

IN SEARCH OF A HOME:
COLONIAL EDUCATION IN MICRONESIA

The young Micronesian today is often heard to complain that "The System" is trying to create Micro-Americans: that is, white minds wrapped in brown skins. It is especially the education he has received that is the target of his criticism. Reflecting on his experience, he sees his foreign education as the basic cause of most of the changes he himself has undergone. In his eyes, an alien and alienating educational system is the most insidious, and most successful, instrument for colonization yet devised by a foreign administration.

It would be dishonest of educators not to acknowledge the patent truth of his complaint. Education in Micronesia, like in any political dependency throughout the world, is in fact designed to do precisely what the young man charges. Not ordinarily, as this essay will try to show, through the deliberate political machinations of the foreign power, but because of the very nature of education in colonial countries. Macaulay's famous definition of the purpose of education in India—"to produce men who are Indian in blood and color, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect"—is a valid enough statement of its purpose in Micronesia or in any other dependency.

Education has always had a 'civilizing' function throughout history. Indeed, its principal purpose has been to make of the uninitiated—the "stranger" or "foreigner" to the society (and this includes the young native-born as well)—a "citizen" of the social group, well-schooled in and responsive to its traditions and values. It is the process whereby the barbarian is slowly fashioned into the civis Romanus and the second generation Pole is remade to the image and likeness of his townsmen in mid-western U.S.A., who themselves were so reshaped years before him.

The Visigoth who had just crossed the Roman frontier and proceeded down the Claudian way towards the Tiber would be assimilated into the mainstream of imperial Roman society, as he mastered the Latin tongue, cultivated a taste for Falerian wines, learned to converse on the most recent political events of the day, and possibly learned to read Livy, Sallust, and Tacitus. As he gained a sense of ease in his new milieu, he would, of course, implicitly accept the values that gave meaning to all of the above. The Visigoth, was, in short, being 'civilized' or

transformed into a citizen of the Roman civitas, just as surely as a citizenship class of immigrants preparing for their American naturalization. Education, whether formal or informal, has as its final goal the induction of the neophyte into the social group.

The same "civilizing" function is served in tribal societies by an informal educational process that often culminates in an initiation rite. Through a combination of dogma, symbol and ritual experiences, the initiate is instructed in some of the sacred lore that is most prized by the tribe as he undergoes a vital experience which confirms his full membership in the fraternity. It is significant that, as one of the very few formal educational experiences in a tribal society, the initiation rite is directly related to the acquisition of full citizenship.

The tribal initiation rites in the U.S., as sociologists have pointed out, is the public school system. Public schools arose in the last century out of the need to assimilate hordes of foreign immigrants into the mainstream of American life. The Americanization of the children of the foreign-born through their instruction in English language, the tenets of the democratic system, American history, and, of course, the rules of proper conduct was the express purpose of the early public grammar schools. At the entrance to many an old New England school built at the turn of the century is carved in large letters: "Dedicated to Citizenship." The fundamental civilizing mission of the school has remained unchanged to the present day, as many contemporary writers have pointed out. Lately, however, the schools have taken upon themselves the task of integrating into middle class American life "native strangers"—blacks, Indians, and members of other minority groups, who are the "dwellers of urban and rural appalachias". The socializing function of the school is the same, only its clientele has changed along with the rationale for performing its function. In our day education is regarded as the insurance of equal opportunity, the guarantee of a fair share in the American dream. Even if this rationale is now being decried as unrealistic by a growing segment of the population, public education is still necessary to initiate these outsiders into the folkways and traditions of middle-class America.

Schools, as institutions whose aims are expressly educational, are meant to serve the interests of the social group by which they are run. American Schools are intended to Americanize; Japanese schools must Japanize. It is clearly in the best

interests of the society not to allow large pockets of its people to remain unacculturated, and the school is regarded as one of the most powerful means of effecting the socialization of "aliens".

But there are rewards, to be sure, for the individual who submits to this socialization process. As the "foreigner"—whether actually foreign-born or not—is assimilated into the society, he develops a self-identity: a sense of who he is, why he is important, and how he relates to others in the society. Ideally he acquires a sense of security and well-being that identify himself as a bona fide member of his social group. Schools, then, offer not just information and skill-training, but they hold out the promise of instilling in the marginal member of society a sense of belonging. Contrary to the impression often given by proponents of "career-education," the school's chief aim is not to assist students in finding a job, but finding a home.

The school in modern societies and their colonial dependencies is becoming the increasingly pervasive path by which persons gain access to full-fledged adult membership in these societies, as many educational sociologists have shown. If this is so, then we would do well to focus principally on the school in the remainder of this essay. Education, of course, is always understood to be something more complex than merely formal educational institutions, for socialization admittedly can and does take place on the playground and in the home as well as in the classroom. But the importance of the school as an instrument of socialization would appear to be so great that we shall concentrate on it alone hereafter. When the term "education" is used, therefore, it must be understood to mean formal educational apparatus, principally schools.

Given the fact that the business of the school is to "civilize" those who are still marginal citizens, it is not surprising that many young Micronesians should charge schools in the Trust Territory with Americanizing the young. What is surprising, though, is the look of pained astonishment that so often accompanies their complaint. One can only infer from this that the awareness that a foreign-fashioned educational system might produce a foreign product comes as a rude shock to many Micronesians. But do hens' eggs, when hatched, ever bring forth anything other than chickens?

The people of Micronesia generally expect that education will accomplish for Micronesia what it had done for countries such as France, Belgium, Japan and the

United States. If it has "civilized" those other nations, why can't it do the same for their islands? If education can bestow other blessings—the imparting of skills and information, the sharpening of critical faculties, the deepening of one's self-awareness—why can't it also prepare the uninitiated for full participation in a distinctively Micronesian society? After all, it "civilized" young Americans for participation in their own society with some degree of success! Why can't it make full-fledged Micronesian citizens of our youth?