

## THE ANTHROPOLOGIST AND SOCIAL PROBLEMS IN MICRONESIA

### INTRODUCTION

We have witnessed the end of an era in Micronesian anthropological research, as I am sure you are aware. The day of the study of traditional kinship and land tenure systems to obtain baseline cultural data has well nigh passed, and anthropologists are now turning their attention to other facets of the culture. And well they might, for they are confronted with cultures that are undergoing rapid transformation under the impact of U.S. administrative policies of recent years. It is becoming ever more difficult for anthropologists to ignore the element of change, even on outer islands, in pursuit of a piece of the "pure" culture.

But if Micronesian cultures are changing, so too are the anthropologists who are coming to study them these days. It is my impression that the present generation of anthropologists feel a stronger moral responsibility to address themselves in their research to the pressing problems of the people among whom they work. More and more they seem to feel that, as professional anthropologists, they are not only required to contribute to the general fund of descriptive literature on the exotic cultures of the world, but that their work must somehow lead to an improved quality of human life among the very people that they study.

I do not mean to suggest that the anthropologists who came to Micronesia in an earlier day were unconcerned with helping the people. Some accepted administrative staff positions in the T.T. government precisely so that they would be in a position to assist in the day-to-day decisions that were having a cumulative effect on Micronesians' lives. They and many other anthropologists who left Micronesia immediately after completing their fieldwork have often maintained a continuing interest in the Trust Territory throughout their professional careers, returning to the islands from time to time to assist in short-term research projects or to undertake more problem-oriented studies. A number of others have expressed their concern for Micronesians by engaging in U.S.-based political movements on behalf of the colonial people they had studied and come to respect. And almost all anthropologists, of course, have made some attempt to provide some financial compensation to the individuals who have acted as informants and assisted them in other ways during their fieldwork.

The difference may be that today's anthropologists come to the field with the intention of addressing themselves from the outset to those change-related social problems that prove so vexing to Micronesians. Their conviction seems to be that they should immediately turn the valuable research tools with which their training has equipped them upon those problems that Micronesians themselves see as critical in their lives, not just on those areas that are designated as "problems" in professional anthropological circles. As human beings, they feel obligated to seek to understand and improve their world. As anthropologists, they look for ways to discharge this obligation in the very way they use their research skills for cultural analysis, not apart from it.

All of this is bound to present a devilish dilemma for the young graduate student as he prepares to embark on his fieldwork for the first time. With a social conscience and a set of ethical norms that demand that he assist the people he studies as he acquires the information he needs to complete his dissertation, he is only too conscious of the need to do "relevant" research. On the other hand, he enters the field as a stranger to the culture that he is to study and must, before he can assist the people in any appreciable way, come to understand them—how they live and work, what they cherish and fear, how they are bound to one another. In a word, he must know something of their culture, and ultimately contribute to others' understanding of the culture. Moreover, he must do this under what are often severe constraints: his choice of a research topic is influenced by the interests and competence of his advisor, and perhaps also by the dictates of the funding agency from which he seeks his research grant; and the length of time he remains in the field is limited by both funds and the pressure to complete his dissertation so as to establish himself in his profession. The neophyte in the field, then, can easily be forgiven if he elects to study land tenure or kinship for his doctoral research.

Much more may be justly expected of the veteran in the field, however. If the observations I have previously made have any validity, then it would seem that his research is bound to be increasingly determined by the life problems of those who are studied. Anthropologists will be putting their professional skills at the service of man: not merely homo academicus (the reader of tomorrow's HRAF cards), but Micronesian man as he exists now! I can only feel that this is as it should be. Micronesians obviously will be helped to the degree that they better

understand the complex socio-cultural elements that give rise to current problems in their societies. The discipline of anthropology, too, can be expected to benefit from research conducted in those frontier areas (such as urbanization) where anthropology and other social sciences must meet.

#### RECOMENDED THRUST OF RESEARCH TODAY

What is required of anthropology if it is to contribute to an understanding of social problems today? I would like to suggest four general directions that anthropological research in Micronesia might profitably take, before I go on to sketch some of the particular problem areas that might be studied. These dimensions have not, of course, been totally absent in past anthropological research, but studies undertaken today should incorporate these elements to a far greater degree than may have been desirable or necessary some years ago.

