantial to Chuuk’s economy and the presence of absent islanders is felt most keenly when families in Chuuk are economically dependent on money and/or goods sent from overseas. On the remitters’ side, obtaining education and work abroad can seemingly give women more power than traditionally relegated “at home,” yet the reality is that tradition still dictates their movement, as their parents, uncles, or spouses decide when and where women should migrate, and when they should return. Migration motivations are thus in the interest of helping the entire family, not just the woman’s economic, health or educational opportunities. As Stacey, a young woman in Oregon explained:

“Leaving Chuuk is really about bettering the entire clan. Not yourself. So, the ones who stay behind expect things to get better for them once a relative leaves Chuuk, gets a job abroad. The whole purpose of leaving Chuuk is to better the circumstances of your family in Chuuk. There is also a modern saying among Chuukese “nuwen staen won kei fénu nge eseor imwan Chuuk” (putting on airs abroad when they don’t have a house in Chuuk). The expectation is that when you leave Chuuk, your life abroad is supposed to finance the betterment of your family’s life in Chuuk, so you need to get a job to build a family home in Chuuk, not abroad. You need to get a job to perhaps build a business in Chuuk, not abroad. If you can do both, that’s absolutely amazing. But if you neglect Chuuk and focus only on your life abroad, you’ll not be seen as a respectable contributing member of your family.”

The pressure for those abroad is to make enough to live modestly and send money, maintaining lineage ties and obligations. Stacey emphasizes:

“There is also a sense of shame. The cultural roots of familial ties and “togetherness” teach us that when one person succeeds in a family – in this case, having a job abroad and sending remittances – then that whole family should at least have the means to buy things with money. The goal for many of us (abroad) who send remittances is to ensure that no shame comes to our families, for them to be found lacking in the basic necessities of modern life, because since we are out here, there is no reason that family back home should be suffering financially. Everyone eats a piece of the pie, as culture has taught us. Shame in Chuuk is extremely family-encompassing.”

While those at home visualize a “rich and easy world out there” in the US (Hofmann 2016: 175), the reality is that those remitting often work two jobs to make ends meet while dreaming of the easy world back home. Some women who travel abroad for education give up on their own dreams, working for the benefit of other family members and financing their education instead. Rents are high in those host communities, and houses are often crowded; confrontations with landlords and neighbours about the number of residents are common.

Moreover, in host communities – especially those with a larger proportion of COFA migrants – anti-immigrant rhetoric is often focused on them. In Guam and Hawai‘i, for example, Chuukese migrants are perceived by the local community in racist, gendered ways. Chuukese women are described as backwards with their ethnic skirts, visible combs, and large families, which is in turn associated with dependence on social services (Bautista 2010; Smith and Castañeda 2021). Men alternatively are stereotyped as violent people who overuse alcohol (e.g. Marshall 2004; Smith and Castañeda 2021). This rhetoric mirrors anti-immigrant sentiment toward migrant groups throughout the US, and impacts the ways in which Chuukese migrants access and experience the education and economic systems in their host communities (Smith and Castañeda 2021). Yet, such difficulties for the individual are generally subsumed under the collective good in the

“transnational moral economy of kin” (Levitt & Jaworski 2007: 137, cf. Hofmann 2016: 177).

In this scenario, lineage land and the kin who remain became all the more vivid reminders of identity and connection for those who are abroad. Many women abroad loved to sit with other family members and reminisce about the better life in Chuuk, where one can live off the land, enjoy each other’s company, and do not have to overwork to survive like in the US. While some did not see themselves going back, others spoke of their dreams to retire in Chuuk on their land after they successfully fixed up their family home (sending money regularly to do so). But in their dreams, Chuuk was full of people of all generations, supporting each other and enjoying the everyday life they remembered as youth, when only the privileged were leaving. They envisioned a dozen female relatives sitting around each night talking story, making food, and watching the little ones. In missing this imaginary, migrant women tried to re-enact home life abroad through family gatherings, church events, and food.

