



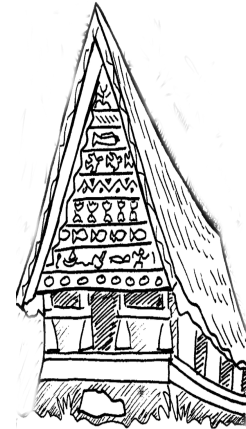
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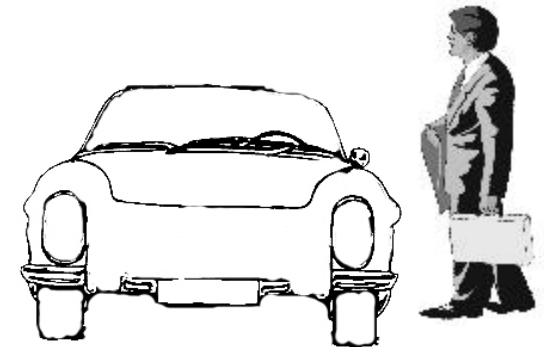
Issue 56



Loss of Culture: How Real is the Threat?

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Francis X. Hezel, S.J.



The Old Lament

How often have you heard someone remark in woeful tones, “How sad that Micronesians are losing their culture?” The complaint is even more poignant when it comes from one who is an Islander. Fear of loss of culture, the occasion of much fretful discussion over the past two or three decades, still seems to be very much a live issue today. Perhaps the talk of globalization, fueled by the awareness of an already changed cultural landscape, is responsible for the recent wave of concern. In any case, I’m hearing the complaint as often as ever from Micronesians with a slight tremor in their voice and a pained look in their eyes.

Culture change is upon us, many fear, like a tsunami advancing rapidly to the shore threatening to engulf whole populations, erasing them and all memory of what they once held dear.

The laments for a culture that is feared to be moribund are prompted by the sea of change that is washing over the shores of the islands. Everywhere one looks there are signs of cultural change: not just in the schools and the churches and the retail stores, but in the political institutions, and in the household economy, and in the very heart of the family. These changes, which go well beyond the more obvious material changes, have touched the heads and hearts of most island people, even affecting some of their core beliefs and values. Signs along the roadside urging young people to use condoms are a measure of how far we have come from the days in which such explicitly sexual topics were tabooed as a topic for public discussion. The simplest things, whether the food on the shelves of supermarkets in town or the satellite dishes that put us in Internet contact with the rest of the world, seem to carry the seeds of radical cultural change.

The carriers of change are everywhere. The ones we usually single out as most pernicious are the media—television, radio and now Internet—but there are others, less conspicuous but just as capable of making their impact felt. Young Micronesians returning from college abroad who take a different view of so much that they grew up



As a dabbler in history, I have read dozens of eulogies and elegies of Pacific cultures—eulogies exclaiming the wonder of these cultures and elegies predicting that the end is near. In the early part of the 19th century French and Russian naval captains were lamenting the loss of the island cultures, with Germans and English visitors bemoaning the same thing toward the end of that century. Since then, just about everyone has taken a turn at it. While it’s heartwarming to see such a display of affection for local island cultures from foreigners of all stripes, it’s probably time to call a halt to this silly game. The Pacific Islands are not a living museum for the entertainment and edification of outsiders, to remind them that the world still contains uncomplicated places with warm, friendly populations; they are the home of thousands of people who must bravely face the future, just as the people of other nations must.

It doesn’t help to frame their present situation in false dichotomies: the choice, for instance, between economic development and retention of their culture; or between education for life in the global village or in the island village. Americans or Europeans are not tormented by the fear that they will be making such colossal choices every time they decide whether a waterline or power line should be extended to a rural community. Why should Micronesians?

* * * *

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If the island culture of Guam has not been swallowed whole over 300 years of colonial rule and during the intensive modernization over the past fifty years, what are the chances that the dreaded globalization is going to be able to do so? Perhaps about the same as the probability that Italy will look and smell and sound just like Germany after a given number of years of shared membership in

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the European Union. The widely shared fear throughout the world that globalization will extract the exotic taste from all cultures so that peoples will be blended into the same bland batch of cultural dough is groundless. There are certainly legitimate concerns about globalization, but this hardly seems one of them.