- 1) Diachronic studies should be emphasized. It is important in our day that Micronesians, and those who assist them, be able to identify with some precision the manifold forms of cultural change that have already occurred in the islands. Changes in land ownership patterns, kinship terminology usage, bestowal of titles and other traditional rewards, and ordinary respect behavior are only a few of the areas that might be studied.
- 2) Convergence and divergence between traditional and modern institutions should be another focus of research. This has already been done with respect to parallel political institutions in many of the different islands of Micronesia (Hughes and Lingenfelter: 1974). As of yet, however, studies in other areas besides the political are lacking. A study of the U.S. court and penal system, for instance, and its interplay with traditional systems of meting out justice has never been done.
- 3) Ethnographic studies of modern institutions that have become a permanent part of the culture are needed. Schools, private businesses, and hospitals are examples of such institutions that play an important part in the "town culture" of many Micronesian islands today. Clearly the ways in which these institutions function in Micronesia differ

considerably from the ways in which their models are employed in the U.S. and elsewhere. To give but one example, larger retail stores on Moen, Truk, frequently serve as shelters for newly arrived migrants from other islands. Even after migrants have moved out on land they have purchased, there is evidence to suggest that they continue to regard the store as something of a clubhouse, much as the Chinese throughout Asia maintain their Benevolent Association Houses.

- 4) An interdisciplinary thrust is needed in anthropological work today if researchers are to confront Micronesia's most pressing social problems. Without the use of models and concepts drawn from psychology, sociology, political science and other social sciences, anthropologists will be unable to bring their analytic tools to bear upon critical issues in those islands. Although an interdisciplinary orientation has never been completely foreign to past anthropological work in Micronesia, it must be even more fully utilized today.

## MAJOR SOCIAL PROBLEMS

There are any number of social problems, painfully obvious to those of us who live in Micronesia, that could provide splendid research opportunities for social scientists. In the remainder of this paper, I will briefly describe a few of what appear to me to be among the most critical problems that Micronesians generally must face. At the end of each brief description, I will try to raise a few basic questions that might be explored by anthropologists or other social scientists.

1. Alienation of Youth. Micronesians are quick to acknowledge the presence of a large and influential youth sub-culture throughout their islands today. This sub-culture, with its own distinctive values and behavior, is especially prominent in the towns, although its presence is felt in many of the outlying areas as well. Rapid socio-cultural change, years of formal education in American-patterned schools, the opportunity to attend college abroad that has become available for greater numbers of young Micronesians in recent years, and the considerable influence of their peer groups have all been important contributing causes of the development of this youth subculture.

Many Micronesian adults see the young as attempting to subvert the traditional values and customs to which they claim to adhere, but very often without honestly acknowledging their own key role in initiating those changes that have contributed to the very formation of this sub-culture. They complain of a "generation gap," but understand only imperfectly, if at all, those social forces that have created such a gap. Most adults would seem to desire more schooling for the young, a greater participation in the money economy, and a larger share of the material improvements that the Western world offers. And yet, they are reluctant to accept the value changes and other effects of modernization upon the young.

An understanding of the forces that have fostered and continue to nurture the youth sub-culture is imperative if Micronesians are to make sound decisions for the future. Some fruitful areas of investigation for the social scientist, in my opinion, would be the following:

- a) Roles. How have roles, especially of youth residing in towns, changed from what they were traditionally? Do the new roles that youth have appropriated provide the same opportunity for cooperation with adults and for full integration into the life of the community that more traditional ones offered?
- b) Socialization. To what extent has socialization begun to take place outside of traditional kin groups? What are the new mechanisms for socialization that have partially supplanted former ones? How effective are they? What values do they promote that may be at variance with the traditional value system? What, if any, common symptoms of personal tension arising from value conflict can be observed in Micronesian societies today?
- c) Social controls. To what extent have traditional rewards and controls become ineffective in influencing the behavior of the young? What new rewards and controls may have superseded the old? How effective are they?

2. Debilitation of local communities. The past two decades have seen a progressive weakening of local communities almost everywhere in Micronesia. Some years ago, these communities planned and executed improvement projects such as the building of docks, the repair of roads, and the construction of water systems. The labor for these projects was supplied by the communities themselves, often at the behest of the village or island chief. Schools were built and repaired by the community, and salaries were partially paid for out of local funds. The upshot of this approach was a slowly paced development, but one that recognized as paramount the responsibility of community members themselves to initiate and sustain the many projects from which they might hope to benefit.

But all of that has changed today. Where the sectional chief or magistrate was once an organizer and initiator of activities requiring the cooperation of all in the community, his role now seems to be more that of solicitor of outside funds for improvement projects. With materials and money available from various sources for the asking, most communities wonder why they should have to do anything more than sit and wait until the Government provides the wherewithal to act on their behalf. Roads in Truk are constructed by Air Force Civic Action Teams, dispensaries and municipal offices are put up by contracted labor with district or Congress of Micronesia funds, and students are fed by the U.S.-sponsored Feeding Program.

