



MICRONESIAN SEMINAR

P.O. Box 160

Pohnpei, FM 96941



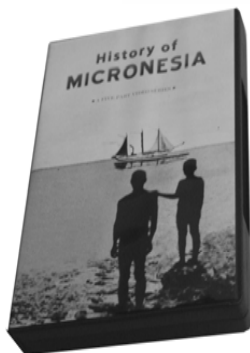
# Micronesian Counselor

September 7, 2009

Issue 78

---

## “History of Micronesia” A five part video series



Micronesia's landscape is dotted with reminders of the century of colonial rule under four different masters. Then there are the debris of even earlier times: the whalers and the coming of the missionaries and the advent of the copra trade. What does it all mean?

Micronesian Seminar has created this five-part video series to show how the outside forces, over the past 200 years and longer, have contributed to make the island societies of Micronesia what they are today. The trade

goods and dress styles, the weapons and words, the religious beliefs and systems of government have all had a profound effect on present day island life.

The series is now available on-line at [www.micsem.org](http://www.micsem.org). The set of five DVDs can also be purchased directly from MicSem.

# A Teacher's Tale

*Francis X. Hezel, SJ*

---

## *A Puzzling People*

Many years ago a young man, then in his early twenties, arrived in the islands to begin a teaching stint at a private high school. He comes freshly scrubbed, filled with hope, convinced that he can help the young islanders he will be teaching. After all, he knows that the people of these islands have a short history of formal education, with a small minority even making it as far as high school. He, on the other hand, has just finished a broad liberal arts program during his college studies and has even completed a Master's degree to boot. He is confident that he can have an impact on the minds of his students, but hopes that he can impart larger lessons, too, about life and how it is to be lived. After all, it wasn't so long ago that these people were supporting themselves by fishing and cultivating a few basic crops, building what they needed from the scant resources that nature provided them, and living a life that the authors he read would have called "primitive."

Life was good to this young man. He set out to teach, armed as he was with the conviction that he had much to share with these people, newcomers to modern 20<sup>th</sup> century life. Like so many people of his ethnic background and nationality, he came to fall in love with the islands. Was it the celebrated beauty of the islands—the stunning sunsets, the waterfalls, the year-round warmth of the place, the tropical plants, the transparency of the offshore waters (at least in most places), the brilliant colors and soft pastels that had never before registered on his visual palate? Probably not. He had read enough Michener and Becke and Nordhoff and Hall to be immunized against such enticements. Even then he already understood enough to know that the promise of a South Seas paradise was a fraud, something that might have duped first-time tourists to Hawaii, but not him. He knew what it was like to do without a shower during an island drought, or lose your zorris as you climbed a mountain trail, or wring out your shirt as you shivered with cold during a sudden evening rain squall on an open boat. If you asked him why he was love-struck with the islands, he would have told you what so many others like him over the years have answered: it was the people. They smiled a lot, were pleasant to be

---

## *New Videos!*



[www.micsem.org](http://www.micsem.org)

### *Ready for What?*



Island people are famous for taking things as they come rather than fretting about the future. But recent disasters have taught us all that there is something to be gained by being prepared to cope. Typhoon Sudal caught Yap unawares a few years ago, and the problems were compounded when many people found themselves without some of the basic necessities during the storm. In this video the survivors help compile a checklist of items that should be prepared in advance. The same could be said of preparation for other disasters: fires, wave surges, even sudden epidemics. There is no excuse for not taking precautions and anticipating the worse. Ready for What? this documentary asks. Prepared for the surprise that could claim our lives or our property, the video suggests.

---

### *The Dreaded Flu*



Dark days have come over an island. The population suffers from a plague that brings just about everything to a standstill. Government offices and schools are shut down, and even stores are forced to cut back as their employees and customers fall ill. The sneezing and coughing, the chills at night, the listlessness are all signs that the dreaded flu has struck. Only one person seems immune to the malaise that has swept the island—a man who has been immunized the year before. When one of the townspeople does some research and finds a way to bring in vaccine, the population is at last delivered from darkness. The same blessings can be ours, the drama suggests to us, if we are inoculated against the flu.

---

That meant, of course, that he would have to be willing to part with his own preconceptions regarding how life was meant to be lived. As trivial as this might seem, it was a lesson as important as any the teacher imparted to the people he had come to instruct and one that transformed the teacher's life in more ways than he could ever recount. The teacher was confident that never again, no matter what culture he encountered, would he forget the importance of trying to see reality through the eyes of those who lived there. He remains forever grateful to the people who had patiently taught him how this is done.

