**Keynote address for Pacific Islands Association of Libraries, Archives, and Museums**

Pohnpei, November 16, 2009

It’s a great pleasure for me to be here before you. I say that not just because that’s what you’re supposed to say at the beginning of a talk, but because I think that you are the people in the trenches. You are the people who have done as much as anybody I know to promote literacy, and literacy means something. But I’m getting ahead of myself. As Bruce said, I’m an amateur historian. Because of that and because of my fascination with the past, I’d like to take a running start. So you’re going to have to deal with that as you take account of what I have to say today. The other thing you’re going to have to recognize is something that my friend Peter Christian, who was just re-elected to the Congress here, has said about me many times—that he has a way of twisting themes for his own ends. And so I’ve twisted the theme of the PIALA conference this year to my own ends. I hope to a productive one, but we’ll see.

What is a library? When were libraries invented? I’m not going to go that far back, but I’d like to remind you that once upon a time there was a city called Alexandria in Egypt. In Alexandria, long before the days of computers and typewriters and such, there were something like a few thousand boxes. Each one of these boxes held rolls, scrolls on which were printed words. Now that was an important thing. That constituted a library. It constituted a library, but it was a work of immense difficulty to produce these things. It was an innovation. Indeed, writing was an innovation. Writing hadn’t been introduced too many years before.

But the idea behind the Alexandria library was to preserve in some place or other the wisdom of the past. In others words, not to entrust this to people’s faulty memories any longer, but to take the laborious step of putting these ideas on parchments or vellum or whatever else they used, so that they could be conveyed to people in the future. In those days the only way that you could get this wisdom out was if somebody came in with a bag of gold, dumped it on your desk and said “I’d like to hire one or two people as scribes to transfer this to this parchment so that I, too, can be the proud owner of one of these books.” It was primitive, but it was an attempt to conserve the best of the past. It was an attempt to bring people in touch with the rest of the world. And it was the beginning of what we do now.

Fast forward a little bit to the recent past in Micronesia. We have our own history here. A history that I was familiar with in the 1970s when Dan Peacock was the director of library services up in Saipan after he had served as librarian here on Pohnpei at the old PICS (Pacific Islands Central School). In those days we were trying to give people access to books and print materials because libraries were small and struggling. So he was having somebody in Guam copy out news clippings and sending these news clippings in envelopes to all of the small libraries around the Trust Territory. I don’t know if any of you people remember that. But I have those clippings still. They’re bound in our library. They’re a treasure of sorts from the past. Dan Peacock it was who sent around print copies of “Lee Boo” and Captain Henry Wilson’s “Account of the Pelew Islands”, books that most of us would not have been able to obtain. He was sending out notices of publications that we could draw on to build up our libraries.

We needed somebody like that. We needed somebody in the driver’s seat, somebody who was at the head of a network that was enriching the libraries that were just starting. We needed somebody who was thinking of bookmobiles and boatmobiles and bringing resources to people. We needed something, if only because it was an early period in the modernization of Micronesia. It was a time when we were just getting into big-time government. We were just moving into the implications of a cash economy. We were just beginning to send people off to colleges in great numbers. Remember, that was just a couple years after the Pell grant became available to Micronesians. And so we needed the development of literacy, we needed someone who would help open people’s minds to the great world that they were entering.

But that wasn’t all it was doing. It was also helping us—and I’m not sure if this is appreciated well enough—recapture something of the past here in Micronesia. One of the books he sent was a work by Frank LeBar called “The Material Culture of Truk.” In 1977 we had the ordination of the first Chuukese priest on Moch. That priest is the present bishop, Armando Samo. People of his island wanted to put up a *fals*, a men’s house, on the island. They wanted to put that up for the celebration and as a way of honoring him. The problem was they forgot, or perhaps they never knew, how to tie the knots that were distinctively Mortlockese that were used for this kind of a building. And so they sent word to us that they needed help. We copied the book and sent it back to them and they built the *fals*. This is not self-congratulatory. It’s simply a way of saying that these materials that we speak about, materials that offer access to wisdom, do not just offer access to the wisdom of other places, but to our own wisdom as well.