My impression is that communities have learned to surrender far too much responsibility to the higher levels of government. The overall result is a decline in initiative within these communities, a growing sense of their powerlessness to cope with their own needs, and a weakening of community cohesiveness as opportunities to actively cooperate on projects diminish. If this is the case, then most of those projects that currently go under the title of "community development" projects may actually have the effect of weakening the community rather than strengthening it. Perhaps these personal observations of mine could be tested by studies of contrasting communities. A comparative study of Satawal, an isolated atoll at the eastern end of the Yap District, and Falalap in Ulithi Atoll, for instance, might yield some interesting conclusions.

What effects does easy access to large sums of welfare money have on traditional institutions, especially as they function to draw people together for collaboration on island or village projects? What other psycho-cultural effects might result from welfarism? Are new secondary associations such as clubs, churches, etc., beginning to develop to satisfy the affiliative needs of islanders in more modernized areas?

3. Migration into Towns. Over the last five years, the population growth rate of Micronesian towns (Majuro, Ebeye, Kolonia, Moen, Rull-Weloy, Saipan and Koror) has averaged seven percent each year. Their rate of growth has been double that of the Trust Territory as a whole, and by 1980 it is predicted that fully two-thirds of all Micronesians will be living in one of these seven towns (Kay: 1974). There has been some evidence of a backwash into outlying areas in very recent years, but the towns will probably continue to show a net gain in population through in-migration.

Most Micronesian towns have the normal problems attendant upon heavy in-migration: overcrowding, a marginal existence for some of the new arrivals who have neither land nor wage employment, and pressure on the physical and social resources of the towns. Characteristically, at least in Truk, a new migrant and his family will live with a kinsman or a patron from his own island. In some cases the sponsor is a businessman who may offer him employment for a nominal wage in addition to food and shelter. Often enough, it is a relative with a government job who might be providing for as many as 25 or 30 kinsfolk in his household.

As the town grows well beyond the point where its residents can all know one another personally and can maintain regular face-to-face contact with one another, traditional social controls which may have been apt for a smaller tight-knit community lose their effectiveness. With the increasing anonymity of town residents, people look to external mechanisms—notably the police force and the court system—to keep peace. At the same time, the small homogeneous sub-communities that have sprung up and become tiny ethnic enclaves develop their own authority systems and social mechanisms for dealing with their own members, and perhaps also for

relating to other similar sub-communities. Usually these ethnic groups maintain ties with their kin on the home island and continue to discharge at least some of their customary obligations towards those who live back home. The town, as a whole, will ordinarily retain the political forms that it had when it was much smaller, but the way in which these function is bound to change.

It would be useful to know the manner in which these sub-communities function, the strength of ties with the parent island or region, the type of authority system that unifies their members, and the ways in which these sub-communities maintain ties, either formal or informal, with one another and the larger political unit.

4. Alcohol-related Violence and Crime. Law enforcement officers in Micronesia estimate that 90 percent of the crimes reported to them are in some way alcohol-related. As anyone who has the slightest familiarity with Micronesia knows, a person who wishes to settle a grudge, carry out a misdeed, speak his mind to another with whom he disagrees, or approach a strange girl on or off the dance floor will almost invariably take a drink (or more usually, several!) to release his inhibitions before doing so. Often it appears that it is not so much the actual quantity of his alcohol intake that frees the person to pursue his original intention, but his success in establishing in the eyes of others present the fact that he is "drunk" (i.e., has been drinking). Thus, it would seem that consumption of alcohol, in whatever quantity, has a cultural significance, quite apart from any physiological effects on the individual. As soon as he is defined as "drunk," the Micnesian (or at least the Trukese!) is exempted from the normal code of behavior that regulates what one may or may not do.

There are, of course, any number of fights and other violent acts that spontaneously erupt among genuinely intoxicated persons. But my personal experiences, including occasional encounters with belligerent "drunks", lead me to believe that the cultural dimension of drinking plays a larger part in determining behavior than bodily chemical effects. For this reason, most of the measures short of total abolition that are so often proposed as remedies to the alcohol problem in Micronesia are doomed to failure. What is



required, in my opinion, is nothing less than a cultural redefinition of the considerable tolerance that is to be given the "drunk". Society must hold him responsible for what he does while and after drinking, and the court system must reinforce this by refusing to admit intoxication as a mitigating factor in judging the gravity of criminal acts.