Over the years, I have been impressed by the strange ways in which cultural uniqueness will burst out, even in countries that complain of being saturated with westernization. TV soap operas may be an American invention, but Japanese or Filipino or Latin American soap operas are clearly stamped with their own unique style. McDonalds serves up burgers in many countries around the world, but the menu reflects the subtle difference in taste from one place to the next.

Conclusion

Can cultures be lost? Only if the societies themselves are lost. If everyone from the Central Carolines, for instance, were to pick up and move to Oklahoma, they might survive as a subculture for a time, but intermarriage and bleaching could well lead to full assimilation of this sub-culture into mainstream Oklahoma society. On the other hand, if a country like Japan were to pour such a great number of migrants into these islands as to dwarf the local population, then over time the culture might be lost as the islands became a colony of Japan, with its older population blending entirely into the colony. But both scenarios are highly unlikely. And so is the cultural extinction that is so often feared.



with, foreign consultants who advise us that changes in law and land policy are needed if we are to encourage business investment from abroad, social affairs specialists who urge everyone to let their guard down and reveal their innermost feelings, the better to channel them in positive directions.

As if all this weren't enough, the harbingers of globalization are stepping off the plane nearly every week to proclaim the urgency of still more changes. Change itself is not so much the problem as what it may lead to: the death of the culture. In the minds of many, cultural extinction can occur either through the cumulative effect of culture change or through the debilitating effect key changes may have upon the basic institutions of their society. Either way, the eventual outcome of intensive culture change could be the demise of the culture.

A Tidal Wave or a Deadly Virus?

Culture change is upon us, many fear, like a tsunami advancing rapidly to the shore threatening to engulf whole populations, erasing

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them and all memory of what they once held dear. Once the wave washes over the island and retreats again, all we can expect to find is the debris of what formerly had been a living and vibrant culture. The assumption here is that a people can endure only so much change, just as waves can beat against a building for only so long and with only such an intensity before the entire building collapses. At some point at the height of the storm, the waves will topple the edifice just as the impact of cultural change topples the culture. If the force of the cultural change persists, the culture is doomed.

Take, for instance, the Re Mataw, those "sea people" from the Central Carolines with their colorful and distinctive way of life who are generally regarded as symbolic of all that is special about Micronesia. They now cook with iron pots and blend some store-bought



goods into their local diet. Shots of vodka are sometimes passed around the drinking circle with tuba, or local brew. Although most of them still wear traditional clothing, there may come a time when this will change. If the lavalavas and loincloths disappear, and the old navigational system vanishes, and sailing canoes are no longer

If we are being summoned to save the local birds and plants, it would seem reasonable to expend even greater effort to preserve as many of those distinctive features associated with culture as possible.

made, then the process of cultural attrition could well continue until the last of the distinctive features of these people is lost. At that point, this model suggests, our worst fears would be realized and the culture would be extinct.

In another model close to the first, cultural change is viewed as a deadly virus or microbe that attacks one of the bodily systems rendering it dysfunctional and leading to complications in others systems as well. An illness that affects the liver will very likely lead to problems in the kidneys, with debilitating side effects in other parts of the body. The final result may be a shutdown of the entire organism, even death. Likewise, when social changes resulting in part from a new cash economy infect the cultural system to the point where they bring about a radical reorganization of the basic family, they can be expected to have an impact on other parts of the culture as well. The damaging effects of these changes could well interfere with the functioning of the other systems deep in the culture. Before long the culture is dead, a victim of the fatal virus that seemed so harmless at the start.

This is the model that underlies some of the classical anthropological works on culture change: "Steel Axes for Stone-age Australians," for instance. That article describes the cultural impact occurring when modern steel axes, which were a status marker and restricted to older males, were passed out to young men and women. Axes are much more than tools, the articles shows us; they can overturn the status and authority system in a society and touch other parts of the culture as well, wreaking havoc as the causal chain



defenders, one of which will win the battle and take the city. Hence, for people who see themselves as belonging to a smaller and weaker society, accommodation is bound to raise specters of out-and-out cultural defeat.

Let's look at Guam as a test case. Guam, which has remained under the rule of colonial powers for over 300 years, has had long history of accommodation to foreign influences, some forced on it and some freely chosen. The island has been host to a large US military presence since World War II, while a booming tourist industry has grown up over the past thirty years. The Guamanian-born population has been reduced to a minority on its own island as various ethnic groups have moved in. These same outside influences, particularly television, have resulted in an alarming decline in the use of the Chamorro language among the local population.

