



A Close-up Look at What's Happening in Paradise

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For about twenty years I have been doing research on social problems in Micronesia. My work was initiated and is sustained by the need to find answers to the questions local people frequently ask: "What can we do about the problem of alcohol abuse (or suicide, or domestic violence, or juvenile delinquency)?" Although the research may be academic, the felt needs of people facing problems that they can not seem to fathom is the engine that has driven it over these years. These are problems that most people attribute, quite correctly, to modernization.

My approach has been to work on these problems one by one, later exploring possible links between them. The volume published by UH Press this month, *The New Shape of Old Island Cultures: A Half Century of Social Change in Micronesia*, is an exploration of the structural changes that I believe have contributed heavily to these problems. The same structural changes, by the way, have fed into a host of other problems, including malnutrition of infants, the increased burden of non-communicable diseases, and the growing number of land disputes in island populations.

A word about my methodology is in order here. Throughout my work I have tried to focus on structural changes-that is, changes in the way societal institutions work-rather than changes in the head and heart of island people. Years ago, when I began to reflect on such problems as alcohol use and abuse among the young, juvenile delinquency and suicide, I may have still subscribed to the belief that such general concepts as anomie and identity crisis and lack of self-esteem were central to the problem at hand. I no longer believe that this is so. In dipping into one problem after another, I have learned that a focus on the mechanics of the society is far more helpful than any attempt to peek into the brain and uncover the motivating forces behind this behavior.

Why?

First, because there is great danger of ethnocentrism in applying psychological labels culled from Western studies to people of a very different cultural background. This was brought home to me in a discussion, many years ago, with HBM Murphy, a noted transcultural psychiatrist, who admitted the futility of postulating the superego in an island society that presents forceful, living reminders every day of the expectations that elders have of their young. Psychology has problems aplenty in plumbing the Western psyche, as revisionists and counter-revisionists demonstrate. To expect the discipline to come up with a standard that fits other cultures as well is more than we have a right to demand of it.

Second, because island people, who have been stereotyped by foreign visitors over the centuries as “a single viscous mass of humanity,” have always accented the collective over the individual. This is for good reason, since tight cohesion is essential in any small society unless members of that society are prepared to invest a great amount of their energy in putting out the brush fires that result from individual confrontations. Strong behavioral expectations on the part of the community and forceful social controls are the heart and soul of any traditional Pacific society.

Third, because I have found again and again that there are cultural meanings embedded in what might be seen as random acts of deviance. Drunken violence, for instance, can sometimes be an unplanned effect of too many beers, but drunkenness can also be a strategy employed for outing a long grievance against someone. While suicide can not usually be predicted and protected against, it remains a patterned response to a rebuke or denial from a close and respected member of one’s own family. Micronesians do not commit suicide because of failure in school or in business or because of other such setbacks. Nor do they commit suicide because they cannot make sense of life. Suicide, like so many other acts, is a response to a specific interpersonal problem—in this case, one that has arisen within the bosom of the family.

Throughout my writings on these problems over the years, therefore, I have continually stressed the social and cultural factors that contribute to these problems rather than psychological pressures that might contribute to the individual’s deviant behavior. I have repeatedly try to call attention to the breakdown, or at least the partial failure, of those traditional institutions that once protected individuals and restrained their behavior. My focus has been on the societal rather than individual. This is not to say that individual motives are unimportant; it is only to assert that they must be understood against the cultural backdrop if we are to make any sense of them at all.

Let's illustrate this by considering four major social problems throughout Micronesia.

(By Micronesia I mean Palau, the Marshalls, and the Federated States of Micronesia.)

Under each of four problem areas, often considered examples of deviance, I have listed in the left-hand column the main pressures that are often claimed to be the major causes of the problem. In the right-hand column I have listed the structural changes in island societies that I believe have contributed greatly to the rise of these problems. For a much fuller treatment, you might want to read my paper on social problems research in Micronesia, which appeared as a chapter in Kiste and Marshall, *American Anthropology in Micronesia: An Assessment* (Honolulu: UH Press, 1999)

My hope is that this approach, which I believe is a necessary complement to the one more commonly used at these conferences, will give us food for thought and discussion.

Francis X. Hezel, SJ

Drug and Alcohol Abuse

* added pressures of life in today's society

* modeling of so many others drinking and using drugs today

* greater ease in procuring drugs and drink today

* ideology of individual freedom (a person is entitled to do his/her own thing)

Structural changes in the family have reduced the tight supervision of the young, because

1) the multi-parent extended family has given way to the two-parent nuclear family; and one of the two parents (usually father) is away most of the day working [note that the first clause is more important than the second].

2) the extended family, and the network of related families living nearby, once provided an protective umbrella for the young; most of their friends were closely related or at least close neighbors.

Child/Wife Abuse

* added pressure on men, giving rise to stronger urges toward anger

* the increase in use of alcohol

Structural changes have weakened the protections on which women once relied, because

1) brothers, who no longer feed their married sisters or are fed by them, are abdicating their traditional responsibility

to protect their sisters;

2) setting up an independent household away from the wife's family and the husband's family means fewer checks on the husband's behavior, with fewer family elders looking over his shoulder;

3) there are more "mixed families- children of woman and man by previous unions-leading to the problem of obvious preference (or aversion) for one group over another.

4) there is a less secure nesting place

for children of teen parents now that the lineage or extended family has broken down.

Suicide

* more conflict situations between parents and youth resulting from value differences

* growing expectations of individual autonomy (“I want what I want!”)

* influence of the example of others as the number of victims grows and the cult of suicide becomes popular

Structural changes have changed the shape of the family so that puts the young male more at risk because:

1) authority is concentrated today in the father rather than distributed among several senior relatives;

2) fewer adults in the family to provide support and act as buffers for young people with adults means a smaller safety net.

Juvenile Delinquency

* cash economy and school culture divides the young into the successes and the failures, thereby begetting an inferiority complex in some youth.

* more temptations today

* influence of Western TV and media

* peer pressure, eg, in the case of gangs

Change in the institution of the family, has weakened social controls and supervision today,

1) with the breakdown of the face-to-face community in urban areas;

2) youth are withdrawn from the protection of the “family umbrella” and associate more and more with their peer group.

3) “absent father syndrome” occurs with the breakdown of the extended family.

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