Yet, Chuuk is not what is in their imagination anymore when they long for home. The women who return regularly can sometimes recognize that their view of Chuuk is romanticized, but those who have not returned for years have a harder time imagining the now increasing struggles that inspired their movement in the first place. In fact, passing through any village in Chuuk outside of Wééné means walking – not by lively familial gatherings – but instead empty houses on compounds cared for by a few remaining relatives waiting for their family members to return; whether in life or death. Since there are not always youth to harvest taro, breadfruit, coconuts, and other important sustenance, or enough time or motivation to prepare local meals, those back home rely on remittances from migrants. Further, with the encroaching sea impacting crops like taro patches, there is not always enough to harvest. They use remittances to buy rice, canned meat, phone loads, and gas stoves to maintain ease of everyday living. Still, given the imagined realities of “home,” some of those abroad are resentful of the hard work they put in to support so many family members, as Stacey describes:

“There is ALWAYS something that we are sending money home for. It



Figure 5: Chuukese family gathering in Iowa, US.

Source: J. Eria.

could be something as small(ish) as a new bathroom/outhouse to something big like renovating our family meeting house (uut), or even money for new tires or assistance in buying a new car. This is in addition to the almost monthly contributions for funerals of distant relatives. For the most part, the elders discuss it, then we are told what the plan is, how much each of us is supposed to contribute. In that, we have no power. I mean...we always do have power and a choice to say no or reject whatever plan is revealed, but being a Chuukese means respecting the elders’ decisions, regardless of the impacts to your own personal life. In this way we (the younger generation specifically) prove that we are respectful of our culture and cinching those ties by participating in that reciprocal interaction. We send assistance, and those who stay will continue to recognize that we are family. It sounds kind

of uncouth to say that, but that’s really what it is, it’s in those deeds that you show that you care.”

As such, remittances are power-relations – structured along age and gender hierarchies and as Stacey indicates, working in both ways to sustain family relations. People abroad send money home, but often have conditions for how it is spent (e.g. building a house or church to keep and create place and social position for their return). People back home meanwhile safeguard their place and property for when they return, sometimes accusing them of being chóón-Merika, for not respecting the gender and age power structures, or sending sufficient money back home to support family. Mobility thus creates a friction between what it means to support and be supported by family, with differing ideas for those at home and abroad. In spite of these tensions, relationships must be upheld.



Figure 6: Chuukese gathering in a church in Guam.

Source: R. Hofmann.



Figure 7: Young man in his family's taro patch on a visit to his home island.

3. Transforming gender and family relationships

Following these mobility traditions throughout the US, young women are sent out of Chuuk regularly to assist new mothers and elderly family members, while also attending the better schools these new locations provide. Yet, these women often do not make the decision themselves, but comply with collective family decisions, reflecting aged and gender-stratified obligations. Kathy explained how she had to go to California for school:

“[M]y cousin who’s at this school in L.A. [Los Angeles, US] called and told my mum that this is a good school for me, so my mum sent me there. The very first nights, I cried. I would call her, saying that I wanna go back, but she would say to stay in L.A. That it is always hard in the beginning but then will get better.”

Similarly, toddlers are often sent back to Chuuk or with a family member in a different part of the US to be raised by grandmothers and aunties, then returned to mothers at some point for

schooling. These migration patterns allow for continuity of the extended family *einang* system but in new ways. It also allows us to further conceptualize home as less of a physical space and more of a metaphysical connection to kin.

Transnational movement did not just reshape extended family relations, but also marriages. Some women moved because their husbands decided it was time to migrate. Migration at times allowed for more family violence, if a woman did not have her kin nearby to support her; at times, however, it also allowed women to gain more power (through education and economic means) to leave a husband, a decision her family may not have supported at home. Separation by islands and now often nations is what scholars and the community call a “Micronesian Divorce.” Some women who stay home while their husbands go abroad to earn and send back money, are sooner or later confronted with their husbands finding a new family abroad, no longer feeling obligated to those left behind.

