KEYNOTE ADDRESS TO PIALA

Given on Pohnpei, November 6, 1992

This is supposed to be a keynote talk, but it seems to be more of a postscript. Still, it is expected to be broad of stroke and expansive, one that opens out to other vistas. So let me try to do that briefly tonight. Let me begin by trying to relate your work as archivists/librarians and mine as a religious.

\* We might begin by comparing your work to that which went on in Benedictine monasteries during what we call the "Dark Ages". There, as you know, whole communities worked to build libraries for the future. They busied themselves preserving writings that were not entirely understood, seldom read, but would be the beacon of the future. The abbots must have believed that they were feeding generations not yet born with the wisdom of the ages. Why else would their monks laboriously copy these parchments, page by page, year after year, adding to the stock of written materials that was the treasure of these monasteries?

Some of you may have read Umberto Eco's bestselling novel, "The Name of the Rose." It is the story of one such monastery and what befalls it when a monk takes it upon himself to decide that one of the classical works is unworthy of the future. Aristotle's "Comedy", like laughter and joy, has no place in a monastery, the monk determines. The book is a murder mystery set in a monastery, a review of the theological and philosphical disputes of the Middle Ages, and a short course in the church history of the period. But it is also something also: a warning to librarians to avoid being censorious in deciding what has a place in our libraries. The message we can take from it is have the sense to save everything that we can and let the future generations themselves decide what is worthy and what is not.

\* There is another book that picks up this theme: "A Canticle for Leibowitz". It is the story of a latter-day religious order that has saved the scraps of a culture which has become extinct and almost destroyed the planet with a nuclear war. Technology has been lost, but the world is rebuilding as it was during the late Middle Ages in Europe. There is a scrap of a drawing done by a man named Leibowitz, whom the order recognizes as a saint. It is, we learn later, a part of a blueprint for some commonplace object. Leibowitz was a draftsman, not a mystic. But in this society, the commonplace of yesterday is the extraordinary of today. The society is built on the garbage of a previous age.

So you see that library/archival work and religious life have common roots, and share, at least in part, a common tradition. Archivists save cultures, and churchmen save souls. We both are tying to feed the people of the future in some way through the preservation of the best of the past.

Let me know move to the point of my talk tonight by replaying what has become a constant theme of mine whenever I talk to librarians (not that I've been privileged to speak to them very often). We are told that we have here in Micronesia sound and vibrant cultures--a living museum if you want in one of the last parts of the world where exotic customs flourish. Look around you and what do you see? Sakau ceremonies in the villages of Pohnpei, weaving on the backloom in some of the outer islands of Yap, lavalavas and loinclothes in these same islands, and traditional navigational practices that have not yet been lost.

You who have lived in these islands for a while, however, can surely see beyond this. The changes in the culture are becoming obvious. Not that this is such a disaster in itself, for all cultures change. No people is in danger of "losing" their culture, anthropologists would say. After all, a culture is like the air we breath. It is an indispensable element of life in society. People in South-Central LA have a culture, or perhaps an amalgam of several cultures, Buffalonians have a culture, and the Pohnpeians and Yapese of the distant future will have a culture, although it could be far different from the culture they assimil...