---



## *Island Music Wanted*

Chants? Traditional dance songs? Pop island tunes from the 60's or 70's, or even the 80's? Old church songs (no matter what denomination)? Funny songs composed during Japanese times or during the war? MicSem would like to copy any of this island music onto disk. We are now collecting island music just as we have long gathered old photos on the island. The music, like the photos, will be archived and made available to those who want it (assuming that we have the permission of the donors to do so).

Please check under the bed, in the closet, in the locked chest to see if you have anything that should be saved. If you find something that you think ought to be preserved, just let us know.

Call Micronesian Seminar at 320-4067 or mail us at [micsem@micsem.org](mailto:micsem@micsem.org). We're located just below the Catholic Church in Kolonia.

---

around, took good care of one another, and were generous to a fault. Why wouldn't an outsider find the people good company, agreeable companions, the perfect foils for a career in education?

---

***As a typical American, he struggled to keep his second cousins straight, and so he was surprised to find his students reeling off the names and degree of relationship of just about anyone living within a hundred miles of them. Did they spend their lives memorizing genealogies, he wondered.***

---

But for all their bonhomie and good cheer, the people could also be puzzling. Their names, for instance. Most of his students had at least two last names, which they sometimes used interchangeably. When he inquired about this, he was told that they had two sets of parents, their natural parents and the family by which they had been adopted. Adoptions seemed to be normal routine, not just a final recourse for people who didn't have anyone to take care of them. If anything, these people seemed to have dozens of people to provide for them, layer upon layer of persons they regarded as close relatives. As a typical American, he struggled to keep his second cousins straight, and so he was surprised to find his students reeling off the names and degree of relationship of just about anyone living within a hundred miles of them. Did they spend their lives memorizing genealogies, he wondered. The spider web of relationships they regarded as sacred was beyond him, so he chalked it up to a lack of other pursuits—like learning the names of the US presidents, or the Roman emperors, or the kings of England.

And then there were the games they played. His students would sometimes form a circle on the field and try to keep a soccer ball in the air as long as possible while kicking it from one to another. Sometimes they clapped their hands and laughed while the ball was in the air, encouraging one another to keep the ball from hitting the ground. For them games seemed to be more a source of amusement than a contest to separate winners from losers. He noticed that even when they played



what he thought of as *real* games, like baseball or basketball, they seemed to smile a lot. Whether they hit a double and drove in a run or struck out swinging, they flashed a smile. If they made a difficult shot in basketball or lost the ball driving for the basket, there was that smile again. Didn't they ever do anything but smile? Where was that sense of do-or-die, the killer urge that was so much a part of sports to him and his kind? Didn't they ever take anything seriously?

---

***People in the Pacific seemed much less interested in righting wrongs, restoring what was theirs, than in just getting along with one another.***

---

Now and then some of his students would casually mention to him that someone had pilfered their pants or shirts or even underwear, but as they spoke it was always in an even tone of voice and with the same old smile. When he suggested that they set a trap and lie in wait to find out who the thief was so they could confront the guilty party, they rewarded him with another wan smile, as if he were a slow-witted child who had to be patiently indulged. For his part, he found their infinite capacity to shrug off such wrongs at first puzzling and then annoying. After all, the teacher had been raised on a diet of western movies in which the hero and the villain stared one another down in the middle of a dusty road while the townsmen skulked off into buildings to peek from behind windows at what was sure to be a dramatic showdown. But these people in the Pacific seemed much less interested in righting wrongs, restoring what was theirs, than in just getting along with one another. It was years later that he heard from an older American colleague the story about an island man who hid behind a tree for fear of being detected while he watched a neighbor dig up the man's own crops. He hid himself, it was said, to avoid embarrassing the other man who was in the very act of stealing from him. As the teacher listened to the story, just as he had while listening to the tales of petty thievery at the school, he couldn't help but feel that there was something terribly wrong here. When would these people learn to assert themselves, he wondered.



and soy sauce or when someone offered the head of fresh fish. Although he would never really be an insider in the islands, something important had changed in his head and heart. After years of practice, he found that he could predict the reactions of these island people in different situations; he could sense what they would do and say in response to most things. He was not fully attuned—maybe he never would be—but he was beginning to understand these people at last.