Family relationships are not the only part of social life that is negotiated, the concept of what Chuukese culture is and should be is also in flux. While transnational studies have focused on the deconstruction of notions of bounded communities and cultural specificity, transnational communities are often reifying what they define as culture, solidifying boundaries. Transnational migration reshaped not only dynamics, responsibilities, and connections, but also what people called culture, and Chuuk was seen as the place holding onto the disappearing traditions abroad.

The term culture was especially invoked when women abroad talked about food, language, and respect. Women constantly discussed the fun of going home to Chuuk to eat local food and drink/eat coconuts, and regardless of their mobility, culture came to them: planes coming from Chuuk were always full of coolers containing *kón* (pounded breadfruit), *puna* (pounded taro), *iik* (fish) and *núu* (coconuts). Culture also included speaking Chuukese – not some hybrid of elementary Chuukese and English – but really knowing the language; a concern, migrant women expressed about their children being raised in the US. Culture included understanding the principles of respect towards brothers, elders, and the family. Those who subscribed to these ideals were perceived to have strong culture.

But it is not that simple. Participating in the US and maintaining tradition is difficult. Complying with cultural rules and gendered taboos abroad are challenging: classificatory sisters and brothers cannot avoid each other as they should when living in crowded housing. Women report that they must change back into skirts when coming home from work and enter the house they share with brothers. Additionally, some young women, such as Cecilia and Marta, believed their US college education further complicated negotiating cultural norms. Cecilia explained:

“Finding a balance between following the elders and knowing what is right as an educated woman. Working in a male environment, not being able to speak out as a woman and younger person... which is the opposite of what is taught at colleges overseas.”

Similarly, Martha quipped:

“We thought we know what it means

to be a Chuukese woman, but then we go to college.”

This tension between being Chuukese enough and living in the US was not as simple as either/or. People both at home and abroad felt this tension in everyday life. Most wanted these differing spaces to be negotiated in the best way possible, respecting historical norms while also appreciating what educational and economic power living abroad gave them. Saralynn articulated this tension well:

“It scares me, because I like to see more people modernize Chuuk, yet I want them to also traditionalize Chuuk at the same time. Hence, modernize and traditionalize. Keep perpetuating the tradition, because that is our identity. That’s more sustainable in the future.”

But that future is in part reliant on the social and economic growth in Chuuk, and in part reliant on the impacts of climate change that increasingly threaten sustainable life in all Pacific Islands.

Negotiating connections to land, family, and Chuukese identities

Returning to the opening story: The coffin arrived and has now been brought to the house the deceased was born in; the same house all her female kin have intoned as they lament over their beloved kin. As the woman’s own physical life journey has come to an end, her body will be reunited with her ancestral lineage land. Her grave delineates and reconfirms not only her family’s property but endorses the continuity of her lineage story. Her gendered connection to the land, the reciprocal relationships that shaped this funeral event, and what it means to be family and Chuukese are all invoked in this practice to commemorate her life and connection. But as we have demonstrated, these elements are shifting for some Chuukese families. Chuukese migrant communities are starting to resemble a more permanent diaspora group, returning rarely. Further, those left behind become fewer as more and more migrate. These trends might be even more likely to continue as people see their possibilities of return or continuity with this land-kin connection threatened by the rising seas. So far, however, those abroad and those “home” are not distinct, discrete cate-



Figure 8: Preparing fish in Chuuk Lagoon.

gories of people, as mobility is enacted at different moments throughout people’s lives. It reflects moments, and sometimes years, but is also fluid. But at any given moment, the people not on the island take presence with them; the absent people still present for those who remain.