The cultural genius of a people will not be denied.

While Guamanians seem generally pleased with the advances the island economy has made and the conveniences that modernization has brought, many rue the loss of so much of the style of island life they themselves remember from their childhood. Even so, have they suffered the obliteration of their culture? It could appear this way at first, but if you scratch the surface you find something distinctively Micronesian about the people of Guam. The government, over which local Guamanians have maintained strong control throughout all the changes, has an island flavor to it. So does the church life of the people, with its plethora of novenas and rosaries. The fiestas and family parties and barbeques, opportunities to spend time with family and neighbors, are the sorts of events at which any Islander could feel at home. The respect forms have changed a little, but they're still very much there. So is the humorous way of dealing with unpleasant events—a trait I find everywhere in Micronesia. Whether all this is being done in Chamorro or English, my judgment is that the local culture is alive and well on Guam, notwithstanding all the accommodations it has had to make over the years.



If the forest is cut back and humans can no longer survive by a hunting-gathering type of existence, then it may be time to take up domestic agriculture. If globalization dictates further changes today, then our paramount concern should be to adapt as necessary. This

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does not mean indiscriminate rejection of all that has served so well in the people with a sense of cultural identity. past; it simply means altering what must be changed to guarantee survival, biological and societal, today. And doing so, I might add, with the confidence that as long as the social group remains intact, the culture will live on in its people.

The key to cultural survival, then, is not purely conservatism—hanging on tightly to all that we have received in the past—but a genuine sense of dynamism and a readiness to adapt to a changing world. Strategies for economic development that entail change, therefore, may be seen as ways of promoting survival, material and cultural. Some of what we have understood in the past as either-or dichotomies ought to be re-examined in the light of this new model of culture.

This is not to say that cultural preservation should be dropped from the agenda. We ought to be wary about discarding features of the culture on the grounds that they are outmoded and useless. Often these features, or the spirit behind them, prove to be just what is needed in facing up to modernity. But some changes are necessary, even inevitable. We should not be afraid to adopt and adapt.

The Risk of Accommodation?

Earlier models of social change tend to underscore the threat of cultural upheaval. Let the enemy get a foot in the gates and before you know it the cultural citadel will be overwhelmed and taken. In this model there are two forces, the attacking army and the



progresses. If the foreign cultural “microbe” burrows deeply enough into the system, it can have the same fatal results as a virus. We are warned that cultures, like bodies, can contract deadly illness. Once this happens, little can be done but wait until the end comes.

Is Preservation the Answer?

All this is based on the supposition, of course, that cultures can become extinct just like the various species of plant and animal life. Everywhere in the islands these days we are confronted by posters urging us to protect our endangered local wildlife—the Pohnpeian Serehd, the Chuukese Monarch, the Micronesian Kingfisher. Other posters warn us that invasive species, mostly weeds, are threaten-

Social norms since then have changed to the degree that not only is divorce accepted, but so are open as same-sex relationship.

ing to overwhelm and kill off our indigenous plant forms. We are called on to redouble our efforts to ensure that the last of these distinctive birds or plants does not die, all the more so because these life forms are so intimately associated with these islands. These calls to preservation are evocative of our fears regarding the very cultures of these islands. If we are being summoned to save the local birds and plants, it would seem reasonable to expend even greater effort to preserve as many of those distinctive features associated with culture as possible. Otherwise, the local culture could become as extinct as the other forms of life we are urged to protect. Needless to say, this would be a disaster for the people of that society, but it would also bother others, if only because the world would be losing one more species of culture, thus subtracting a bit from the colorful bouquet of folkways on the planet and thereby impoverishing its cultural diversity.

The watchword, then, is cultural preservation: keeping a close lookout for whatever might imperil the culture, eradicating anything that threatens to suffocate those cultural forms we know as customs, employing the same measures we have learned to take to preserve our wildlife. But doing so with redoubled diligence since we would be losing not just some form of life symbolic of the culture, but the culture itself.



Therefore, we man the watchtowers and keep a vigilant eye out for massive change—that last attacking force that will overwhelm the citadel, or the final towering wave that will wash away the remainder of our culture.

Although the human reaction is understandable, the model upon which it is based is apocryphal in the extreme. If the flood is already upon us, what response can we make other than stoically to await the end? Cultural change in Micronesia has been occurring for centuries, but never more intensely than during the past fifty years. The waves have long since started washing over these islands, and there is no indication that the storm will abate in this present era of globalization. We can expect much more of the same in the years ahead. Under these conditions, it would appear that our cultures are doomed.