---

***The teacher was confident that never again, no matter what culture he encountered, would he forget the importance of trying to see reality through the eyes of those who lived there.***

---

The teacher found that, as the years went by, his interest waned in the cultural questions that had intrigued him for so long. It wasn't that he had solved the cultural puzzle, just that it didn't matter nearly as much as it did in his early years. Somehow, without even becoming aware of it, he had begun to take the cultural part of the picture for granted as he learned to deal with people. What astonished him now were the remarkable differences in personal qualities among the people he had been living with all these years. Where he had once seen nothing but smiles and self-effacement, he could now discern personal ambition, fear of failure, anger and shame, deep gratitude, selfishness and selflessness, and everything in between. It embarrassed him to recall that he had once thought of all these people as cut from the same cloth, almost indistinguishable from one another. Only after he learned to decipher a little of the code could he recognize them for what they were: not exotics with no egos, limitless patience, and astonishing generosity; but simply people like himself. In other words, these other-directed people, as he had typed them long ago, ranged over the same wide spectrum as the people in his own culture.

He could have never come to understand this if he had not been challenged repeatedly to acquire a new set of eyes that would permit him, bit by bit, to look at life as the islanders themselves viewed it.

children? What guarantee did he have that the proposals, fabricated abroad, for analyzing and dealing with social problems like juvenile delinquency and child neglect were reliable?

In his later years, the teacher sometimes found himself in the position of giving presentations on such matters to mixed audiences. More than once, during the questions following his presentation, someone with little experience in the islands would testily challenge the teacher's departure from conventional wisdom on the subject under discussion. The teacher would suddenly find himself at a loss, unable to convince the disgruntled person that "conventional wisdom" was sometimes flawed, as the teacher well knew from his own long experience in the islands. As his eyes wandered over the audience, he thought he saw some of the islanders show the faint trace of a knowing smile while he struggled in vain to lay out in a few minutes what he had learned over the course of many years of patient tutoring. At times like that, the teacher clearly understood that he had been forever altered by his experiences with these people. He came to realize that he, the teacher, was in reality a student all the time. Those people with the enigmatic smile had been patiently working with him all the while as they reshaped his view of reality and slowly trained him to see life from a different perspective.

An older man from another set of islands distant from his own once tried to explain to him that culture was not just a set of behaviors and goals, but also included reactions that were far more primal. The teacher knew that his mouth would never water the way these people's might when someone described slices of green mango dipped in salt

---

***Only after he learned to decipher a little of the code could he recognize them for what they were: not exotics with no egos, limitless patience, and astonishing generosity; but simply people like himself. In other words, these people ranged over the same wide spectrum as the people in his own culture.***

---

Such nice people, but such strange reactions! The islanders were as friendly and helpful as any people anywhere, but their entire lives seemed driven by the need to please others. Where was that core of the individual, the small, still center of being that was commonly called the "self"? The center of gravity in these people apparently lay somewhere

else. But where? The teacher had read a few popular sociological works by American authors, including David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd*, a book that introduced him to the concept of the "other-directed personality." In contrast to the inner-directed individual with his inner gyroscope and strongly embedded principles, the outer-directed person depends on a group milieu, picks up signals from others, and has difficulty in going it alone. Reading about such groups was one thing, but encountering them on a day-by-day basis was quite another.

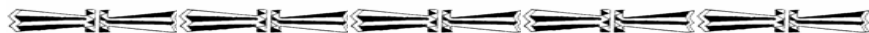
---

***Such nice people, but such strange reactions! The islanders were as friendly and helpful as any people anywhere, but their entire lives seemed driven by the need to please others.***

---

### ***Deciphering the Codes***

Like many outsiders, the teacher had trouble figuring out exactly what gestures and words meant to these people. Take the smile, for instance. People in his country smiled when they were pleased and glowered when they were angry. It was years before he came to realize that the ever-present smile was an ambiguous sign. It could be a indication of happiness, that all was well, but it could serve other purposes as well. It could be used to cover embarrassment, he noticed as he watched the smile form on the face of students who, when called on in class, had to admit in front of their classmates that they didn't know the answer. All those smiles that had once seemed so out of place flitted across his mind's eye—the baseball players who had just let an easy ground ball slip between their legs, the boys carrying a heavy load who had dropped it before they could get it on the back of the pickup truck. He recalled clearly the time he had fallen clumsily on his backside, twisting his leg behind him as he went down. He could still



hear the echoes of laughter from those watching him take the spill, and he could feel once again the rising indignation and finally outright anger at them for making a fool of him. Polite people weren't supposed to laugh at the misfortunes of others, he had always been taught. Where was that graciousness that had so charmed him from the day he first set foot on the island? It was only much later that he came to understand that smiles and laughter serve another purpose—they put people at ease and deflect embarrassment when something awkward happens. It was only then that he understood that they had not been laughing *at* him, but laughing *with* him—at least if he had accepted their invitation to join in the fun.

