**Cultural Dilemmas in Development**

***East-West Center Seminar***, ***Honolulu 2013***

*Introduction*

* Writing my latest book, *Making Sense of Micronesia*, was an exercise in recalling the contrasts between my own Western thinking and island thinking. Spurred me to reflect on how deeply this difference influences other matters.
* Cultural dilemmas–Western vs Island values–and their impact on how islands face modern day issues. These impinge on a number of problem areas. Let’s consider some.

*Economic Development (Land)*

* FSM and RMI struggles with economic development. Data on jobs plateau since 1995; problem with exports and tourism; economic indicators for 2011; growth in GDP needed to become self-reliant.
* Conventional wisdom on economic growth: make it easy to do business with the outside, seek foreign investment, and make land available for long-term leases if not for sale.
* Dilemma: Land is a tool to be used in gaining economic development, but it is also an heirloom, symbol of identity, and security for the islander.

“In former times land was as inalienable as an arm or a leg. It could be taken away by force or as a punishment, but it certainly was not regarded as a commodity. Land was the single resource, without which no one could live. Land rights were conformed to the shape of the extended family unit. One’s identity was drawn from the land, which bound generations of family to one another. Just as people sprang from the land, so they returned to the land at their death. This was symbolized by the burial of the umbilical cord at birth and the burial of the body at death.”

* *land sold to store owners in early 80s*
* *Pohnpeian chiefs intervention in Ambros Senda case in 1991*

Should land be redefined by the islander today? How is it being commodified today?

*Family Finances (Savings)*

* Anecdote in the book about the worker who asks for a loan to meet the requests of his extended family. He uses the zero-balance budget as a strategy for dealing with the demands of his relatives–this strategy limits the amount of money available, but it ignores the advice of Americans who tell him to put money in the bank.
* On the other hand, the emphasis in island cultures is investing in people–what we could call social capital.

“Personal relationships are more valued than material wealth. The latter passes with time, but the former endures. The main purpose of having money is to give it away, thus transferring it into social capital. Moreover, even the key to one's material well-being lies in those relationships that guarantee assistance when one may need this in the future. Consider, for instance, that children are seen as a better form of social security than bank savings.*”*

* *Palauan saying: “What I gave I have. What I spent I had. What I kept I lost.”*
* *Petersen’s article on Mom and Pop stores on Pohnpei; concept of social capital*
* This leads into the bigger question of the two ways in which savings may work: salting money away in the bank to be used in times of need; or investing the money in social capital–that is, extended family and community–with the expectation that we can draw on them in times of need.

*What’s Fair (Equity and Equality)*

* Gender equity? Or complementary distribution of roles to men and women? In islands, women have their voice heard indirectly–usually amplified through men in the family or village. Should they speak for themselves? Should special measures be taken to provide them with seats in the legislature?

“At one time, men’s work and women’s work were mutually exclusive. The two sexes engaged in different but complementary work. When the entire community gathered to work on a joint project, men and women were assigned distinct jobs: men gathered the leaves, women wove the thatch, the men attached it to the roof, and the women prepared the meal.The project was completed together, but with each gender doing certain defined tasks.”

Likewise, women had share in the decision-making, especially with respect to disposal of land and bestowal of titles, but they did not voice the decisions made. Men did that. The demand today is that women and men do the same type of work and exercise the same type of leadership roles.

* *Should gender equality be measured in relative number of seats in the legislature? In the decision-making roles that women hold?*
* Should all persons be treated equally? (Impartiality is the premise of the Western government) Western bureaucracy assumes a notion of blind justice, but island life is built on the social map–some persons deserve more of me than others. Preferential treatment of those close to one suggests corruption for the Westerner. Yet, islanders are obliged to treat people according to their status.
* *This may have been true in Western societies at one time as well. Are we Westerners better off for having discarded the social map, and will islanders also be better off?*

*Seeking and Speaking the Truth (Information)*

* Freedom of the press vs. how information is handled in the islands. Open sharing of information to keep the public informed is important in a modern society. But information is often withheld in island societies because it is dangerous and valuable.

“Although islanders are lavish with material possessions, they tend to be withholding in information. Information was a precious commodity in traditional times and was not dispensed carelessly. Even more importantly, information is also liable to hurt someone and cause a break in a personal relationship. Hence, it is doubly sacred and should be meted out with great care. Related to this is the reluctance to embarrass a person by publicly outing information even if it is widely known in the community.*”*

* *difficulty in obtaining info from the government today*
* *quote of Marshallese cabinet member on release of info to people: “They’ll only misinterpret the information we give them.”*
* *government suspicions of media rooted in fear of misuse of information to discredit government*
* Free discussion with persons vs respectful deference. Expression of personal opinion is seen as essential for a modern democracy. On the other hand, open expression can lead to confrontation and lack of respect so important in traditional society.
* The first issue here deals with the right to access information from those who run the government, the leaders of society. The second deals with the right to express oneself on public matters so that personal viewpoints might be taken into account in decision-making.

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