While land remains central to wom-

en’s hearts and connection to Chuuk whether home or abroad, it looks quite different for each. For those afar, a common concern has been to keep the islands rooted in their family, so there is always a place through which to return. Ideally, it is a place for new buildings and improved socio-political statuses are enjoyed by those left



Figure 9: Family and kin expressing condolences at funeral in Chuuk Lagoon.

behind; a result of migrants' remittances. While returning is not always an option, many retain imaginaries of their home islands; these visions serve as an anchor for their self-identity and membership in their familial system. But the memories of transnational migrants often cleanse Chuukese island villages of the trouble and hardship they left behind, romanticizing life back home. Instead of remembering the physical labour in the taro patch, the droughts that restrict water usage or the torrential rains that bring muddy drinking water for days, they reminisce over moonlit beaches, abundant space, and food harvested directly from the land. Transnational migrants construct an opposite world which accentuates the perceived hardships of their migration experience, fostering the wish to return home one day. Hence, the major objective to leave is to gain economic wealth, not least to be able to afford a comfortable life on the home islands in the imagined future. Women abroad are often renegotiating gender roles, blaming their new experiences and US education that makes them question their status in their Chuukese family, while reifying what it means to be Chuukese through remittances, dress, and church or familial gatherings abroad. Yet, when they can return, they are critiqued for not being Chuukese enough.

While those abroad reminisce about living off the land, those at home await remittances to live off items in the cash-economy. They struggle to care for the land and properties left behind, and also reminisce of a time in which the number of people on the land was enough to easily obtain subsistence and social structures. The renegotiated gender roles and US education adopted by those abroad only further reinforces the perception that their migrant family members are no longer Chuukese enough. Further, they also distinguish them as rich and unwilling to sufficiently share the wealth they amass, all while controlling the home space through their meagre remittances. As a result, tensions exist between these separated kin and their distinct imaginations of Chuuk.

This paper explored the ways in

which absent islanders are present back home, and those who stayed are present abroad and how – in the liminal space between – conceptions of home itself have been redefined as women engage in, redefine, and resist new ways of being. We considered how Chuukese women actively engage in homemaking practices of both spaces culturally, politically, and economically, and provided a salient example of the ways in which 1) connections to lineage land, 2) family obligations, and 3) gender, family relationships and identity are produced, contested, and stratified across transnational boundaries.

The importance of eventual return – if only in death is connected to the meaning of land and kin in Chuuk. Death often triggers the (re)negotiation of land and family. In this moment, families can clear up past concerns and consider the future, as the deceased body is reunited with ancestral lands and symbolically connected to the family. So, although return is often only realized in death, it has generally been central to the comfort with those who enact mobility. But some are no longer considering this eventual return. Additionally, the land is slowly shrinking with climate change. Burials are postponed when airports flood on the way, graves too close to the water are feared to be under water soon, taro patches are getting saltwater intrusion from the seas, and narratives about the disappearing land are abundant. Some of those away recognize this impending future, like Martine, who explained:

“My son in the US asks me to send pictures of our islands. He says they will be under water eventually and he wants pictures while they are still there.”

In this reality, how will narratives and connections between home and away shift over time? Further, as all family members navigate Chuukese futures in this environment, how will gender, familial and land connections, remittances and obligations, and concepts of Chuukese culture continue as the land itself disappears and more islanders settle permanently abroad? Micronesians have a long history of adapting to weather disasters that is beyond the scope of this paper, but

this new disaster is global in reach. Will the clan system be able to substitute land-connection as the rising seas from climate change eat up the familial land and inspire even more migration out of Chuuk?

Endnotes

¹ Although the Chuuk administration formally recommends the spelling of the Chuukese language as documented by Goodenough and Sugita (1976), it is not strictly taught in schools and local variants show amongst islands. Throughout this paper, we follow the spelling of Chuukese co-author to this paper, Josealyn Eria.

² We use composite characters and pseudonyms to represent women's stories and maintain anonymity.

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