---

***People in his country smiled when they were pleased and glowered when they were angry. . . . the ever-present smile was an ambiguous sign. It could be a indication of happiness, could be used to cover embarrassment, and deflect embarrassment when something awkward happens.***

---

When does yes mean yes, and when does it mean no? He couldn't count the number of times he asked people for a favor and received what he took to be an affirmative reply, only to be disappointed when the favor was not done. "Can we meet tomorrow morning at nine?" "Can you come over tonight to help me with something?" The answer was infallibly yes, but as often as not the person failed to show up. "Why don't they just tell me outright that they can't do it?" he once complained to a friend in frustration. The answer he got from his friend was that the people didn't want to disappoint him when he made his request. If yes is what someone wants to hear, yes is what they shall hear. After all, the folks here want to make people feel good.

Equally confusing, however, were the no's the teacher would receive. Once while staying in a village, he offered food to a young man who had helped him all day long, but the man refused the offer. He was not hungry, he told the teacher. A half hour later he found the



the depth of emotion, he gradually came to understand. As the years passed, he was privileged to come to know hundreds of couples who, although they barely exchanged a word with one another in public and almost never walked side by side, had an affection for one another so deep and lasting that even the dismissive social scientists he had read so assiduously in his early years would have had to call it love.

### ***How Many Mistakes Can You Make?***

As time went on, the self-assurance that the teacher once had in his ability to gauge people and circumstances drained away. The teacher was forced to confront his misjudgments, numerous as they were and multiplying with the years. How could he have been wrong so often about the most basic features of life among these people he had come to instruct? He had mistaken the way they dealt with anger for simple resignation, their unwillingness to express affection publicly for indifference, and the reluctance to press their own interests for lack of conviction.


---

***His experience was turning the teacher into a skeptic who felt the need to re-examine every one of his principles, turning them this way and that, before applying them to island people.***

---

If the norms he was using for making these judgments were so faulty on such basic matters, what assurance did he have that they would be a truer guide in other areas of island life? His experience was turning the teacher into a skeptic who felt the need to re-examine every one of his principles, turning them this way and that, before applying them to island people. Were the assumptions on what constituted government integrity, for instance, just as blinkered as some of his previous assumptions had been? Were the formulas for economic development that emanated from the wisdom of those on the other side of the world any more sound than, say, his own formula for nurturing

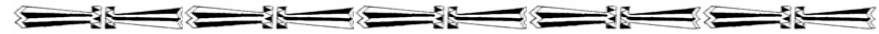




publicly make of their children may not be countenanced in US psychiatric circles, but they can be viewed, through an altogether different lens, as testimony of the tight bond between the parent and the child.

He had also wondered about the relationship between men and their wives. Curiously enough, spouses never gave the slightest hint that there was any bond between them. Seldom did the teacher see so much as a gentle touch or a reassuring glance pass between a husband and wife. The truth is that they seemed more comfortable when they were at a safe distance from one another. Wives usually walked a step or two behind their husbands and behaved deferentially toward them. At parties, the wife would join the other women flitting from one little task to another while the men relaxed in one another's company somewhere else, usually as far away from the women as possible. It was hard to avoid forming the conclusion that women were little more than a functional necessity: they were there simply to take care of the kids they bore, keep the house clean and prepare the food.

What were the real relationships like? Little by little the teacher had a chance to explore this as he came to know couples from different places. Once when staying in a village to pick up some of the local language, he even heard pillow talk between a man and his wife, who were quartered in the next room, separated from him by a thin sheet of plywood. The teacher couldn't understand much of what was being said in the local language, but even so he couldn't help but catch the intimacy signaled in the voice inflection. As he was introduced to many more married couples, he was in a better position to take fuller measure of the relationship between spouses. Once again, the teacher had been deceived by appearances. He had expected the little tokens of love that were common between couples in his own country—the arm draped around the shoulder, the embrace at the airport at the departure or arrival of one of them, the little gestures that spoke of the bond between them. But when he finally understood that he was, as usual, looking in the wrong place for the wrong signs, he began to loosen his hold on his precious assumptions and let his instincts take over. The signs of affection that he valued were by no means an accurate gauge of



man practically unconscious outside the house after fainting from what others told him was hunger. He had not eaten all day, it turned out, but still felt obliged to make the polite refusal of the food that he so badly wanted. No didn't really mean no, just as yes didn't always mean yes. If the teacher had been more observant, he would have understood that he would have been expected to press the food on his guest. "Here, take this food," he should have insisted; and then his hungry friend would have gratefully eaten.