I mentioned the news clippings that Dan Peacock sent out. For the past 18 months we’ve had a young volunteer working on a history book for FSM that will be finished next month, we hope. But in his work on this history book, the author is running into trouble because he’s looking through the 1970s, the early years of the Congress of Micronesia, trying to find first-hand accounts of things that happened: the burning of the Congress of Micronesia building in Saipan in 1971, the speeches that people gave extolling free association or independence or commonwealth. When I pointed him to those news clippings that Dan Peacock sent out a long time ago, he came back excited. He said “This is a treasure chest.” And so he’s converting this material into a product that’s going to help educate our young people.

The goals of that past day and I think our goals still are, first of all, to allow us and our people to link with other parts of the world. We’re still in the era of modernization. Our future still depends on our ability to relate to other parts of the world. People in our libraries can explore Antarctica if they want. They can find out what they need to know about grizzly bears or polar bears. They can find out what the climatic conditions are in the steppes in Mongolia or in China. They can deepen their knowledge about the U.S. and Asia. They can become, in other words, members of the world community, even as we begin to modernize and embrace these parts of the world ourselves.

The second thing they can do is to deepen our understanding of our own society, our own history and culture, from materials in print. I pointed out a couple months ago to some people who were visiting our library and looking for education materials, that the PALM (Pacific Area Language Materials) Project in Hawaii during the 1970s was wildly producing local language materials: Chuukese, Ponapean, Kosraean materials. There was a whole range of these materials. Now when I visited a state not so long ago, perhaps a year and a half ago, I asked somebody about this. Nobody, at least nobody in that particular department, had heard of this. Why not? These are local materials. These are on CDs. All you have to do is print the booklets on request, basically. In doing that, you’re using materials that were developed 30 years ago for educational purposes. But of course, you have to stay in contact with the schools to find out what the most relevant materials are.

The third thing that they can do is contribute to literacy, as I suggested. This can help us transition from orality: that period of time—and it was a long period in the life span in the history of Micronesia, as it was in the history of the world—when we got information by talking and by listening. So we help these people help themselves to get information from the printed page.

But the library of today is even more of a challenge. The library of today is much more than just books, particularly with the expansion of electronic communications. Yes, it includes books for sure, but it also includes what Jane Barnwell and other people are fond of calling “grey material.” I didn’t know what that was until a couple of years ago, but I sure understand it now. Grey material is stuff that doesn’t come out nicely bound. Grey material is stuff that the government puts out: it might be looseleaf, it might be just photocopies of documents. But it’s stuff that tells its own story, a story very often of what’s happening today, not yesterday. And it needs to be collected, at least if in some time in the future we hope to tell other people the story of what’s happening today.

The library today includes other resources, of course--Internet, myspace, facebook, forums of all sorts--a tremendous resource for getting information in and out of the islands. Very soon we’re going to have fiber optic cable. April 1st is what I was told by somebody in the Marshalls, Tony Muller. Whether it’s on that day or not, the opportunities for contact this way and that way are going to expand enormously. It’s very important for us and for our libraries to be in a position to utilize this email and internet. I tell people all the time that I think the greatest spur to literacy in the islands was email. People who would have dropped dead before they ever sent a letter now think nothing of spending half a day on the Internet—reading and writing, but electronically.

But then again we also have something else in the libraries today. We have the media of different sorts: music, photos, videos—on the islands and on the rest of world. All of these can become tools for educating our people. There’s an embarrassment of riches today, an enormous quantity of material—in fact so much that we need help in deciding what to invest in, what to acquire for ourselves and the people that we serve. That means, friends, that we need to keep our antennas out and open. That means that have to keep contact with schools, with governments, with businesses for ideas on what is needed, what is more important than what. We don’t have unlimited resources, but there are almost unlimited materials out there to tap into. I think that the point of the conference was: ordering materials, acquiring materials for our libraries to serve those people out there. But that, in turn, depends on something else—and that something else is an effective network.