If this is the way you think of culture change and possible culture loss, please read on. The models of culture extinction described above, although commonly held, are grossly inadequate and unduly alarmist. If uncorrected, they could sap energy and divert attention away from constructive approaches. In the remainder of this article I will attempt to offer what I hope is a more balanced view of culture change.

Do These Models Fit the Facts?

If these models were accurate, my own culture would have perished long ago. We no longer dress the way my father's generation did, to say nothing of a much earlier age. The mandatory hats men once wore whenever they went out have been discarded, and the only men who wear suits to work are bankers, lawyers and high government officials. Women's bonnets can be seen only in museums and old movies, and even dresses have given way to pantsuits and other attire. There are no longer blacksmiths or coopers or milkmen or junk collectors or street sweepers. We have not used horses as our means of transportation for about a hundred years; the only ones to be seen on city streets are police mounts used for crowd control in cities like New York and Philadelphia. Horse-driven buggies have yielded to trains and automobiles and buses and planes. The day when most Americans lived in farmhouses with their extended families is long past; they have moved into the cities



dred years later. It lies in the continuity of the culture (pattern of life) transmitted, inasmuch as this pattern of life has been handed down from one generation to another for that entire period. Naturally it has evolved, perhaps very substantially, but its sameness is rooted in the people this design for living serves. This sense of continuity over the centuries, nourished by a remembrance of their past, provides a people with a sense of cultural identity. distinctive language helps nourish this sense of identity, but it is not an essential feature of cultural identity.

Although Americans speak the same language as Englishmen, no one doubts that the two cultures are distinct. Nor do I have any doubt that my father's family, who once spoke German even after immigrating to the US, were rapidly taking on the cultural characteristics of their new home even eighty years ago.

Adaptation As Key to Cultural Survival

If we have assumed that culture is the sum total of the products of a people, we may have been focusing too exclusively on preservation of customs and the external features of that culture in our efforts to ensure cultural survival. Yet, culture is not a display of exotic artifacts—feathered headdresses, shell belts, and stone pounders—to be displayed in the showcase of a museum. It is the pattern of life, the design for community living, that is found in a real people as they exist today. As long as these people survive, their culture is alive and well. How could any people possibly exist in a cultureless void, after all?

Perhaps our emphasis in cultural survival is misplaced. Instead of guarding the ramparts against breaches of culture, we should be encouraging adaptation as a means of survival. Life forms, including humans, will survive only to the extent that they are prepared to accommodate to changes in environment, as Charles Darwin taught us back in the mid-19th century. He furnished us with many marvelous examples of adaptation in birds and mammals to such changes.

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what ungainly entity." A culture that is heavily bombarded by change may be octopus-like in its loose unity, but, like the octopus, it is still capable of reproducing itself. The cultural pattern, however knobby, remains a pattern that provides continuity from one generation to the next.

The Amazing Continuity of Culture

Cultures manage to survive for hundreds of years despite the many mutations they have undergone. A striking example of this is Japanese culture. What does life in urban Tokyo today, with men and women in Western business dress commuting to work by subway or bullet train, have in common with the days of the sworded samurai and the daimyos they served? Not much, on the surface of it all. But might not there be a spirit that could be called Japanese, however difficult it may be to articulate the features of this spirit? Does it have to do with the formal courtesy that Japanese pay to those with whom they deal? Is it related to the spareness of Japanese decor, the preference for focusing on a single detail and somehow finding all of life embodied in a leaf or a blossom? None of these really comes close to summing up what it means to be a Japanese, of course. Yet it does suggest that there may be a combination of distinctive features that goes into the making of a Japanese, even a young one with spiked purple hair who sleeps on a park bench when he is not skateboarding. Not all these features can be articulated, not all of them are even discernible, and certainly not all of them are to be found in each individual from that culture.

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But there is an imprint of how life is meant to be lived that is passed down from one generation to the next—not through the DNA, but through the social environment with its hundreds of personal interactions, each exemplifying in some way how people ought to conduct themselves.

The identity of any culture rests on much more than the similarity between the lifestyle of a people and their descendants three hun-



to find new types of jobs, and now move from one place to another, changing jobs with a frequency that was formerly unimaginable. The tools of our trades now are far more often computers than plows. Many of what we today consider the staples of American society are post-World War II innovations: motels, fast food, television, and shopping malls, as well as computers, stereo sets, Nintendo games, VCRs and DVDs.