---

***The hosts considered it a matter of pride to provide their guest everything needed before the guest could articulate his desire. But people's uncanny ability to anticipate the needs of others extended well beyond all this. If you entered a room at which three people sat around a table, a fourth chair would be placed in front of you instantaneously.***

---

One of the lessons the teacher learned was that verbal cues are not the only ones, or even the most important. Timing can reveal a great deal, too. He started to notice that when the pause before the inevitable yes was a beat longer than usual, this could be a signal that the person he was talking to might have trouble holding up his end of the bargain. He also began listening less and watching more—scanning the face for the degree of enthusiasm registered, checking for subtle signs of concern. Early on he had learned that he would have to read faces, if only because his students were always answering yes-no questions by simply flicking their eyebrows. When he reflected on this much later, it occurred to him that this might explain why a phone conversation was usually so much more difficult than a face-to-face conversation with someone. It had nothing to do with accented English, which is what he first believed; it was because a phone call screened out the important visual cues on which he had learned to rely. It was a one-dimensional voice interaction in a society that placed a high premium on the non-verbal and the visual.

He should have expected these “other-directed” islanders, people who rely so much on the support of their community, to have developed a keen ability to scan the social scene, but he was still surprised at how finely they had honed these skills. Every so often he was invited to parties, where he would marvel at the way islanders seemed to anticipate every need. A napkin? A second serving of meat or fish? A second glass of iced tea or beer? A bowl of water for washing his hands at the end of the meal? He had it before he could even ask for it, sometimes even before he himself realized that he wanted it. It was almost as if the hosts considered it a matter of pride to provide their guest everything needed before the guest could articulate his desire. Like other newcomers to the island, the teacher attributed all this to the superb hospitality of the island people. After all, they were acclaimed for their graciousness to visitors. But people’s uncanny ability to anticipate the needs of others extended well beyond all this. If you entered a room at which three people sat around a table, a fourth chair would be placed in front of you instantaneously. If you appeared at the doorway of a room in which a group of young people were listening to the radio, a hand would reach out to turn down the volume even before you could make your request.

The teacher only realized how much he had come to appreciate this quality in its absence. In his occasional visits to the United States, he found himself taken by surprise at the degree to which his fellow Americans seem to expect him to verbalize everything. “How are you feeling today?” “Do you want something to eat?” “What do you think of our new house?” Must Americans demand verbal answers for everything? Didn’t his own people ever do what islanders were so skilled at doing—

---

***Years later, the teacher stood at the doorway of the TV room in his own house, crowded with young Americans. . . They sprawled on the lounge chairs in the room, with one of them using the only unoccupied seat to prop up his legs. The teacher stood there silently, waiting for someone to move.***

---

Their children were stupid and lazy, careless in their chores at home, disrespectful and ill-mannered, and—as if all this were not enough—ugly besides. Sometimes, the children bore nicknames like “Monkey” or “Frog” or “Goatfish” just to make sure that others didn’t miss their physical resemblance to certain members of the animal kingdom. The teacher was sure that these practices were not highly recommended in the parenting manuals circulated in his own country. It seemed to him that these mysterious islanders, who were the model of circumspection in dealing with others, took malicious delight in degrading their own children and destroying what little might be left of their egos.