So my vision for today, and I suppose you could say what I’m trying to foist off on you, is a network. No man is an island, no woman is an island, no library is an island.

The only way libraries will survive in the future, even right now, is by networking and by collaborating. There has to be a collaboration of universities and specialized libraries as there was in the past in Alexandria. If a wealthy man who was interested in literacy wanted a text, he had to go to the major library in Alexandria.

Today our work depends on collaboration with universities and specialized libraries. What I’m talking about here is COM FSM (College of Micronesia National Campus Learning Resource Center), MARC (Micronesian Area Research Center), university and college libraries, our own Micronesian Seminar. Let’s not pretend that we can do this whole thing ourselves, alone. We can draw specialized materials from these sources, but help, in turn, to replenish them with materials. In other words, we can have a system, a network that profits both the people out there in the villages or in the different towns, and the places that are supposed to be the dispensers of materials.

That PALM project material that I was referring to before is on CDs. It’s available and there are many of ways of getting these things. But when you come to MicSem tomorrow morning, those of you who will be there at that early hour will see the opportunities for acquiring this and other materials that you need.

Recently Palau has been interested in undertaking a project on translating the German Hamburg Expedition volumes. There are five volumes in German on Palau. Not many Palauans speak German or read German. That’s understandable. But the volumes can be translated. In fact, half of the material has been translated. Where are those translations? Many of the colleges have them on hand. The same thing, by the way, goes for other places as well. We have translations of the Sarfert work on Kosrae. We have translations of Nevermann’s volume on Ralik-Ratak in the Marshalls. All these materials are available. We have material on current economic and political issues. Again, when I say “we,” what I’m talking about is myself as a representative of major libraries whose holdings are a little bit more extensive.

It’s our mission to share these things with other people who need them. We don’t want to simply dust off our materials and contemplate them with reverence periodically. We’d like to get these materials into the hands of people who can use them, and that’s you. But at the same time you can contribute to this pool of material that some of the larger libraries have. I think Jane Barnwell’s Greenstone Project is an attempt, a very strong attempt, to do just that. Creating a digital library that can be shared is itself a step towards building the network that I’ve been trying to describe. You perhaps should be looking at the materials in these libraries when you go around to see what else should be digitized, what else should be made available to people, what’s going to serve their needs best.

We’d also like to ask you to contribute to this pool of data. We’d like to ask you, as I shamelessly did, to bring copies of local reports, grey materials, to meetings like this. We would appreciate having these. It saves me the trouble of going around, knocking on every government door, because I’m sorry to say the mailing list has not yet been invented in most of our islands. It would save me the trouble and it also makes these materials available for other people who use them, and I think you’d be surprised to find out how many people do.

This network that I keep talking about is still a vision, not a reality. Most of us find ourselves taking care of our own libraries, doing our own work. Of course, that’s the way things are. We meet yearly on opportunities and occasions like this to share ideas and spend time together, to bond. But we still really haven’t done as much in the way of collaboration as we should, even several years after the founding of PIALA.

Let’s begin now. So I’m challenging you to establish this network. Not a paper network, but a real network. A network that’s going to make a difference in the way you serve your people, and in the way we are able to serve our clientele. When you visit our library, the college library, other places on the island, I’d ask you (and I think I speak for them, too) to let us know what you need. And that could include materials that you may want digitized under the Greenstone Project or perhaps independently.

My hope, as I said, is that you people act as a channel for the other libraries to acquire materials from your place. I think if we do this, if we make a real honest effort to achieve this, we’ll be helping one another to enrich our people and we’ll be establishing the kind of a network that’s long overdue here. We will become the modern day version of the Alexandria library.