But let's consider other types of change besides the technological or material. A few years ago, a Jesuit high school in New York City found that 40 percent of its students were living in single-parent families. It appears that just as the extended family in Micronesia is being transformed into a two-parent family, the US is well along the way in making the transition to single-parent families. When I was growing up, our neighbors would point to one of the houses on the block and whisper shrewish things about the divorced woman living there. Social norms since then have changed to the degree that not only is divorce accepted, but so are open same-sex relationships.

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America has always prided itself on being able to make room for everyone, but for a century or more "everyone" meant those of European descent. Today, not only has the society had to make room for Jews and Afro-Americans, so often excluded in the past, but for dozens of Asian and Hispanic sub-cultures. These ethnic minorities are incorporated into the general culture somehow, even while retaining the trappings of their own sub-cultures, including specialty stores selling their own food, churches and use of their own languages. American culture seems flexible enough to embrace these groups representing a panoply of different cultures into its own broad cultural network.

In view of the sheer number of changes that the US has absorbed over the past century, American culture should have been swept away. Or, to shift models, we might expect that the host of changes that clearly transformed the social organization of the family might have proceeded to bring about so many other malfunctions



that the entire cultural system would simply collapse. But the dramatic changes that might have seemed so destructive were absorbed by the culture. If this resilience were owing to the power of the US and the strength of its culture, we would not find the same resilience in other, less dominant cultures throughout the world. But we do, whether we look in East Asia, Africa, Latin America, or the Middle East.

Cultures, then, appear to survive for centuries despite sweeping changes. This raises the question: When the facts don't fit the model, do we adjust the facts or throw out the model?

The Meaning of Culture

In older anthropology textbooks, culture was identified with the products that a particular society produced: not just material artifacts (food and clothing and house styles), but also institutions (village

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authority system, land inheritance patterns), beliefs (for instance, that sickness is the work of spirits), concepts (the particular view of the universe that people hold), values (like the importance of sharing, or disdain for boasting), (and guidelines for behavior (such as fanning flies for a guest at a meal, or keeping the eyes lowered when speaking to someone of higher status). All these translate into an observable pattern of behavior. In the old definition, a culture was the sum total of all these things—the behavior of people, along with everything that they produced: shrines, food, housing, burial rituals, and so forth, while taking account of the intricate network of relationships between all these cultural products.

In the newer model, however, culture is understood to mean not the observable cultural phenomena themselves, but the design or plan for living that is passed on from one generation to another. This design may be, and often is, altered from one generation to another as new influences are brought to bear on a society. What does it



mean, for instance, to be a Re Mataw? Surely not simply to wear a loincloth, or to observe the respect behavior that was used forty years ago, or even to know the old stories or the history of the

A culture that is heavily bombarded by change may be octopus-like in its loose unity, but, like the octopus, it is still capable of reproducing itself.

island. At bottom, it is to be raised by the people who call themselves Re Mataw and to be imprinted with the pattern of living that they call their own at that particular time. The last phrase here is important because the norm of a culture must always be the way people live today, not the way they might have lived fifty or a hundred years ago.

This new understanding of culture may make it a little more abstract, but it locates culture where it belongs: within the people who pass it along—and who change it, in big ways and small, as they are forever doing. Customs, which are sometimes mistakenly regarded as synonymous with culture, are far more colorful and evocative than an abstract “design for living,” but they change every few generations and so could not serve as the polar star for a cultural identity with any permanence. Just as there can be no culture without the people who transmit it, so there can be no people without a culture of some form. It is the social air that people breathe, the glue that binds them to one another, the shared understandings that make it possible for them to communicate with one another and so to live together. What could it possibly mean, then, to say that people have lost their culture? Is this supposed to mean that they are now utterly devoid of any organized pattern of living at all?

The organizational unity in a culture may be loose, especially if a society undergoing a time of rapid transition, but it is real. During my college days, I was trained to think of culture as a tightly integrated whole, with each part related closely to other parts of this system. Clifford Geertz, one of the pioneers of symbolic anthropology, however, has his doubts about this. Culture, he writes, is “more like the octopus, whose tentacles are in large part separately integrated, neurally quite poorly connected with one another..., and yet who manages to get around and preserve himself as a viable, if some