Many years later, a longtime friend of the teacher’s, a middle-aged woman from another island, told of what happened when a man showed up at her family’s house many years earlier to ask for the hand of her older sister in marriage. As her older sister sat with bowed head, her mother offered a full shopping list of her daughter’s faults: she was dull-witted, not very energetic, hardly a raving beauty, and was sure to prove a liability to anyone who wanted to take her in marriage. As she was recounting the story, the woman laughed at how embarrassed she had been for her older sister at the time. Then she laughed again at how she had misinterpreted her mother’s remarks. The teacher could laugh with her because by this time the veil had been lifted from his own eyes. What they both recognized was that no mother in those days could have praised her own daughter outside the family any more than a man could have lavished praised on the food he was serving a guest. Words spoken to an outsider about a son or daughter were a formality, and it was just as bad form to speak well of the fruit of your womb as the work of your hands. Disparaging remarks like those island parents

---

***Parents were often talking down their children in public, spinning out long lists of negative traits that they attributed to them . . . No mother in those days could have praised her own daughter outside the family any more than a man could have lavished praised on the food he was serving a guest.***

---





newest arrival in the family. The slightly older child who had once been the center of attention was suddenly demoted and found himself under the care of an older sibling. The shift from center stage to the far wings was, the social scientists concluded, traumatic for the young child; the experience was bound to make the child confused and mistrustful of the support of those closest to him. As a result, the child's emotions were certain to be constricted, leaving the child with an impaired sense of trust and a capacity for love almost certainly more shallow than that of his peers in the West.

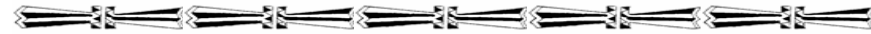
---

***The normal marks of affection, even in the family, were very limited . . . few hugs or kisses exchanged within the family, and none between family members of opposite sex. . . Could it be that these island people, for all the importance they accorded to their tight-knit families, were afraid to invest too much of themselves in their relationships with others ?***

---

Already predisposed to believe what he had read, the teacher observed that the emotional distance between the child and his close relatives seemed to increase as the boy or girl grew older. He noticed that the normal marks of affection, even in the family, were very limited. He observed few hugs or kisses exchanged within the family, and none between family members of opposite sex. School boys would sometimes hold hands with other boys, but that seemed to be the limit of outward expression of affection. He also noticed that brothers seemed to do everything possible to dissociate themselves from one another. The social scientists must be right: normal affection was stifled among island people. Could it be that these island people, for all the importance they accorded to their tight-knit families, were afraid to invest too much of themselves in their relationships with others?

He would often hear parents talking down their children in public, spinning out long lists of negative traits that they attributed to them.



scan the scene for visual clues to find the answers themselves? Could it be that the very people who thought of themselves as owning a permanent perch at the pinnacle of development were retarded or blind? Why hadn't they mastered the skills in which unschooled islanders excelled? Were these "inner-directed" people so turned inward, trapped in the web of their own principles, that they were unable to recognize what was going on around them?

Years later, the teacher stood at the doorway of the TV room in his own house, crowded with young Americans, teachers as young as he had been when he first came to the island. They sprawled on the lounge chairs in the room, with one of them using the only unoccupied seat to prop up his legs. The teacher stood there silently, waiting for someone to move. One... two... three... four... five minutes elapsed before one of the young Americans turned to him to ask if he wanted a chair. If the old teacher had any doubts that his experience in Micronesia had changed his expectations and the way he viewed life, they were removed there and then. He declined the chair, slowly turned to leave, and realized how much of a stranger he had become to his own culture.

### ***Doesn't Anyone Here Ever Get Angry?***

Was there no end to the patience of these people, the teacher wondered. They not only watched out for one another to an almost impossible degree, but they outdid themselves in material gifts. Tales of generosity abounded. When people were asked to contribute food to a community party, they seemed to bring in ten times as much as was needed. The lavish generosity of islanders was once associated with the mountains of food they brought to such events. But even as money was replacing food as the measure of generosity, there was no change in behavior that he could discern. Church fund-raising and family collections could bring in thousands of dollars from people who seemed to have little to spare. Whatever other faults these people might have, stinginess was clearly not one of them. People appeared ready to surrender food reserves, household goods, even the family boat or car for the sake of personal relationships. Or was it just status in the eyes



of the community that prompted such generosity? They had a sharp eye out for the way others in their society regarded them, after all. Whatever the case, the old island saying seemed to encapsulate perfectly people's thinking: "What I gave away I have.... What I kept I lost."

