

# History of Kosrae

A section of the great Pacific Tectonic Plate, later to be called the Caroline Plate, shifted some 3,000,000 years ago. For centuries, the volcanic mass stood weathering storm after storm. Rising and falling seas climbed up its sides and then subsided as glacial ice ages passed. Hot sun baked and cracked the black rocks; rain cooled and further split them. Rivers began to form as the land was slowly sculptured by nature's forces. The island beauty was formed, it was the beginning of the jewel of Micronesia: Kosrae.

The first to find the island were not men, but only little organisms. Archaeological evidence shows that the island was settled by the early years of the first millennium AD, although it is expected that future research will push this back to the first millennium BC.

By the time of the island's first contact with European travelers in 1824, Kosrae had a highly stratified society, typical of the surrounding islands of the time. Its cultural features included matrilineal lineage and clans, with a feudal structure of "nobles" controlling land worked by "commoners" and settlements consisting of small groups of close relatives sharing a single cook house. While the commoners lived on the main island, which was then called Ualang, the royalty and their retainers lived inside more than 100 basalt-walled compounds on Lelu and the nearby islets of Pisin, Yenyen and Yenasr. With its canal system and coral streets, the fortified island of Lelu would have rivaled its medieval counterparts in Europe.

There are indications that Kosrae was once an important power in the region. Pohnpeian legend says that around the 14<sup>th</sup> century Kosraen warriors sailed to Pohnpei and overthrew the tyrannical Saudeleur dynasty that ruled the island. Chukese legends also suggest cultural influences from Kosrae around the same time.

In 1824, Captain Louis Isidore Depurrey on the **French** ship, *Coquille*, anchored on June 3 in Okat harbor and stayed on Kosrae for ten days. Much to the relief of the Frenchmen, whose skin color and clothes astonished the Kosraen, the natives brought the officers cooked breadfruit and seka and there was an exchange of small gifts. The French, described the Kosraen as "peace-loving people who had no weapons". Unfortunately, for several decades after this first friendly visit, Kosraens were victimized by whaling crews, who made deals with chiefs for the Island's abundant foods, water, and female companionship. The first missionary established a station in 1852 and virtually the entire population was Christianized in the

1870s. Traditional songs, dances, myths and other oral histories were discouraged or banned and ultimately forgotten. Tattooing went out of fashion, alcohol was forbidden and the ceremonial use of *seka* (Pohnpeian's sakau) was no longer allowed. Under church influences, Kosrae's traditional matrilineal society developed into a Western-style patrilineal system.

1885 saw the conflict of interest between **Spain** and **Germany** over "ownership" of the Micronesian Islands. As it was resolved by the Pope, Spain was the owner while Germany kept trading rights. Many coconuts trees were planted during this time, and copra production encouraged. After the Spanish-American war of 1898, Spain sold the Caroline & Marianas Islands to Germany for four millions dollars. The German government didn't interfere with the American missionaries, Germany's main interest in Kosrae was economic development. World War I was to end German Pacific Empire and begin the **Japanese** control of these Pacific Islands.

Extensive economic improvements took place during the Japanese mandate of 1914 to 1945. An agriculture program was started; sugar was exported to Saipan for crushing; a rice project didn't succeed but, "truck gardening", the growing of vegetables on small farm lots did. Cucumber (still called by the Japanese name *ki-uri*), beans and cabbage were grown in Kosrae. This concept of small vegetable gardens is also encouraged by today's government. A weather station was constructed and a branch hospital was built on Lelu Island. Many health problems were reported and patients were successfully treated. A public school and a teachers' residence were built in Lelu in 1936. The island was occupied by the Japanese during World War II, tunnel bunkers were dug into the tops of some of the island's interior peaks by Japanese soldiers and some are still intact (as the ones in Mt. Oman).

In 1945, administration of the Micronesian islands, including Kosrae, passed to the **United States**, which began to provide aid and investment for the island in the 1960s. During the Trust Territory (TTPI) period, Kosrae was initially administered as part of the Ponape (Pohnpei) District, but later became a separate district. When the Micronesian constitution was defeated in the TTPI districts of Palau and the Marshall Islands, Kosrae joined the remaining districts (Yap, Chuuk and Pohnpei) to form the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM). Kosrae is the only one-island FSM state, while the other three states are composed of many islands.