Cultural attitudes towards alcohol, especially the relaxation of norms of conduct in the case of the "drunk", deserve much more attention than they have so far gotten from social scientists working in Micronesia. Frank Mahoney's monograph on alcohol abuse (1973) and Mac and Les Marshall's forthcoming book on alcohol in Truk are the only works with which I am familiar. Some questions that might profitably be explored are these. Why is drinking generally regarded as an important part of the male adult's role? What are the general expectations that Micronesians have of a "drunk's" behavior? What ritualized behavior may be part of drunken comportment?

5. Suicide. Official Trust Territory statistics are notoriously unreliable, but there is fairly good evidence to indicate that Micronesia's suicide rate has been rising in recent years. Last year the overall rate, which varied considerably from district to district was 20 per 100,000. The incidence of suicide among the 15-25 age group is alarmingly high; 18 of 23 suicides tabulated during the past year fell within his age bracket (Hezel: 1976). In almost every case the suicide was occasioned by a falling out that the victim had with parents, close relative or spouse over what would appear to be a trifling matter. Suicide, it would seem, is usually a response, both self-pitying and aggressive, to the threat that a close interpersonal relationship will be terminated or at least deprived of real meaning.

Most of the literature on suicide, including Emile Durkheim's classic study, sheds little light on Micronesian suicides, since the latter do not correspond to the pattern traced in either the Western World or in the more achievement-oriented cultures of the East, such as Japan and China. It is only reasonable to suppose that the motives for committing suicide in a given society furnish us with an index to the most important values in that society. Hence, in a society in which money, career success, and youth are highly prized, the absence of any or all of these paramount social values will

most frequently figure as the cause of the desperate act of suicide. Certainly it is difficult to imagine a Micronesian youth ending his life because his business went bankrupt (as in the U.S.) or because he failed an entrance examination for college (as might happen in Japan).

Making all necessary allowances for individual personality differences, I would still propose that the suicide pattern in Micronesia represents a phenomenon that must be studied from a cultural perspective. Social anthropologists might attempt to answer questions such as these. What do suicide patterns in Micronesia tell us about the value hierarchy in these cultures? Is there in some Micronesian cultures a pronounced tendency to displace aggressive feelings towards others by inflicting injury on oneself? How prevalent is this masochistic tendency? To what extent has anomie in this period of rapid socio-cultural change contributed to the suicide increase in Micronesia? In what sense has the traditional family been weakened through modernization, and how large a factor has this been in the suicide increase?

6. Over-Education. Last year more than 2,000 young Micronesians were attending college abroad, and the estimate for this current school year puts the number at close to 3,000. The ease with which a high school graduate can obtain U.S. funds for college, available to Micronesian students since 1973, explains in great part the tertiary education explosion in the Trust Territory. Something similar is happening on the secondary level as well. There are currently more than 8,000 Micronesians attending high schools in the Trust Territory, compared to 5,000 in 1970 before the expansion of the public high school system.

At a time when Micronesia's political leaders are repeatedly calling for development of their islands' resources in order to achieve a measure of economic self-reliance, the expansion of educational opportunities presents a real problem. Relative to the number of wage employment opportunities available for those who enter the labor pool, the number of college-educated Micronesians who will return to their islands within the next few years is alarmingly high. To make matters even more difficult, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) Five-Year Indicative Plan projects a cutback

in existing government employment levels. However intrinsically valuable education may be, 16 years of formal schooling is bound to foster in many young Micronesians expectations that can not be fulfilled in years to come. Given the underdeveloped state of Micronesia's economy at present, it is impossible to believe that the 3,000 Micronesian students away at college can all hope to obtain government jobs when they return from school. Will they leave Micronesia for good to seek employment elsewhere? If they remain, will scarcity of jobs bring upon the educated young widespread frustration at not being able to enjoy the lifestyle to which they aspire?

#### CONCLUSION

At the bottom of all the social problems sketched above lies the fact of modernization (not so much political as socio-economic) which has greatly altered the course of life for Micronesians today. If anthropology is to pay its dues to what surely must be one of the most studied regions in the world, it will have to sharpen its tools and bring these to bear on Micronesian towns and villages, not as they might have been, but as they exist today: partly transformed by the modernization that U.S. dollars have brought. It would be a pity to leave the critical task of analysis of socio-cultural change to economic planners, legal consultants and political advisors alone. And, I might add, to well-intentioned but professionally unequipped missionaries like myself.

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