---

***They not only watched out for one another to an almost impossible degree, but they outdid themselves in material gifts. People appeared ready to surrender food reserves, household goods, even the family boat or car for the sake of personal relationships. . . the old island saying seemed to encapsulate perfectly people's thinking: "What I gave away I have.... What I kept I lost."***

---

But life in a close-knit society wasn't always sweetness and warmth. The teacher learned that even these gentle island people got angry at times. Not in the way and for the reasons that his own people might. They would not storm into an office or store and create a scene when they felt they were wronged by an employee or overcharged for goods. He had watched foreigners do this, and perhaps he had done it a few times himself, but he soon learned that such tactics were counterproductive. He could feel the static in the atmosphere whenever such an exchange was carried on, even when the offending islanders lowered their eyes and meekly apologized for the problem. But he could also watch the eyes shift from one employee to another when the angry customer left, and he could almost hear the sound of heels digging into the ground in a subtle show of resistance—something that he would later learn to call passive aggression.

Anger was usually far less demonstrative than what he was used to, and it was rarely displayed in public. He himself had witnessed two men who he knew disliked one another intensely sit together at a table and engage in what to all appearances was an amiable conversation for two hours. But he was getting used to the fact that appearances in



else, even life itself. If these were indeed the priorities that guided them, then they were certainly a reversal of the system that guided the teacher himself from his earliest days.

### ***Where Is the Love?***


The teacher had attended a few funerals during his earliest years on the island, enough to have witnessed the keening that was common at these events. Women certainly cried at funerals, but with an intensity that was scarcely believable, and their loud wailing could seemingly be turned on or off at will. Were they hired mourners or were the bone-chilling shrieks and sobs they emitted expressions of genuine emotion? The teacher wasn't sure, but he noticed that the men at such events, usually nursing a cup of coffee at the outer fringes of the wake, maintained the same mask of indifference as always. Tears didn't come easily for men in his own culture either, but the stony stoicism that island men showed in such emotion-laden situations made him wonder whether they had any feelings at all.

---

***Women certainly cried at funerals, but with an intensity that was scarcely believable, and their loud wailing could seemingly be turned on or off at will. . . But the men at such events, usually nursing a cup of coffee at the outer fringes of the wake, maintained the same mask of indifference as always.***

---


Not many years after the teacher had first come to the islands, he was asked to give a short presentation to other teachers. After reading the works of a few distinguished anthropologists on child-rearing and family in the Pacific, he brashly concluded that love as the Western world knows it could not be applied to the relationships between family members there, perhaps not even between spouses. The social scientists had noted that the family coddled infants until the age of two or three, when their attention abruptly ceased and was refocused on the



with the family—trouble that would have been so understated as to be all but invisible to an outsider like the teacher himself. Meanwhile, the teacher, long accustomed to understanding suicide as emanating from depression or a sense of failure, couldn't easily comprehend that, instead, it might be a final display of anger. People worked hard to get along, but sometimes even within the tight circle of the family they just didn't succeed.

Not all strategies for dealing with bad feelings ended so tragically. One common way to deal with disappointment, even catastrophe, was to joke about it. There was that smile again—the same reaction that the teacher found among his students when they had lost their last pair of briefs to a thief. What can we do but make light of it—at least publically! The teacher had never before heard a person describe a serious medical operation not in morbid tones but as a humorous event, punctuated every so often with laughter. The house just blew away in the fury of a typhoon wind? Bombs are dropping all around us, uprooting trees and scattering earth? What can we do but laugh about it! Sometimes, people would even go one step further—they would compose a song about a situation that was painful and embarrassing. That's what the people did about their bad times during World War II. One group of women sang about themselves hopping around the rice paddies like frogs as they worked from dawn to dusk, with time out only to scramble for shelter during air raids. Another group huddled around to sing a complaint to their Uncle Sam, asking him not to abandon the family, but come back and help when they needed him. This was a playful, satiric humor with a distinctive Pacific stamp that could be drawn upon even in the darkest of days.

How odd! the teacher thought. The most trivial of slights at the hands of an older family member—a few harsh words or the refusal of a little spending money—can end in loss of life, while a major catastrophe that could lead to loss of all worldly possessions and even death is dismissed with a humorous song. How could their response be so disproportionate to the magnitude of the problem? But then again, perhaps these “other-directed” people consider the rupture of a close personal relationship far more important than the loss of everything



island society could be very deceptive. He seldom witnessed an outburst of rage, with harsh words and threatening gestures. That just wasn't the island way. Now and then he would hear of two women, usually rivals for the affection of the same man, meeting on the road, screaming at each other, and getting into a full on brawl as they clawed at one another and tried to rip off one another's clothes. Then, too, there were the bar fights and violence that sometimes broke out when men were drinking, occasionally ending in injury or even death. He came to understand that even among these long-suffering people the dam sometimes burst and a fury that had been long checked by rules of social etiquette could erupt suddenly and with spectacular consequences. Still, this was clearly the exception rather than the rule.


Fatal stabbings, while not everyday occurrences, were becoming more frequent in the 1960s after the ban on alcohol for islanders was rescinded. The teacher heard to his bewilderment that following one such incident the victim's family adopted the killer in place of their dead son. Why would they possibly do such a thing, he wondered, unless it were to rub salt in the wounds of the killer by reminding him every day of the loss the family had suffered because of him. But wouldn't the killer's presence also serve as an irritant to the family that had suffered the loss of its young man? What purpose would be served by such an adoption?

Nonetheless, stories of adoptions following such incidents multiplied over the years. Then someone took him aside and explained to him the logic of it all: the adopted son would serve as a replacement to the family for the labor it had lost in the death of its own son. Not only would the adopted son be obligated to provide support for the family he had injured, but the adoption would bind together the two families to

---

***Fatal stabbings, while not everyday occurrences, were becoming more frequent in the 1960s after the ban on alcohol for islanders was rescinded. . . For the most part, however, displays of anger were done privately and redirected at those within the close confines of the immediate family.***

---



ensure that they did not remain forever alienated from one another. Seen in this light, he had to admit, the adoption of the killer made good sense. Thus was another mystery solved.

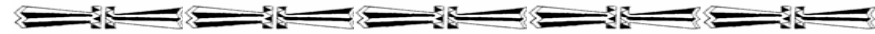
---

***Feelings, although not openly displayed, could run very deep. Nowhere was this more the case than anger within the family. The island household, was normally quiet and the children gave the impression of being well behaved. When anger erupted in the family, its force was devastating. . . . young men would hang themselves due to real or fancied problems they were having with someone else in their family.***

---

For the most part, however, displays of anger were done privately and redirected at those within the close confines of the immediate family. A man who had been scolded by his boss might leave the office with the usual smile fixed on his face, but slap his child or his wife when he returned home that evening. One high government official, who the teacher knew was infuriated by the unreasonable demands his immediate supervisor made on him, drank himself silly every night of the week and when sufficiently drunk would scream into the darkness of the evening. His family rarely got a full night's sleep, but at least his wife could appear without having to hide bruises from her friends as other wives in those circumstances might have had to. The teacher wondered how healthy this redirection of anger was for those who had to cope with these strong feelings. He had always been taught that if he had to display anger, it should be channeled at the party who aroused the feeling, not some poor bystander. But then, too, he wasn't raised in an "other-directed" society like this. Handling negative emotions has to be a serious challenge in a society in which people are raised to get along at the expense of one's own interests.

But slow simmering anger was the worst type, he soon learned. It was the reaction provoked by trouble with neighbors or members of



your own family, people from whom you might have expected much more. Disputes over land, especially between people in the same extended family, were the most common cause of this type of anger. Land, the teacher soon learned, is about as precious a commodity as there is. Challenge to someone's claim to land is bound to take on cosmic proportions, but the fight gets all the nastier if the two claimants are closely related to one another—and that is usually the case with anything even remotely connected to land. He thought of those stories he had read of the American Civil War and how it had fractured families in the border states when some of the young men had enlisted in the Confederate Army while other remained loyal to the North. The bitterness endured long after the war ended, sometimes for generations, the teacher had read. Could the acrimony engendered by land disputes run as deep and persist for as long? The more experience he acquired, the more certain he became that the wounds in divided island families were just as deep and lasting.

Feelings, although not openly displayed, could run very deep, the teacher learned. Nowhere was this more the case than anger within the family. The teacher had grown up in a society in which arguments between children and their parents were a regular and expected occurrence. Toddlers would fling things around the room, sometimes even at their parents. Adolescents would go into a huff every so often, occasionally blurting out the most hurtful things at parents who were portrayed as indifferent to their needs. The American household might not have been as animated as, say, an Italian or Lebanese one, but it could be loud and cantankerous at times and was never long without real drama. The island household, on the other hand, was normally quiet and the children gave the impression of being well behaved, as if they had already internalized the code of respect and recognized their own humble place in the order of things. But here again, as in so much of island life, appearances could be deceptive. When anger erupted in the family, its force was devastating. The teacher heard of a few young men, and later many more, who hanged themselves due to real or fancied problems they were having with someone else in their family, usually an older sibling or a parent. Although the suicide might have seemed sudden and impulsive, there was often a long history of trouble